The Soviet Critique of a Liberator's Art: Zinovii Tolkachev and the Anti-Cosmopolitanism of the Late Stalinist Period

Eric Benjaminson
M.A. Candidate, Department of History, University of Oregon
Adviser: Dr. Julie Hessler

March 2017

Abstract

This paper examines the Soviet reaction to Zinovii Tolkachev's moving representations of Jews, Poles and Slavs in the extermination camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz. Using Russian-language primary sources, I analyze the nature of the accusations leveled against Tolkachev during Stalin's postwar "anti-cosmopolitan" campaign and the connections between these attacks, the Holocaust, and Soviet paranoias of that era. Soviet anti-Semitism played an important role in the critiques and purges of the post-war period. Yet, although the critiques are consistently anti-religious and realist, the documents do not directly critique Tolkachev's Jewishness and Jewish themes, but rather his stylistic choices and its value as propaganda for the Soviet people. His broad artistic philosophy also is savaged, setting native social realism against Tolkachev's foreign-style expressionism. These elements of the anti-cosmopolitan movement in the visual arts were part of a broad critique of representations of the Second World War applied to Jew and gentile alike, and included themes that included nationalism, pro-war sentiments, and a future-oriented propaganda for the New Soviet Man.

Introduction

The Soviet army liberated the Nazi extermination camps at Majdanek and Auschwitz between July 1944 and January 1945. In one of these units was a soldier and combat artist named Zinovii Tolkachev. Tolkachev was a Ukrainian-Jewish artist born in 1903. He became an adult in the wake of the Russian Revolution, and his expressionistic art represented both Jewish themes as well as those more amenable to Soviet realism. Immediately after the liberation of these camps, Tolkachev feverishly drew a number of lithographs and paintings -- these drawings were used in the first Soviet-Polish war crimes trials in Lublin. Despite his revolutionary pedigree, Tolkachev was in 1947 accused of various political violations: "bourgeois nationalism", "rootless cosmopolitanism", and "false worship of the West." He was purged during Stalin's postwar "anti-cosmopolitan" campaign, lost his teaching positions, and worked out of the public eye until the 1960s.

Does Tolkachev's experience help clarify whether the cultural purges of the late 1940s were founded on anti-Semitic, nationalistic, xenophobic, and/or patriotic tendencies? Using primary sources, I will analyze the accusations against him and their connections with the Holocaust and Stalin's paranoias of that era. My argument is two-fold. First, Tolkachev's case is a unique view into the complexities of Stalin's anti-cosmopolitan campaign and into the enduring effects of the Second World War on the USSR. Second, although the anti-cosmopolitan campaign is often seen as largely anti-Semitic in character, Tolkachev's case shows that it was also tied to the psychological traumas of WWII and the Holocaust, to the challenges of memorializing the Soviet wartime role, and to the paranoias implicit in the Cold War.

I do not doubt that anti-Semitism was deeply imbedded in the actions of this tense period. Yet while this no doubt played a role—boosted by the creation of the State of Israel and fear of "disloyal" Zionists—contemporary documents show an ideological critique of the artistic philosophy of Tolkachev and other visual artists, both Jewish and Christian. These critiques do not focus upon their religion, but rather their stylistic choices and, most directly, the underlying messages to the Soviet people conveyed by their art. Tolkachev was a Party member and a Soviet artist. The early artistic work of and later discrimination towards Tolkachev helps us to understand that the anti-cosmopolitan campaign involved an ideological critique of art that rejected tragic imagery of "passive" war survivors in favor of strength and victory.

The Artist and the Liberation

Born in Belarus in 1903, Tolkachev moved with his family to Kiev as a child. In 1919, he became one of the first members of the Ukraine Komsomol, supporting the Bolsheviks through agitprop art. In 1920, after a few months as an artist in the Red Army, he became responsible for the Komsomol's political education department in a Ukrainian district. In 1922, he joined the Communist Party. During this same period, Tolkachev was associated loosely with the "Kultur-Lige" Jewish cultural group.[1] This Jewish art society was closely associated with the avant-garde movement that Stalin later denounced[2] Tolkachev was thus artistically both Jewish and an exemplary revolutionary.

---

[1] "Ukraine-Jewish Culture", *Encyclopedia of Modern Jewish Culture,* ed. Glenda Abramson.

[2] G. Kazovskiĭ, *Khudozhniki Kul'tur-Ligi.* Seriiã̃"Sovremennye Issledovaniiã̃", pp. 16-22.

His revolutionary activity continued. Tolkachev served as an artist with the newspaper "Pravda" in Kiev, and from 1925-27 served again in the Red Army as a combat artist. During that service, he created a series of lithographs entitled *The Red Army*, highlighting its role as a protector of the people. He also produced a second series called *Lenin and the Masses*, in which he used an avant-garde style to stress the connection between Lenin and the Soviet people. In his illustrations of Jewish author Sholem Aleichem's books, Tolkachev created expressionistic pastels that were exhibited at a 1939 exhibition in Kiev.

Tolkachev's pre-war biography thus shows that he had a foot in three artistic "camps"—Soviet, avant-garde expressionist, and Jewish. At this time, all three tendencies served both his artistic purposes and those of the State. As we will see with his wartime art, it appears that Tolkachev genuinely hoped to combine all of these strains into one unified style.[3]

As Germany invaded the USSR in July 1941, Tolkachev was named the head of the Committee of the Communist Artists of the Ukraine and evacuated many artists and their families. He re-joined the Red Army (in spite of being thirty-eight years old) and was assigned to the 8th Independent Infantry Division, referring to himself in a letter as a "combat artist."[4] By the summer of 1944, Tolkachev was serving as a combat artist in the Political Department of the First Ukrainian Front and in July 1944, this veteran of the revolution entered the extermination camp at Majdanek, Poland.

---

[3] Boris Groys, "From Internationalism to Cosmopolitanism: Artists of Jewish Descent in the Stalin Era", in *Russian Jewish Artists in a Century of Change, 1890-1990*, ed. Susan Tumarkin Goodman. Munich, Prestel, 1995, page 86.

[4] RGALI, (Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Literatury i Iskusstva), f. 2094, op. 1, d. 907-2, p. 1; and Center for the Study and Culture of Eastern European Jews, Kiev, Ukraine, f. 001, op. 223, page 3.2 (Zinovii Tolkachev).

The Shock and the Internationalism of Tolkachev's Artistic Response

In 1967, Tolkachev told Soviet art critic G.L. Muravin:

> I stood for a long time next to the crematorium that turned into ashes Russians and
> Jews, Poles and Ukrainians, Greeks and French—people of different nationalities,
> different ages, and different religions that were concentrated here from all the ends of
> occupied Europe.[5]

Majdanek was an extermination camp for political prisoners, Jews, and Poles. The fleeing Nazis had little time to destroy the evidence, and thus Majdanek became a visual archetype of the Nazi camps. Tolkachev was ordered to document what he had witnessed. For thirty-five days, he worked feverishly, creating numerous drawings depicting the victims and survivors. These were the first accounts of an artist who had witnessed Nazi atrocities. Mirjam Rajner writes that he "created highly individualized, emotionally-charged pictures that immediately became recognizable as visual symbols depicting the Holocaust."[6] Although a sizeable minority of the dead at Majdanek were Jews, the prisoners overall were decidedly mixed by nationality and religion, and in this sense Tolkachev hewed to the Soviet internationalist line about the diversity of victims of the Nazis. His unit reached Auschwitz in January 1945.

Tolkachev's drawings are spare and direct pencil works, often on captured Nazi stationary. His subjects include shocked survivors and piles of corpses, but he also illustrates subjects more closely tied to Soviet iconography—Red Army soldiers as liberators, and inmates

---

[5] Gennadiĭ L'vovich Muravin, *Двое из многих тысяч,* Moskva, 1967, p. 101.

[6] Mirjam Rajner, "From the Shtetl to The Flowers of Auschwitz and Back: The Creation, Reception, and Destiny of Zinovii Tolkachev's Art", in Heftrich, et al, *Images of Rupture* (2016), page 160.

in revolt.[7] Tolkachev made efforts to universalize the diversity of the victims and his style is not

unlike the expressionism of Goya or Diego Rivera. In political terms, he either universalized his

victims because he believed that ideological turn of mind or because he felt that he could not

focus on only the Jewish victims. And, of course, at Auschwitz more than at Majdanek, the

majority of the dead and living <u>were</u> Jews from all the nations of Europe.

Few of his drawings have a specifically Judaic theme: his portrait of Jesus in Majdanek

shows Jesus wearing the Nazi camp symbols for Jews, Poles, and political prisoners. In another

drawing a proud but shattered prisoner wears the symbology of a Pole. His drawings of women

and children obscure national or religious origin. The one explicitly Jewish reference is of a

Jewish male's prayer shawl (a *taleskoten*) stuck to the barbed wire of the camp fence, evincing

tragic loss. His drawing of a Red Army trooper surrounded by liberated children is stylistically

very close to traditional Soviet Realism.[8]

The Continuum of the War, Anti-Cosmopolitanism, and Anti-Semitism

The Stalinist "anti-cosmopolitan" campaign of 1946-53 that swept up Tolkachev is often seen

as largely a manifestation of anti-Semitism. Yet in its "formative" years, it was also a campaign

tied to xenophobia, the horrors of the recent war, burgeoning national tensions activated by

that conflict, and confusion about how to memorialize wartime atrocities.

The Marxist belief in "internationalism" did not put to rest concerns about

"cosmopolitanism". Bringing the revolution to the wider world was one thing, but in a

domestic Soviet context, socialism was opposed to diversity; the drawing together of classes

---

[7] Rajner, "From the Shtetl to The Flowers of Auschwitz and Back...." **op.cit**. pages 163-64.
[8] **Ibid,** page 164.

and leveling economic resources were the ideology's hallmarks.[9] Soviet concern was with

relations with "the other"—in this case, capitalist countries with their "alien unpredictability

and enmity."[10] Cosmopolitanism was thus defined as the ability to move between political

spheres. For the Soviet intelligentsia, exposure to the West and to Western ideas was a

dangerous space.

The cultural campaign that led to the anti-cosmopolitan movement began soon after

the war. In August 1946, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet Andrei Zhdanov gave a speech

stipulating that "Communist morality" was the sole directive for cultural activity. Almost

immediately, art forms faced negative politicization that was directed at several targets: works

that were "irrelevant" to Soviet reality; "groveling" and "genuflection" to the West and its

values and achievements; and "bourgeois nationalism." This latter became a trap for Jews.

Socialist realism involved a "rehabilitation" of national art and was officially defined as "an art

national in form and socialist in content." Artists were to maintain links with their own

"national culture" while avoiding "bourgeois nationalism." Threading this narrow path was

especially difficult for Jews, given the less-than-complete attitude toward their national status

and because, with their links to Jewish communities outside the USSR and their concentration

in business and intelligentsia professions, they were open to accusations of links to "bourgeois"

elements.[11]

---

[9]. Humphrey, Caroline, "Cosmopolitanism and kosmopolitizm in the political life of Soviet citizens." *Focaal* 44 (2004): 138+. *Academic OneFile*. Web. 24 Oct. 2016, p. 146.

[10] **Ibid.**

[11] Groys, "From Internationalism to Cosmopolitanism: Artists of Jewish Descent in the Stalin Era", **op.cit**. pages 81-82.

Early approbation notwithstanding, the critique of Tolkachev began in an article that highlights the complex elements that I believe lay behind the attacks on his work. It also illustrates the context of postwar Soviet views on the Holocaust and cosmopolitanism. In all of the writings of both Christian and Jewish critics of Tolkachev, the substance remains the same: the anti-Zionist interpretations of his work are undertones to the overt criticism of tragic passivity in favor of a victorious and future-oriented propaganda. The article that sparked this critique, in Pravda in October 1947, begins with a broad complaint about his adoption of a "decadent, Western, expressionistic style." The author, a Christian Ukrainian artist named Vovchenko, then turns to his main argument: Tolkachev portrays the Soviet people as "weak victims, a hopeless group under the heels of the Hitlerites… exhausted and tortured by the enemy, not victorious as they have earned the right to be portrayed." Vovchenko critiques the series of paintings "Christ in Majdanek" for Tolkachev's decision to replace the hero image of the victorious Soviet soldier-liberator with that of a passive, emaciated Christ. (In a later speech given by Academy of Arts' delegate Сысоев, a similar criticism was leveled at Tolkachev, whose works *ironically enough* "preach the submissiveness of Christianity, non-resistance and turning the other cheek.)"[12]

Returning to Vovchenko, we discover the only specifically Judaic critique of Tolkachev that I have found and it is in part sympathetic to the Jewish wartime experience. Here is the key paragraph:

---

[12] П.М. Сысоев, "Борьба за социалистический реализм в советском изобразительном искусстве", in *Сессии Академии художеств СССР. Третья сессия: Вопросы теории и критики советского изобразительного искусства*, Москва, February 1949, pp. 35-36.

> "A sea of working-class Jewish blood was shed by the Fascist executioners in Majdanek, in Auschwitz and at Babi Yar, at the hands of Hitler's dogs, the blood of hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens and other nationalities. It is a shame for the sacred memory of the Jews who died at the hands of the Nazi sadists that there is an element of bourgeois nationalism in Tolkachev's work which he uses in an attempt to snatch the Jewish victims out of the close-knit family of Soviet peoples who fought together against the Fascist aggressors. Only those with a limited view of the concept of nationality might argue that the tragedy of Auschwitz was only of the Jewish people rather than a tragedy of all freedom-loving peoples…"[13]

Interpreting this statement must be subjective, for it at once promotes membership of the Jews in the USSR while it also subsumes the Jewish experience of the Holocaust under nationalist Soviet memory. What the critique does identify is its place as part of a postwar intellectual continuum: the USSR was concerned to show its people as strong and unbowed, united by revolutionary conviction and victory, and ready to engage in the class struggle against capitalism and Zionism in the wake of the War.

Anti-cosmopolitanism was such that artistic renderings of the camps could only show a Soviet rather than a Jewish tragedy. But, in point of fact, only a small proportion of the victims of Majdanek and Auschwitz were citizens of the Soviet Union. While there were some Soviet POWs in both camps, the vast majority of inmates at Majdanek were either Polish political prisoners or Jews, and at Auschwitz, the majority were Jews from all over Eastern and Western Europe, rarely from the USSR. We can thus see that cultural authorities were antagonistic to portrayals of victims of fascism who did not fight back, regardless of country, religion or ethnicity.

---

[13] "В атмосфере либерального примиренства", *Київська Правда* (October 19, 1947) , p 3.

The Soviet critique in 1949 moved from an attack on ideology and form to a somewhat-veiled attack on Jews and foreign influences, with the first association of Tolkachev with "cosmopolitanism [...] oriented toward the rotten bourgeois art of the West." [14]. Yet, there is still no specific identification of Tolkachev as Jewish, and in fact he is accused of preaching Christian mores. During the anti-cosmopolitan campaign, Christian and Jewish artists alike were censured, as one critique of the Christian artist Ovchinnikov states, for "distorting the image and memory, and falsely highlighting the spinelessness, of the Soviet peoples."[15] In May 1949, Pravda stated that Tolkachev "expressed elements of corrupt and depressing Western bourgeois art[...]mixed with[...]rootless cosmopolitanism[...]insulting the dignity of the Soviet people, showing them as spineless victims." [16] Although his critics were often acting out of anti-Semitic motives, once again we are seeing a continuum of criticism that starts with the Soviet experience of the Great Patriotic War. With the ensuing threat of a Hot or Cold War with the West, Soviet Man writ large cannot afford the weakness of "fatalism", and Jewish victims, while noted, must be seen only as a subset of "Soviet" human losses.

Conclusion

Tolkachev's political persecution during the anti-cosmopolitan campaign was linked to his artistic philosophy and its conflict with Soviet cultural directives. After Stalin's death and the thaw, Tolkachev returned to his position as a state artist. The question of his Jewishness was only partially the reason for his dismissal, and did not interfere with his reinstatement.

---

[14] П.М. Сысоев, "Борьба за социалистический реализм в советском изобразительном искусстве", in *Сессии Академии художеств СССР. Третья сессия: Вопросы теории и критики советского изобразительного искусства*, Москва, February 1949, pp. 35-36.

[15] "За дальнейший подъ'ем украинского советского изобразительного искусства", *Правда Украины* (May 25, 1949) , page 1.

[16] **Ibid.,** p. 1.

There is a strange episode that adds confusion but also some understanding of the broader Soviet cultural policy of the period. After Tolkachev had lost his job, he was praised in a Soviet journal while the culture wars were still at their height. In the June 1950 issue of the popular magazine *Огонёк* appeared an article by one of the USSR's most doctrinaire Soviet painters, Fyodor Reshetnikov. Reshetnikov praises the contributions of Soviet artists who at a Moscow international art show exhibited works on world peace as a "weapon against the militarism of the bourgeois West". He specifically praised the Ukrainian Tolkachev as one of the "masters actively defending the cause of world peace."[17] Is it possible that this excursion outside of the anti-cosmopolitan framework occurred because the Soviets understood that Tolkachev's art, memorializing innocent victims from the USSR and Europe as a whole, served to help convince the wider world of the USSR's commitment to peace more than did the standard visual of Socialist Realism? His paintings might have led observers to conclude that the USSR sympathized with cowed and brutalized civilians, and thus had the empathy to be accepted as a nation interested in peace.

In 1965, during the 25th anniversary celebrations marking the end of the War, Tolkachev's Auschwitz drawings were finally published. For the next ten years, he taught in his restored faculty position, and died at home in Kiev in 1977. The text accompanying the publication of his Auschwitz drawings stressed the international character of the prisoners, and exaggerated the Communists in the camps who led revolts against the Fascists.[18] Even then, the memorialization of the War by the State had to stress themes of resistance and unity of the

---

[17] "Оружием Кисти", *Огонёк*, June 4, 1950, p. 25.
[18] Rajner, "From the Shtetl to The Flowers of Auschwitz and Back…." **op.cit**. p.167.

Soviet peoples. This made Tolkachev the beneficiary of a type of political schizophrenia: his drawings could be used to build international sympathy for Communist strength, but not for their losses nor their victimhood. And while at times his "expressionism" and "formalism" offended the cultural bosses in Moscow, they were happy to promote his same artistic works when the audience was right.

In closing, Tolkachev's experience highlights the cultural struggle that consumed the Soviets in what they perceived as a dangerous postwar environment. Insofar as his work partly memorialized Soviet heroism and liberator status, Tolkachev was more protected than were theater critics or others who were purged because of their "cosmopolitanism" or their Jewish themes and background. Tolkachev had many works tied to pre-war Soviet Jewish life that adopted a Western expressionist style. Nevertheless, although he displayed a "bourgeois" empathy for victims, he also served a purpose for Soviet cultural officials who used a complex set of algorithms in calibrating their persecutions of artists in this tense period of heightened national stress.