Andrei Zhdanov Defines Socialist Realism (1934)

Andrei Zhdanov (1896–1948) was a decorated leader of the army of the Soviet Union during World War II, and throughout the 1930s and 1940s, a leading figure in the government of the U.S.S.R. Before the war, he won the loyalty of Stalin, who assigned him to establish political control over artists and intellectuals; after the war he returned to these duties, for which he was widely feared.

In 1934 Zhdanov convened a Congress of Soviet Writers and, with the help of the writer Maxim Gorky, enunciated in the speech given here a doctrine of “socialist realism.” This would be the only acceptable model for Soviet authors from this time. Socialist realism also had relevance to music because it suggested an end to free musical experiment and an elimination of nonconforming subject matter.

Comrades, in the name of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) and of the Council of the People’s Commissars of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, permit me to convey to the first Congress of Soviet Writers and to all writers of our Soviet Union—with the great proletarian author, Maxim Gorky, at their head—flaming Bolshevik greetings. . . .

The mighty banner of Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin has triumphed. It is to the victory of this banner that we owe the fact that the first Congress of Soviet Writers has gathered here. Were it not for this victory, your congress would not be taking place. Such a congress as this can be convened by none save us Bolsheviks.

The key to the success of Soviet literature is to be sought for in the success of socialist construction. Its growth is an expression of the successes and achievements of our socialist system. Our literature is the youngest of all literatures of all peoples and countries. And at the same time it is the richest in ideas, the most advanced and the most revolutionary literature. Never before has there been a literature which has organized the toilers and oppressed for the struggle to abolish once and for all every kind of exploitation and the yoke of wage slavery. Never before has there been a literature which has bas ed the subject matter of its works on the life of the working classes and peasantry and their fight for socialism. Nowhere, in no country in the world, has there been literature which has defended and upheld the principle of equal rights for the toilers of all nations and the principal of equal rights for women. There is not, there cannot be in bourgeois countries a literature which consistently smashes every kind of obscurantism, every kind of mysticism, priesthood, and superstition, as our literature is doing. . . .

Of what can the bourgeois author write, of what can he dream, what source of inspiration can he find, whence can he borrow this inspiration, if the worker in capitalist countries is uncertain of the morrow, if he does not know whether he will have work the next day, if the peasant does not know whether he will work on his plot of ground tomorrow or whether his life will be ruined by the capitalist crisis, if the brain worker has no work today and does not know whether he will receive any tomorrow? What can the bourgeois author write about, what source of inspiration can there be for him, when the world is being brought down once more—if not today, then tomorrow—into the abyss of a new imperialist war? . . .

Characteristic of the decadence and decay of bourgeois culture are the orgies of mysticism and superstition, the passion for pornography. The “illustrious persons” of bourgeois literature—of that bourgeois which has sold its pen to capital—are now thieves, police sleuths, prostitutes, hooligans. All that is characteristic of that section of literature which is trying to conceal the decay of the bourgeois system, which is vainly trying to prove that nothing has happened, that all is well in the “state of Denmark,”
that there is nothing rotten as yet in the system of capitalism. Those representatives of bourgeois literature who feel the state of things more acutely are absorbed in pessimism, doubt in the morrow, eulogy of darkness, extolment of pessimism as the theory and practice of art. And only a small section—the most honest and far-sighted writers—are trying to find a way out along other paths, in other directions, to link their destiny with the proletariat and its revolutionary struggle. . . .

That is how matters stand in capitalist countries. Not so with us. Our Soviet writer derives the material for his works of art, his subject matter, images, artistic language, and speech from the life and experience of the men and women of Dnieprostroy [site of a hydroelectric project], of Magnitostroy [a Russian mining area]. Our writer draws his material from the heroic epic of the Chelyuskin expedition [an ill-fated Russian ship that explored a northern shipping route], from the experience of our collective farms, from the creative action that is seething in all corners of our country.

In our country the main heroes of works of literature are the active builders of a new life—working men and women, men and women collective farmers, Party members, business managers, engineers, members of the Young Communist League, Pioneers. Such are the chief types and the chief heroes of our Soviet literature. Our literature is impregnated with enthusiasm and the spirit of heroic deeds. It is optimistic, but not optimistic in accordance with any “inward” animal instinct. It is optimistic in essence because it is the literature of the rising class of the proletariat, the only progressive and advanced class. Our Soviet literature is strong by virtue of the fact that it serves a new cause—the cause of socialist construction.

Comrade Stalin has called our writers engineers of human souls. What does this mean? What duties does the title confer upon you? In the first place, it means knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as “objective reality,” but to depict reality in its revolutionary development.

In addition to this, the truthfulness and historical correctness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remolding and education of the toiling people in the spirit of socialism. This method in belles lettres and literary criticism is what we call the method of socialist realism.

Our Soviet literature is not afraid of the charge of being “tendentious.” Yes, Soviet literature is tendentious, for in an epoch of class struggle there is not and cannot be a literature which is not class literature, not tendentious, allegedly non-political. . . .

To be an engineer of human souls means standing with both feet firmly planted on the basis of real life. And this in its turn denotes a rupture with romanticism of the old type, which depicted a non-existent life and non-existent heroes, leading the reader away from the antagonisms and oppression of real life into a world of the impossible, into a world of utopian dreams. Our literature, which stands with both feet firmly planted on a materialist basis, cannot be hostile to romanticism, but it must be a romanticism of a new type, revolutionary romanticism. We say that socialist realism is the basic method of Soviet belles lettres and literary criticism, and this presupposes that revolutionary romanticism should enter into literary creation as a component part, for the whole life of our Party, the whole life of the working class and its struggle consist in a combination of the most stern and sober practical work with a supreme spirit of heroic deeds and magnificent future prospects. Our Party has always been strong by virtue of the fact that it has united and continues to unite a thoroughly business-like, and practical spirit with broad vision, with a constant urge forward, with a struggle for the building of communist society. Soviet literature should be able to portray our heroes; it should be able to glimpse our tomorrow. This will be no utopian dream, for our tomorrow is already being prepared for today by dint of conscious planned work. . . .
Organize the work of your congress and that of the Union of Soviet Writers in the future in such a way that the creative work of our writers may conform to the victories that socialism has won. Create works of high attainment, of high ideological and artistic content. Actively help to remold the mentality of people in the spirit of socialism. Be in the front ranks of those who are fighting for a classless socialist society!