

CHAPTER 8

Ivan Moody

Orthodox Church Music and the Politics of the Unpolitical

An examination of the collision of modernist currents in art with socialist politics in the 20th century might be thought automatically to exclude any discussion of music written for or inspired by the Orthodox Church. The difficulty of viewing such music in a modernist context – independent of politics – is neatly expressed by Max Paddison, in discussing Adorno. He speaks of

the predicament faced by the artist caught between, on the one hand, the traditional demands of the art work for unity and integration (the harmonious relationship between part and whole) and, on the other hand, the loss of faith in any overarching unity on both individual and social levels in the face of the evident fragmentation of modern existence.¹

Adorno's negative dialectics, in which thesis and antithesis occur without the “overarching unity” created by synthesis, would seem to exclude anything as profoundly engaged with synthesis – the “placing together” of the human person – as Orthodox theology, which is what the art of the Orthodox Church is intended to manifest. Any use of such a vocabulary within quotation marks, as it were, would seem to relativize, recontextualize and possibly ironize it, something that at first sight seems in any case more a postmodernist than a modernist procedure.

However, if one considers the century as a whole, and broadens one's view geographically, a remarkable “porousness” becomes apparent: a po-

¹ Max Paddison, *Adorno, Modernism and Mass Culture: Essays on Critical Theory and Music*, London, Kahn and Averill, 1996, 52.

rousness between political alignments that in certain circumstances enabled such music not only to be non-political, but to be part of the dialogue between socialism and modernity. The title of this paper takes its cue from an essay by the British art critic and cultural historian Herbert Read (Figure 1), who wrote an essay entitled “The Politics of the Unpolitical” in which he said,

The politics of the unpolitical – these are the politics of those who desire to be pure in heart: the politics of men without personal ambition; of those who have not desired wealth or an unequal share of worldly possessions; of those who have always striven, whatever their race or condition, for human values and not for national or sectional interests.²

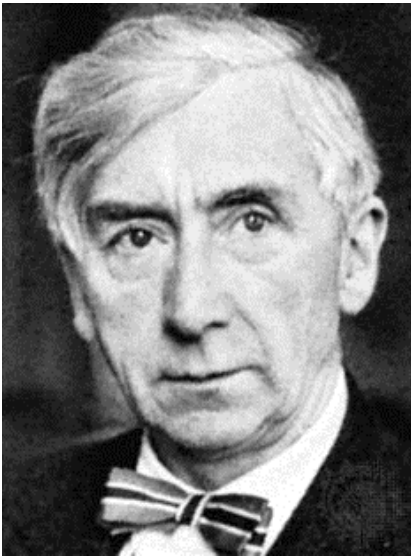


Figure 1.
Herbert Read

Though the idea of writing church music *per se* might be considered an unpolitical act, the fact of writing it at all in adverse political and cultural circumstances requires that it be dealt with from various perspectives, one of which is precisely its positioning with regard to politics, something that varied according to time and place. And it is the ambiguity, the porousness, that allowed the politics of the unpolitical – “those who desire to be pure in heart,” as Read has it – to manifest themselves wherever they could in regimes of extraordinary political oppressiveness.

² Herbert Read, “The Politics of the Unpolitical” in Herbert Read, *To Hell with Culture*, London, Routledge, 1963, 38.

In situations in which church music was actually suppressed, such ambiguity naturally arose only gradually. This was clearly the case with Russia: what Marina Frolova-Walker has described as the “New Trend” in Russian church music had not only reached a climactic point with Rachmaninov’s *Vigil* in 1915, but was effectively extinguished by the Revolution of 1917.³ The choral heritage was maintained “under cover” for an extraordinarily long time, in works by such composers as Georgy Sviridov (1915–1998), Rodion Shchedrin (b. 1932) and Georgiy Dimitriev (1942–2016). Shchedrin’s *Zapletchatlennyy Angel* (1988) is a particularly successful example of a disguised religious work, and one that was awarded the Russian State Prize by Boris Yeltsin in 1992. Such tactics were not approved of by all, as may be seen from the comments of Edison Denisov (1929–1996). Denisov never had an easy relationship with the Soviet authorities, being denounced as a Western-inspired modernist by Tikhon Khrennikov for his 1964 cantata *Le soleil des Incas*, and famously blacklisted with Elena Firsova, Dmitri Smirnov, Alexander Knaifel, Viktor Suslin, Vyacheslav Artyomov and Sofia Gubaidulina, and he was scathing about colleagues who changed magically from hard-line communists into religious composers:

There are in Russia composers who used to write works to the glory of Lenin, and who have today become very religious. They now write Orthodox music: I think that one must not believe in such men, these chameleons who change position so quickly. [...] Shchedrin, Dimitriev, for example. I do not believe that they are sincere when after having written works such as *Lenin in the Heart of the People* and *On Reading Lenin’s Book, The State and Revolution*, they compose two or three years later liturgical pieces on Russian Orthodox texts.⁴

Denisov’s own attitude was that “true music is always spiritual music”, and that he had “written many works which do not employ a text, and which are

³ Marina Frolova-Walker, *Russian Music and Nationalism*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007, 299.

⁴ “Il y a en Russie des compositeurs qui jadis ont écrit des oeuvres à la gloire de Lénine, et qui sont devenus en quelques jours très ‘religieux’. Ils écrivent maintenant de la musique orthodoxe. Je crois qu’il ne faut pas croire de tels hommes, ces caméléons qui changent si vite de position (...) Chedrine, Dimitriev, par exemple. Je ne crois pas qu’ils soient sincères lorsqu’après avoir écrit des oeuvres comme Lénine dans le chœur du peuple ou En lisant le livre de Lénine, l’Etat et la révolution, ils composent deux ou trois ans après des pièces liturgiques sur les textes orthodoxes russes.” Edison Denisov, Jean-Pierre Armengaud, *Entretiens avec Edison Denisov. Un compositeur sous le régime soviétique*, Paris, Editions Plume, 1993, 134–135. (Translation by I. Moody.) More on Denisov’s own religious work may be found in Ivan Moody, *Modernism and Orthodox Spirituality in Contemporary Music*, Joensuu–Belgrade, ISOCM–Institute of Musicology SASA, 2014, 111–115.

perhaps more spiritual than the works I have written on religious texts,⁵ a singular observation if one takes into account the vast dimensions of such overtly religious works as the *Requiem* (1980) and the oratorio *Istoriya zhizni i smerti Gospoda nashego Iisusa Khrista* [The Story of the Life and Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ] for tenor and bass soloists, choir and orchestra, completed in 1992. In this latter, the liturgical element is to the fore; while the soloists sing in modern Russian, the choir parallels the unfolding of the story with sections from the Eucharistic Liturgy in Slavonic, suggesting the symbolic interpretations of the Liturgy as the Life of Christ by mediaeval commentators such as St Nicholas Cabasilas (1319/23–after 1391). The impossibility of creating such a work in earlier years is impressively compensated for both by this openness and by the sheer scale of the piece.

The situation outside the Soviet Union proper was different, partly for reasons of geographical distance and partly on account of the more recent establishment of national identity. Modernism in both Bulgaria and Serbia appeared in reaction to very recently-established traditions of art music. In Bulgaria this development of national consciousness had been made possible by the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878, which brought to an end five centuries of Ottoman domination, and the Third Bulgarian State was proclaimed, initially as a principality, in 1878. That tradition of art music is generally seen as having been crystallized in the work of Pancho Vladigerov (1899–1978). He was born in Switzerland and studied in Germany, before moving to Bulgaria, and thus his melding together of Bulgarian nationalist tendencies and the classicism of his German training was entirely natural.

Born in the same year as Vladigerov, however, was one of the most articulate advocates of modernism in Bulgaria, the architect and writer Chavdar Mutafov; he died much earlier than his contemporary, in 1954 (Figure 2). He too studied in Germany, but returned to his native country with a mission, that of bringing avant-garde ideas to the Bulgarians. He travelled round the country giving lectures on modernism in art and architecture, film and music, publishing generally in the provocative arts journal *Zlatorog* (Golden Horn), which was published from 1920 to 1943, and was fundamental in furthering modernism in Bulgarian writing and in developments in art criticism, particularly that of Sirak Skitnik (1893–1943).⁶ Mu-

⁵ “J’ai écrit beaucoup d’œuvres qui n’ont pas recours à un texte, et qui sont peut-être plus spirituelles que les œuvres que j’ai écrites sur les textes religieux”; “*l’Ecume des jours* [...] est également une œuvre profondément spirituelle, religieuse car ma conception de *l’Ecume des jours* est tout à fait contraire à celle de Boris Vian”; “Mais pour moi, la vraie musique, c’est toujours de la musique spirituelle”, Denisov, Armengaud, op. cit., 131.

⁶ See, *inter alia*, Charles A. Moser, “The Journal *Zlatorog* and Modern Bulgarian Letters”, *The*

tafov's work in this area was drastically curtailed by the communist authorities, but the last few years have seen an exponential explosion of interest not only in his work but in the entire ethos of the artists and writers associated with *Zlatorog*.⁷



Figure 2.
Portrait of Chavdar Mutafov by Ivan Iliev

It was not until the later 1940s that avant-garde thought began to appear in Bulgarian music. Composers such as Konstantin Iliev (1924–1988), Lazar Nikolov (1922–2005), Georgi Tutev (1924–1994), Vassil Kazandzhiev (b. 1934) and Ivan Spassov (1934–1996) were brave enough to risk the ire of the Communist Party, which championed socialist realism.⁸ Iliev was in fact a pupil of Vladigerov, but also studied with Alois Hába in Prague, an experience that left a deep impression on him. He composed prolifically – his output includes two operas, a ballet, six symphonies, four string quartets and a great

Slavic and East European Journal Vol. 7, no. 2 (Summer 1963), 117–133, and Dimit'r Avramov, "Sirak Skitnik Aspekti na negovata estetika," <<http://kultura.bg/web/сирак-скитник-аспетки-на-негова-ест/>>

⁷ For a brief biographical summary, see the article by Katia Mitova-Janowski previously available at <<http://www.customessay.net/essay-encyclopedia/Chavdar-Mutafov-Essay.htm>> There is also a discussion of Mutafov's influence on modernism in Bulgaria in Nadezhda Tsocheva, *Chavdar Mutafov i b'lgarskata kultura mezhdu dvete svetovni vojni*, Sofia, Iztok-Zapad, 2008.

⁸ For a detailed analysis of the phenomenon of socialist realism as it affected Bulgarian literature, see Plamen Doynov, "The Sovietization of Bulgarian Literature and the 'Bulgarianization' of Socialist Realism", *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Iegallonicae Cracoviensis* 10, 2015, 333–345.

deal of chamber and choral music – and was also very prominent as a conductor, and it was this that enabled him to continue to work: his first experiments with new techniques took place in the provinces, in Ruse and Varna, where he was comparatively free from political interference. It was in 1968 that everything changed, with the notorious première of his orchestral work *Fragmenti*. The clear suggestion of Bulgarian folk music in the actual musical material was overlooked on account of the way in which it was treated, aleatorically and serially. Vladigerov was one of those deeply unimpressed by the music, but the work was a huge public success, and the composer had to return to the stage to take a bow seven or eight times.

What, then, constituted Bulgarian identity? The position of Vladigerov and the other luminaries who walked out at the end of *Fragmenti* clearly showed that for them, whatever it actually was, it was incompatible with the radicalism of a musical vocabulary such as that of Iliev. The same question resonated in the field of church music, in that, though nobody in the 1940s was proposing anything as radical as Mutafov or Iliev, the persecution of the Orthodox Church from 1944 onwards meant that anything that brought sacred music to the fore was immediately crushed: no “concert composer” was able to demonstrate any identification with Christianity, and even the work of the famous Filip Kutev (1903–1982) with the *Bolgarsky rospev*⁹ was really part of his radical reimagination of Bulgarian traditional music. As Spas Raikin wrote in 1988,

The Bulgarian Church has preserved its nationalism, but, lacking broad popular support and independent means of self-support, it has settled for a precarious existence. In the mid-1980s, it functions as a propaganda tool for the regime, which is actively working to extinguish all traces of religion at some point in the future. [...] The Church serves the communist government with more zeal and more obedience than it had displayed towards any of the prewar princes.¹⁰

The extraordinary philosophical contortions of Atanas Bozhkov, the author of the sleeve-notes for Boris Christoff's 1979 recording of Grechaninov's *Liturgia Domestica*, not only exemplify this intensely nationalist approach, but do so in a context that may be thought to be at the very least bizarre, bearing in mind that Grechaninov was of course Russian. He wrote:

⁹ See, especially, Elena Toncheva and Stefan Kozhukharov, *Bolgarskii rospev*, Sofia: Association of Bulgarian Composers, 1971.

¹⁰ Spas T. Raikov, “The Bulgarian Orthodox Church”, in *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Pedro Ramet, Durham, Duke University Press, 1988, 179–180.

All those who have seen [Christoff] with his eyes fixed on the miniatures of the Madrid Manuscript of Skilitzes or on the Chronicle of Manasses in the Vatican Library, all those who have witnessed his unexpected outbursts when faced with forgeries of historical truth, or the consequences of nihilism, can clearly understand that in this particular case he is not imploring but insisting. His exquisite voice seems to become richer because of the moral reflexes of raptures which have accumulated over a long period of time, due to suppressed sufferings and fine perceptions, and that is why the words he utters have a conquering firmness: the Bulgarian people must be saved from every enemy, they must be preserved! These words are perhaps sufficient to impart a patriotic tinge to the entire Liturgy.¹¹

One wonders whether such herculean efforts at justification would have been necessary had Christoff recorded music by a Bulgarian composer.

Later composers, notably Alexander Tekeliev (b. 1942), Velislav Zaimov (b. 1951), and Ivan Spassov (1934–1996) were freer to begin to work with the riches of Bulgaria's sacred music. Spassov is particularly interesting in the way he used traditional Bulgarian music as structural building-blocks, working with the principle of serially-derived varied repetition of extremely small cells, not unreminiscent of Iliev's technique. His outpouring of music to sacred texts, which never rejects the modernist language he had previously developed, however, avoided the genuinely liturgical, and began for personal reasons, after the death of his daughter Ioana, in 1991.¹²

Serbia had its equivalent of Mutafov in the avant-garde theorist Ljubomir Micić (1895–1971), who in the 1920s began attacking the "Byzantine modernism" that had been dominant in the arts hitherto (Figure 3). He founded the Zenit group in 1921; this was intended to further a new, radical aesthetic and a revolutionary social agenda in the new state of Yugoslavia which had been created three years before, in 1918. Micić promoted his ideas in the periodical *Zenit*, inspired by various European modernist currents (such as futurism and dada), but in combination with a decidedly Soviet orientation which was disagreeable to many of more traditional bent.¹³ *Zenit* proved, in fact, to be of great interest to many Russians, including Vasily Kandinsky, Anatoly Lunacharsky and Vladimir Mayakovsky.

¹¹ Atanas Bozhkov, "An Important Contribution in the Musical Life of our Age", sleeve notes to Grechaninov, *Liturgia Domestica*, Balkanton BXA10371-72 2LP, 1979.

¹² Further on Spassov, see Ivan Moody, "Spirituality and Technique in the Music of Ivan Spassov", *Bulgarian Musicology* 4, 2014, 19–24.

¹³ For a concise survey of the advent of modernism in Serbian painting, see Steven A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, 226–235.

It is worth recalling here the words of the historian Peter Sugar, who noted that “Eastern Europe was in a state of semimodernity beginning with the first movements to change its social-political-economic structure in the second half of the eighteenth century until 1948.” He went on to say that,

... a semimodern society resembles an acrobat suspended by his toes and fingertips between two chairs continually being pulled further and further apart. When that circus act is performed by an unwilling star, and most people in any society undergoing change are unwilling acrobats, they naturally tend to recall the prestress situation with longing; they see it as a peaceful ideal, and hope to land in its midst again, not between two, but on the older chair, when the stress becomes unbearable.¹⁴



Figure 3.
Ljubomir Micić in 1925

Such acrobatics in the arts produce what has been described as the “moderated modernist.” This term seems to have been first used by Adorno

¹⁴ Peter F. Sugar, “Ethnicity in Eastern Europe”, in *East European Nationalism, Politics and Religion*, Aldershot, Ashgate Variorum, 1999, II, 4–5 [424–428].

(“gemässigte Moderne”),¹⁵ inevitably pejoratively, but has since gained wider (and more positive) currency following its use by Hermann Danuser in his 1978 article “Tradition und Avantgarde nach 1950.”¹⁶ It is a particularly useful term to describe a large amount of music written by composers who began their careers just after the Second World War and the wide acceptance of the more fundamental challenge to modernism known as postmodernism. Certainly, between the polemics of a Mutafov or a Micić and the postmodern promise of today, there are many examples of composers who in fact never entirely decided that they were either willing or unwilling acrobats.

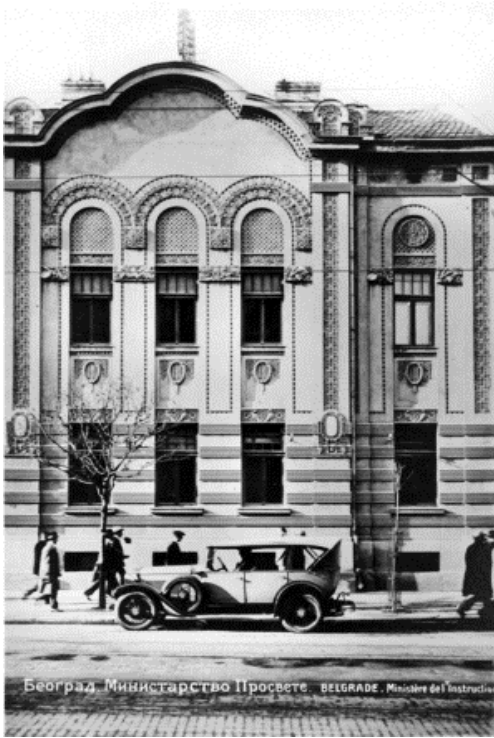


Figure 4.
Branko Tanazević: Ministry of Education, Belgrade (nowadays: The House of Vuk’s Legacy)

¹⁵ See various essays in Theodor Adorno, *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert. Berkeley, etc: University of California Press, 2002, especially “The Aging of New Music” and “On the Social Situation in Music.”

¹⁶ In Reinhold Brinkmann, ed., *Die Neue Musik und die Tradition*, Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Neue Musik und Musikerziehung Darmstadt, 19, Mainz, 1978, 22–54. See, further, Ivana Medić, “The Ideology of Moderated Modernism in Serbian Musicology”, in *Muzikologija/Musicology* 7, 2007, 280, and “Moderated Modernism in Russian Music after 1953” in *Rethinking Musical Modernism*, ed. Melita Milin and Dejan Despić, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade, 2008, 195–204, as well as Vesna Mikić, “Aspects of (Moderate) Modernism in the Serbian Music of the 1950s” in *ibid.*, 187–194.

Turning again to the situation in Serbia, composers of sacred music born in the 1880s, such as Petar Konjović (1883–1970), Miloje Milojević (1884–1946) and Stevan Hristić (1885–1958), already active when Micić burst upon the scene, were certainly more conservative in outlook than he, and benefited hugely from the research and compositional activity into Serbian “folk” chant of the earlier collectors and composers Kornelije Stanković (1831–1865) and Stevan Mokranjac (1856–1914), though they were in fact able to take this national project in new directions. Though there is no exact parallel with the “Byzantine modernism” of architects such as Branko Tanazević (1876–1945) (Figure 4), there is nonetheless a clear concern with reconciling the modern with the traditional.

Konjović’s concert music defined him clearly as a “moderated modernist”¹⁷ in the ritualistic folk primitivism of such works as *Kestenova gora* of 1938. Nadežda Mosusova has noted that, “[t]he modernism of Serbian musicians did not threaten tradition, i.e., the general European tradition of classical music, because the Serbian tradition in art music before and after the First World War was new, and tradition in the performing arts slight and negligible”¹⁸.

This is an important observation: as was generally the case in the Balkans during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, modernism arrived precisely at the time when the new nation-states were coming into existence, their spiritual and artistic traditions dating from before the Ottoman conquest and thus coming into direct and fascinating collision with avant-garde currents from the countries in which artists from these new countries went to study.

However, in spite of the open-minded spirit in the work of composers active in both fields, attempts to maintain high levels of church music began to suffer from the impossibility of performances of a consistently high standard, so that the musical horizons of those composers in Serbia interested in choral music became gradually less defined by the parameters of contemporary church singing. The situation of the Serbian Orthodox Church between 1945 and 1955 was extremely difficult, Belgrade acting severely towards clergy for the slightest infraction, while anti-religious infractions were barely punished at all, as the mob attack on Bishop Nektarije of

¹⁷ See Medić, “The Ideology of Moderated Modernism in Serbian Musicology”, 279–294, Ivan Moody, “Tradition and Modernism in Serbian Church Music in the 20th Century” *Orientalia et Occidentalia Vol.6: Stav Výskumu Mukačevsko-Užhorodského Nápevu*, Košice, Slovakia, 2010, 195–199 and Ivan Moody, “Interactions between Tradition and Modernism in Serbian Church Music of the 20th Century”, *Muzikološki zbornik/Musicological Annual*, XLVII, 2011, 217–224.

¹⁸ Nadežda Mosusova, “Modernism in Serbian-Yugoslav Music”, in *Rethinking Musical Modernism*, ed. Melita Milin and Dejan Despić, Belgrade, Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, 2008, 119.

Tuzla in 1953 demonstrates – he had simply made the point that the Law on the Status of Religious Communities passed in that year specifically permitted the holding of religious services.¹⁹

It is nevertheless important to note that the production of church music in Serbia up to the beginning of the Second World War far outweighed that of Russia after 1917.²⁰ There were, in any case, also some notable exceptions to the general tendency towards decline, such as Hristić's *Opelo* and a few elaborate settings of the Liturgy, including that written in 1931 by Marko Tajčević (1900–1984) and, even more, the highly idiosyncratic settings from 1925 by Milenko Živković (1901–1964) and 1938 by Milivoje Crvčanin (1892–1978), both of which show a genuine concern for the integration of modernism within the context of sacred music.²¹

Petar Konjović, writing in 1954, noted that,

The basic creative reasons which gave rise to newly-written sacred choral music of that time may be divided into three categories: a) the experience of church music as an exotic folk material, which needed to be shaped in a new way, b) a free and transformed poetic relationship between liturgical text and music, and, probably the least important of all, c) inspiration proceeding from profound religious feeling.²²

Crvčanin was in fact a composer who corresponded exactly with this last category, being also a priest of the Orthodox Church; but in general, as in Bulgaria, Herbert Read's "purity of heart" was not necessarily spiritual in the work of choral composers. It was rather more often a complex interweaving of nostalgia and nationalism. Church music was part of that porousness not only between political alignments, but between more purely artistic ideologies. As Read also noted,

¹⁹ See Pedro Ramet, "The Serbian Orthodox Church", in Pedro Ramet, ed., *Eastern Christianity and Politics in the Twentieth Century*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1988, 240.

²⁰ See Bogdan Đaković, "Serbian Orthodox Choral Music", 179 and Ivana Perković-Radak, "Crkvena muzika", in *Istorija srpske muzike – Srpska muzika i evropskonasleđe*, ed. Mirjana Veselinović-Hofman et al., Belgrade, Zavod za udžbenike i nastavna sredstva, 2007, 297–330.

²¹ See Bogdan Đaković, "The Modern Traditionalist Milivoje M. Crvčanin (1892–1978)", in *Composing and Chanting in the Orthodox Church: Proceedings of the Second International Conference on Orthodox Church Music*, Joensuu, University of Joensuu/ISOCM, 2009, 191–198, Perković-Radak, op. cit., 328, and Bogdan Đaković, "Rediscovering a Serbian national style: Problems in sacred architecture, church art and church music in the late 1930s: The case of the Orthodox choral music of Milenko Živkovic (1901-1964)", in *Church, State and Nation in Orthodox Church Music: Proceedings of the Third International Conference on Orthodox Church Music*, Joensuu, University of Joensuu/ISOCM, 2011, 306–312.

²² Petar Konjović, *Miloje Milojević – kompozitor i muzički pisac*, Belgrade, Institute of Musicology SASA, 1954, 102; quoted in Đaković, "The Modern Traditionalist..."

...art, in its essence, is independent of politics – as, indeed, it is independent of morals and all other temporal values. [...] There is nothing specifically aristocratic about [genius] – it seems to be absolutely arbitrary in its manifestations, and can as likely visit the peasant's croft as the palace or academy. That is why it is illogical to associate it with political freedom. The artist enjoys freedom and is harassed by tyranny. But there is no reason to suppose that a democratic system of government, so-called, is any more favourable to the prevalence of art than the systems we call aristocratic, oligarchic or totalitarian.²³

He would have found confirmation of his words in the mere existence of so much art – politically independent art – in the totalitarian regimes under discussion in this volume; the porousness of that political independence in its historical and geographical context, however, is quite another question.

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²³ Herbert Read, *To Hell with Culture*, xxvi, xxvii

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Ivan Moody

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