

The Embodiment
of Communist
Utopia: Socialist
Realism in
Slovakia,
1948–1956

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A man on a combine harvester is as great a subject as a man in armour or in princely robes was for the Renaissance painter ... Instead of portraying our former, diseased inner world, we must now express the joy of a liberated life. We must express all this in comprehensible language, we should strive to reach the widest possible public ... To try to do this is to fulfil our cultural norm, to try to do better is to exceed that norm, and to try to do the best we can is to work like a Stakhanovite.

Štefan Bednár²

After the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948, visual art—like all other areas of artistic production—became a propaganda instrument of Communist ideology, an idealised image of its aim of building a new society. The idea of Socialist Realism, now quickly transplanted to this context, had already found ardent Czech and Slovak supporters among a section of the left-oriented intelligentsia in the 1920s. But these supporters would prove to have a different idea about the form the 'socialisation' of artistic production should take. Into the 1940s the hope still survived among artists of a concrete possible variant of Socialist Realism that would draw on the achievements of the avant-garde, but that faith was shown to be in vain.³ In other words, everything that then happened in Czechoslovakia, whether in the realm of economics or culture, was decided by Joseph Stalin's advisers, enforcing the Soviet model. Thus, as there could not exist any particular (non-Soviet) path to Socialism, neither was any freely-developed artistic production permissible.

After the Ninth Congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party the doctrine of Socialist Realism as formulated by Andrei Zhdanov was officially established. This began to impose itself widely through the institutional pressure that headed downwards from the Communist Party Central Committee to the Ministry of Culture and from there to the centrally-controlled apparatuses of the artists' unions. The suppression of any kind of free artistic manifestation was now a matter of little time. In the same year, 1948, a Czech translation appeared of a collection of Zhdanov's writings, *On Art (O umentí)*, in which the implacable Soviet ideologue supplemented Vladimir Lenin's thesis of Party-mindedness in art with the need to picture reality in its revolutionary development, outline visions of the future, reveal new perspectives, and acquaint the masses with these, referring also to Stalin and his assertion that art must be Socialist in content and national in form. His dogmatic form of Realism rejected the art of the European avant-gardes as Formalist, decadent, and ideologically hostile, and insisted on a return to the Realist traditions of nineteenth-century Russian art. The aim was to transmit ideas to the masses in as unambiguous a form

and as comprehensible a language as possible, to grip them emotionally on a first viewing, pull them in through the chosen content, convince and arouse in them an optimistic zeal for Socialist construction and a faith in a new society.

In its essence, Socialist Realism, as an approach to reality, was above all a means of replacing reality with an idealised projection of society, conceived to resemble a Communist utopia. On the other hand, as a socially-critical construct it was the product of an uncompromising ideology, so it also had to be a weapon of class struggle. Transformed into vehicles and symbols for political ideas, works of art were not primarily supposed to contribute to the satisfaction of spiritual or aesthetic needs, but rather to become a homogenous component of the ideological mechanisms of state power. They were conceived programmatically, in such a way as to suppress any creative remoulding of reality through the artist's inner vision, to negate the artist's freedom of spirit, critical thinking, subjective interpretation of themes or search for new methods of expression. They were supposed to offer an uncomplicated and succinct visual image of the class-oriented, pre-established mythology of the proletariat as the leading social force, and they were meant to express the collective euphoria of Socialist development, the optimism, joy, and élan of the dedication to construction, but also the unceasing 'battle for peace', because while the war had ended, the Western 'ideological enemy' remained.

This ideological implacability was notably demonstrated publicly in intensely-politicised posters and drawn caricatures in the daily press. Among the foremost creators of both was the painter Štefan Bednár, a devout leftist with significant connections to the Slovak National Uprising, who from the beginning had been a passionate theorist of the new art.⁴ In one of his early essays devoted to Socialist Realism he asserted that it was not a matter of a specific style, but only of a 'general line of artistic production' (in an analogy with Klement Gottwald's general line of direction for the Czechoslovak Communist Party).⁵ The painter Ladislav Čemický, a close friend of Bednár's, was one of the first painters to attempt to formulate the characteristics of Socialist Realism, even prior to the publication of Zhdanov's text in Slovak translation in 1950. Čemický argued that Socialist Realism was the only artistic method capable of capturing and expressing the period of transition from a class-based to a classless society. The Realists of the past had still not been able to reveal the revolutionary nature of the proletariat, the only class that can play the leading role in the development of humanity. Čemický developed the thesis that the planned system of Socialism should also involve consciously-planned and controlled artistic production, while in regard to the relationship between form and content he argued that 'in contrast to the decadent perversity of formalism ... content is here the dominant component of the artistic work and form is only secondary. The criteria for the evaluation of a work of art is based on its relation to objective reality'.⁶ The artist is free to choose the means and manner of representation; it is essential only that conflicts be 'expressed truthfully, which means emphasising their progressive socialist elements'.⁷

Let us pause for a moment at this point, for it is Čemický's definition that captures the fundamental paradox of Socialist Realism, which is founded on the one hand on Lenin's 'theory of reflection' (in which the artist does not present a mere 'dead' copy of reality as though seen in a mirror, but rather an image based on a specific, mentally-produced generalisation) and on the other hand on Party-mindedness. The professed attempt to 'truthfully express' something, and yet not thereby to assume an objective position and to 'emphasise' *a priori* certain elements, reveals the fictive core of the whole method of Socialist Realism and its deceitful, simulacrum essence: it is a method of conscious and programmatic beautification that presents itself as the portrayal of reality.

Socialist Realism's proclaimed ideological function also lies behind the predominant emphasis that was placed on propagandistic forms of art designed for public spaces. This model of visual imagery that would impact directly in the streets and in public squares was adopted from the Soviet monumental propaganda connected with the Great October Socialist Revolution, and among its first examples in the Slovak context was the realisation of a number of works for the fifth anniversary of the Slovak National Uprising in 1949.⁸ Produced to a common measurement of 3 x 5 metres, these works decorated the place of celebration, at the main square in Zvolen,

and formed part of a larger architectural design in which they alternated with photographic documentation. Subsequent monumentally-conceived public displays for various significant political and social anniversaries employed an iconography of motifs, symbols, and emblems that had already been validated by Soviet use. Themes of the past, particularly the revolutionary tradition of the proletariat and the history of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, were joined by motifs from the Slovak National Uprising, which Communist ideology appropriated and interpreted as its own victory. Pictures with this theme were stabilised into a kind of pictorial scheme based around winding crowds of partisans in long, hooded rain-capes marching across a landscape with a distant horizon, while in the foreground more detailed figures of partisans appeared carrying machine-guns. These motifs were integrated with the theme of liberation by the Red Army, which was celebrated for its irreplaceable leading role in achieving victory over Fascism. Such celebration served to remind Slovaks of why they belonged to the camp of nations building Socialism. That message was symbolically reinforced not only through monuments, but also through drawings, paintings, and sculptures that depicted the pairing of Slovak partisan and Soviet soldier (the latter shown in an *ushanka*-hat, military jacket and rain cape, and high boots), a pairing that expressed tight brotherhood, fidelity, and dedication to the Soviet Union as well as an enduring bond of alliance against the social enemy.

Contemporary themes were bound in their content to directives from the resolutions of Communist Party congresses and to political buzzwords. An important role in all this was also given to smaller-scale painting and sculpture, which was bound to the so-called target actions that provided artists with groups of prescribed themes; this art was then circulated among the workers, chiefly through travelling exhibitions held directly in work plants. Besides themes concerning the revolutionary traditions of the proletariat and the struggle against Fascism, a preferred theme was the depiction of that which was called 'life today' (*'dnešok'*). The depicted subjects should above all comprise images of the reconstruction of burnt-out partisan villages, the collective élan of volunteer work brigades, and the process of the planned industrialisation of Slovakia, especially scenes of large-scale Communist construction (for instance the building of the Track of Friendship (Trať družby), of dams, power stations, hydroelectric plants, metallurgical works, and industrial plants), the successes of collectivisation and the mechanisation of agriculture (with motifs from such settings as farming cooperatives, machine and tractor stations and state farms, and images of harvested fields). These works were supposed to arise from artists' stays at the 'place of action' itself, with the intention to produce an optimistic, 'truthful representation' with a certain share of celebratory pathos. The works were judged by committees of art theoreticians, and a selection of them would be presented every year at exhibitions representing artists from all across Slovakia, and every two years at showings in Prague representing artists from across the whole Czechoslovak state.

Thus, the demand was mainly for paintings with thematic and figurative compositions. The mythical peak of this genre was the depiction of the beauty of work, the energetic activity of the collective, and the exceptional achievements of the individual for the good of the whole, and all this was to be expressed in the name of the motion and positive energy characterising a process of social rebirth, the transformation of the old into the new. But even this did not suffice: an emphasis was put on the 'living' treatment of a theme, in which all the different elements of a picture form a balanced relationship to support the complex articulation of an idea. The chief model for this kind of 'living' treatment of themes was considered to be the Soviet painting of the 1930s and 1940s, work that had an easily-discernible educational aim. Through a stress on epic narrative elements, these genre compositions were supposed to present some kind of parallel with literary storytelling, though at the same time they were not supposed to be descriptive. Themes of interpersonal relationships, private life, or the subjective feelings of the individual were considered unacceptable. What took hold instead was the repeated use of generalised 'types' of human figures set into fixed, formulaic images of work environments, which were depicted with conventional, realistic methods, and often featured posters of political leaders on the walls.

The Socialist person was represented solely as a positive hero, a conscious and progressive agent of history and a powerful element in a dynamically-productive relationship that would transform existing reality. Individualised portraits tended to apply only to the depiction of Communist leaders, while the representation of ordinary people was typicalised according to social class (as we see in the many work-related portraits which present shock workers, farmers, and even members of the Pioneer youth organisation, union members, and soldiers). The elements of typicalisation, by which artists homogenised or de-individualised the figures represented, included first and foremost the presentation of figures in their work clothes and with their work tools. This enabled a subject's class and professional belonging to be identified at first glance. A kind of fetishisation of tools and machines can be observed here; in themselves these things were not only a symbol of the importance of manual labour (as with the mining lamps, hammers, and drills), of the collectivisation and mechanisation of large-scale agricultural production (the tractors and combine harvesters), or of the system of five-year economic planning to build the new society (the emblem of the tooth wheel): they were also a token of the social and class superiority of the labouring class over the intelligentsia.

An exceptional degree of attention was given to the depiction of miners with burner mining drills, especially during the expansion of heavy industry in Slovakia's immediate post-war years. This was consistent with the self-confident slogan of the time: 'I am a miner, and who is anything more?!' Artists were also sent to observe mining production directly, to get an immediate impression of the heavy labour in the mines, 'to stand where life pulsates at its most vigorous and fascinating'.⁹ But the question was how long artists could remain truly fascinated by these themes; how long, in other words, before their enthusiasm exhausted itself and these motifs began to be soullessly repeated, overused, and reduced to an imposed formula?

Miners were followed in order of importance by metallurgists and welders (especially in sculpture), who mainly appeared as typicalised figures representing the priority status of heavy industry in accordance with the economic plan. Since the expansion of industry demanded an increase in the labour force, the state undertook an intensive recruitment of women into production. This was even incorporated into the pictorial promotion of individual professions within art and the mass media: photographs appeared in the newspapers of young female miners, as well as of female welders, captured in their professional dress with heads dipped down among the shooting sparks of their welding operations, of women shock workers at industrial and textile plants, and of emblematic 'types' of new woman such as the female tractor driver (*traktoristka*). But despite this, painting and sculpture maintained a more traditional image of women, depicting them as mothers or as peasants working in the fields. Occasionally a portrait of a female partisan would appear, connecting back again to Soviet art and its depictions of women as warriors. While such images would show the female partisan with a weapon in her hand, their composition would also make them resemble the traditional image of the village woman holding a bunch of wheat ears (as in a painting by Ján Mudroch, *Partisan Woman On Guard Under Rozsutec Mountain (Partizánka na strážu pod Rozsutcom)*, 1954).

The core iconographic model for the image of paired figures was Soviet sculptor Vera Mukhina's monumental sculpture from the personality-cult era, *Worker and Collective Farm Woman (Rabochii i kolkhoznitsa, 1937)*, which depicts the pride, unity, and uplifted attitude of its two noble representatives of work, who are shown striding forward in matching step and looking somewhere into the horizon, at a vision of the happy future. Pairings of worker and peasant, often male worker and female peasant, were exceptionally popular, especially in drawn illustrations and on posters, for they represented class unity, and in the case of differently-gendered pairings they also demonstrated an equal and harmonious relationship between man and woman. This 'archetype' of the times was sometimes situated in a symbolic setting against a vista of work plants with factory buildings, chimneystacks, and the abundant fields of a fertile land. That this was not a matter of actual equality but rather of established gender roles—in which women are identified with nature and men with culture and the city—is reflected in the fact that we never encounter this scenario's inversion, in which the depicted couple comprises a man in the role of a peasant beside a woman in the role of a worker.

The official portrait, whether situated in a real or an imaginary setting, also enjoyed exceptional popularity among this repertoire of imagery. Most often this would be an image solemnly representing the Party, a portrait of one of the leaders of the proletariat, presented in a frontal view. Such images took inspiration from a tradition of portrait typology that went back to imperial Rome, and drew especially on the ritualistic aspect of the monumental figure, of the saint or monarch as depicted with a dutiful smile and an expression of determination, decisiveness, and wisdom. Portraits of the chief proletarian leaders Lenin and Stalin, but also of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels—whether of their heads, upper bodies or whole bodies—appear in painted form as well as in busts, graphic art, mosaics, posters, and individually as well as in pairs, trios, and quartets. The President and General Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party Klement Gottwald was also often depicted alongside them. In such collective portraits the figures were shown in three-quarter profile and their faces often nestled one behind the other like a fish's scales, suggesting a 'genetically' kindred bond through their literal shared direction, their marching in file, so to speak, towards the same goal. The arrangement of heads and figures in profile one behind the other to form a single diagonal line became a popular compositional scheme for depicting different class or professional types grouped together: workers, soldiers, and so on.

It is as though everything was copied according to the same narrow range of artistic models. And thus the same compositional schemes that bound the fine arts—involving positive characters of unambiguous class status shown in their work environments, stooping over their productive tasks or upright and engaged in weighty discussions that would change history—were also applied to the composition of shots in films, to the staging of plays, to the arrangement of actors onstage, and the use of props. The thesis of the time declared that the typical is not only that which we most frequently encounter, but also that which most fully and most expressively captures the essence of a given social force, and stated that 'the problem of typicality is also always a political problem'.¹⁰ In consequence of this, we see everywhere a typicalisation of characters according to their class belonging, the same eloquent gestures, the same outfits, and the same exaggerations of expression that resemble the deceptively-lifelike quality of wax figures.

The hitherto popular modes of landscape and still life painting found themselves in a marginal position within the Slovak art of the 1950s. Still life painting was judged to contain 'the most conspicuous remnants of old tastes and ideas', and for that reason it was deployed only to supplement other subject matter, or, when appearing as an independent genre, it had to feature ideologically-unambiguous elements that would allow it to be identified as set in the present day (fluttering red flags, books by Communist leaders, contemporary press material).¹¹ For instance, in a still life of a vase of flowers by Peter Matejka, *Flowers for a Celebration (Kytica na slávnosť*, 1951), the colour scheme is symbolically derived from the tricolour flag, an example of which is seen partially covering the table under the vase, and there is also the tiny motif of a waving red flag which appears on top of a building far on the horizon. Likewise, the genre of landscape painting now had to be understood in terms of important settings for social events. The only landscapes that were supposed to be painted were those connected with the Slovak National Uprising, the victory of the Soviet army over Fascism, or else those landscapes that had been fertilised by the work of collective farmers for a good harvest, or that had been transformed by intensive industrialisation. Nature was thus presented as mere pliable material, as a place that provided shelter for the partisans, a witness that bore the traces of victorious battles or the material for great feats of Socialist construction; in each case nature had to be shown bearing the impact of positive human activity. In general, however, landscape painting was perceived as an escape from contemporary lived reality, and its presentation at exhibitions belonged to the most criticised areas of contemporary artistic production.

An example of a landscape painting that did fit the parameters of the time is a 1951 picture by the aforementioned Ladislav Čemický, symptomatically entitled *A New Era Has Come (Nastali nové časy)*, which comprises a work of propaganda to promote the mechanisation and collectivisation of Socialist agriculture (Fig. 27.1). Set in a field of ripe corn, the scene depicted presents a symbolic meeting between the past (in the form of a typical Slovak peasant with



Fig. 27.1. Ladislav Čemický, *The New Times Have Arrived* (*Nastali nové časy*, 1951). Oil on canvas, 117.3 x 150.3 cm. Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava.

a scythe, who might have been cut out of a painting from the turn of the century) and the present (represented by a member of an agricultural cooperative in overalls, whose work has been lightened by the use of a tractor).

With regard to showing the transformation of the landscape through the gradual socialisation of the village, photographic representation was also considered important. A halt was called to ‘photographs of chance occurrences, of all manner of playthings, or of fabricated novelties’; instead, what should now be depicted were ‘the wide collectivised fields, in contrast to the little fields that had characterised the private farming of the past’.¹²

The depiction of the naked human body also disappeared from artistic production. As late as 1956, in response to letters from photographers interested in why the nude had disappeared from local art and especially from photography, the editors of the journal *Československá fotografie* (*Czechoslovak Photography*) replied that

the naked human body is only rarely the bearer of an idea—shots of nudes are more or less solely concerned with producing an emotional effect; but this is not sufficient to a modern understanding of the requirements of photography. If we want to avoid this mistake, we must necessarily connect the body to some kind of context; it is very difficult to find such a context, one that would be natural, tactful and tasteful. That is why today’s art does not take the nude as its principal concern. We do not in any way exclude the possibility of publishing photos with this subject matter, as long as they are truly in accord with the principles of the new photography.¹³

The vague way in which the method of Socialist Realism was defined, with all its postulated norms, on the one hand enabled arbitrary restrictions and and, on the other, aroused uncertainty among artists. Propounded through the evaluative measures of the target actions and thematic contests that chiefly prescribed themes with a clear political delineation, this vague definition led right away to the unchallenged victory of descriptively-Realist, schematic, and thesis-driven works with an easily-legible content, works in the spirit of the tried-and-tested, clear-cut symbolic opposition of good and evil. In practice then, Socialist Realism presented a kind of indiscernible point on the horizon, a target that many artists strived to reach but which only a few lucky ones succeeded in at least ‘touching’.

In principle the application of Socialist Realism to the realm of art should not have been a problem for Slovakia at this time. In comparison with the art of neighbouring regions, Slovak art was less marked by the avant-garde; in many areas conservative tendencies still survived and even the turn towards abstraction in the first half of the twentieth century was more a case of episodic deviations and only impacted on painting and graphic art (Anton Jasusch, Ester Šimerová, Ľudovít Fulla, Mikuláš Galanda, Ladislav Guderna). Sculpture in particular—at this point still mainly bound to public commissions, portraits, memorials, and monuments—was much more firmly anchored in traditionalism and could thus be seen as better prepared for the arrival of Socialist Realism. One of the main reasons why Socialist Realism did not fulfil its ideological expectations in the Slovak context and why, as was repeatedly stated, Slovak Socialist-Realist painting, above all, seemed ‘lifeless’ in comparison with the works presented at exhibitions of Soviet art, was the fact that Slovakia had no tradition of grandiose historical painting, of art swollen with pathos over the commemoration of national history. This genre of painting, a typical feature of nineteenth-century art in nearly all the European countries then coming to national consciousness, could have provided a formal starting point for the execution of multi-figure scenes that were not only technically proficient but also expressive and compositionally assured, and which had a strong ideological charge. While a Realist tradition already existed in Slovakia, this was either a matter of graphic art oriented to the critical depiction of the life of the urban proletariat, or of painting focussed on rural folk life (with a certain share of idealisation), and these tended to be chamber works produced in small formats. The sole artist to achieve the required pathos and heroic representation of characters in the realm of rural-themed painting was Martin Benka. With its idealising and idyllic style and its national content, Benka’s work from the 1920s onwards was able to be utilised by any regime that celebrated patriotism. Although his heroisation of the common person was grasped in the commentary of the time as a precursor to the image of the Communist ‘new man’, his paintings continued to remain at odds with the emphasis on class struggle, despite featuring the new accoutrements of Socialist construction such as factory chimneys. The heroes of his compositions, though dressed in contemporary work clothes, seemed to remain stuck in the nineteenth-century world of Slovak national revival poetry.

If we look at the artistic production of that era through the criteria of the time, then the artist who could be said to come closest to the respected Soviet model in thematic, compositional and expressive terms was the painter Mária Medvecká. Her various paintings set in her native region of Orava always readily connected to the required themes, but among all the other artists of this time she also perhaps best succeeded in capturing a landscape transformed by industrialisation, in investing the characters depicted with that proclaimed ideal of ‘living truthfulness’ and in typicalising them in their essential features. In addition, she was able to use the figures’ gestures, movements and faces to expressively convey specific feelings, above all, the preferred feelings of collectively-shared optimism and faith in a happy future. Her first celebrated work, the triptych *The Construction of the Orava Dam (Stavba Oravskej priehrady)*, reflected the thematic concern with the grand construction projects of Socialism and the successful transformation of the formerly-backward region of Slovakia. One aspect of her work that was considered particularly important is the presence of ‘typicality and the selection of a hero who is truly a new, positive hero, a typical representative of the workers’ class, a politically conscious worker with a new relationship to work’.¹⁴ In 1952, for the painting *Delivery of the Quota in Upper Orava (Odovzdávanie kontingentu na hornej Orave)*, Medvecká won the State Prize, Second Grade, because, as critics asserted, she had vividly captured ‘the typical qualities of the Orava women, who joyfully hand over their crops and poultry for the public food supply, and despite some minor errors—such as the picture’s weak lighting—*Delivery of the Quota* is a strong picture, realistically capturing the new people of our villages’.¹⁵ The picture was even celebrated by Soviet critics when, on the occasion of a reciprocal exhibition of representative Czechoslovak art in Moscow in 1954, they declared that in Slovakia there are ‘few examples of developed thematic painting’, but that Medvecká specifically had proven able, with this picture, ‘to depict Slovak peasant women in such a passionate and heartfelt manner that the viewer is permeated with a sincere affection for these good, simple women with an open



Fig. 27.2. Mária Medvecká, *Children of Peace* (*Deti mieru*), 1952). Oil on canvas, 165 x 202 cm. Orava Gallery, Dolný Kubín. © DACS 2019

soul and a kind, gentle character'.¹⁶ From today's perspective, that era's conception of Socialist-Realist representation is perhaps most closely approximated by Medvecká's painting *Children of Peace* (*Deti mieru*) from 1952, which can be read as an allegory of a utopian new society and the birth of the new man (Fig. 27.2). In this painting Medvecká portrayed two groups of children in a meadow. The group in the foreground is comprised of Pioneers, representatives of politically-conscious youth, who are shown wearing glove puppets on their hands and presenting a puppet show for the second group, comprised of village children sitting nearby in the grass. The stage of the puppet theatre overlays a panorama of the Orava landscape seen in the background of the picture, and this stage motif, with its open proscenium space, symbolically suggests a window giving onto a view of the happy future. Through her depiction of play in connection with the attributes of education (such as the book that one of the girl Pioneers is holding), Medvecká thus outlines the prescribed non-violent transformation of the 'old' into the 'new'. This group of young Pioneers represents the hopes of Socialism: it represents youth as the unequivocal bearer of new ethical values, values to which we must unavoidably subscribe. This group not only heralds a world of purity and innocence, but also an optimistic future of new horizons, unencumbered by the past. Medvecká endows this metaphor of ideological re-education with an epic-style gaiety, enabling us to read the pictorial composition in a circular fashion as we move from one childish figure to the next. Each child is depicted with an individual expression of enthusiasm and captivation on its face, and together their portraits create an integrally-connected system of elements and a homogenous expressive unity bound by a commonly-espoused idea. Through this fusion of typicalisation and the individualisation of the portrayed figures, depicted on a larger-than-life scale, the picture has an exceptionally-vivid effect, which was precisely one characteristic of the multi-figure genre compositions of Soviet Socialist Realism.

Medvecká returned to the theme of children in her composition *Michurinites* (*Mičurinky*, 1954), which depicts a young girl in a headscarf and, beside her, a female Pioneer. (A variation of this motif would later appear on a ten-koruna state banknote from 1960, on whose reverse side we see this same pairing of girls holding flowers, set amidst a landscape divided up



Fig. 27.3. Ctibor Belan, *The Last Winter* (*Posledná zima*, 1955). Oil on canvas, 134.5 x 184 cm. Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava.

by factory buildings and chimneystacks.) The name of the picture refers to the Soviet scientist Ivan Vladimirovich Michurin, who used cross-breeding to cultivate crops for the Communist economy; it refers more specifically to the then-significant phenomenon of small circles of young naturalists, or 'Michurinites' (*Mičurinci*, 'followers of Michurin'), and thereby also to the cult of belief in humanity's boundless capacity to reshape the world according to its needs. The frequent use of the motif of children in such a context is hardly surprising.

Medvecká's husband Ctibor Belan can be considered another successful exponent of the genre scenes of Socialist Realism. His pictures also enjoyed a positive reception, although in his choice of themes he preferred the 'male' genre of painting, concerned with the revolutionary tradition of the proletariat and using motifs connected with the battle against Fascism. His work approaches Medvecká's in its frequent method of intimately depicting a motif from up close, and in its ethically-focussed portrayal of the simple person as positive hero. But he also knew how to balance these aspects of his compositions with a bellicose enthusiasm and pathos, qualities admired by critics at the time. His painting *The Krompachy Uprising* (*Krompašská vzbura*) was considered as the first serious attempt at an historical composition, because, beside the required degree of drama, the artist also achieved the truthful and correct typicalisation of the positive and negative participants in this event, and 'showed that in this crowd of workers there is both defiance and pride, as well as a brutal, spontaneous force, a sense of social and historical right'.¹⁷ Belan's war scenes—such as *The Last Winter* (*Posledná zima*, 1955), with its depiction of two brave young boys who do not want to betray information about the Partisans to the Germans—were also valued for their multi-layered and non-schematic means of portrayal, as well as for their capacity to elevate 'individual fate and the individual person to embodiments of significant social ideas and forces' (Fig. 27.3).¹⁸

Ladislav Guderna belonged to those artists who accommodated themselves to Socialist-Realist doctrine in their own way. As a member of the generation of wartime artists who in the 1940s had built on the inspiration of the avant-garde, Guderna was unable to renounce his Formalist experiments. While turning from Surrealist-Cubist compositions to realistically-depicted works, he retained a distinctive stylisation. He did not avoid socially-engaged themes; on the contrary, he accepted these as his own, as though he wished to show that a work's content does not in any



Fig. 27.4. Ladislav Guderna, *The Newly Constructed Machine Station in Galanta* (*Novostavba stroj. st. v Galante*, 1949).
Tempera, card,
60 x 84.6 cm.
Slovak National
Gallery, Bratislavas.
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way influence its formal approach. Despite the fact that his works of the first half of the 1950s are fundamentally realistic, and thus legible on a first viewing, there seems to be a kind of cryptic message concealed inside them; something alien to the art of Socialist Realism, which divests itself of all mystery. Guderna's 1949 painting *Construction of a Machinery Station in Galanta* (*Novostavba strojovej stanice v Galante*) is anchored, in terms of subject matter, in the motif of work and thus it fulfils the era's aesthetic requirements to the letter (Fig. 27.4). If, however, we look at Guderna's sophisticated perspectival work with distant vanishing points, at the geometric lines that clearly and authoritatively outline the painting's compositional scheme, as well as at the painted figures and tractors, we perceive a peculiarly-rational distance assumed by the artist towards his theme. His play with reduced forms and the dark windows of the buildings recall the paintings of Giorgio di Chirico, while the tractors that Guderna presents as geometric ornaments strike us as more alive than the depicted figures of the workers. The fact that Guderna succeeded here in partially outwitting Socialist-Realist principles represents a personal victory for his intellectual approach, which also manifested itself in his handling of other 'prescribed' themes. As he proved in his dual portrait *Little Sisters* (*Sestričky*, 1954), which focusses on the tender relationship between siblings, he was also unafraid to work in a more intimate vein and could endow a character with an expression of personal emotion that lacked any ideological attributes. Even in a work from the same year entitled *Partisan* (*Partizán*), a portrait of a man's head and chest that evokes the figure of a monk in the vestments of his order, there is none of that desired typicalisation that defines the positive hero figure of Socialist Realism; even the standard accoutrement of the weapon is missing. On the contrary, we are gripped by the man's individualised, realistically-depicted, and 'living' face, which seems as though it is drowning in the hood of his light-coloured cape, which is a strange mass of material whose abundant folds offer a play of chiaroscuro against the picture's dark background. The depth of feeling from which this passionately-human and realistic portrait emerged was no chance phenomenon, for this was a portrait of Guderna's own brother, whom he lost in the Slovak National Uprising. This face could have come from Guderna's *Farewells I-II* (*Lúčenie I-II*) compositions, which take the uprising as their theme.

Yet in Guderna's case another model symptom of this era comes to the fore: the painful situation of those young artists, poets, and theorists formed in the 1930s and 1940s whose previous

affiliations had set them on the path of modern art, but who had only had a short time in which to pursue it. While they had stood in opposition to the Fascist regime and while several of them had been convinced leftists who had supported the idea of building a new society, neither their art nor their opinions were considered properly revolutionary, for these 'did not relate to the workers' struggle'.¹⁹ Moreover, at a Party meeting in 1950, prior to the Ninth Slovak Communist Party Congress, these artists, just like other representatives of the 'old intelligentsia', were forced to reflect critically on their own activities and deny their own past, even if this meant their recent past. An excerpt from Guderna's own act of self-criticism can be used to stand for all the other cases, for among all the painters of his generation Guderna was perhaps the one who had espoused modernist tendencies the most doggedly:

As the revolutionary forces fought on in illegality, my view of this struggle was hazy. I came into contact with opportunistic forces. I had an ardent attachment to Western culture ... My lack of resistance led me to alcoholism, anarchy ... Only the gradual evolution of our society and the trust of the [Slovak Communist Party], which I did not at all deserve, enabled me to participate in the Congress of National Culture, where I came to realise the wrongness of my behaviour, my thinking and my distorted character.²⁰

(He also declared how he realised that it is not the workers who must establish a relationship with art, but rather artists who must forge a relationship with the workers.) We need only add that, in this same year, all other 'engaged' artists, critics, and theorists with a 'Formalist' past had to undergo similar acts of 'self-criticism' at congressional meetings if they wished to continue professionally in the field of culture.

A noticeable turn away from schematism in works of art and dogmatism in their assessment began to occur after the important exhibition *Contemporary Art of the Soviet Union (Současné výtvarné umění SSSR)*, which took place in January 1954 in Prague, in the riding hall of Prague Castle, and was then reprised in Bratislava. After this exhibition, which had the paradoxical effect of showing that contemporary Soviet art was hardly less barren than its Slovak counterpart, other themes and approaches began to appear, the range of artistic subjects started to expand, and the interpretation of Socialist-Realist principles became more stylistically diverse. Pictures enlivened by a freer, impressionistic hand or by expressive strokes of the paintbrush now simply felt more convincing than a dry, descriptive Realism bound to the nineteenth century.

The monumental products of Soviet art, connecting back to a rich tradition of Russian nineteenth-century painting and celebrated at the time as works of vivid truthfulness and genre-style social diversity, remained a more or less unattainable model. In both form and content they were fundamentally alien to the Slovak context and its specific artistic heritage. As something implanted from a differently-structured cultural environment, something that unavoidably disrupted the existing culture and the specific logic of its domestic development, the methodological dictates of Socialist Realism (amounting in any case to 'the discovery of the already discovered') could never have resulted in an adequate and enduring artistic programme. This would have been the case even without the violent mechanisms of ideological power that prepared the ground for Socialist Realism in this context.

There are other reasons why the phenomenon of Socialist Realism began markedly to 'wither away' from inside after the mid-1950s, persisting from then on as a mere empty façade, an outdated cliché. The experience of the political show trials, which revealed the false basis of the notion of Communist utopia, also put paid to the original guarantee of a socially-progressive, revolutionary ethics. An ever-greater distaste with the Communist system spread through the ranks of artists and art theoreticians, as did their attempts to escape its directives. Gradually and with a varying degree of intensity, such efforts began to appear in all fields of art. Additional factors behind this situation were the rise of younger artists at the end of the decade as well as the fact that Slovakia also had an older, modernist tradition with which artists could once again forge connections.

- 1 Zora Rusinová, *Súdržka moja vlast: Vizualna kultúra obdobia stalinizmu na Slovensku* (Trnava: Trnava University Philosophy Faculty (FF TU), 2015).
- 2 Štefan Bednár, 'O záväzkoch umelcov', *Nové slovo* 5 (1949): p. 79.
- 3 On 8 April 1948 a *Manifesto of Socialist Humanism* was launched at a meeting at the Bureau of Trade (Obchodné grémium) in Bratislava, an event initiated by the Council of Arts and Sciences (Umelecká a vedecká rada) and attended by Slovak cultural representatives from the ranks of both Communists and non-Communists. In addition to the need for the 'socialisation of art', this manifesto also proclaimed its belief in creative freedom. The new art, whose 'form must be adequate to its new content', had to emerge from a creative process that 'does not reject all that was created in the past, but which finds its point of departure in previous art and acts as its organic continuation'. Quoted in: A. Matuška, 'Umelci vystúpili', *Kultúrny život* 8 (1948): p. 1
- 4 Bednár himself recounted the activities of many artists during the uprising: 'A whole range of them passed through the torture chambers of prisons and concentration camps, and three artists sealed their loyalty to their nation in blood. The graphic artist Janko Novák fell in battle as a partisan at Martinské hole, the painter Ludovít Varga was killed, along with hundreds of other patriots, by the Nazi murderers in the Mauthausen concentration camp and another painter, A. Weiss-Kubínčan, also disappeared, never to return, into the torture chambers of Hitler's Germany'. Štefan Bednár, 'Slovenské národné povstanie vo výtvarnej tvorbe 1944–1954', in *Slovenská univerzita – výstavné miestnosti Slovenskej sekcie UZČSVU*, exhibition catalogue, Šafárikovo nám. 7 (Bratislava, August–September 1954), unpaginated.
- 5 Štefan Bednár, 'Socialistický realizmus. Generálna línia umeleckej tvorby', *Nové slovo* 50 (1948): p. 766.
- 6 Through his emphasis on content, Čemický thus distinguished himself from the opinion of Communist Party Central Committee member Václav Kopecký, as expressed at the Ninth Communist Party Congress. A fanatical devotee of Soviet imperialist politics, Kopecký asserted that Socialist Realism does not want 'any kind of "formlessness", but instead wants clear forms and firm shapes ... it does not want content and attitude without form, it wants a unity of content and form, seeing this as a fundamental requirement from the perspective of a work's artistic value'. Václav Kopecký, 'Záznam z prejavu na IX. Zjazde KSČ, máj, 1949', in *Slovenské výtvarné umenie na ceste k socialistickému realizmu* (Bratislava: TVAR, 1950), p. 35.
- 7 Ladislav Čemický, 'Čo je socialistický realizmus?', *Umenie. Mesačník pre výtvarnú kultúru* 1 (1949): pp. 73–75.
- 8 For more information see: Anatolii Lunacharskii, 'Lenin i iskusstvo', in Lunacharskii, *O Vladimire Il'iche* (Moscow: Partizdat, 1933), pp. 46–51.
- 9 Štefan Bednár, 'Súčasná situácia výtvarnej tvorby na Slovensku', *Výtvarné umění*, 2 (1950–51): p. 34.
- 10 Zoltán Rampák, 'Niektoré otázky našej pôvodnej dramaturgie', *Pod zástavou socializmu* 3 (1953): p. 173.
- 11 Marian Városov, *Slovenské maliarstvo 1950–1952* (Bratislava: TVAR, 1954): pp. 10–13.
- 12 František Čihák, 'Socialistický realizmus v nové fotografii', *Nová fotografie* 10 (1951): p. 217.
- 13 (red.) [sic], 'K otázke aktu ve fotografii', *Československá fotografie* 4 (1956): p. 4.
- 14 Radislav Matuščík, 'K základným otázkam boja za socialistický realizmus vo výtvarnom umení', *Pod zástavou socializmu* 4/5 (1952): pp. 179–182.
- 15 M. Pavel Fodor, 'K celoslovenskej výtvarnej výstave', *Pravda* 1 (1952): p. 9.
- 16 A. Kamenskij, 'Československé umění na nové cestě', *Výtvarná práce* 4 (1954): p. 5.
- 17 Városov, *Slovenské maliarstvo*, p. 11.
- 18 Marian Városov, 'Účasť slovenského výtvarného umenia na III. celoštátnej prehliadke v Prahe', *Kultúrny život* 34 (1955): p. 1.
- 19 Ľudovít Kudlák, 'Z uznesenia plenárneho zhromaždenia výtvarných umelcov' *Kultúrny život* 31 (1951): p. 2.
- 20 Alongside Guderna, other artists engaged in harsh self-criticism, including the avant-gardist Ľudovít Kudlák, who condemned his own long-dead Dada past in the following terms: 'As a young man I was a terribly destructive element. In the years 1919–1922 I showed occasional tendencies towards a Dadaist worldview, something that grew out of my personal characteristics as well as my artistic activity—as a poet ... It was only after studying historical materialism and philosophy that I came to understand the great promise of art's role ... I must therefore go to some factory, live there for some time among the people and the machines, and from this I will gain a further stimulus to create for a Socialist society...'. See: 'Z aktív slovenských výtvarníkov – komunistov. Ohňom sebakritiky k novej tvorbe v duchu socialistického realizmu', *Kultúrny život* 11 (1950): p. 9.