

## Russian revolution

The work of artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid caused a sensation when it was first exhibited in the Soviet Union in the 1970s. As a show of their seminal installation, *Yalta 1945*, opens at London's Ben Uri Gallery, **Zinovy Zinik** says their art still has the power to shock

**T**he Yalta Conference was somehow regarded by the Soviet authorities as a conspiratorial, if not shameful, secret," Vitaly Komar told me in our recent phone conversation from his home in New York. The first time Komar and his fellow artist Alexander Melamid saw the famous photograph of the Yalta gathering – the secretive trio of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin – was not in the Soviet Union but in New York in 1978, after a year-long stopover in Jerusalem en route from Moscow.

There in Jerusalem the two artists commemorated their emigration from the Soviet Union in 1977 with an installation called the Third Temple. Their first sacrifice in that temple was to burn their old suitcases. My suitcase was not sacrificed: a friend of the artists since our youth in Moscow, by that time I had departed from Jerusalem to London.

I'm recounting all this because the wave of emigration from the Soviet Union during the 1970s was the direct follow-up of events that originated during the Yalta Conference. At that meeting, held in February 1945, the allied leaders negotiated the future of post-war Europe. The Yalta Conference has, in one way or another, cast long shadows on the lives of Komar and

Melamid – as it has for all of us born at the end of World War II.

Komar told me of his personal interest in this subject matter: his parents were professional lawyers who were employed by the Soviet state and sent to Germany to sort out the legal aspects of the Soviet occupation after the war. Alex Melamid's father, a native German speaker, directly translated to Stalin all of Hitler's broadcasts. The partition of Germany and Eastern Europe, and Stalin's broken promises, led to the Cold War and the creation of the Iron Curtain.

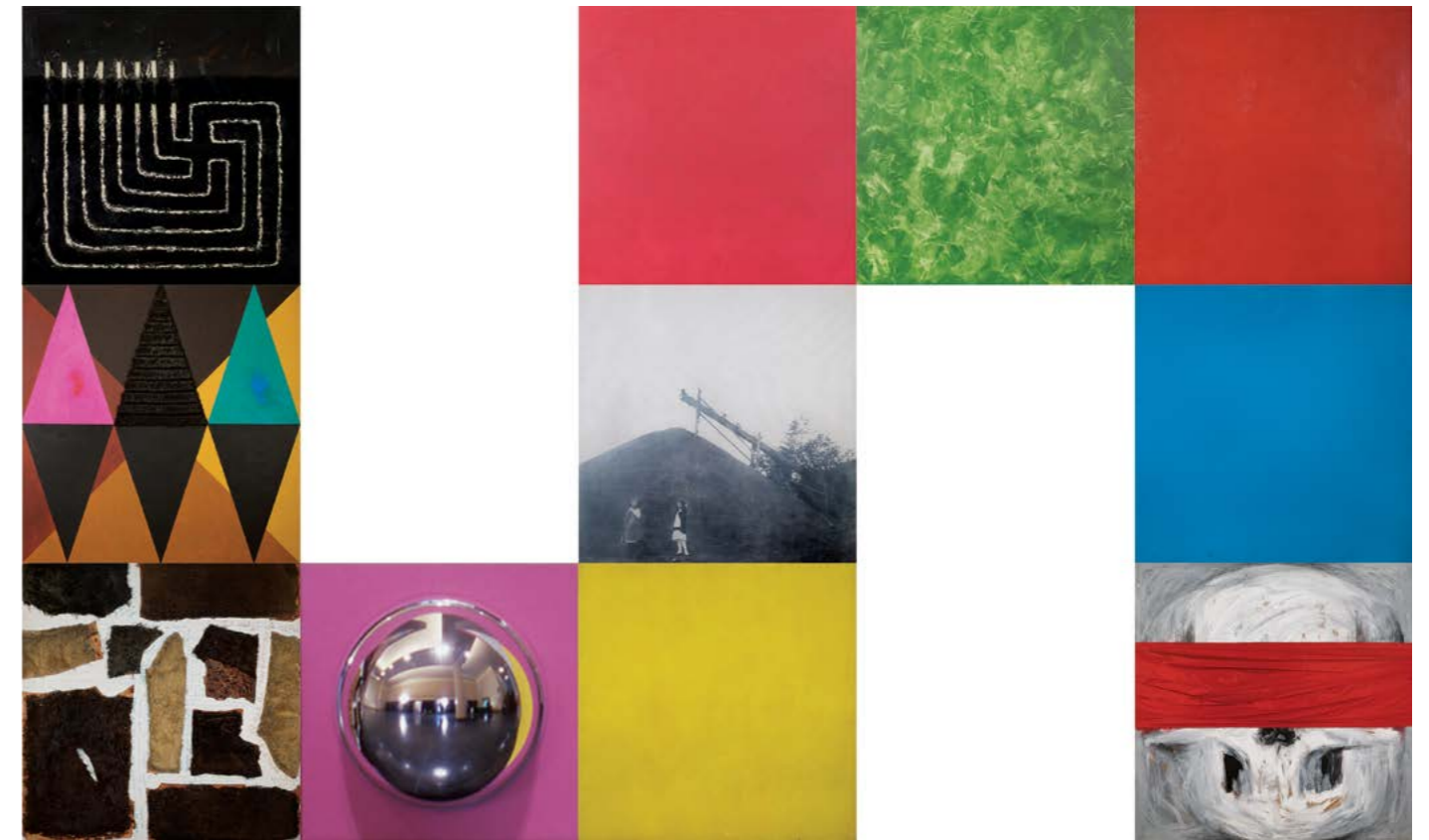
But in 1982, when Komar and Melamid decided to make the Yalta Conference the subject of their artistic contemplation, these grand political concepts had not been their prime concern. "Looking at that photograph of Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin in Yalta," Komar continues, "I was first of all struck by the clash of political ideologies personified in these three figures, representing Capitalism, Monarchy and Totalitarianism. And, accordingly, by the drastically different ways each of them was dressed."

"The style is the man himself", said the French 18th-century naturalist, the Comte de Buffon, and the Soviet Man was a combination of styles that had acquired political significance imposed on him

from above by the cultural bureaucrats.

Having graduated from the same Stroganov School of Art in Moscow, the artists (nicknamed the Marx and Engels of Russian conceptualism) started to actively collaborate at the end of the 1960s – a period of Soviet history when the conservative heavies headed by Leonid Brezhnev had driven the country towards total stagnation and corruption.

And yet, alternative forms of independent existence were created in private spaces, such as at a kitchen table or in a seedy cafe. Both Melamid and Komar were part of my circle of friends who got together every Thursday in my Moscow apartment. Here, a new attitude to officialdom developed. By that time, Soviet iconography was already an empty shell, a crust under which home-brewed concoctions of different religious and political trends, fads and obsessions had started bubbling.



It was in this atmosphere, during the early 1970s, that the pair developed their notion of Sots-Art ('Sots' is a compression of the Russian words for 'socialist realism'). Sots-Art treated the omnipresence of Soviet ideology with the same regard American Pop Art showed to the overproduction of material goods.

The duo's first memorable painting in this new genre was their *Double Self-Portrait* (1972). The classical faces of Lenin and Stalin or Marx and Engels that look at you from the frescos in the Moscow underground were replaced in this work by Komar and Melamid's own profiles. It was an apt illustration of how official art was omnipresent in the private life of every citizen. One version of this double portrait was literally bulldozed: in 1974 the duo's notorious unofficial open-air show in Moscow was smashed into smithereens by the authorities. And then the artists themselves were bulldozed out of the Soviet Union.

In New York, they became the talk of the town with their ironic conceptual projects (such as 'auctioning' the souls of famous artists) and with their major exhibitions of the 1980s in the

*Yalta 1945*, 1986-87, mixed media on 31 panels; *Yalta Conference in February 1945* with (from left to right) Winston Churchill, Franklin D Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin

Ronald Feldman Gallery. Their Nostalgic Socialist Realism series established ironic parallels between the ideal socialist realism of the imagined Stalinist variety and the didactic, allegorical nature of

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18th- and 19th-century European academicism. Ancient Greek muses were portrayed presenting books of history to Stalin, and Ronald Reagan was depicted as a centaur.

It was in this vein that the artists approached the Yalta Conference. Their first ironic treatment of the subject substituted the alien ET for Roosevelt and instead of Churchill, featured an apparition of Hitler with his finger pressed to his lips as if saying: "Mum's the word!" According to Komar, the ET image reflected his feelings of being an extra-terrestrial Russian in

the USA. Artistically, Komar and Melamid were employing a conceptual style that had featured in their early works, notably in *The Biography of Our Contemporary* (1973), in which the daily life of an ordinary Soviet citizen was reflected in different artistic styles depending on the ideological phase the character was going through.

The artists' second series of Yalta paintings was exhibited in 1987 at the German art show *documenta 8* in Kassel. It is these panels that are now on display at the Ben Uri Gallery in London. Here again, the duo contemplates the world's history as a conglomeration of styles and symbols of each epoch: the swastika is transfigured into a seven-branch menorah, Churchill is depicted in the Impressionist manner while Stalin next to him remains loyal to his socialist realist style.

Ben Uri claims to be the only art museum in Europe whose *raison d'être* is to address universal issues of identity and migration through the visual arts. The migration of styles and the fluidity of Komar and Melamid's work (they ceased collaborating in 2003) make their Yalta project feel perfectly at home in London. ■

*Yalta 1945* by Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid runs from 16 September - 18 December at Ben Uri Gallery. See [benuri.org.uk](http://benuri.org.uk) and *What's Happening* p61. Zinovy Zinik is a Moscow-born author who has lived in London since 1976. He contributes to the TLS and BBC Radio. His new novel *Sounds Familiar or the Beast of Artek, Divus*, £16, is out now.