

## **The Post-Thaw Period and Monumental Art in the Soviet Province**

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### **Abstract**

The article is devoted to the study of the influence of the socio-political context of the «post-thaw» period (1964 - 1970) on Soviet culture in general and on monumental art in the Soviet province in particular. «Post-thaw» is a term characterizing the historical period between the fall of Khrushchev and the «frost» that followed the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968. The cultural and ideological processes of the «post-thaw» period became more complex compared to the period of the thaw. «Post-thaw» gave rise to such forms of social life and culture that did not support the official ideology and official discourse, and at the same time were not openly opposed to them. Monumental art in the USSR, especially monumental decorative painting, developed mainly within the framework of rigid ideological canons, but during the post-thaw period, artists were already more free in their choice of styles than before, and they were not prohibited from using any new artistic forms, elements abstract art. In the course of the study of a specific case undertaken by the authors, the meanings of the panel «Soviet Tataria» on the outer facade of the suburban railway station in Kazan, built in 1967, were analyzed. The image of a woman's head in a Tatar ethnic headdress became in the following decades a symbol representing the Soviet image of the city of Kazan and the Republic of Tatarstan as a whole. The authors believe that this panel in its artistic form reflects not only the main ideas of the official discourse of the 1960s, but also contains certain hidden meanings that are opposed to the official discourse.

**Keywords:** «Post-thaw», «thaw», monumental art, official discourse

### **Introduction**

Post-thaw is a term that characterizes the historical period between the fall of Khrushchev and the «frosts» that followed the invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact troops in 1968. However, the elimination of all the effects of the «post-thaw» could not be instantaneous, stretching until 1970. Thus, the «post-thaw» - this is an intermediate period in Soviet history from 1964 to 1970.

The term «post-thaw» was used by the sociologist Y. Levada when describing the explosive growth of social knowledge in the USSR at the end of the 1960s. (Sociologiya pered sudom istorii, 1995) Not all researchers of the history of the USSR distinguish this period: for example, S. Chuprinin in his commented chronology of the «thaw» extends it until 1968 (Chuprinin, 1953) On the contrary, other authors believe that a period of stagnation began in

1965 (Pyzhikov, 2002). Disagreeing with either one or the other, R. Pikhoya emphasizes that during the first five years of Brezhnev's rule there were alternative options for the country's development, although he does not use the term «post-thaw» (Pikhoya, 2007).

The periods of «thaw», in our opinion, are primarily characterized by de-Stalinization from above, which received enthusiastic support from below, primarily from the youth. Discursively, this turn was framed as a return to the romantic communism of the early 1920s, the replacement of «bad Stalin» with «good Lenin». Sociologist G. Batygin, characterizing the spiritual situation of the «thaw», wrote about «an explosion of communist exaltation» accompanied by «sincere spirituality and brightness of publicistic rhetoric» (Batygin, 2005).

The cultural and ideological processes of the «post-thaw» were not so simple and linear. De-Stalinization went deeper, not limited to the primitive dichotomy «good Lenin» - «bad Stalin», while opposing the impulses of restalinization.

The culture of the «post-thaw» is deeper, more relaxed, more versatile than the culture of the thaw, and the authors of the period of the «post-thaw» - be it the Stalinist V. Kochetov or the denouncer of Stalinism A. Solzhenitsyn - are more radical even than themselves during the period of the «thaw». But, along with politicized works, others appear that do not directly oppose the official ideology, but drop out of the official discourse and allow themselves a slight irony about it.

The Brezhnev leadership sought to maintain a delicate balance between opponents and supporters of Stalin, between internationalists and Russian nationalists, but such maneuvering was too difficult and tiring for him. It was easier to close all the alternatives at once. «Post-thaw» ended in 1970, when the editors of two major literary journals, personifying opposing ideological discourses, were replaced (Krechmar, 1985). The end of the «post-thaw» was determined by the alignment of forces in the Politburo of the CPSU Central Committee, the elimination of the group of Alexander Shelepin and the strengthening of the positions of Leonid Brezhnev (Schattenberg, 2018).

## **Methods**

During the research were used historical-genetic, comparative, discursive and semiotic methods, as well as the case study method.

## **Results and discussion**

In order to discuss individual cultural phenomena of the post-thaw period, it is necessary first to describe the general political and cultural context of this period.

How was the great cultural and discursive complexity of this period expressed in comparison with the «thaw»?

During the «post-thaw» period, political opposition begins to form. The arrest of A. Sinyavsky and Yu. Daniel, who published their works of art under pseudonyms abroad, gave rise to such forms of protest as writing collective letters in defense of someone or against something, as well as - for the first time in almost forty years - public demonstrations (the first took place on December 5, 1965 in Moscow on Pushkin Square) (Vaissie, 2015). During the post-thaw years, Solzhenitsyn finished «The Gulag Archipelago» and wrote «August 1914». In an open letter to the IV All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers A. Solzhenitsyn demanded the abolition of censorship (Solzhenitsyn, 1996).

But it would be a mistake to reduce the «post-thaw» only to the intensification of the confrontation between society and the party oligarchy, or the intelligentsia and the party oligarchy. «Post-thaw» gave rise to such forms of social life and culture that do not support the official ideology and official discourse and at the same time are not openly opposed to them. During the post-thaw period, the novels by M. Bulgakov («The Master and Margarita», «Black Snow: A Theatrical Novel») and A. Platonov («The Soul») were published, and «The Trial» by F. Kafka was translated and published. Young Soviet science fiction writers Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, who expressed the spirit of the «thaw» in the science fantasy novel «Monday Begins on Saturday», create such socially poignant works as «The Tale of the Three», «Snail on the Slope», «Ugly Swans», «Prisoners of Power» («Inhabited Island») and fall into disgrace for a long time («The Ugly Swans» were not published in the USSR until 1987). Ivan Efremov, previously famous as the author of the communist utopia «Andromeda: A Space-Age Tale», subjects the Soviet society to veiled criticism in the anti-utopia «Hour of the Bull» (Sergeev, 2017). In 1964, director Yuri Lyubimov reformed the Taganka Theater, making it the most avant-garde of Soviet theaters. Vladimir Vysotsky, who became one of the brightest Soviet singer-songwriter, worked in the same theater. The author's or bard song reached their prime, which earlier, during the years of the «thaw», had a very limited social addressee: narrow student or tourist companies. The first Russian rock bands appear. Irony and loyalism are combined in the popular Soviet comedy films L. Gaidai («Operation Y and Shurik's Other Adventures» (1965), «Kidnapping, Caucasian Style» (1966), «The Diamond Arm» (1968)), E. Ryazanov («Beware of the Car» (1966)).

However, monumental art, especially monumental decorative painting, developed mainly within the framework of rigid ideological canons. The fact that monumental artists strictly translated the semantic codes and canons of Soviet ideology is probably explained not only by their internal self-censorship, but also by a whole complex of reasons related to the peculiarities of the Soviet system of managing the national economy, the cultural sphere in general, and the urban economy, in particular. The canon was set by the decisions of the party and the government, controlled by the party-ideological apparatus of the CPSU, and broadcast through various media. The order for the creation of works of monumental art was formed by city and regional authorities under the vigilant control of party bodies. Often, the executors of these orders were the same artists from among those who had already been tested for understanding the styles and meanings required by the customer. Monumental projects that do not correspond to ideological codes and canon simply would not receive funding. In the provinces, the situation looked even sadder: sculptures, for rare exceptions were the standard images of the Bolshevik leaders, heroes of the revolution and the Great Patriotic War, as well as representatives of the Tatar intelligentsia (Sergeev & Sergeeva, 2020), and monumental decorative painting until the 1960s practically absent.

The situation begins to change just in the «post-thaw» period. The party leadership comes to the conclusion that it is necessary to slightly revive the dull look of provincial Soviet cities. The content of all art objects was still determined by ideological guidelines, the artist was supposed to glorify the communist ideals, the working man, world peace, etc. some new art forms, elements of abstract art (in contrast to the period of the thaw, when the party leadership persecuted unrealistic art). In 1967, a new suburban railway station building was built in Kazan by order of the Kazan branch of the railway. Its outer facade is decorated with a panel with the double name «Soviet Tataria» or «Kazan - the capital of Tataria», made using the sgraffito technique. In the following decades, this panel became a symbol representing the Soviet image of the city of Kazan and the Republic of Tatarstan as a whole. The panel sketches

were made by the monumental artists Sergei Bubennov and Viktor Fedorov (Mirhanova).

The left side of the panel represents the head of a young girl in the Tatar national headdress (kalfak) with a fluttering headscarf. On the scarf, framed by ornamental patterns, there are oil storage facilities as symbols of the oil-producing republic. In the lower right corner, against the background of Kazan's sights (a monument to young Lenin, the Soeymbike tower), several young people and a girl are depicted briskly walking somewhere - probably into a bright future.

It would seem that the panel in artistic form reflects the main ideas of the official discourse of the 1960s:

- Soviet Tataria is an example of a harmonious combination of Tatar ethnic traditions and socialist modernization (it is appropriate to recall that socialist realism was defined as national (ethnic) art in form and socialist in content);

- youth is the builder of communism and a bright future;

- the workers are the vanguard of society (indeed, two young men in overalls and rough boots are leading the procession);

- the oil-extracting and oil-refining industries are important sectors of the republic's economy.

In this interpretation, the panel turns out to be one of the means of communist agitation and propaganda in the spirit of the monumental propaganda plan proposed by Lenin.

However, the context of the «post-thaw» suggests that the idea of the authors of the panel might not have been so simple. In addition, the general cultural context may have generated non-obvious connotations that authors may or may not be aware of.

The woman's head in the national headdress and headscarf symbolizes the motherland, the land of Tatarstan, and, ultimately, traditional society. It is noteworthy that the builders of communism, marching towards a brighter future following the working class, are in the opposite direction from the head of a woman who symbolizes the motherland. Socialist modernization, indeed, presupposed a break with traditionalism and a departure from the values of traditional society, moreover, de-ethnicization. All young people are depicted in modern clothes, without any indication of ethnic markers. Mother Earth, on the other hand, is presented as a Tatar woman in a national headdress.

You can also pay attention to the fact that there is only one girl in the group of young people walking (perhaps, gender prejudices of the late Soviet society were manifested here). A girl with a tube, emancipated and educated, opposes a Tatar woman from a traditional society, a housewife who is financially completely dependent on her husband. Also, attention is drawn to the fact that there are no ordinary residents of the city on the panel: old people, mothers with strollers, children; there is no everyday life, but there is an abstract movement forward (Sergeeva, 2020).

Another detail of the panel adds additional meaning: instead of a necklace around the woman's neck, there are railway cars. The train crosses the neck, cutting off the head. Of course,

the appearance of a train on the wall of a railway station looks quite understandable and justified. But it was the railway that became in Russia not just a symbol of modernization, but of the rapid and often violent destruction of traditional society. It was the development of railways that heralded a new economic order and the tragic fate of the Russian peasantry in the twentieth century. The main heroine of A. Solzhenitsyn's story «Matryona's Place», old woman Matryona, dies under the wheels of a train (Solzhenitsyn, 1963). The death of Matryona is interpreted as the martyrdom of peasant Russia with its traditional way of life. Anna Akhmatova called «Matryona's Place» a story «more terrible» than «Ivan Denisovich» (she meant A. Solzhenitsyn's story «One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich»): «... it was not Matryona, but the entire Russian village hit by a train and shattered» (Chukovskaya, 1997). The story «Matryona's Place» was well known to the reading public; parodies of him are known (Vail & Genis, 2013), so Bubennov and Fedorov, most likely, were no exception. For the work of Fedorov, by the way, semi-official Soviet themes (with the exception of historical-revolutionary paintings) are uncharacteristic (Viktor Fedorov, 2010).

## Conclusions

«Post-thaw» is a term characterizing the historical period between the fall of Khrushchev and the «frost» that followed the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968. The cultural and ideological processes of the post-thaw» period became more diverse and complex compared to the period of the «thaw». Monumental art in the USSR, especially monumental decorative painting, developed mainly within the framework of rigid ideological canons, but during the «post-thaw» period, artists were already more free in their choice of styles than before, and they were not prohibited from using any new artistic forms, elements abstract art. The authors analyzed the meanings of the panel «Soviet Tataria» on the outer facade of the suburban railway station in Kazan, built in 1967. This panel in artistic form reflects the main ideas of the official discourse of the 1960s: a combination of Tatar ethnic traditions and socialist industrialism. But, perhaps, it contains hidden meanings, opposition to the official discourse: the death of traditional society under the pressure of modernization.

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