

# History of the Literary Institutions in the Soviet Union and Beyond. An Introduction

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WITH the turn of Slavic studies towards social history in the 1980s, new, previously unnoticed or underestimated, but nevertheless determining practices of the functioning of literary institutions, were rediscovered. The return to the sociology of literature today is engendered not only by intradisciplinary trends, but also by the current politicisation of society, which influences the academy. The aim of this cluster is to problematize the key practices of literary production, which would allow us to take a new approach to historical and literary material, see it in a new context, and conceptualise it in the light of new approaches and methodological keys.

The study of Soviet literary institutions has until recently been characterised by a number of factors, each of which had a detrimental effect on its quality: political instrumentality, direct dependence on the ever-changing ideological conjuncture, radically different research conditions in the West and in the USSR. If we add to this the equal deficit of archival sources and methodological conservatism for Western and (post)Soviet authors, the picture is relatively complete. Soviet Russia has the dubious honour of being a forerunner in the instrumentalisation of literature and art for the needs of political propaganda, of being in many ways a pioneer in the creation of the mechanisms and institutions of ‘totalitarian art’. These innovations in the political instrumentalisation of art and literature were originally Soviet and emerged before even Italian, German, Spanish, Chinese, and other national forms of this type. Thus, the emergence of the VAPP, the first literary association created and directly controlled by the party-state, proceeded in 1920-1922, immediately after

the defeat of the Proletkul’t, before the emergence of the *Novecento Italiano* (1922) in Fascist Italy. The Union of Soviet Writers began to form in 1932, a year and a half before the creation of the *Reichskulturkammer* (1933) in Nazi Germany<sup>1</sup>. Returning to this history with a reliance on sociological and institutional methodology and in particular the institutional theory of art<sup>2</sup>, which has not previously been applied to Soviet literary institutions (partly because the history of these institutions has not been documented) allows for a new understanding of Soviet literary culture.

Since in many respects the USSR was a pioneer in the formation of not only political but also cultural institutions of totalitarian regimes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is extremely important to understand the nature of these institutions, the logic of their formation and functioning. Since Soviet culture fulfilled

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<sup>1</sup> See I. Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art: In the Soviet Union, the Third Reich, Fascist Italy, and The People’s Republic of China*, New York 1990.

<sup>2</sup> See P. Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, Stanford 1992; R. Caves, *Creative Industries: Contracts between Art and Commerce*, Cambridge [MA] 2000; D. Crane, *The Production of Culture*, Newbury Park 1992; G. Dickie, *Art and the Aesthetic: An Institutional Analysis*, Ithaca 1974; B. Frey – W. Pommerehne, *Muses and Markets. Explorations in the Economics of the Arts*, Oxford 1989; J. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge 1994; D. Hesmondhalgh, *The Culture Industries*, London 2002; N. Luhmann, *Art as Social System*, Stanford 2000; W. Powell – P. DiMaggio, *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*, Chicago 1991; L. Ray – A. Sayer, *Culture and Economy after the Cultural Turn*, London 1999; R. Scott, *Institutions and Organizations: Ideas and Interests*, Los Angeles 2008; P. Thornton, *The Institutional Logics Perspective: A New Approach to Culture, Structure and Process*, Oxford 2012; D. Throsby, *Economics and Culture*, Cambridge 2001.

specific political functions, it developed unique operational mechanisms and new methods of party-state control and management of cultural production, this culture cannot be understood outside the institutional framework, although it is this aspect of it that is least studied. Both in the USSR and in the West, Soviet culture (literature, art, music, theatre, cinema) has been studied mainly through its most prominent authors rather than through its institutions. This is because Soviet cultural and, in particular, literary institutions were almost always political instruments in the hands of the party. Hence the need to focus on institutional aspects. But their activities – despite their democratic decorum – were opaque, and their archives were either completely or partially inaccessible, making historical research difficult, if not impossible.

Although after the collapse of the USSR many archives were declassified and opened to researchers, although during this time a lot of materials were published, mostly from archives containing the fonds of the largest Soviet cultural institutions, such as creative unions, as well as state institutions<sup>3</sup>, these institutions and agencies themselves have rarely been considered (with some recent exceptions)<sup>4</sup>. Their history has not yet been written. We still know little

about the histories of creative unions, thick literary journals, publishing houses, censorship, book distribution, and other key literary institutions in the USSR and Eastern Europe. Even today many scholars in Slavic studies tend to neglect how important these aspects are in our understanding literature and literary products: in fact, the institutional history of literature is a history that is centred not on texts and authors, but on the mechanisms of cultural and literary production that determine – through the interaction of producers with customers, consumers, the authorities, and each other – the specifics of this production itself: aesthetic features, the rise and fall of genres, a repertoire of styles, and language modes.

It should also be remembered that in the field of literature there are forces at work not only inside but also outside institutions: they work within their boundaries, which helps to see a lot not only in the mechanisms of their functioning, but, more importantly, in their very nature. After all literary institutions are not only structures, but also a part of the social and cultural environment in which they function. Soviet institutions functioned in a very specific milieu. Thus, in the absence of a rule of law (which was relevant both for the USSR and Eastern Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century), all spheres of life – including literature – go through shadow institutionalisation when only shells remain of institutions, and they themselves perform completely different functions than they officially declared. Real functions remain unspoken, unformalized, and unregulated. They are carried out based on ‘unwritten norms’, ‘rules of the game’, ‘understanding’, ‘codes’, etc. through institutions or outside of them, strategies of creative and social behaviour, the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is not, aesthetic concepts, relations with censorship and bureaucratic authorities, group identities, financial relations (forms of literary earnings), relations within literary hierarchies, (non)participation in political rituals were built, and much more. In fact, these forms of institutional and extra-institutional organisation became a kind of form of self-organisation of culture within a deformed public sphere.

Such a state of affairs compelled us to invite our

<sup>3</sup> See D. Babichenko, *Literaturnyi front: 1932-1946*, Moskva 1995; D. Babichenko, “Schast’ e” *literatury: Gosudarstvo i pisateli, 1925-1938*, Moskva 1997; A. Blium – V. Volovnikov, *Kul’tura i vlast’: Tsenzura v Sovetskom Soiuz: 1917-1991: Dokumenty*, Moskva 2004; T. Goriaeva, *Iskliuchit’ vsiakie upominaniia. Ocherki istorii sovetskoi politicheskoi tsenzury*, Minsk-Moskva 1995; T. Goriaeva, *Istoriia sovetskoi politicheskoi tsenzury. Dokumenty i kommentarii*, Moskva 1997; T. Goriaeva, *Politicheskaiia tsenzura v SSSR. 1917-1991 gg.*, Moskva 2009; T. Goriaeva, *Mezhdumolotom i nakoval’nei: Soiuz sovetskikh pisatelei SSSR: Dokumenty i kommentarii. T. 1: 1925 – i iun’ 1941*, Moskva 2010; T. Goriaeva, “My predchuvstvovali polykhan’e...” *Soiuz sovetskikh pisatelei SSSR v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny. Dokumenty i kommentarii. T. 2: Iiun’ 1941-sentiabr’ 1945 g. V 2 kn.*, Moskva 2015; T. Korzhikhina, *Izvol’te byt’ blagonadezhnyi!*, Moskva 1997; L. Maksimenkov, *Boi’shaia tsenzura: pisateli i zhurnalisty v Strane Sovetov 1917-1956*, Moskva 2005; O. Naumov – A. Artizov, *Vlast’ i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia. Dokumenty TsK RKP (b)-VKP(b), VChK-OGPU-NKVD o kul’turnoi politike. 1917-1953*, Moskva 1999.

<sup>4</sup> See C. Any, *The Soviet Writers’ Union and its Leaders: Identity and Authority under Stalin*, Evanston 2020; A. Karpov, *Russkii Proletkul’t. Ideologiia, estetika, praktika*, Sankt-Peterburg 2009; D. Tsyganov, *Stalinskaia premiia po literature*, Moskva 2023.

colleagues to reflect upon the following questions: what kind of mechanisms of institutionalisation (and shadow institutionalisation) of literary life are to be found in Soviet Union and Communist Eastern Europe? What institutional dynamics could one find under the communist rule in the post-revolutionary era, in Stalin's time, in the period of normalisation both in the USSR and Eastern Europe? What institutional transformations occurred in the literary field during the post-Soviet era, both in Russia and in former Soviet bloc countries?

At first, we wanted this section of "eSamizdat" to be an occasion to collect works by experts of various contexts of Eastern Europe, and our call for paper had been addressed also to specialists of non-Slavic cultures that were under Communism in the second half of the 20th century; however, apart from one exception, in the end we had to focus on the Soviet Union, though with case studies that practically cover its whole seventy-year history. By doing this, we nevertheless hope our initiative can provide some valuable models for further research in order to encourage more comparative studies between Eastern European literary cultures.

The authors of this cluster, to whom we are deeply thankful for accepting our invitation, have proposed works that make extensive use of archival materials, and rightly focused on the problem of reconstructing the more or less implicit 'rules of the game' that made literary institutions properly work. Marina Arias-Vikhil' analyses the methods and principles in the workings of World Literature Publishing House (1918-1924), the first literary publishing institution in post-revolutionary Russia, created under the aegis of Maksim Gor'kii. Early Soviet literary institutions are also at the centre of the article by Dar'ia Moskovskaia and Vagif Guseinov, who investigate the different characteristics and (ideological and political) functions of the numerous Soviet mass writers' associations from 1918 to the 1932 resolution, leading to the setting-up of the Union of Soviet Writers. Dmitrii Tsyganov examines the institutional aspects of the Stalin Prize for literature in the years of late Stalinism: the prize was crucial in moulding the Socialist Realist canon, as well as

being used as a political tool on an international level, in particular, during the Cold War. As for the following period (1950s-1960s), emphasis is placed on the international cultural relations of the USSR: Kristina Buynova sheds light on the role of the Foreign Commission of the Union of Soviet Writers in developing and maintaining contacts with writers from abroad according to Party policies; lacking of clear instructions from above, the members of the Foreign Commission had to resort to various strategies to avoid being accused of taking personal initiative. The late Soviet period is considered by Maria Mayofis through the key concept of 'literary scandal' and its various uses as a political tool, often in relation to the question of censorship: the author provides a 'thick description' (Clifford Geertz) of what she calls 'backstage' discussions of unwritten norms in private documents. Alice Bravin concludes this historical narrative by examining Soviet attempts to institutionalise underground culture in 1970s and 1980s in order to neutralise its activity, which was implicitly subversive in its evasion of control from above. Lastly, the article by Michal Bauer moves our discourse beyond the USSR, giving us a deep insight into the psychological and economic aspect of the Czech literary field – with the formation of the Union of Czechoslovak Writers in the first 'Stalinist' years of Communist rule under Klement Gottwald (1948-1953) – and enabling us to find functional parallelisms with the Soviet case.

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**Abstract**

Introduction and preliminary remarks by the editors of the section “History of the Literary Institutions in the Soviet Union and Beyond”.

**Keywords**

Soviet Culture, Sociology of Literature, Institutional History.

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