

Igor Golomstock (1929–2017)

The art historian Igor Golomstock is best known for his *Totalitarian Art* (1990), the first serious study of the similarities between the official art of Stalinist Russia and that of Nazi Germany. The inspiration for this came in the early 1960s, when Igor was working in Moscow, in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts. Behind the library shelves a colleague had found a copy of an official German art journal from the years of the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Igor showed the illustrations to a discussion group he ran for senior schoolchildren, asking the children to name the artists. As he expected, they rattled off the names of the main artists of the Stalin years. He told them to look more closely at a reproduction of a working-class family listening to a wireless—and they were bewildered. Hanging on the wall, above the heads of the family, was a portrait not of Stalin, but of Hitler. Igor, needless to say, soon had to leave the museum.

Some twenty-five years later, however, he was able to expand his initial insight into a substantial work, including sections on Fascist Italy and Maoist China. At the time, Igor's detailed demonstration of the near-identity of the various totalitarian artistic systems seemed controversial, but one needs only to glance at the illustrations to realize how easily one could have made the same mistake as Igor's schoolchildren.

Igor's thesis does, in fact, remain controversial to this day, though not everyone recognizes this. When I was writing an obituary of Igor for *The Guardian*, the editor told me that they did not want to reproduce any paintings of Hitler on their website. Paintings of Stalin and Mao were OK, but paintings of Hitler were not—even though neo-Stalinism is a far greater threat today than neo-Nazism.

Igor—who died on July 12, 2017 in a London hospital—was born in 1929, in Tver', then known as Kalinin. In 1934, his father Naum Kojak, a Karaite Jew, was sentenced to five years in the Gulag. Igor's mother, Mary Golomstock, registered Igor for school under her own surname, which he used for the rest of his life.

In 1939 Mary Golomstock volunteered to work as a doctor in Kolyma. Igor believes that, before going there, she had little idea of what Kolyma was like. She wanted a job and, since her former husband was “an enemy of the people,” her choices were limited. She went to Kolyma with Igor and her second husband, Iosif Taubkin, and they remained there until 1943. Igor witnessed much that would have scarred anyone, let alone an impressionable child.

When Igor was around fifteen, after the family's return to Moscow, a remarkable change occurred in him. He describes himself as having been a foul-mouthed, barely-educated child without the least interest in literature. Influenced by a friend, he began reading Dostoevskii with passionate excitement. Often he had a book open under his desk during lessons. His love of Dostoevskii stayed with him throughout his life, balanced by a hatred of Tolstoi, whom he saw as the father of Socialist Realism.

Igor qualified first as an accountant, and then as an art historian. For several years he worked for the Ministry of Culture; one of his jobs was accompanying travelling art exhibitions the length of the Soviet Union. In 1960, together with the writer and scholar Andrei Siniavskii—a close friend throughout his life—he published the first Soviet book on Picasso. In 1965 Siniavskii and Yulii Daniel' were sentenced to terms in the Gulag for publishing abroad. Igor was also sentenced, for “refusal to give evidence,” though in the end he received only a fine.

In 1972 he immigrated to Great Britain. This was during a brief period when Jews could emigrate only on payment of a vast sum, supposedly to repay the state for their

education. Friends and sympathizers rallied; Boris Pasternak's son Evgenii volunteered "to ransom a hundred grams of Golomstock."

After several years of university teaching, Igor spent the rest of his professional life making radio programs for the BBC Russian Service. He also co-curated the exhibition *Unofficial Art from the Soviet Union* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (London, 1977). This included both artists who were already well known, like Ernst Neizvestnyi, and younger artists like Ilya Kabakov. The most remarkable figure of all, perhaps, was Boris Sveshnikov; in 2000, Igor published a large-format album of the delicate, surreal pencil drawings Sveshnikov composed in the Gulag in the 1940s and early 1950s.

I am personally indebted to Igor in many ways, but perhaps most of all for sending me transcripts of his four programs about Vasili Grossman's *Life and Fate*, soon after the Russian text was first published in 1980. With Igor's help, I published an article about the novel, and a sample chapter, in the journal *Index on Censorship*. Collins Harvill then commissioned a translation. A few years later they also published my translation of *Totalitarian Art*.

Igor was an important cultural mediator. My impression was that every important Russian writer or artist passing through London would visit him. The conductor Yevgeny Mravinsky, for example, would slip away from his hotel in the small hours and spend half the night reading dissident literature in Igor's apartment. Joshua Rubenstein has written to me about meeting Igor to discuss Siniavskii and Daniel' for his book about Soviet dissidents (1980).

Among Igor's many publications are books about Hieronymus Bosch and Paul Cezanne, (Moscow, under pseudonyms, 1974 & 1975); *Unofficial Art from the Soviet Union* (London, 1977); and *English Art from Hans Holbein to Damien Hirst* (Moscow, 2008), which deserves to be translated into English. Igor's taste in English literature remained typically Soviet (he worshipped Charles Dickens but knew next to nothing of George Eliot or D.H. Lawrence), but his understanding of English art was original and profound.

Igor's last publication, in Russian, was *Memoirs of an Old Pessimist* (2011).¹ Two chapters that stand out are his account of his years in Kolyma and an analysis of the conflict between Siniavskii and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn—an important contribution to a long-running debate. Is it best to fight a dictatorship, as Solzhenitsyn did, with its own weapons of iron will and discipline or, like Siniavskii, by attempting to undermine it with irony and mockery?

Igor was an Anglophile. He spoke of two moments in his life when he felt overwhelmed, unable to believe he was truly in England. One was in the Senior Common Room at New College, Oxford; the other was in an ordinary London pub. Nevertheless, his inner world, like that of many Russian émigrés, remained deeply Russian, and most of his friends were either Russians or English Russianists.

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1. An extract from *Memoirs of an Old Pessimist*, available online at <http://www.stosvet.net/12/golomstock/index.html> (last accessed October 23, 2017). I.B. Tauris will publish the memoir in 2018. Their provisional title is *A Ransomed Dissident: Memoirs of a Soviet Art Historian*.