

ARTICLE

“Tragic Presentiments”: Maksim Gor’kii and the Invention of Soviet Humanism

Alexander McConnell 

University of Michigan

Email: amcconn@umich.edu

“You’re a humanist even in a graveyard!” the Devil exclaimed. “Quite right. Humanism is more appropriate in the company of corpses—here it offends no one. In factories, on the streets and town squares, in prisons and mines, amongst the living, humanism is absurd and can even arouse anger. Here no one laughs; the dead are always serious. And I’m sure they’ll be pleased to hear talk of humanism—after all, it’s their stillborn child.”¹

—Maksim Gor’kii, “Masters of Life,” 1906

Humanism? Yes, this is a timely slogan for us. Just look at how people are being reformed here. I am especially fascinated by this side of our life, I follow it very closely . . .²

—Maksim Gor’kii, 1935

Soviet citizens perusing their daily copies of *Pravda* or *Izvestiia* on May 23, 1934, would have come across an essay by the famous writer Maksim Gor’kii with an unusual title: “Proletarskii gumanizm” (Proletarian Humanism).³ Perhaps intrigued by this funny sounding but clearly important foreign word, inquisitive readers might have turned to the recently published first edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* (BSE), which provides two entries for humanism: one referring to “a conventional but not sufficiently precise term used to characterize the culture of the Renaissance epoch, or some aspect thereof,” and a second, much shorter entry concerning “a modern movement in the theory of knowledge that arose in the early twentieth century in connection to pragmatism.” Neither entry makes any mention of proletarian, socialist, or Soviet varieties of humanism. Indeed, according to the BSE, Renaissance humanism inevitably “exhausts its progressive possibilities, degenerates, and becomes a conservative and reactionary force,” remaining “alien to the broad masses and even a significant part of the bourgeoisie.”⁴

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¹ Maksim Gor’kii, “Khoziaeva zhizni,” in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Khudozhestvennye proizvedeniia v dvadtsati piati tomakh*, vol. 6 (Moscow, 1970), 227. Unless indicated, all translations are my own.

² Quoted in the diary of Nikolai Ustrialov, “‘Sluzhit rodinu prikhoditsia kostiami . . .’ Dnevnik N.V. Ustrialova 1935–37 gg.,” *Istochnik: Dokumenty russkoi istorii* no. 5–6 (Moscow, 1998): 15.

³ M. Gor’kii, “Proletarskii gumanizm,” *Pravda* no. 140 and *Izvestiia* no. 119, May 23, 1934.

⁴ “Gumanizm” in *Bol’shaia Sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, ed. O.Iu. Shmidt, vol. 19 (Moscow, 1930), 792–98.

Were our intrepid readers able to consult another Stalin-era linguistic compendium, Dmitrii Ushakov's *Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language* (the first volume of which was not published until 1935), they would have discovered a comparable set of definitions:

Humanism (from lat. *humanus*)—1. An ideological movement of the Renaissance epoch, aimed at liberating the human personality and thought from the shackles of feudalism and Catholicism (*historical*). Enlightened love for humankind (*dated*).⁵

Contemporary reference works thus give no indication of how to understand the concept of “proletarian humanism.” Both Ushakov's *Explanatory Dictionary* and the BSE treat humanism as a historical relic, an outmoded worldview associated with the rising bourgeoisie of Italian city-states. Nor would a formulation such as Gor'kii's have been familiar to even voracious consumers of Soviet print media. Indeed, prior to May 1934, not a single instance of the phrases “proletarian humanism,” “socialist humanism,” or “Soviet humanism” appeared in *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*—the main Communist Party and government newspapers—or the popular journals *Ogonek* and *Krokodil*.⁶

References to humanism that did appear in the Soviet press before 1934 were almost invariably denunciatory. An editorial commemorating the Bolshevik Party's thirtieth anniversary in 1933, for example, pronounced “universal humanism incompatible with Bolshevism,” while a 1932 article characterized humanism as “a thinly veiled weapon of imperialist politics” and those styling themselves humanists (*gumanisty*) as “defenders of imperialism . . . supporting the tottering building of capitalism.”⁷ In the parlance of the early Stalin period, humanist and humanism were sooner epithets than expressions of praise. At best, they were formerly progressive designations belonging to a distant past that was being superseded daily by the achievements of socialism. “We are not humanists,” the writer Alexei Tolstoi stated firmly in January 1934, “but we have taken everything of value that humanism created, and it has simply ceased to exist as a reality.”⁸ Gor'kii's essay on “Proletarian Humanism,” published mere months after these remarks, thus represented a new phenomenon in Soviet public discourse: the explicit claiming of humanism as a socialist concept and abandonment of hostility to its invocation in a contemporary context. What explains this seemingly abrupt reversal? Where did the ideas Gor'kii expressed in his essay originate? And what did it mean for Soviet culture to begin speaking the language of humanism?

This article examines the “invention” of a Soviet concept of humanism over the course of the 1920s to mid-1930s, tracing the term's evolution from a fringe intellectual concern to a core element of the Stalinist ideological lexicon. This conceptual revolution reverberated across every domain of Soviet society and culture, from obscure academic works to the highest echelons of the political elite. While Iosif Stalin himself rarely if ever used the term in public, Party propagandists began attributing the quality of humanism to the dictator's speeches from 1934 onward.⁹ Stalin's patronage and guidance were also crucial

⁵ “Gumanizm” in *Tolkovnyi slovar' russkogo iazyka*, ed. D.N. Ushakov, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1935), 638.

⁶ Data from EastView, retrieved July 2020. Searches performed over the date range 01/01/1917 to 05/23/1934, with search terms in Cyrillic in quotations and a wildcard character (*) to account for case variations (e.g., “пролетарск* гуманизм”). There is one instance each of “proletarian humanism” and “socialist humanism” in the newspaper *Literaturnaia gazeta*, both from 1930 and with decidedly negative connotations. These usages relate to literary polemics aimed at the *Pereval* group, discussed subsequently.

⁷ “Tridtsat' let bol'shevizma,” *Sovetskoe iskusstvo* no. 35, August 2, 1933, 1; I. Anisimov, “Gumanisty na sluzhbe u imperializma,” *Literaturnaia gazeta* no. 26, June 11, 1932, 3.

⁸ A. Tolstoi, “Nauka i literatura,” *Izvestiia* no. 14, January 16, 1934, 2.

⁹ Dina Khapaeva claims that “Gorky's article received the enthusiastic endorsement of Joseph Stalin, who co-opted the concept of ‘proletarian humanism’ for his own speeches.” However, the speech Khapaeva cites is Stalin's “Cadres Decide Everything” address on May 4, 1935, which does not mention humanism. An editorial also titled “Proletarian Humanism” in *Literaturnaia gazeta* on July 9, 1935, referencing the “Cadres” speech (not, as

in encouraging Gor'kii to develop his association of humanism with a socialist vision of the future rather than the vestiges of a dying capitalist order.

As the article's first epigraph indicates, Gor'kii's interest in humanism dates to the early years of his literary career. His relationship with Aleksandr Blok and involvement in the genesis of Blok's 1919 essay "Krushenie gumanizma" (The Collapse of Humanism) were particularly important in shaping Gor'kii's pessimistic outlook on humanism as an ideology of individualism and Christian mercy that was proving impotent in the wake of the First World War and Russian Revolutions. This attitude only deepened during the 1920s while Gor'kii was living in Italy, where he observed the rise of fascism and the deterioration of the international situation. From Italy, Gor'kii maintained contact with writers back home, including Aleksandr Voronskii and members of his *Pereval* group, an eclectic faction sympathetic to non-Party "fellow travelers." It was, in fact, the Perevalists, not Gor'kii, who first attempted to articulate a socialist conception of humanism, a sin for which they suffered dearly at the hands of the militant Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP).

RAPP's assaults on Pereval ended with the dissolution of independent literary factions by Central Committee fiat in 1932, coinciding with Gor'kii's return to the USSR at Stalin's behest. Now positioned as the country's foremost cultural figure and Stalin's emissary to the European intelligentsia, Gor'kii became increasingly concerned with the danger fascism posed to "culture," bourgeois as well as socialist. It was the growing fascist threat following the Nazi seizure of power in 1933, I argue, that provided the impetus for Gor'kii's reassessment of humanism and the Soviet embrace of the concept after years of official animus. Because of its flexibility and resonance within the nascent European resistance, humanism could be instrumentalized as a tool for antifascist coalition building, helping underwrite Stalin's pivot to a Popular Front with foreign social democrats in 1934. Gor'kii, with his abiding interest in Europe's degenerating humanistic traditions, played a decisive part in this process. But whereas the Popular Front was a temporary expedient, abandoned with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939, the Stalin-era embrace of humanism endured, becoming entangled with the Soviet wartime experience and ideals of socialist personhood in ways that would later prove complicated to resolve.¹⁰

Silver Age to Revolution: Gor'kii and Blok

Gor'kii first engaged with the concept of humanism in the *fin-de-siècle* period of high modernism known as the Russian "Silver Age."¹¹ Most renowned for its poetry, the Silver Age also witnessed a flowering of quasi-mystical religious thought, part of a pan-European reaction against positivism at the end of the nineteenth century.¹² Silver Age religious thinkers espoused a Christian humanism centering freedom and creativity in response to the moral degeneration and civilizational decline they perceived within late imperial Russia.¹³ It was in this turbulent climate that Gor'kii established his literary credentials. Despite frank depictions of social ills, his early works evinced a naïve faith in human potential bordering

Khapaeva suggests, reprinting it verbatim) is evidently the source of this confusion. Dina Khapaeva, *The Celebration of Death in Contemporary Culture* (Ann Arbor, 2017), 36, 193n10.

¹⁰ Indeed, one text described Viacheslav Molotov's speech announcing the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1939 as the "greatest historical document of socialist humanism." V. Sokolov, *Kommunisticheskaia moral'* (Orel, 1940), 24.

¹¹ On Silver Age culture and humanism broadly, see Tatiana Elshina, *Russkii kulturnyi renessans. Issledovanie problemy gumanizma v kontekste literatury XX veka* (Kostroma, 1999).

¹² H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890–1930* (New York, 1958).

¹³ Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, "Religious Humanism in the Russian Silver Age," in *A History of Russian Philosophy 1830–1930: Faith, Reason, and the Defense of Human Dignity*, eds. Gary M. Hamburg and Randall A. Poole (Cambridge, Eng., 2010), 227–47. On late imperial pessimism, see Mark D. Steinberg, *Petersburg Fin De Siècle: The Darkening Landscape of Modern Times, 1905–1917* (New Haven, 2011), 157–66.

on secular religion.¹⁴ “I know of nothing better, more complex, or more interesting than man,” Gor’kii declared in 1899. “Man is everything. He even created God.”¹⁵

Though he remained formally unaffiliated, Gor’kii’s underground activities increasingly aligned him with the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. He was among workers marching towards the Winter Palace on January 9, 1905, when the army opened fire, killing dozens and wounding hundreds more. Imprisoned for his role in “Bloody Sunday,” Gor’kii wrote a play, *Children of the Sun*, satirizing the intelligentsia’s obsession with perfecting humanity while remaining oblivious to the struggles of ordinary people. In fact, the events of 1905 radicalized many formerly apolitical intellectuals, including religious thinkers, who turned their Christian humanist notions towards transforming Russian society.¹⁶

One locus of post-1905 ferment was the salon of Viacheslav Ivanov, frequented among others by the poet Aleksandr Blok.¹⁷ Both writers were associated with the Russian symbolist movement and went on to compose essays about humanism nearly simultaneously in 1919.¹⁸ Gor’kii, meanwhile, fled abroad after his release from prison, whence he made little secret of his distaste for the symbolists. “My attitude towards Blok is, as you know, negative,” he wrote to the playwright Leonid Andreev in 1907.¹⁹ Upon returning to Russia in 1913, however, Gor’kii struck up a cordial relationship with Blok, and by 1919 they were meeting regularly.²⁰ Indeed, at Gor’kii’s initiative, the People’s Commissariat for Education of the new Bolshevik government established a publishing house called World Literature in Petrograd where Blok began working as an editor.

On March 25, 1919, Blok read a lecture at the World Literature offices on the German poet Heinrich Heine, whose verses he was translating.²¹ The evening itself is remarkably well-documented. Both Blok and the poet Kornei Chukovskii recorded contemporaneous accounts placing Gor’kii at the scene and describing his participation. Chukovskii’s diary entry is worth quoting at length:

Yesterday, at the meeting of “World Literature,” Blok lectured about his translations of Heine.... He said that Heine was an anti-humanist, that now, when the humanistic civilization of the nineteenth century has ended, when the bell of anti-humanism is tolling loudest of all, Heine will be understood differently.... No sooner had Blok finished than Gor’kii spoke up:

“I am an ordinary fellow and, of course, you (Blok) and I are different sorts of people, so you will be surprised by what I have to say. But it also seems to me that humanism, precisely humanism (in the Christian sense) should go to the devil.... I was at a congress of poor peasants recently—ten thousand faces—the village and the city must certainly

¹⁴ For an alternate account of Gor’kii’s formative years, emphasizing his relationship with Aleksandr Bogdanov, see Jutta Scherrer, “Maxim Gorky as a Spokesman for Proletarian Humanism,” in *Stalin Era Intellectuals: Culture and Stalinism*, eds. Vesa Oittinen and Elina Viljanen (New York, 2022), 136–39.

¹⁵ M. Gor’kii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Pis’ma v dvadtsati chetyrekh tomakh* [henceforth PSS *Pis’ma*], (Moscow, 1997), 1:377.

¹⁶ Rosenthal, “Religious Humanism in the Russian Silver Age,” 228.

¹⁷ Robert Bird, “Imagination and Ideology in the New Religious Consciousness,” in *A History of Russian Philosophy*, 276–77; James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York, 1970), 497–98.

¹⁸ A. Paiman, “U vodorazdelov mysli: krizis ili krushenie? (tema “gumanizma” u Viach. Ivanova, A. Bloka, o. Pavla Florenskogo),” in *Viacheslav Ivanov. Issledovaniia i materialy*, vol. 1, ed. K. Iu. Lappo-Danilevskii and A.B. Shishkin (St. Petersburg, 2010), 122–32.

¹⁹ M. Gor’kii, PSS *Pis’ma* (Moscow, 2000), 6:68. See also K.N. Gavrilin, ed., *Maksim Gorkii i khudozhestvennaia kul’tura simvolizma. K 100-letiiu “Skazok ob Italii”* (Moscow, 2017).

²⁰ A.M. Kriukova, “K istorii lichnykh i tvorcheskikh otnoshenii Bloka i Gor’kogo,” in *Aleksandr Blok. Novye materialy i issledovaniia*, ed. I.S. Zil’bershtein and L.M. Rozenblium, Literaturnoe nasledstvo vol. 92 (Moscow, 1987), 4:236.

²¹ Aleksandr Blok, “Geine v rossii,” in *Sobranie sochinenii v vosmi tomakh*, ed. V.N. Orlov, A.A. Surkov, and K.I. Chukovskii (Moscow, 1963), 6:116–28.

collide, the village harbors an animal hatred for the city. It will be like we are on an island, people of science will be besieged, this isn't even a struggle, it's something deeper . . . as though there are two races here. Humanistic ideas need to be sharpened to the extreme, humanists need to become martyrs, Christlike, and this will happen, it will . . . I sense much prophecy in Aleksandr Aleksandrovich's (Blok's) words. Only the word humanism needs to be replaced with another: nihilism."

It's strange Gor'kii didn't sense that Blok *is against humanism*, that he is with those animalistic ones—he counts Heine among them—and that his enmity is towards liberalism, the main representative of which is Gor'kii. It's astounding how Gor'kii can be possessed by one single idea! These days, no matter what he talks about, everything is reduced to discord between the village and the city.²²

Chukovskii's contention that Gor'kii misunderstood the lecture is difficult to assess; he himself may have misjudged Gor'kii's views on humanism, which from the elliptical monologue cited above appear compatible with Blok's own. The reference to Gor'kii as the "main representative" of liberalism is also somewhat perplexing, but likely alludes to the writer's initially adversarial attitude towards the Bolsheviks during the revolutionary year of 1917.²³

Blok's account gives no indication of Gor'kii having misconstrued anything substantial. Certain details also diverge from Chukovskii's telling.²⁴ In any case, the two accounts concur on Gor'kii's overall reaction to the lecture. Here is Blok's recollection of the same evening:

Yesterday was a big day. I read a lecture about Heine (how my translations are going), touching on the collapse of humanism and liberalism.... Gor'kii gave a lengthy speech about how something truly new is coming, something before which humanism, in the sense of "Christian relations," will have to recede temporarily.... He translated the issue into his favorite topic of recent days . . . the struggle between the village and the city. . . . He said a desperate struggle between the village and city is coming, which will mean trouble not just for capitalists, but for writers and artists as well.²⁵

For Gor'kii, the central issue Blok's lecture raised was not poetics, but ethics. Humanism, which Gor'kii evidently took to mean something like traditional Christian virtue, was collapsing amidst the cataclysm wrought by the First World War and Russian Revolutions. But whereas Blok used this as an entry point for discussing Heine, Gor'kii saw the collapse of humanism as portending a broader reorientation of moral values, centering on looming conflict between educated urbanites ("people of science") and the bestial, ten-thousand-faced mass of the countryside.²⁶

²² K.I. Chukovskii, *Dnevnik 1901–1929*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1991), 105–6. Emphasis in original.

²³ Maksim Gor'kii, *Untimely Thoughts: Essays on Revolution, Culture, and the Bolsheviks 1917–1918*, trans. Herman Ermolaev (New Haven, 1995), 98; Tovah Yedlin, *Maxim Gorky: A Political Biography* (Westport, 1999), 112–25.

²⁴ According to Blok, for instance, Gor'kii proposed replacing "liberals" with "nihilists," not "humanism" with "nihilism," a more plausible version considering humanism's centrality to the lecture. Possibly this was a mild objection to Blok's thesis about a "liberal legend" of Heine in Russia. See Blok, "Geine v rossii," 119.

²⁵ Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1963), 7:355–56.

²⁶ The theme was a familiar one for Gor'kii. Writing for the Menshevik newspaper *Novaia zhizn'* from 1917–18, he had denounced Bolshevik manipulation of the public's "animal anarchism." The world war, Gor'kii argued, had exposed the hypocrisy of Europe's intellectuals, whose high-minded appeals to "humaneness" (*chelovechnost*) had not prevented them from plunging into the abyss. "In the twentieth century," Gor'kii lamented in July 1917, "after Europe has, for nineteen centuries, preached humaneness in churches (which she is now destroying with cannons), and in books (which soldiers are burning like firewood)—in the twentieth century, humanism is forgotten and ridiculed . . ." Gor'kii, *Untimely Thoughts*, 76, 96, 142.

According to Blok, Gor'kii was so enthralled by the lecture on Heine that he suggested devoting a special session to the topic. This led Blok to expand his lecture into "The Collapse of Humanism," which he read at World Literature on April 9, 1919.²⁷ Around this time, Ivanov was completing his own study of humanism, a development Blok noted anxiously on April 1: "I have received proofs of Viach. Ivanov's essay on the 'crisis of humanism' and am afraid to read them."²⁸ Both essays discuss humanism as a Renaissance phenomenon and its disintegration during the nineteenth century.²⁹ Ivanov's combines striking imagery of natural decay and rebirth with a vision of artistic "transhumanism" superseding all extant aesthetic and ethical standards.³⁰ For Blok, meanwhile, humanism is identifiable with individualism; its collapse elevated the "masses" as history's motive force, culminating in the maelstrom of mass violence and mass politics that engulfed Europe from 1914 to 1918. Gor'kii registered his impressions of Blok's essay in a literary sketch published in 1923:

All this came to mind after yesterday's unexpected conversation with Blok. We left World Literature together and he asked: what do I think about his "Collapse of Humanism?" A few days ago, he read something like a lecture on the topic, a short essay. The essay struck me as vague, but full of tragic presentiments . . . I don't understand: does he lament or rejoice at humanism's downfall? . . . Blok seems to me unclear about his own beliefs; words cannot penetrate the depths of thought that are destroying this man, along with everything he calls the "destruction of humanism."³¹

Gor'kii's confusion is understandable. "The Collapse of Humanism" can be read simultaneously as an indictment of nineteenth-century quests for unity through national revolutions or civilizing missions, and as a requiem for the old humanistic culture that modernity was rendering obsolete. Nowhere does Blok unequivocally hail or decry the coming mass age, which he considers an inevitable result of humanism's collapse. Ultimately, as Gor'kii observed in the discussion of Blok's initial lecture, the two writers remained "different sorts of people." The direct political engagement Gor'kii practiced was alien to a decadent such as Blok, while the latter's symbolist poetics did not lend themselves well to polemicizing.³²

Stylistic differences aside, Gor'kii was clearly taken with what he understood as Blok's core insight: the impotence of humanism, as an ideology of individualism and Christian mercy, against the forces unleashed by twentieth-century wars and revolutions. His personal copies of Blok's diaries (published in 1928) are heavily underlined, including the entry recounting the lecture on Heine and Gor'kii's reaction.³³ Indeed, well into his second exile during the 1920s, Gor'kii continued to ruminate on the implications of Blok's thinking.

²⁷ Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 7:357, 539. Evgenii Zamiatin later recalled a spring evening with Blok "lecturing about the crisis of humanism" at an apartment in Petrograd: "In those days, Gor'kii was in love with Blok . . . Gor'kii listened to Blok at meetings of World Literature like he did to nobody else." Evgenii Zamiatin, *Litsa* (New York, 1967), 16.

²⁸ Blok, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 7:363.

²⁹ Aleksandr Blok, "Krushenie gumanizma," in *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1962), 6:93–115; Viacheslav Ivanov, "O krizise gumanizma. K morfologii sovremennoi kul'tury psikhologii sovremennosti," in *Sobranie sochinenii*, ed. D.V. Ivanov and O. Deshart (Brussels, 1979), 3:367–82.

³⁰ On Ivanov, see Robert Bird, *The Russian Prospero: The Creative Universe of Viacheslav Ivanov* (Madison, 2006); Emily Wang, "Viacheslav Ivanov in the 1930s: The Russian Poet as Italian Humanist," *Slavic Review* 75, no. 4 (Winter 2016): 896–918.

³¹ M. Gor'kii, "A.A. Blok," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii. Khudozhestvennye proizvedeniia v dvadtsati piati tomakh* (Moscow, 1973), 17:223. See also N.N. Primochkina, "Problema gumanizma v ocherke M. Gor'kogo 'A.A. Blok,'" in *Studia Litterarum* 1, no. 1–2 (2016): 278–85.

³² "[Blok] is not as flexible or talented in prose as in poetry, but he is a person of very deep and destructive feelings. All in all: a man of 'decadence.'" Gor'kii, "A.A. Blok," 223.

³³ Kriukova, "K istorii lichnykh i tvorcheskikh otnoshenii Bloka i Gor'kogo," 257.

“Humanism, in the form we have assimilated it from the Gospels and the holy scriptures of our own authors about the Russian people, about life, this humanism is a bad thing,” Gor’kii wrote to Konstantin Fedin in 1926. “And Blok, it seems, is the only one who almost grasped this.”³⁴

1920s: Pereval versus RAPP

Blok’s death and Gor’kii’s return to exile in 1921 coincided with the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP), often depicted as a moment of experimentation not only in the economic domain, but also for culture and the arts.³⁵ As Katerina Clark has observed, however, the NEP-era withdrawal of subsidies and reestablishment of market relations made avant-garde endeavors harder to sustain. Absent state sponsorship, the Party itself increasingly oversaw cultural administration by funding so-called “thick” literary journals.³⁶ The first of these, *Krasnaia nov’* (Red Virgin Soil), appeared in 1921, edited by the prominent Marxist critic and theoretician Aleksandr Voronskii.³⁷

In 1923, Voronskii founded the group *Pereval* (The Pass), comprised of fledgling writers receptive to Bolshevism but who had departed militant literary journals like *Molodaia gvardiia* (Young Guard) and *Oktiabr’* (October).³⁸ Voronskii and his comrades hailed the Revolution not mainly as an economic or political achievement, but as a “cultural *coup d’état*, encompassing the whole of society and man’s inner world.”³⁹ Their advocacy of principles such as “Mozartistry” (*motsartianstvo*)—an intuitive creativity contrasted with soulless “Salieri-ism” (*salerizm*)—placed *Pereval* at odds with the rough-and-tumble “proletarian” ethos ascendant in organizations such as VAPP (All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, rechristened RAPP in 1928), which were dominated by writers from *Molodaia gvardiia*, *Oktiabr’*, and the VAPP publication *Na postu* (On Guard).⁴⁰

Most egregious in the eyes of the proletarian writers were *Pereval*’s appeals to humanism, or “new humanism,” in the midst of ongoing class warfare.⁴¹ As a literary theory, new humanism reflected Voronskii’s ideas about “art as the cognition of life” and the priority of the individual personality, or *lichnost’*.⁴² “The *lichnost’* not only has the right to exist—it is the highest social value,” wrote the *Perevalist* Dmitrii Gorbov in 1929. “It is within and through *lichnost’* that the collective realizes its being.”⁴³ For *Pereval*, moreover, humanism

³⁴ M. Gor’kii, *PSS Pis’ma* (Moscow, 2013), 16:6.

³⁵ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford, 1989), 225; Peter Kenez, *The Birth of the Propaganda State: Soviet Methods of Mass Mobilization, 1917–1929* (Cambridge, Eng., 1985), 12.

³⁶ Katerina Clark, “The ‘Quiet Revolution’ in Soviet Intellectual Life,” in *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture*, eds. Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch, and Richard Stites (Bloomington, 1991), 211–13.

³⁷ “Undoubtedly, for most of NEP, no one in Soviet literature was as powerful as [Voronskii].” Clark, “The ‘Quiet Revolution,’” 221.

³⁸ About half of *Pereval*’s members were Party members in 1925. Edward J. Brown, *Russian Literature Since the Revolution: Revised and Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), 160. For the origins of the group’s name, see A. Voronskii, “Na perevale,” *Krasnaia nov’* no. 6 (1923): 316.

³⁹ D. Gorbov, *Poiski galatei. Stat’i o literature* (Moscow, 1929), 11.

⁴⁰ By the mid-1920s, “it was possible to talk of the total dominance in the literary scene of two antagonistic factions, the *Na postu/Oktiabr’/Molodaia gvardiia* camp, on the one hand, and, on the other, that of the *poputchiki* [fellow travelers] led by Voronskii.” Clark, “The ‘Quiet Revolution,’” 221.

⁴¹ On *Pereval*’s literary aesthetics, see S.I. Sheshukov, *Neistovye revnители iz istorii literaturnoi borby 20-kh godov*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1984), 266–67; Evgeny Dobrenko, *Aesthetics of Alienation: Reassessment of Early Soviet Cultural Theories*, trans. Jesse M. Savage (Evanston, 2005), 75–88.

⁴² A. Voronskii, “Iskusstvo kak poznanie zhizni i sovremennost’,” *Krasnaia nov’* no. 5 (1923): 347–84. On the concept of *lichnost’*, see Derek Offord, “*Lichnost’*: Notions of Individual Identity,” in *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution, 1881–1940*, ed. Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (Oxford, 1998), 13–25.

⁴³ Gorbov, *Poiski galatei*, 193.

was a socialist concept, unfairly maligned by proletarian cultural partisans who associated any general (rather than class-based) concern for humanity with bourgeois apologia.⁴⁴

Here, in an essay from 1928, the Perevalist Abram Lezhnev imagines a conversation with a generic member of LEF (Left Front of the Arts), who chides Lezhnev for “old-fashioned, great-grandmotherly humanism” and accuses him of adopting the tone of a “Schillerian ode.” Lezhnev responds with a rousing defense of humanism:

There are things you must not scoff at when you call yourself a communist. To you, humanism is a swear word. I won't argue: *old* humanism partly deserves such reproaches. But hasn't it ever occurred to you that socialism—eliminating class division and man's exploitation of man, liberating the worker from the slavery of excessive and monotonous labor, granting him enough leisure time and the opportunity to show all his abilities, to raise his personality to its full height—is a kind of *new* humanism? You speak of Schiller. We are much closer to the humanism of the eighteenth-century French enlighteners and Feuerbach, that which you hear in Marx's words. . . . But even Schiller, for all his starry-eyed idealistic pathos, has something or other we can identify with.⁴⁵

Lezhnev thus stakes out a position for Pereval at the boundary of materialism (Feuerbach) and idealism (Schiller), unconsciously evoking Marx's assertion that “humanism distinguishes itself both from idealism and materialism, constituting at the same time the unifying truth of both.”⁴⁶ Socialism, on this account, is roughly synonymous with humanism, emancipating workers from the dehumanizing conditions of capitalism and thereby enabling their self-realization as creative individuals.

Such catholic conceptions of socialism, however, were anathema to the increasingly dogmatic critics of RAPP and its print organ *Na literaturnom postu* (On Literary Guard).⁴⁷ Leopold Averbakh, head of RAPP, led the charge against Pereval:

Today, we hear discussions of socialist humanism from some intelligentsia writers, as if to suggest they sincerely strive to go along with us. Though they acknowledge the class struggle, they speak not about class hatred but about humanism, not about class solidarity but about the individual personality, not about the struggle for collectivism but about the right to individuality. . . . They come to us with propaganda of humanism, as if there were something on this earth more truly human than the class hatred of the proletariat.⁴⁸

Averbakh's words were echoed by Mark Serebrianskii, who, while stipulating that “communism does not exclude humanism,” denounced Pereval's version of the concept. “Yes, we are against humanism,” Serebrianskii declared, “insofar as we understand it completely differently. . . . With us, humanism cannot lead down the narrow path of Tolstoi's ‘all men are brothers,’ for all men are not brothers. There are our enemies and our friends, and only two fronts exist on this earth—that of the oppressors, and that of the oppressed.”⁴⁹

⁴⁴ On the proletarian culture movement, see Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley, 1990).

⁴⁵ A. Lezhnev, *Literaturnye budni* (Moscow, 1929), 80–82. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁶ Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York, 1964), 181. While possible, it is unlikely Lezhnev was familiar with these early writings of Marx. David Riazanov, founder of the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow, published incomplete sections of the 1844 *Manuscripts* in Russian in 1927. The first complete version appeared in Germany in 1932. No Russian translation of the full text was available until 1956. Marcello Musto, “The ‘Young Marx’ Myth in Interpretations of the *Economic-Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*,” *Critique* 43, no. 2 (2015): 233–39.

⁴⁷ *Na literaturnom postu* replaced *Na postu* in 1926 but maintained the same ideological orientation.

⁴⁸ L. Averbakh, “O tselostnykh masshtabakh i chastnykh Makarakh,” *Na literaturnom postu* no. 21–22 (1929): 12.

⁴⁹ M. Serebrianskii, “Epokha i ee ‘rovesniki,’” *Na literaturnom postu* no. 5–6 (1930): 22.

Significantly, these heightened attacks came amidst Stalin's all-out collectivization drive of 1929–30. By 1928, NEP was in crisis, with grain procurements and industrial production falling below demand.⁵⁰ Abandoning his previously moderate stance on the agricultural question, Stalin blamed peasants for withholding grain and ordered requisitioning of crops through collective farms. This move demanded intransigence towards any who might sympathize with the kulaks, or rich peasants, whom Stalin announced in December 1929 were to be “liquidated as a class.”⁵¹ In a letter to RAPP's leadership back in February, Stalin had already conveyed his displeasure and questioned the organization's ability to “win the war against the class enemy.”⁵² Now the message was crystal clear: proponents of humanism, whatever their professed socialist intentions, were not to be trusted. “The main thing,” concluded Serebrianskii, “is that preaching humanism now, at the moment of liquidating the kulaks and the intensification of the class struggle, is objectively harmful, since this means preaching class peace and building socialism in union with the kulak.”⁵³

The campaign against Pereval climaxed in the spring of 1930, when two discussions of the group were convened in quick succession: one on March 21 at Moscow's Press House, and another on April 1 at the Communist Academy.⁵⁴ Members of RAPP took turns castigating the Perevalists, with humanism again providing the main target for their attacks. “Now the question of humanism is decisive,” Gorbov noted on April 1. “It is precisely over humanism that the fiercest battles are being fought.”⁵⁵ Ivan Kataev's short story “Milk” (1930), a compassionate portrayal of an elderly Baptist who speaks of “the universal milk of love and kinship,” aroused special ire.⁵⁶ By elevating individual traits over class essence, the RAPPists argued, Kataev's “philistine, petty bourgeois, and trivial humanism” turned his protagonist's fate from a historical necessity into a “personal tragedy.”⁵⁷

For the first time, however, the RAPPists did not simply reject Pereval's humanism; they also proposed an alternative conception based on class hatred and violence rather than universal love. “We have our own understanding of humanism,” asserted the critic Mark Gel'fand:

Our understanding of humanism is contained in the slogan “fraternal solidarity of all workers.” But we would be three times opportunists and vulgar philistines if we spoke only about fraternal solidarity, without combining this with the commandment of a most rabid hatred for the class enemy. . . . Our humanism presupposes this hatred, it cannot do without it. Otherwise, it would not be our humanism, but the humanism of philistines and liberal bourgeois.⁵⁸

Another, Mark Bochacher, offered a similar formulation, adding a sloganeering finish:

Do we have another humanism? We do—proletarian humanism. What is it? It consists in the fact that, in the name of love for the oppressed working masses of the proletariat,

⁵⁰ Lynne Viola, V.P. Danilov, N.A. Ivinskii, and Denis Kozlov, eds., *The War Against the Peasantry, 1927–1930: The Tragedy of the Soviet Countryside*, trans. Steven Shabad (New Haven, 2005), 17–22.

⁵¹ I.V. Stalin, “K voprosam agrarnoi politiki v SSSR,” in *Sochineniia*, vol. 12 (1949), 167–69.

⁵² “Pis'mo I.V. Stalina pisateliam-kommunistam iz RAPPa,” in Andrei Artizov and Oleg Naumov, eds. *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia. Dokumenty TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b), VChK-OGPU-NKVD o kulturnoi politike. 1917–1953 gg.* (Moscow, 1999), 110.

⁵³ Serebrianskii, “Epokha i ee 'rovesniki,’” 23.

⁵⁴ A.Iu. Ovcharenko, “Strategii khudozhestvennogo vybora v tvorchestve Sodruzhestva ‘Pereval’ v istoriko-literaturnom kontekste 1920–1930” (PhD diss., Peoples' Friendship University of Russia, 2019), 178–79.

⁵⁵ *Protiv burzhuaznogo liberalizma v khudozhestvennoi literature. Diskussii o “Perevale” (aprel' 1930)* (Moscow, 1931), 58.

⁵⁶ I. Kataev, “Moloko,” in *Rovesniki. Sbornik sodruzhestva pisatelei revoliutsii ‘Pereval’*, vol. 7 (Moscow, 1930), 21–59. See also Brown, *Russian Literature since the Revolution*, 162.

⁵⁷ *Protiv burzhuaznogo liberalizma*, 26, 42–43.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

people take part in the class struggle, fight on the barricades, in a word, serve as active defenders of revolutionary violence.⁵⁹

This is almost certainly the earliest recorded usage of the phrase “proletarian humanism” with a positive connotation. Predating Gor’kii’s article by more than four years, it suggests the extent to which Pereval had succeeded in crafting a conceptual vocabulary appropriate to the transitional culture of NEP. While neologisms like “Mozartistry” proved ephemeral, the proletarian writers’ brazen co-option of humanism signaled growing appreciation of the concept’s ideological utility. “Time has shown we were correct,” Lezhnev wrote in 1930. “Pereval’s principles are embraced by those who fought most fiercely against them. They have ceased to be Pereval’s principles, our property in particular. Now they are issued by a different firm, under unfamiliar branding.”⁶⁰

Nevertheless, in Soviet public discourse of the early 1930s, humanism—even proletarian humanism—continued to be associated primarily with Pereval and other suspected soft-liners. In May 1930, for example, the *Kuznitsa* faction of proletarian writers condemned “peace-loving intellectual glosses of the class struggle’s [literary] front under the completely untenable slogans ‘proletarian humanism,’ ‘tragicness of art,’ and so on (‘Pereval,’ Gorbov, Lezhnev).”⁶¹ A November 1930 article entitled “‘Proletarian’ Humanists and the Revolution” likewise accused the writer Aleksei Bibik of repeating Kataev’s mistakes in “Milk.”⁶² Indeed, so common was humanism’s use as an ideological cudgel at this time that it became the object of ridicule, as seen in this 1932 verse by the satirists Il’ia Il’f and Evgenii Petrov:

Children, beware of humanism,
Beware of egomania, my friends,
Formalism, schematism,
Avoid these like a sea of flames.⁶³

The move by certain RAPP-affiliated writers to counter Pereval’s “socialist” or “new humanism” with their own, more militant interpretation thus had little immediate effect on how the concept was broadly understood. At the close of the First Five-Year Plan in 1932, humanism remained a term of opprobrium, something for good Soviet children (and writers) to beware.

On the Path to “Proletarian Humanism”

During the 1920s, Gor’kii kept abreast of Soviet cultural life from exile by corresponding with members of the literary establishment, including Aleksandr Voronskii of Pereval. Gor’kii had personally recommended Voronskii to Lenin before leaving Russia in 1921 and continued to support him from abroad.⁶⁴ In 1924, when proletarian writers moved to oust Voronskii and install the Party functionary Fedor Raskolnikov as editor of *Krasnaia nov’*, Gor’kii protested and rebuffed Raskolnikov’s attempts to procure his endorsement. “I consider the position of the *Napostovtsy* (On Guardists) to be anti-revolutionary and anti-cultural,” Gor’kii wrote to

⁵⁹ Ibid., 42.

⁶⁰ A. Lezhnev, “Vmesto prologa,” in *Rovesniki*, vol. 7, 6–7.

⁶¹ “Na putiakh proletarskoi literatury. Rezoliutsiia vsesoiuznogo soveshchaniia ‘Kuznitsy,’” *Literaturnaia gazeta* no. 21 (May 26, 1930), 3.

⁶² M. Serebrianskii, “‘Proletarskie’ gumanisty i revoliutsiia. O novom romane A. Bibika ‘Katrusina vyshka,’” *Literaturnaia gazeta* no. 56 (November 29, 1930), 2.

⁶³ “Otdaite emu kursiv,” *Literaturnaia gazeta* no. 24 (May 29, 1932), 3.

⁶⁴ N.N. Primochkina, *Pisatel’ i vlast’. M. Gorkii v literaturnom dvizhenii 20-kh godov*, 2nd ed. (Moscow, 1998), 98; Yedlin, *Maxim Gorky*, 174n94.

Voronskii in 1925.⁶⁵ Pereval's theorists reciprocated by lavishing critical attention on Gor'kii and defending him from accusations of petty-bourgeois individualism.⁶⁶

For most of the decade, however, Gor'kii operated at one remove from the barb-trading on the so-called "cultural front."⁶⁷ Only just before visiting the USSR at Stalin's invitation in 1928 did Gor'kii deign to engage with the proletarian writers directly. In essays for *Izvestiia*, he mocked their crude understanding of class consciousness—pointing out that the Party's founders had not been proletarians themselves—and stressed the need for a notion of the "universal" or "common-to-all-humankind" (*obshchechelovecheskii*) even in a workers' state. In response, the RAPPist Vladimir Ermilov spoke at the first All-Union Congress of Proletarian Writers against Gor'kii and, remarkably in retrospect, "Gor'kii's humanism" (*gorkovskii gumanizm*).⁶⁸

If sympathetic to Voronskii, Gor'kii neither joined Pereval nor endorsed the group's theoretical platform. His writings from this period convey a continued wariness of humanism and concern with international affairs over domestic literary disputes. In the essay "On 'Mechanical' Humanism" (1926), a response to an article by several Russian émigrés in Germany, Gor'kii criticized intellectuals who decried revolutionary terror but ignored violence directed against the Bolsheviks during the Civil War. Such intellectuals, he wrote, exhibited a reflexive "humanism according to habit." Moreover, it was "awkward and even a bit shameful" for those in Europe to invoke humanism after years of brutal violence across the continent.⁶⁹ Gor'kii elaborated these themes in the missive "To the Humanists" (1930), attacking Europeans for condemning Soviet extra-judicial practices on humanitarian grounds while ignoring problems in their own countries. Luminaries such as Albert Einstein and Heinrich Mann, Gor'kii complained, voiced outrage at Stalin's execution of "traitors and spies" while remaining "indifferent to the rise of nationalism, antisemitism, and xenophobia" at home.⁷⁰

Although Gor'kii never submitted "On 'Mechanical' Humanism" for publication, the essay marked a shift in his journalistic writing towards deeper engagement with the concept itself. His assessment of humanism's moral and political bankruptcy continued to reflect the influence of Blok, whose thinking Gor'kii had commended in his letter to Konstantin Fedin earlier that year.⁷¹ At the same time, Gor'kii's preoccupation with European intellectuals and his justification of Soviet repression betrayed an increasingly cozy relationship with the Kremlin after 1928. Stalin, for his part, made every effort to recruit Gor'kii as the state's chief propagandist, furnishing him with a Moscow residence and fêting him on the fortieth anniversary of his literary debut in 1932.⁷²

Gor'kii returned to the USSR for good in May 1933. Prior to this return, two things occurred that drove him decisively towards redefining humanism as a Soviet value. First was the dissolution of all existing literary groups, including RAPP, by Central Committee decree on

⁶⁵ M. Gor'kii, *PSS Pis'ma* (Moscow, 2012), 15:122.

⁶⁶ See D. Gorbov, *Put' M. Gorkogo* (Moscow, 1928); A. Lezhnev, *Maksim Gorkii. Ego zhizn' i tvorchestvo* (Moscow, 1928).

⁶⁷ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, 1992), 2.

⁶⁸ Primochkina, *Pisatel' i vlast'*, 110–13. Ironically, Ermilov later became one of Gor'kii's foremost hagiographers and even published a book entitled *O gumanizme Gorkogo* (On Gor'kii's Humanism, 1941).

⁶⁹ M. Gor'kii, "O 'mekhanicheskom' gumanizme," in S.S. Zimina, E.G. Koliada, and E.B. Tager, eds., *Arkhiv A.M. Gorkogo*, vol. 12, *Khudozhestvennye proizvedeniia. Stat'i. Zametki* (Moscow, 1969), 120–22.

⁷⁰ M. Gor'kii, "Gumanizam," *Izvestiia* no. 340 (December 11, 1930), 2. In fact, both Einstein and Mann would sign the "Urgent Call for Unity" (*Dringender Appell für die Einheit*) in 1932, asking German voters to support the Social Democrats or Communists and reject the Nazi Party.

⁷¹ The letter to Fedin is dated March 3, 1926. "On 'Mechanical' Humanism" is undated but was written no later than September 11, 1926. See Gor'kii's letter to D.A. Lutokhin in *PSS Pis'ma*, 16:126–27.

⁷² Yedlin, *Maxim Gorky*, 177, 197. These developments did not escape the attention of European socialists. See, for example, "Massimogorkicità," *La Libertà* no. 40 (October 6, 1932), 2.

April 23, 1932.⁷³ Gor'kii had long advocated unifying Soviet writers against the factionalism represented by groups like RAPP.⁷⁴ But as with Blok decades earlier, Gor'kii also drew closer to his nemeses among the proletarian writers after visiting the USSR in 1928. As honorary chair of the committee to form an RSFSR Writers' Union, he supported rehabilitating former RAPPists and incorporating them into the nascent literary bureaucracy. Nataliia Primochkina contends that this change of heart masked an underlying continuity in Gor'kii's politics, which remained centered on "the struggle for a more humane [*chelovechnoe*] and more cultured face of Stalinist socialism."⁷⁵ If before 1932 this entailed resisting the hegemony of RAPP, now, after the decree, it meant backing proletarian writers at risk of expulsion from Soviet literature altogether.

Gor'kii's desire to protect vulnerable writers in the name of a "more humane" Stalinism did not, apparently, extend to smaller factions like Pereval. Among the longest holdouts after the Central Committee's decree, the Perevalists waited until the Writers' Union Orgkomitet (organizing committee) plenum in October–November 1932 to disband. At this plenum, they mounted a last stand in defense of their version of humanistic socialism, which came under renewed assault in light of the Party's new literary mandate. "Of course," Orgkomitet Secretary Valerii Kirpotin began by noting, "the Central Committee's decree does not by any means preach Perevalist humanism in the literary sphere." Kataev, author of "Milk," tried to thread the ideological needle by affirming Pereval's commitment to humanism while somehow aligning it with the prevailing cultural militancy:

They want to erase us, the Perevalists, from literature because of one word alone: "humanism." We ourselves never thought of it as Christian forgiveness, professorial liberalism, or class reconciliation. It's what we called the artistic worldview opening up before us, which places at its center a fully-fledged and full-blooded person commanding the entire arsenal of feelings, including the feeling of social hatred.⁷⁶

Kataev's statement highlights the affective dimension of Stalin-era debates over humanism, particularly the concept's relation to the obligatory "civic emotion" of hatred for enemies.⁷⁷ By specifying "social hatred" as part of the ideal Soviet person's "emotional arsenal," he effectively conceded to the proletarian critics who had contrasted Pereval's socialist humanism negatively against their own ideology of class enmity.

Despite Gor'kii's interest in the Orgkomitet proceedings, there is no evidence he took notice of Kataev's desperate conceptual revisionism or Pereval's fate in general. His overriding concern was the rift between former RAPPists on display at the plenum and what this meant for the possibility of a unified literary line.⁷⁸ Many writers welcomed the Central Committee's decree as a liberation from RAPP's petty tyranny and the more permissive climate it portended.⁷⁹ But the decree's most immediate impact was arguably to raise Gor'kii's own standing in the cultural hierarchy. His honorary chairmanship of the RSFSR Writers' Union Orgkomitet was followed by an invitation to chair its All-Union equivalent in

⁷³ "Postanovlenie Politburo TsK VKP(b) 'O perestroike literaturno-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii,'" in T.M. Gorიაeva et al., eds., *Mezhu molotom i nakovalnei. Soiuz sovetskikh pisatelei SSSR. Dokumenty i kommentarii*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 2010), 128–29.

⁷⁴ See Gor'kii's letter to Averbakh on November 17, 1928, in *PSS Pis'ma*, (Moscow, 2016), 18:94–96.

⁷⁵ Primochkina, *Pisatel'i vlasti*, 144.

⁷⁶ *Sovetskaiia literatura na novom etape. Stenogramma pervogo plenuma orgkomiteta Soiuz sovetskikh pisatelei (29 oktiabria—3 noiabria 1932)* (Moscow, 1933), 17, 99.

⁷⁷ Serhy Yekelchuk, "The Civic Duty to Hate: Stalinist Citizenship as Political Practice and Civic Emotion (Kiev, 1943–53)," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 7, no. 3 (2006): 529–56.

⁷⁸ Gor'kii did not attend the plenum but followed it closely from Italy. See his letter to Fedin on November 30, 1932, in *PSS Pis'ma* (Moscow, 2019), 21:238–39.

⁷⁹ Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931–1941* (Cambridge, Mass., 2011), 138; Primochkina, *Pisatel'i vlasti*, 141.

1933, while his Moscow flat famously played host to meetings with Party officials (including Stalin) to formulate the aesthetic of “socialist realism.”⁸⁰

The 1932 ban on literary factions thus cut short the Pereval-RAPP dispute and positioned Gor’kii as the country’s main cultural arbiter, ushering him to center stage for the pivotal second act of the Soviet turn towards humanism: the Nazi Party’s rise to power in Germany, culminating in Adolf Hitler’s appointment as chancellor on January 30, 1933. As long as fascism remained an Italian peculiarity, explains James Wilkerson, “the debate over its doctrine and consequences had been conducted, even by Italians themselves, in correspondingly narrow terms.”⁸¹ With the Nazi takeover, however, fascism was suddenly a phenomenon of continental rather than peninsular proportions. Leftist intellectuals framed this peril in civilizational terms, and international congresses for the “defense of culture” were soon organized. The first of these, held in Amsterdam in 1932, led to the formation of a “World Committee against War and Fascism,” which Gor’kii joined as the Soviet representative.⁸²

Although Gor’kii missed the Amsterdam conference due to visa issues, his planned speech was published on the front page of *Pravda*. The speech reiterated his critiques of European intellectuals for encouraging the outbreak of war in 1914. Like working-class soldiers duped into killing each other instead of their capitalist bosses, Gor’kii cautioned, “the humanists do not see who the true enemy of humanitarian culture is.”⁸³ Such statements were standard fare. What changed around 1933 was that Gor’kii began to regard humanism not merely as a source of bourgeois degeneracy, but also as a formidable weapon in the fight against fascism. In this sense, he executed a maneuver akin to that of the proletarian writers who had brazenly appropriated the concept from their own ideological opponents, the Perevalists.

Fascism, Gor’kii recognized, was more than just the paroxysm of counterrevolutionary capitalism that some Marxists claimed.⁸⁴ It also represented a wholesale rejection of Europe’s humanist heritage, “an intellectual disarming of the bourgeoisie.” Nazi Germany, he wrote circa 1933–34, “refuses to worship the founder of bourgeois humanism—Christ, preaching a return to the pagan god Wotan instead. This testifies very well to the German bourgeoisie’s consistency in its descent into savagery.”⁸⁵ A fragment from Gor’kii’s notes, first published in 1969, contains the clearest indication of how his thinking was shifting at this time:

Man is a commodity. Hatred for unhappiness, suffering. In a country that has affirmed fascism, Christianity is overthrown as a remnant of bourgeois humanism, which the bourgeoisie formerly used to defend itself against feudal lords and still tries to use to deceive the proletariat today.... Fascism contradicts what the bourgeoisie has created—contradicts itself. Humanism—to be defined. [*Gumanizm—opredelit*].⁸⁶

Here, then, was the task Gor’kii set himself: to define humanism anew in response to the fascist threat to the very bourgeois cultural tradition he had so thoroughly denounced. Even Christianity, which he continued to see as a weapon of bourgeois deception, now represented the lesser evil in comparison with the open “savagery” of Nazism.

⁸⁰ T.M. Goriaeva, “Sluzhebnaia rol’ sovetskoi literatury. Istoricheskii aspekt problemy,” in *Mezhdu molotom i nakovalnei*, 14–15; Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*, 80.

⁸¹ James D. Wilkerson, *The Intellectual Resistance in Europe* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), 19.

⁸² Larry Ceplair, *Under the Shadow of War: Fascism, Anti-Fascism, and Marxists, 1918–1939* (New York, 1987), 79–80.

⁸³ M. Gor’kii, “Delegatam antivoennogo kongressa. Rech’, kotoraiia ne byla proiznesena,” *Pravda* no. 246 (September 5, 1932), 1.

⁸⁴ Ceplair, *Under the Shadow of War*, 31–33.

⁸⁵ M. Gor’kii, “Beseda,” in *Arkhiv A.M. Gorkogo*, vol. 3, *Povesti, vospominaniia, publitsistika, stat’i o literature* (Moscow, 1951), 204–6.

⁸⁶ M. Gor’kii, *Arkhiv A.M. Gorkogo*, vol. 12, 283. The editors date this note circa 1933–36, based on orthography and content, but it was almost certainly written before the publication of “Proletarian Humanism” in May 1934.

Inventing Soviet Humanism

On May 20, 1934, Gor'kii wrote to Stalin with an urgent request:

Please forgive me for disturbing you again, dear Iosif Vissarionovich. I beg you to read the attached essay, which I mentioned at our last meeting. If it's successful, shouldn't we suggest that our men of letters—those most read in Europe—produce a few essays on the themes discussed here?⁸⁷

The essay in question was “Proletarian Humanism.”⁸⁸ Stalin did not reply straightaway, but his opinion can be judged from commentary on another essay by Gor'kii, which the Soviet leader compared unfavorably to “Proletarian Humanism”: “Dear Aleksei Maksimovich! In my view, it's not worth sending to print. It will weaken the impression created by your previous essay on ‘Humanism.’”⁸⁹ Gor'kii also noted Stalin's endorsement to the German writer Alfred Kurella, who had requested something to publish abroad: “I recommend ‘Humanism of the Proletariat,’ [sic] which appeared in *Pravda* about a month ago. Comrade Stalin highly approved of this essay.”⁹⁰

“Proletarian Humanism” was Gor'kii's first attempt, and the first by any Soviet figure in a public forum, to articulate a positive conception of humanism in place of the Christian ethic of brotherly love that had failed to deter fascism. The origins of humanism, Gor'kii wrote, lay in the bourgeois revolt against feudalism and the medieval church. Like nationalism in the Bolshevik understanding, this humanism was a masking ideology that deceived people into acting against their class interests.⁹¹ Protestant reformers, Gor'kii claimed, justified exploitation and fealty to the state by neglecting the “humane” Gospels for Biblical passages glorifying violence and tribal enmity.⁹² Now, by supporting fascism, the bourgeoisie had dropped all pretense of Christian virtue and “discarded humanism, like a worn-out mask no longer covering the face of a predatory beast.” Even “lyrically minded humanitarians” had realized that “‘love for humanity,’ ‘mercy,’ ‘magnanimity,’ and other such feelings . . . are inapplicable to reality and difficult to commodify.”

The Soviet Union, by contrast, was developing its own “genuinely universal, proletarian humanism . . . a humanism that aims to free working people of all races and nations from the iron claws of capital.” Paradoxically, the distinguishing features of this new Soviet humanism were its universality and “genuine” fulfillment of the emotional categories its bourgeois counterpart had forsaken. Whereas RAPP had rejected universal love as an insufficiently socialist emotion, Gor'kii placed “genuine love for humanity” at the center of the “universal culture of socialism” being built in the USSR. The capitulation of Europe's “masters of bourgeois culture,” he implied, was largely a failure of feeling, an inability “to sense the supreme, heroic tragedy of the era and understand who exactly its heroes are.”⁹³

Although scholars have devoted little attention to “Proletarian Humanism” relative to the rest of Gor'kii's oeuvre, two theories have been offered for the essay's appearance in May 1934. Dan Healey, referring to a brief but disturbing passage linking fascism to homosexuality, labels the essay “the regime's first public explanation of the recriminalization of male

⁸⁷ “Perepiska M. Gor'kogo i I.V. Stalina (1934–1936),” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* no. 40 (1999): 261.

⁸⁸ A lightly annotated typescript has been preserved in Stalin's personal papers: Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI)), f. 588, op. 11, d. 720, ll. 31–36.

⁸⁹ RGASPI, f. 588, op. 11, d. 720, l. 39.

⁹⁰ “A.M. Gor'kii—A. Kurella,” in *Arkhiv A.M. Gorkogo*, vol. 8, *Perepiska A.M. Gorkogo s zarubezhnymi literatorami* (Moscow, 1960), 201.

⁹¹ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, 2001), 4.

⁹² Cf. Glenn Burgess, “Political Obedience,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Protestant Reformations*, ed. Ulinka Rublack (Oxford, 2017), 83–102.

⁹³ Gor'kii, “Proletarskii gumanizm.”

homosexuality,” which had occurred that March.⁹⁴ Jutta Scherrer, meanwhile, contends that Gor’kii “coined the propagandistic locution ‘proletarian humanism’ . . . as a direct result of [his] apology for labor camps and educational colonies . . . and his admiration for Stalin’s politics of industrialization and corresponding methods.”⁹⁵ Both of these arguments point to domestic ideological functions that the essay undoubtedly served. By placing the question of homosexuality, as Healey writes, “squarely within the terms of the propaganda war between Fascism and Communism,” Gor’kii rationalized the Soviet state’s repressive turn against same-sex relations as a matter of political exigency.⁹⁶ In a similar vein, his allusions to the salutary effects of physical toil and admonition that “predatory madness cannot be cured by eloquence; tigers and hyenas do not eat cakes” implied the necessity of harsh corrective measures like those employed in the Gulag.⁹⁷

Neither of these theories, however, is sufficient as an explanation of Gor’kii’s recourse to the concept of humanism at precisely this moment. Healey’s framing of “Proletarian Humanism” overstates the significance of homosexuality within the text, and his supposition that Gor’kii was “briefed about . . . the arguments against the new legislation he was required to demolish” has little basis in the archival record.⁹⁸ As a defense of forced labor policies, moreover, the essay is at best suggestive, evincing far greater concern over the fascist threat to “culture” writ large. Scherrer rightly notes that “‘proletarian humanism’ was also intimately linked to the rise of fascism and National Socialism” but leaves the exact sources and nature of this linkage unexplored.⁹⁹

Rather than a coordinated defense of Stalinist labor camps or laws against homosexuality, I argue, Gor’kii’s embrace of humanism in May 1934 was aimed primarily at the Moscow-based Communist International (Comintern) and its shifting relationship with the European Left. Since 1928, the Comintern had operated based on the doctrine of “social fascism,” which predicted the eventual degeneration of social democratic forces into pawns of the bourgeoisie. Neither Hitler’s rise nor the mass arrest of German communists after the Reichstag fire in February 1933 changed this stance. Over the next eighteen months, however, the Comintern reversed course, such that by the end of 1934 communists were allying with social democratic and non-socialist parties alike.¹⁰⁰ Stalin’s elevation of Georgi Dimitrov as Comintern head in April 1934 signaled a decisive shift, and Dimitrov soon began strengthening ties with antifascists of all stripes.¹⁰¹ “The ‘turn’ in Comintern policy,” conclude Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, “can thus be dated with some certainty from mid-May 1934”—in other words, just as Gor’kii was finishing “Proletarian Humanism.”¹⁰² Indeed, the essay appeared in *Pravda* alongside one of the very first Soviet editorials endorsing a united front against fascism.¹⁰³

⁹⁴ Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago, 2001), 189.

⁹⁵ Scherrer, “Maxim Gorky as a Spokesman for Proletarian Humanism,” 141.

⁹⁶ Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, 189.

⁹⁷ On Gor’kii’s contributions to the Stalinist forced labor system, see Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (Oxford, 2012), 142–74.

⁹⁸ Healey cites a two-page gap in the published record of Stalin’s correspondence with NKVD chief Genrikh Iagoda about the legislation, speculating that this gap might contain a directive to Gor’kii. However, this speculation cannot be confirmed without access to the classified archival file. Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia*, 189–90, 332n38. See also Aleksei Bursleshin’s critiques regarding the source of “Proletarian Humanism” in his review of Healey’s book: A.V. Bursleshin, “Vskrytaia povsednevnost,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* no. 102 (2010): 344–84.

⁹⁹ Scherrer, “Maxim Gorky as a Spokesman for Proletarian Humanism,” 145.

¹⁰⁰ Kevin McDermott and Jeremy Agnew, *The Comintern: A History of International Communism from Lenin to Stalin* (London, 1996), 123.

¹⁰¹ E.H. Carr, *Twilight of the Comintern, 1930–1935* (New York, 1982), 124–26.

¹⁰² McDermott and Agnew, *The Comintern*, 125.

¹⁰³ “Za ediny front, protiv raskola,” *Pravda* no. 140 (May 23, 1934), 3.

That the essay's timing was no accident can be determined from the growing significance accorded to humanism by antifascists within the nascent European resistance of the 1930s. While the concept's post-1934 circulation through the networks of the Popular Front is well established, humanism was, in fact, already a mounting concern for leftist intellectuals in the first years of the decade.¹⁰⁴ In 1932, for example, the French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier inaugurated his new *Esprit* magazine with a plea to "remake the Renaissance," transcending the "abstract humanism" bequeathed by Europe's revival of classical culture while rebuffing the "equally abstract and no less inhuman humanism" of Soviet communism.¹⁰⁵ Writers like Paul Nizan and Thierry Maulnier produced major works of Marxist and "nonconformist" humanist thought that notably "preceded the mid-1930s turn in Communism and Catholicism toward humanism." Such "disaffection with existing notions of the human and humanism" among French intellectuals became fertile ground after 1934, once "the Soviet Union had moved to a policy of defending 'socialist humanism.'"¹⁰⁶

Italian antifascists exiled in Paris also joined these debates.¹⁰⁷ Writing in 1930, the liberal socialist Carlo Rosselli ridiculed "those... who attempt all sorts of interpretive acrobatics in order to prove to us that Marxist humanism leaves room for ethical evaluations."¹⁰⁸ Seeking a new Left coalition, Rosselli founded "Giustizia e Libertà" (Justice and Liberty) in 1929 and began issuing a monthly newspaper under the same name, as well as a theoretical publication called *Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà* (Notebooks of Justice and Liberty) in 1932. In a piece for the *Quaderni* in June 1933, reflecting on Hitler's rise, socialist Angelo Tasca stated the movement's task thusly: "Socialism must reconnect with the young, not to offer them a new or different barbarism, in the fascist manner, but to lead them toward a new Humanism. This is what is at stake in the struggle between fascism and socialism."¹⁰⁹ A variant of Tasca's line subsequently appeared in the subtitle of Rosselli's paper, beginning with its first weekly edition on May 18, 1934: "United Movement of Action, for Workers' Autonomy, the Socialist Republic, a New Humanism."¹¹⁰

The appearance of "New Humanism" in the masthead of Rosselli's weekly only days before the publication of Gor'kii's "Proletarian Humanism" is surely coincidental. Yet, it points to the broader constellation of antifascist humanisms that was already taking shape across Europe as Gor'kii turned his attention to the Nazi threat in 1933–34. If unfamiliar with the particulars of French or Italian debates, Gor'kii was unquestionably aware of humanism's use in these circles as a shorthand for revolutionary notions of socialist personhood. This is evident from a letter sent by Alfred Kurella on May 3, 1934, informing Gor'kii that another of his recent essays had been reprinted in France with an alternative title: "Un nouvel humanisme."¹¹¹ The essay had aroused such interest from the French intelligentsia

¹⁰⁴ Katerina Clark calls humanism "a banner term of the Popular Front," while Andreas Agocs (mistakenly) credits the German writer Klaus Mann with coining "socialist humanism" in 1935 to mean "the synthesis of bourgeois high culture and socialist politics that would enable the cooperation of communist and liberal antifascists." Katerina Clark, "M.M. Bakhtin and 'World Literature,'" *Journal of Narrative Theory* 32, no. 3 (2002): 288n14; Andreas Agocs, *Antifascist Humanism and the Politics of Cultural Renewal in Germany* (Cambridge, Eng., 2017), 25 (citing Wilkerson, *The Intellectual Resistance*, 21). See also Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome*, 152.

¹⁰⁵ Emmanuel Mounier, "Réfaire la Renaissance," *Esprit* no. 1 (October 1932), 31. See also Jon Kirwin, *An Avant-garde Theological Generation: The Nouvelle Théologie and the French Crisis of Modernity* (Oxford, 2018), 142–44.

¹⁰⁶ Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism That Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford, 2010), 104–5, 109, 120. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰⁷ On this community, see Alexander De Grand, "'To Learn Nothing and Forget Nothing': Italian Socialism and the Experience of Exile Politics, 1935–1945," *Contemporary European History* 14, no. 4 (November 2005): 539–58.

¹⁰⁸ Carlo Rosselli, *Liberal Socialism*, ed. Nadia Urbinati, trans. William McCuaig (Princeton, 1994), 74.

¹⁰⁹ A. Tasca, "Opinioni sulla Germania," *Quaderni di Giustizia e Libertà* no. 7 (June 1933), 14. On Tasca's interest in humanism, see Emanuel Rota, *A Pact with Vichy: Angelo Tasca from Italian Socialism to French Collaboration* (New York, 2013), 60–61.

¹¹⁰ Stanislaw G. Pugliese, *Carlo Rosselli: Socialist Heretic and Antifascist Exile* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999), 167–68. See also the lead editorial, "Fronte verso l'Italia," *Giustizia e Libertà* no. 1 (May 18, 1934), 1.

¹¹¹ "A. Kurella—A.M. Gor'komu," in *Arkhiv A.M. Gorkogo*, vol. 8, 200. Kurella, a German, was editor-in-chief of the French communist weekly *Monde* from October 1933 until January 1934.

(and such backlash from the right-wing press) that Kurella wanted to run a follow-up. His request prompted Gor'kii's suggestion, quoted above, to use "Proletarian Humanism" for this purpose.¹¹²

For Gor'kii, therefore, recourse to humanism in May 1934 was a logical extension of his own longstanding fascination with the concept and a recognition of its strategic potential as a framework for engaging with antifascists abroad. Although competing "socialist" and "proletarian" humanisms were already circulating in the USSR during the late 1920s, it was Gor'kii who, drawing on his literary connections and with Stalin's endorsement, became the first to reclaim it as a Soviet idea before a world audience. True, while "Proletarian Humanism" invokes a working-class united front, the essay never explicitly discusses Comintern politics or coordination with non-communists. Such tactical considerations fell outside the purview of a writer who, by 1934, was long past his street-fighting days. Rather, by framing the struggle against fascism as a defense of "culture" and moral values abandoned by the bourgeoisie, Gor'kii provided ideological cover for Stalin's pivot to a Popular Front strategy in the international arena. His Soviet humanism synthesized Moscow's professed leading role in the global Left with the moral mission of European intellectuals in the emergent resistance movement. Communists and non-communists alike could unite in support of saving humanism from fascism, even if they disagreed over what this might mean in practice.

This ideological synthesis did not, of course, mean equating Soviet and bourgeois culture. In the appropriately titled "On Cultures" (1935), Gor'kii gave a fuller account of how proletarian humanism ostensibly differed from its precursors. The essay was a postscript to the International Congress for the Defense of Culture in Paris, which Gor'kii had skipped due to ill health.¹¹³ In it, he cited press coverage of the Congress that ignored fascism and fixated instead on the event's left-wing organizers: "Can communism truly be the heir to a Western European culture founded on Greco-Roman values?" Gor'kii's reply, unsurprisingly, was that Europe had long since consigned these values to museums. In the Soviet Union, humanism was alive and well, though "not the humanism that the bourgeoisie until recently boasted as the basis of its civilization and culture":

These two humanisms have nothing in common other than the word humanism. The word may be the same, but the content is drastically different.... The revolutionary proletariat's humanism is straightforward. It does not pronounce loud and sweet words about love for people.... The proletariat's humanism demands undying hatred for philistinism, capitalist power and its lackeys, parasites, fascists, executioners, and traitors to the working class; hatred for everything that causes suffering and for all those who live off the suffering of hundreds of millions.¹¹⁴

Here was the obverse of the affective register featured in "Proletarian Humanism." Not "genuine love for humanity" but "undying hatred" now constituted the basis for the Soviet humanist moral stance. More precisely, love and hatred were co-constitutive of this humanism, with each feeling reinforcing the other. What made abstract love genuine, and thus permissible, was hatred for the individuals who caused all suffering. Conversely, hatred for such individuals was justified by the purity of one's devotion to human liberation in general.

Insofar as Gor'kii offered a positive vision of humanism, therefore, it was still predicated on negative emotional content and suspicion of bourgeois values. His emphasis on hatred

¹¹² "A.M. Gor'kii—A. Kurella," in *Arkhiv A.M. Gorkogo*, vol. 8, 201.

¹¹³ Gor'kii had been slated to deliver the Soviet delegation's keynote on "proletarian humanism." Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI), f. 3, op. 34, d. 204, l. 105.

¹¹⁴ M. Gor'kii, "O kulturakh," *Pravda* no. 193 and *Izvestiia* no. 164 (July 15, 1935).

fully aligned with Stalinist cultural codes about the proper attitude towards enemies.¹¹⁵ At the same time, this mid-1930s embrace of humanism was not just a continuation of RAPP's strident antihumanism under another moniker. Gor'kii's innovation was to have identified a potential ideological throughline to European intellectuals at a moment of international crisis that also accommodated the broader Soviet cultural shift away from class-based internationalism and collectivism.¹¹⁶ As a productively ambiguous form of universalism, humanism did not demand an explicit rejection or even confrontation with nationalism, enabling it to survive beyond the Popular Front conjuncture and facilitate Stalin's wartime revival of Russocentric patriotism.¹¹⁷ Humanism's historical association with individual self-expression also resonated with the mid-1930s trend towards a normative conception of personhood based on socialist "individualization," as opposed to both the bourgeois ideology of "individualism" and discourses of individual dissolution within the collective.¹¹⁸ This can be seen, for example, in a 1935 article titled "Socialist Humanism and Soviet Literature" that called on writers to produce "an especially fine 'individualization' of literary types," reflecting socialism's elimination of "average individuals."¹¹⁹

The closest thing to a formal acknowledgement of humanism's new status came in August 1934, at the First Congress of Soviet Writers. Gor'kii himself presided over the event, but it was future head of the Writers' Union Aleksei Surkov, relatively unknown at the time, who provided the most forthright explanation of the about-face that had just occurred:

At our congress, one word has been granted full citizenship, a word that not long ago we treated with distrust or even hostility. That word is humanism. Born in a wonderful era, this word was sullied and slobbered over by feeble degenerates, insignificant descendants of great forefathers.... We had the historical right to disdain and hate people who uttered this word. But now we are taking it for ourselves.¹²⁰

With these remarks, Surkov consummated humanism's entry into the Soviet ideological lexicon. What had until quite recently been a marker of bourgeois sympathies was now accepted (indeed, stipulated) as a fundamental socialist value. In the years to come, such frank admissions of how drastically the official position on humanism had changed would be few and far between. Both the prehistory of Gor'kii's 1934 essay and the Perevalist variant of socialist humanism were expunged in favor of a narrative emphasizing the humanistic essence of Marxism-Leninism. This did not, however, put an end to contestation over the scope and meaning of Soviet humanism, or the proper attitude towards non-socialist humanisms, questions that acquired renewed salience in the decades after Stalin's death in 1953.

Alexander McConnell is the Postdoctoral Fellow at the Eisenberg Institute for Historical Studies at the University of Michigan. He is a historian of modern Russia and the Soviet Union, specializing in the intersections of political language, cultural production, and moral values. He is currently writing a book about the evolution of humanism in Soviet ideology and culture, examining how contests over the scope and meaning of this key concept reshaped ideals of socialist personhood.

¹¹⁵ See Anna Toropova, *Feeling Revolution: Cinema, Genre, and the Politics of Affect under Stalin* (Oxford, 2020), 84–115.

¹¹⁶ David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931–1936* (Cambridge, Mass., 2002), 1–2. The classic text on this mid-1930s shift is Nicholas S. Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York, 1946).

¹¹⁷ For a characteristic example, see N.K. Cherkasov, "Obrazy velikikh russkikh patriotov," *Literatura i isskustvo* no. 3 (January 19, 1942), 4.

¹¹⁸ Anna Krylova, "Imagining Socialism in the Soviet Century," *Social History* 42, no. 3 (2017): 318–19.

¹¹⁹ "Sotsialisticheskii gumanizm i sovetskaia literatura," *Literaturnyi kritik* no. 7 (1935): 4–20.

¹²⁰ *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei, 1934. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1990), 513–14.