

## IMPLEMENTING COMMUNISM, NEGOTIATING MODERNISM PICASSO AND HIS ART IN THE EASTERN BLOCK

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On October the fifth, *L'Humanité*, the press organ of the French communists announced Pablo Picasso's entering the communist party of France.<sup>1</sup>

Three days before, in Nazi occupied Poland, the Warsaw uprising—the last desperate strain of the Polish underground state—had capitulated after two months of fighting. After the defeat of the uprising, there was no power to compete against the marionette communist committee (PKWN), which was later transformed into the temporary government. The troops that remained from the underground army were consistently and violently pacified by the Red Army, the NKWD and its Polish younger brother, KBW (Korpus Bezpieczeństwa Wewnętrznego—The Internal Security Corps).<sup>2</sup>

Jerzy Borejsza previously name Benjamin Goldberg), was the former Red Army officer and member of the communist committee that was responsible for the propaganda and that, some years later, would invite Picasso to the Peace Congress in Wrocław in an effort to elevate Communism in the minds of the cultural elite. He wanted to create “the new intelligentsia,” as he said.<sup>3</sup> His brother Józef Różański, previously named Józef Goldberg, crushed the anticommunist opposition in interrogation rooms using methods that were as violent as those of the Nazis.<sup>4</sup>

The roles of the brothers reflect the double-faced policy of the Communists while the power of the Soviet agents was still unconfirmed in the areas gained by Stalin in Yalta. It was the policy of the stick and carrot. The elite of the art world and the intellectuals were granted the carrot: their books were edited in large amounts, art magazines were accessible for the painters and sculptors, and careers in the new structures were available.

The policy of the new establishment in the first decade after World War II was to emphasize and take advantage of the support of intellectuals as a means of legitimizing the system.<sup>5</sup>

Using the term “gentle revolution,” invented by Jerzy Borejsza, they started the battle for the minds of artists and writers.<sup>6</sup>

Since the battle for Picasso's mind seemed to be won by the French Communist Party on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October, 1944, he became an excellent propaganda tool for the Mid-Eastern communists. In a number of articles, Picasso was presented as the model of the committed contemporary artist.<sup>7</sup>

Why was the example of Picasso so important in post-war Poland and in other countries of the region?

The resistance of the artistic society—especially the part connected with modernist trends—was rather vestigial. A great

number of artists were left-wing or involved in the communist movement before the war (especially in Czechoslovakia). Their anxiety and fears was caused by Socialist Realism as the “compulsory” trend in the USSR. In Poland artists knew Socialist Realism from the shows of Russian art which took place before 1939. During the time of first Soviet occupation in Lvov and Białystok in 1939, some artists could experience Socialist Realism.<sup>8</sup> It was perceived by the Mid-Eastern modernists as the contradiction of freedom and progress in art.

Exposing Picasso's political engagement by communist propaganda created an impression that there was no obstacle for artists to support communism and stay modernist. For this reason, the modernists could feel comfortable in the new regime, especially as Picasso was the guarantee of freedom.

In every country of the region (my research refers to Poland, Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Hungary)<sup>9</sup> there was a debate raised in art magazines published by the regime focusing on two postulates: social engagement of the artists, and realism in art. These were presented by politicians and critics connected with communists as the most desirable features of the new art and artists whose attitude would properly stand up to the demands of the history. Avant-garde artists and critics didn't deny those postulates. After the horrors of war it was clear for them that artists had to engage in the creation of a better world. But in their texts one may notice a kind of negotiation of terms, such as realism and social engagement in order to make them integrate: modernist form and socialist content.

The notion of humanism (in times when humanistic values were questioned) was then a binder and Picasso and his art became its example.

In his article “Culture and politics,” the Czech art critic Jindřich Chaloupecký pointed out that post-war Czechoslovakia faced the civilizational choice between Eastern socialism and Western modernism. Nevertheless, as he argued, none must be rejected, because there is a possibility to combine both directions.<sup>10</sup> The art of Picasso and the poetry of Paul Eluard were examples that the acceptance of socialism in art did not necessarily require the abandonment of the achievements of modernism. Socialism as the only way of extricating humanity from a deep crisis should not exclude human heritage, but rather make use of it.

In Poland, a similar point of view was presented by the artists associated with the “Group of Young Artists” and the critics accompanying them. Tadeusz Kantor and Mieczysław Porebski, the most important Polish artist and art critic of the

time, wrote in the manifesto of the Group of Young Artists: “for those of us who, in the darkest times of the occupation, stood by the writers and poets of the cultural resistance movement, Picasso’s *Guernica* became the most amazing human, human manifestation.”<sup>11</sup>

So, the art of Picasso, with *Guernica* as his most important masterpiece, is a synthesis of all the trends of modern art and may be the reflection of the real demand of the new era. The notion of a new era was understood as the comprehensive reality born after the horror of the war. In the shadow of catastrophe, humanity and its environment could no longer be described in academic language. It was only Modernism, with its expressionist means and deformations of superficial viewpoints, that was able to touch the core of reality. This was the point of what Porębski described as intensified realism.

German Surrealist and critic Heinz Trökes described Picasso’s art in a similar way, calling it spiritual realism. Referring to *Guernica* and the war pictures by Picasso, he wrote: “at a time, when everyone is deprived from humanity and humanistic convictions, Picasso does not create the portraits of individuals, but pictures of disintegrated women with their faces broken by tears, resting on armchairs, with their faces showing eyes on their foreheads broken by fear, eyes that would call for help from somewhere on another planet. These are the pictures of our time.”<sup>12</sup>

Trökes’s article represents one of the points of view expressed in the discussion held in the East German periodical *Bildende Kunst* in 1947-48. The debate touched upon the problem of modernist and abstract art. His point of view was not a dominant one in the discussion. The main opinion expressed was that of Heinz Lüdecke, who summed up the discussion.<sup>13</sup> The author described Picasso as the decadent artist, but he underlined that this was not an insulting definition—his art was simply connected with the decadent phase of the bourgeoisie, following the Marxist thesis that consciousness is defined by existence.

Lüdecke’s point of view is the beginning of the new period in the reception of Picasso after the war in the region.

In 1948, when the power of communists was improved, they tightened their policy towards the West and Picasso’s paintings were no longer in favor. Though Picasso was one of the most important guests at the Peace Congress in Wrocław in 1948, initially inspired by Joseph Stalin (the organizer was Jerzy Borejsza),<sup>14</sup> there was an attempt to avoid showing his paintings. Only a small exhibition of Picasso’s ceramic work was organized, which presented Picasso not as an artist creating incomprehensible paintings, but as a craftsman producing the wares of a pottery workshop.<sup>15</sup>

Picasso’s ceramics were not what his Polish admirers had expected to see. “A retrospective exhibition of his work could have become at that time, an unforgettable artistic event,” recalls Helena Syrkusowa, an architect associated with Modernism who took care of Picasso during his visit in Poland.<sup>16</sup> “But there was no attempt to organize an exhibition of work, nor even a lecture or meeting with students of architecture, sculpture or painting.” The artist was honoured

by the state and presented by the president with high distinction, but at the same time, he was isolated from the environment of contemporary artist.<sup>17</sup> Picasso’s lover, François Gilot, recalls how during the official congressional dinner, a Russian accused Picasso of cultivating decadence in art through his “impressionist-surrealist” style.<sup>18</sup>

As, by the end of 1948, the Communists consolidated their position in the region, a campaign against “Formalism” in art officially began, and Picasso was not exempt. In the part of Germany occupied by Russia, which was shortly to become the GDR, the campaign took place in the pages of *Taegliche Rundschau*—the press organ of the Communist Party (SED). Alexander Dymshitz, who initiated the debate, did not hesitate to point out the deep contradiction between Picasso the peace campaigner and Picasso the artist, who had blundered into the dead end of Formalism.<sup>19</sup> The “discord,” as Dymshitz put it, should be a warning to his followers, an instruction to modernist artists, which clearly meant that following the formalist path would not be tolerated. Another implicit warning was issued by an author signing himself N. Orlow in the text closing the “formalist debate:” “(...) some representatives of this absurd trend in painting of the DDR try to hide behind the name of Picasso. Picasso painted a number of paintings in a realistic style. An example of his realistic works is his famous representation of a dove, a symbol of peace. The formalistic ‘dislocation’ of Picasso means nothing other than an obvious waste of his talent.”<sup>20</sup>

While Picasso, the author of the Peace Dove (and others gadgets for communists inspired by international events) and the participant of peace congresses was perceived as a warrior for peace, his art, regarded as formalism, was condemned and forbidden behind the Iron Curtain. The absence of his art was nevertheless balanced by the dove’s omnipresence. This “trademark” for the Peace Movement organized by the Communist Party had been transmitted into almost every area of social life, from paintings to posters and designs of souvenirs.

Following *Guernica* (1937) and *The Charnel House* (1944-45), more masterpieces by the new “committed” Picasso emerged in the first half of the 1950s. *Massacre in Korea*, which was Picasso’s reaction to the Korean War and the danger of a new global conflict, was created in January 1951. The Communist Party disliked the painting due to its modernist deformation of women’s bodies and to its weak emphasis on the invaders’ identity as “American imperialists.” For example, in an official art periodical in Poland, Ryszard Stanisławski, wrote of *Massacre in Korea*: “Even though in the comparison to *Guernica*, Picasso has used much more understandable and clear symbols, *Massacre in Korea* may distract the spectator, whose desire is to see a more explicit and less symbolical accusation of the American soldiers, rather than a nameless torturer hidden in armor.”<sup>21</sup> However, it was still used as communist propaganda. It was presented, for example, in a 1952 exhibition of French painting in Warsaw. The exhibition showed key works of modernists such as Picasso and Léger working with politically engaged subjects. Matisse’s fabric works were also shown, highlighting his involvement in the

applied arts. Works by young politically active painters such as André Fougeron and Edouard Pignon were also included.<sup>22</sup>

*Massacre in Korea* reappeared in Warsaw four years later, following the ‘Krushchev Thaw’ when, after the death of Stalin in 1953, repression and censorship were partially reversed. A large-scale reproduction was installed in Krakowskie Przedmieście, the city’s main promenade, in November 1956 as a sign of solidarity with the revolutionaries’ campaigner against the Stalinist regime on the streets of Budapest. The context of the Thaw had changed the meaning of the painting. The characters in armor were now identified with Soviet forces.

The changes began in the first (or second,) half of the fifties with the Thaw in the Soviet block. After Stalin’s death, the battle of his heritage began. In satellite countries, anti-Soviet attitudes became much more common. In art and literature, many former supporters of Socialist Realism began to retreat from their former positions. The modernist part of Picasso’s art was not so much condemned and rejected.

In Poland, the prominent art historian Juliusz Starzyński, who promoted the so-called social realism a while before in his article published in the beginning of 1955, highlighted the importance of Picasso’s art.<sup>23</sup>

A Picasso discussion took place in the East German publication *Bildende Kunst* in the same year. Several artists and critics from Germany and elsewhere were training to answer the question: is it possible to reconcile social engagement with modernist form?<sup>24</sup> This process of reevaluation of the Formalist art of Picasso can also be observed in Czechoslovakia, but it was little delayed. It was not until 1958 that a book by prominent Czech art historian and collector of Picasso’s art, Vincenc Kramář, was published. In the book, Kramář defended Cubism.<sup>25</sup>

The Thaw in Hungary ended shortly with the invasion of Soviet tanks. Picasso was flooded with letters asking for his reaction to the events in Hungary. A group of exiled Hungarians wrote: “do for Budapest what you have done for Guernica and Korea...”<sup>26</sup>

Picasso reacted, but not the way he was expected to. He signed a letter, together with nine members of French Communist Party, addressed to the Central Committee calling for a meeting of an Extraordinary Congress. In fact, the letter was far from being a condemnation of Soviet aggression and did not have the accusatory power of *Guernica*.

Let me end this text with a short fragment of a short fragment of a letter to Picasso, dated 1958, from the Polish poet, Nobel laureate and political dissident Czesław Miłosz (laureate of the Nobel Prize):

“I need hardly tell you what your name, quite appropriately annexed by the Stalinist, has been used to cover up...

During the years when painting was systematically destroyed in the USSR and the peoples’ democracies you lent your name to statements glorifying Stalin’s regime...

In fact you added weight to the balance and deprived of all hope those in the East who did not want to submit to the absurd.

What would have been the consequence of a categorical protest voiced by all of you? Against the Rajk trial, for example. If your support helped the terror, your indignation would also have mattered.”<sup>27</sup>

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1. *L'Humanité*, 5 Oct.1944.
2. About taking control over Poland in 1944-1945 by Red Army and NKWD: Andrzej Paczkowski, Poland, the "Enemy Nation", in Stéphane Courtois, Nicolas Werth, Jean-Louis Panné, Andrzej Paczkowski, Karel Bartošek, Jean-Louis Margolin, *The Black Book of Communism. Crimes. Terror. Repression*, Harvard University Press, 1999, p.363.
3. Jerzy Borejsza, *Na rogatkach kultury polskiej, Spółdzielnia Wydawnicza Czytelnik*, Warszawa, 1947, p.16.
4. Tadeusz Płużański, Zotchałni, Wydawnictwo2kolory, 2014.
5. Andrzej Friszke, *Kultura czy ideologia? Polityka kulturalna PZPR w latach 1957-1963*, w: Władza a społeczeństwo w PRL, Warszawa, 2003, s.120.
6. Jerzy Borejsza, 'Rewolucja łagodna', *Odrodzenie*, no.5, 1945.
7. An extract from famous Paul Gaillard's interview with Picasso (*New Masses*, vol. 53, no.4, 24 Oct.1944, p.11) in which Picasso explained why he decided to join FCP, was published in the first issue of *Kuźnica*: 'Oświadczenie Pabla Picassa', *Kuźnica*, no.1, 1945.
8. Wojciech Włodarczyk, 'Surrealistyczny epizod. Warszawa 1933-Moskwa 1958', in: <http://culture.pl/pl/artykul/socrealistyczny-epizod-warszawa-1933-moskwa-1958>
9. Piotr Bernatowicz, 'Picasso za żelazną kurytną. Recepcja artysty i jego sztuki w krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945-1970', *Towarzystwo Autorów i Wydawców Prac Naukowych UNIVESITAS*, Kraków, 2006.
10. J.Chalupecky, 'Kultura a politika', *Listy*, no. 3, 1946.
11. T.Kantor, M.Porębski, 'Grupa Młodych Plastyków po raz drugi', *„Twórczość”* no. 9, 1946.
12. H. Tröckes, 'Moderne Kunst und Zeitbewusstsein', *Bildende Kunst*, no. 3, 1948.
13. H. Lüdecke, Die Entwirklichung der Bürgerlichen Kunst, *Bildende Kunst*, no. 5, 1948.
14. See unpublished note by Jerzy Borejsza Jr quoted in Dorota Folga-Januszewska, 'Picasso. Przemiany/Changes', exh. Cat., The National Museum in Warsaw, 2002-2003, p.12; for the roots of the Peace Congress in Wrocław see Zygmunt Woźniczka, 'Wrocławski Kongres Intelektualistów w obronie pokoju', *Kwartalnik historyczny*, no.2, 1987, pp. 131-57; Official invitation was directed to Picasso on behalf of the chef of culture and art department, Wiktor Mencil, the communist, member of international brigade (of J.Dąbrowski) which fought in Spain in 1936-39 supervised by NKWD.
15. 'Pablo Picasso o swoim pobycie w Polsce. Wywiad z wielkim malarzem hiszpańskim', interview with Pablo Picasso, *Głos Ludu*, no.238, 29 Aug.1948; 'Ceramika Pablo Picasso we Wrocławiu', exh. Cat. Gmach Główny Politechniki Wrocławskiej (Main Building of Wrocław University of Technology), Wrocław, 25-28 Aug.1948.
16. Mieczysław Bibrowski (ed.) *Picasso w Polsce*, Kraków, 1979, p.92.
17. Picasso spent thirteen days in Poland. Apart from his presence at the Peace Congress, he visited Warsaw, Cracow, Auschwitz-Birkenau. For a detailed schedule of his stay see Birbrowski, 1979, pp.21-22.
18. François Gilot and Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso*, Harmondsworth 1966, pp.231-214.
19. Adolf Dymshitz, 'Über die formalistische Richtung in der deutschen Malerei', *Tägliche Rundschau*, 19-24 Nov. 1948.
20. N. Orłow, 'Wege und Irrwege der modernen Kunst', *Tägliche Rundschau*, 20-21 Jan.1951.
21. Ryszard Stanisławski, 'Nowe drogi malarstwa francuskiego', *Przegląd Artystyczny*, no.3, 1952.
22. 'Sztuka francuska walczy o pokój' speech by the head of the Polish artist's association (ZPAP), Franciszek Strynkiewicz, on the opening of 'Wystawa współczesnej plastyki francuskiej' exhibition, in *Przegląd Artystyczny*, no.2, 1952, p.55.
23. Juliusz Starzyński, 'Sztuka wieczyście młoda – kilka uwag o malarstwie Picassa w związku z ostatnimi wystawami', *Materiały do Studiów i Dyskusji z Zakresu Teorii i Historii Sztuki, Krytyki Artystycznej i Badań nad Sztuką*, nos.1-2, 1955.
24. Martin Damus, *Malerei in DDR, Funktionen der bildende Kunst im Realen Sozialismus*, Hamburg 1991, p. 141; see also, for 'Picasso discussion' in *Bildende Kunst*: Angela Schneider, 'Picasso ist uns selbst', in *Deutschlandbilder: Kunst aus einem geteilten Land*, ed. Eckhart Gillen, Cologne 1997, pp.539-544; Bernd Linder, *Versteller, offener Blick. Eine Rezeptionsgeschichte bildener Kunst im Osten Deutschlands 1945-1995*, Vienna, Cologne and Weimar, 1998.
25. Vincenc Kramář, *Otázky moderního umění*, Prague 1958.
26. Groupement des Anciens Etudiants de l'Université et des Ecoles Supérieures de Budapest, letter to Picasso, 14. Nov. 1956, Archives of the Musée national Picasso-Paris.
27. Czesław Miłosz "A letter to Picasso" in *Voices of Dissent: A Collection of Articles from Dissent Magazines*, Grove Press, New York, 1958, pp.381-384).