The Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow (currently in temporary premises while the gallery itself is being refurbished) is dedicated to contemporary Russian painting and sculpture and includes marvellous sections on nineteenth and twentieth century art, most of which was buried from 1930 to the early 1970s. At the end of a series of corridors, one comes to an area popularly known as the Stalin room. In here the art is not impressionist, post-impressionist, surreal or expressionist (which the immediately preceding rooms are), but Social Realist, or perhaps, more accurately, Hagiographically Representationalist.

Ivan Davies
Here are Stalin, Svetlana Alliluyeva (Stalin’s daughter), General Timoshenko, Maxim Gorky, etc. as they would like to have looked (Gorky looks like a romanticized Mark Twain). Pride of place is given to an enormous painting of Stalin and his war cabinet, with Moscow unfolding through a vast window behind. It is every corporate dream of how he would like to be remembered (and, indeed, Soviet representational art was selling well in the last years of Thatcher’s Britain, as the business executives tried to find an aesthetic to match that was commensurate with their perceived status).

Through the wall in the next gallery is a collection of contemporary paintings (for sale). Most of them are heavily symbolic, apocalyptic scenes, not on themes which go back beyond the nineteenth century. They evoke Redon, Schwabe, de Chavannes, Moreau, Delville and even further back to Bosch and Piranesi. The contrast is traumatically real, and based on a Russian sense of total disaster. All of them have been painted in the past five years, and, if not for the fact that they are painted in Russia, might be mistaken as promotion material for Western horror “B” movies. But the Draculas are Lenin, Stalin, Brezhnev, and Gorbatchev. If, in another adjoining gallery, the geometrical and dreamlike work of El Lissitzky, which did so much to affect the architecture and industrial design of the Soviet Union, receives great prominence, here it might never have existed. In Kiev, St.Vladimir’s Cathedral, built in the late nineteenth century to commemorate the 900th anniversary of Christianity in Russia, is a fully-functioning church of the Ukrainian Orthodox church, although it served in time as a museum, and was damaged by the Germans in the Second World War. Virtually every art object in it is an imitation of traditional Byzantine works, and most were painted or recreated in the post-war period. The major exception is a Virgin and Child by Vuatazov, a non-iconic symbolist portrayal from the inter-war years, which shows how Ukrainian religious art might have developed in other circumstances. In these moments of uncertainty it is barely conceivable that its hour has come round at last.

The Byzantine, the symbolist, the social realist, the representationalist, the gothic, the mechanistic—all seem to be the competing styles of the Russian eye here and there punctuated by the abstract-symbolism of Chagall, who represented another culture borrowing into the Russian.

Culture, Perestroika and Glasnost: The Case of the Writers’ Union

At the heart of the Soviet dilemma has been the problem of culture. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s the issues of education, intellectual freedom, workers’ control of the processes of cultural production, the colorization of the media, and the importance of ideology in determining the direction of Cominform’s production as many experiments, manifestoes, editorials and blood-lenting as any of the economic issues. The classic experiment took place under Annylyaychik’s period as Commissar of Education (1917-1929). (“The people themselves, consciously or unconsciously, must evolve their own culture,” he declared in 1917. This was echoed by Lenin’s wife, Krupskaya: “We were not afraid to organize a revolution. Let us not be afraid of the people... Our job is to help the people in fact to take their fate into their hands”). The experiments were characterized by attempts to work with existing institutions and also to help to set up parallel ones, with Narkompros, the People’s Commissariat for Education, being both the guide and mediator. But Narkompros represented in many respects the democratic, culturist tendency in the Revolution. For all the problems he had with schoolteachers and university lecturers (who almost all went on strike), actors, writers and film directors, Lunacharsky believed in the liberating potential of education and culture, and fought for culture as an important (maybe the most important) element in social change. He is one of the brightest lights in the early Bolshevik pantheon.

But Lunacharsky had serious problems with the Party. Narkompros at the beginning of the New Economic Policy had about seven percent of the Union budget, almost all of which went to schools, universities and the Academy of Sciences, though it continued to have some control over music, film, theatre, the fine arts, and literature. Its main competitor for control of the cultural apparatuses was Glavpolitput (the chief political department of the Commissariat of Communications, which had ten percent of the budget), Vesenkha (the Supreme Council of the National Economy, which had nine percent of the budget), and VTSIK (the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Congress of Soviets) which was responsible for the distribution of printed matter. Under NEP the budget for Narkompros (and its power) declined, to the extent that fees were charged for schooling. Glavpolitput progressively took over cultural funding and administration, and academic research was increasingly funded by VTSIK. Lunacharsky ceased to be commissar because the high schools were put under Vesenkha control. The cut and thrust of the debates that had characterized cultural policy in the 1920s were foreclosed, both because of the trials that took place in the 1930s, and because of the complete subordination of all cultural institutions to the Party, the economy and the war effort (from 1941-5). As is well-known, most of the major writers, theatre directors, film-makers, intellectuals and artists of the 1920s had been killed by 1940 or had been forced into exile. If a Marxist debate continued to exist, it was either directed discreetly towards the West (as in the work of Lukacs), or as masking terrorism and censorship in the East (as in the infamous attack by Zhadnov in 1947 on the satirist Mikhail Zoshchenko and the poet Anna Akhmatova). In education, the debates on school pedagogy were increasingly influenced by the regional ideas of Anton Makarenko, former NKVD organizer of labour colonies and camps for juvenile delinquents. And yet “culture” continued to be made. In 1934 the First Congress of Soviet Writers was held in Moscow, following the dissolution of RAPP (the proletkult-based Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) and foundation of the Writers’ Union of the USSR. By that time the centralization of the cultural apparatuses had been completed, with the control of printing,
distribution, publishing, radio, film and theatre firmly established at the centre. The concept of "autonomy" of cultural bodies had long been discarded, with the Central Committee having absolute power of veto, even over the management of obscure literary journals in Leningrad or Alma-Ata (a prerogative that it periodically claimed, as when, in 1947, it decided to close the literary magazine Lesnograd because of its "viperous" content). Thus the creation of the Writers' Union, as well as other cultural unions (Cinematographic Workers, Actors, Artists) took on the appearance of their being company unions to the one great State enterprise. However, after the death of Stalin, even more so after Khruzhchev's speech at the Twentieth Congress, running of the system itself controlled by the media in so far as the writer was considered essential to the smooth movement of the system. The Union itself controlled 120 journals, at local and national levels. The price of course, was that the writer (including screenwriters, journalists and playwrights) had access to the media in so far as the writer was considered essential to the smooth movement of the system. When, as in the spectacular case of Pasternak, Brodsky, Boldinhitsyana, Sakharov, and several other writers, the writer was declared persona non-grata by the Party, the Writers' Union did not stand by its members, and frequently aided in censoring them. Its attitude to Novyi Mir in the fifties was that of unmitigated hostility, and was responsible for Tvardovsky's sacking as editor twice, first in 1954, and again in 1970, when the Khruzhchev thaw was overthrown by Brezhnev's heavy-handed, neopatriotic politics. Something of a purge of the union leadership took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the ambition at least allowed for the admission that other writers existed than those who had been officially sanctioned by the Union in general. But what really affected the attitude of the union executive, once again, were issues which were beyond its immediate control. Peregrinova and Glasnost provided the context within which the monopoly that the Union had on publishing, distribution and accreditation was broken. The growth of independent publications and publishing houses in the late eighties and the emergence of separatist movements in Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Georgia, Moldova, and, in particular, Ukraine challenged the rasion d'etre of the Union. The circulation of Union publications declined sharply in the mid-eighties, leading to some internal questioning. (Was the Union really representing ideology, writers, workers?) Today there is certainly a major segment of the Union that supports "Pamyat" (a nationalist group) that announces that Russia must be for the Russians, and that all foreign influences — Jewish, American, Lithuanian, British or Asian must be purged to clean the Russian soul; it is certainly anti-Semitic and anti minority nationalism. In 1986 a new organization, the "April Group", composed largely of Western-oriented intellectuals, emerged to challenge the hegemony of the Union. It almost immediately gained control of the executive of the Leningrad Writers' Union, and by 1990 claimed that 30 percent of the members of the Writers' Union of the USSR supported it. Politically it was backed in Moscow by the city council who in 1991 granted it a lease on a building. Since then, the April Group has been affiliated with the international organization PEN, though not necessarily for the best of motives; it allows delegates access to international travel, which is an important commodity. For a long time, the Decemberists' faction, which has been in opposition with PEN, said it was not worth even wearing the PEN badge. PEN has no official status. If PEN had real status, it would have the ability to lobby for the rights of writers. This is a crucial issue. PEN is a self-selected bunch of academics doing a lot of ideological propaganda. It is essentially a right-wing organization that is not concerned with the fate of the writer. PEN is not a union. PEN is a self-selected bunch of academics doing a lot of ideological propaganda. It is essentially a right-wing organization that is not concerned with the fate of the writer. PEN is a self-selected bunch of academics doing a lot of ideological propaganda. It is essentially a right-wing organization that is not concerned with the fate of the writer. PEN is a self-selected bunch of academics doing a lot of ideological propaganda. It is essentially a right-wing organization that is not concerned with the fate of the writer. 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kind of person who has become prominent in the Union (and possibly in the higher reaches of the Government) since perestroika destroyed the firm foundations of Marxist rhetoric that were left after Brezhnev reduced the Party to being the agent of a Caesarian nepotism. In spite of his military writings, he is not an expansionist imperialist; he is, however, troubled by the "intellectuals," who are out of touch with the spirit of the country. The Writers' Union has a mandate—to make them realize their political responsibilities, and to maintain the continuity of an ongoing commitment to the working-class and peasant writers. He is particularly fierce on the "April" group, those whose god is Vaclav Havel, "a caricature of a President." "If I had the power, I would demand of the April group that they apologize for all the nasty things they have said about me. I have given them every opportunity to write and publish and reduct. I am a democrat, but my patience is wearing thin." And then he becomes very eloquent in saying what he would do if he were cultural Czar:

If I had full dictatorial powers, I would construct a cultural Empire. I would build a new pyramid. I would search in all the cultures for mutual goals, and create a mystic structure that would unite them all. As Cultural Dictator, I would have many faults, including repeating the crimes of Stalin. But everyone would be united for a common purpose.

Prokhanov is the once and future king, and his shadow hovers over all other deliberations of writers, theatre directors, film-makers. He is the populist anti-intellectual who sees a role for writers as part of a "well-oiled machine." Thus the long debates of the 1920s, the theoretical issues of proletarian versus bourgeois writing, phenomenological Marxism versus structuralism, even Party loyalty versus opposition, are reduced to maintaining law and order. I asked him whether he was a Marxist. "I am not a member of the Party. I am a Conservative. Marx, Hegel, Kant, Freud... do they really address the issues of the survival of our culture? All of them might provide useful tools in understanding what is happening to us, but I'm afraid I do not have those tools. I am simply a writer, a small cell in a big machine."

The Writers' Union, for all the bombast of Prokhanov's talk, should not be written off yet. The Union has about 10,000 members across the USSR, and the control by the government over the means of distribution, of printing presses and the supply of paper is still very great, as is its control of other media of communication. Thus between them the Union and different levels
course, a solution which owes nothing to Marxism, except in rhetoric, and as a claim to legitimacy. The major change from the old Bolshevik position is merely one of the nature of the economic model to be used. To quote Kagarlitsky again, "If the Bolsheviks viewed the economy as one big factory then, according to the West, the intelligentsia should be run as one big supermarket." Soviet literature operates as the supermarket of Russian culture, though within a framework that is classically Soviet paternalistic. The opposition to this view of culture is fragmented, incoherent, despairing. At this moment, the intelligentsia in the Soviet Union are engaged in an act of re-creation and re-grouping. The traditional sense of the intelligentsia (see the accompanying interview with Tatyana Tolstaya) was that of being the collective moral conscience of the society and it was a tradition that was carried on, underground, by poets and short story writers throughout the 1960s and 1970s, writing, reading into audio cassettes (paper was always scarce), and trying to get published anywhere. Much of this literature, composed in elevators, boiler rooms, kitchens and waiting lobbies disappeared though some of it appeared in Sanktuar or, now, 20 years later in newspapers and magazines. It was an ongoing resistance to the policies of the government and of the Writers' Union. The oppositional intelligentsia, however, was, more or less killed off by the remorseless fear of them by Stalin and the specter of the Party's terror. But it was inevitable that the idea of the intelligentsia would be reborn when the conditions were ripe. But this intelligentsia was one which had, with almost immediate community and, for some, to the West, but ultimately none to the matrix of the culture of the society in which it lived, those links having been effectively sundered by the purges of the 1930s and the slow emasculation of talent in the 1940s and 1950s. The rebirth of intellectual life therefore was bound by the pitting of the counts of "commissary" and "Writers-secretaire," both of them highly problematical concepts, and particularly because the middle ground was occupied by the Writers' Union and the upper reaches of the Party. The intelligentsia did not really exist anymore. It did not have a life or a series of connecting links of its own: "Life," as Milan Kundera remarked, "is elsewhere." Neither professional in the Western sense, nor truly communist in the Czech, it began to operate in no man's-land.

This sense of lack of purpose and of intellectual blockage was marked by all the writers, playwrights, directors, critics, cultural activists that I met in the USSR. Serially, I will list my impressions.

- Svetlana Vragova, 38, Director of the Theatre on Spartakov Square (housed in an old Stock Exchange), passionately argued for the theatre which would be apolitical, exposing the iniquities of the present system, but knowing that it would get no-one anywhere. Theatre had to display the reality of the present, while being conscious of the Stalinist heritage (see Sobolovin, below). Her plays have been performed in Chicago, San Francisco as well as Moscow.
- Israel Metter, 88, Jewish novelist, short story writer from Leningrad, whose novel, Fireawards, written 30 years ago about an agricultural community on the Russian-Finnish border, is now published in Russian, English and German, said that nothing of any consequence was being written now. Everyone was busy reading the material that had suddenly become disappear and lining up for food.
- Alla Gerber, 50, film critic, whose son had just produced a film based on one of Babol's Odessa stories, argued that all the new films would be instantly put on the shelf because the new market economy allowed everyone to catch up on the old Hollywood movies which were cheaper to import. Thus the old Stalinist censorship and the new authoritarian market liberalism amounted to the same thing.
- Alexander Sobolovin, Theatre Director and chief archivist/animator of the...
Stanislavsky Centre. In a sense the Stanislavsky cult is to theatre what the Writers' Union is to writing. Lunacharsky having come to a deal with Stanislavsky in 1918, to recognize the pre-eminence of the Stanislavsky school in Soviet drama, a deal which has more or less stuck since then. Svoboda, however, reflected the winds of change. To maintain the Stanislavsky heritage, the great man's country home was being restored as a museum and acting school with foreign aid, mainly from the US and Germany. It was important to maintain standards in the theatre against potential barbaric incursions.

Alexander Galman, 50th, playwright, probably the best known playwright from the USSR in the West (particularly in France and New York, but that is the penalty for being avant-garde), saw theatre everywhere as having no place to go apart from exploring the Kafkaesque realities of all the bureaucracies that we live under.

A group of people from the Writers' Union in Kiev (including Valeriy Shevchuck, Igor Rynanuk, Volodymyr Musienko, Mykhailo Hryhorov, Paro Hrymik and Solona Pavlychko as well as Ivan Drach, President of Rukh, in a separate column) being the founding congress of Rukh, evocative of being at a convention of the Parti Quebecois, though without the sense that they know what they are doing, apart from trying to get on the road to Ukrainian culture. Using the Writers' Union as the agency of a separatist culture might seem bizarre, but what structures are there left? The magazine, newspaper that the Union publishes in Kiev as autonomous Ukrainian writing depend on the sponsorship from Moscow. Has anybody figured out what will happen if Moscow cuts off the print-run? Is there a sense of Ukrainian which is not based on purely separatist sentiment? The idea of nationalism is exciting, but what if it is not only idea? Is there, anywhere, a community of which they are a part, a theory of dissent except the gut feeling that linguistic community is important and that life is elsewhere?

Galina Drobova, one of the founders of the April group, out of whose apartment the annual journal April and the general conclaves of the group have emanated. Certainly a group founded on a sense of the "Western" intellectual, whose antennae are tuned to the New York Review of Books, Nouvelle Observatoires the London Review of Books, maybe even Titkos. And, of course, the real problem is that the Soviet Union does not have a space for Western-style intellectuals. The space that April tries to occupy is precisely that which has been left vacant by the demise of the old intelligentsia. April wants to occupy the moral space, but has not yet been convincing enough to demonstrate that that is not a space whose audience is (because of the form within which the issues are put) either absurd or dead.

Tatyana Tolstaya, short story writer, distantly related to Leo Tolstoy, who spends her time alternating between Moscow and the USA. She showed unmitigated hostility to the Writers' Union, which she thought should be closed down, though she also thought that an organization like PEN, as a purely advocacy group, might have a place. She was quite hostile to the idea of the necessity for a woman's movement (as was Drobova) seeing it as a feminist equivalent of Proletcult. She argued that writers should be published because they were good, not because they belonged to a union or were women.

Valentina Konstantinova, sociologist, deputy director of the Centre for Gender Studies at the Academy of Sciences (which I met in Prague, who argued strongly for the necessity of a feminist movement, particularly now as the rhetoric of Marxism gave way to that of the market. If women had received some backing under the old regime, now they received absolutely none. It was time to encourage feminist writing.

These interviews represent a cross-section of the positions adopted by some members of the creative intelligentsia. In addition, some background facets are illuminating in knowing what people think, read, do. Prada is down from a circulation of 2 million to 200,000 in one year. The weekly Argumenti i Fakti, a cross between People magazine, USA Today and Index on Censorship, sells an astounding 32 million copies a week. A wide array of brochures and newsletters dealing with everything from astrology to business forecasts are available at the street corners and in the entrances to the Metro, mainly German toursim line up to be seen eating at McDonalds, and Rupert Murdoch's Sky TV has a regular slot on Moscow TV producing rock music. George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four has now sold ten million copies, and, while independent newspaper reporters write and make film right across the the Soviet Union, the amount of this material shown on Soviet TV is very low.

But the real faceouts are elsewhere. In Hungary, after the introduction of the free market economy, all the daily papers are owned by Rupert Murdoch or Robert Maxwell and all the local papers by the Springer group. The production of serious literature has declined (the state subsidized Dickens and Zola, while Orwell, Zamyatin and Havel were produced in samizdat). The soft porn that was encouraged by the State publishing houses in the mid-eighties has given way to an avalanche of Harlequin romances, Pottsop, and worse. Meanwhile in Poland, most of the publishing houses are going bankrupt under the privatization laws, and even the schools cannot get textbooks.

And in the former East Germany, the KGB has had to relax its grip in all communities. The Berliner Ensemble survives because of a potential outburst from the West and the possible loss of tourist dollars.

The threat of the market therefore hangs over everyone. In a society without values, the valueless dollar imposes itself. (Not for nothing did Gorbachev and Thatcher get on so well if they shared anything it was a touching faith in old culture as marketable commodity but no faith in the peoples' ability to create culture). There is no evidence that into this vacuum a Prokhanov will not project himself and impose a solution.

When I met Prokhanov, I was struck by the amazing collection of butterflies that were displayed in his apartment in Pushkin Square, above McDosad, with a crippled Coca-Cola sign blocking "Coca," "Coca" (through the window). The butterflies were framed in glass cases, each containing a particular genus of butterfly; no two were alike, native to light blue in another, bright yellow to cream in another, and so on. Sixteen frames in all. "Where did you get them?" I asked. "Nicaragua, Vietnam, Mozambique, Angola, Cambodia, Cuba, Afghanistan," he replied. "But I did not shoot them, I caught them in a net." One thinks of the writers under Prokhanov's command, and the ambition to trap them in one "mystic structure." Prokhanov is currently the last in a line that began with Lenin and Lunacharsky, the head of what has been described as the "greatest cultural experiment since the Middle Ages." That experiment owed a lot to men more intelligent than him, who read their Hegel and Marx. Will the experiment die as Prokhanov has a shootout in the cultural supermarket? What will be left with more dead butterflies?

The threat of the market hangs over everyone.

In a society without values, the valueless dollar imposes itself.

Jean Davies is a member of the Books/ Lines collective. He was in Moscow as the invitation of the Soviet Academy of Sciences, and his trip was funded by a grant from the Ontario Arts Council.