On 10 February 1948, The Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union issued a decree ‘On the Opera A Great Friendship by Vano Muradeli’. The opera (Velikaia druzhba in Russian) by a young Georgian composer, produced by the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow to mark the 30th anniversary of the October Revolution, was described as ‘an inartistic work, faulty both musically and as regards to its subject matter’. Its shortcomings were rooted in its music which was inexpressive and poor. Muradeli was denounced for embarking on a ‘faulty formalistic path, fatal to the work of a Soviet composer’. This criticism was not seen as an isolated event, but was connected to ‘the unhappy state of contemporary Soviet music, the spread of a formalistic trend among Soviet composers’. Muradeli’s failure was linked back to the 1936 attacks against ‘formalism’ in Soviet music, literature and art, which was sparked off by Dmitrii Shostakovich’s opera Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk District.

In 1948, Aleksandr Gerasimov, a leading Soviet painter and the new president of the Academy of Arts of the USSR (Akademiia khudozhestv SSSR), chose precisely this example—‘the historical decision of the...
Central Committee of our Communist Party on the opera’—to illustrate the Academy’s position on art education. Gerasimov spoke of Soviet composers as ‘compatriots in our struggle’ and the events in Soviet music as close to the heart of Soviet painters. He repeated the postulates of the post-war denunciation of ‘formalism’ and ‘cosmopolitanism’ in all spheres of Soviet art and culture, which was directed against all foreign influence. Composers, directors, poets, critics and artists, all came under public attack orchestrated by the Committee on Art Affairs (Komitet po delam iskusstv) headed by Andrei Zhdanov, the secretary of the Central Committee and the leading spokesman on cultural issues in the 1940s.

The Academy was itself renamed and restructured in September 1947 by a decree of the Council of Ministers to incorporate the national art institutes and schools of all the Soviet Republics. The following year, it was transferred from its original eighteenth-century building in Leningrad to Moscow. Speaking at the first session of the Academy in 1947, the newly appointed Gerasimov reminded his audience that the success of Soviet art was achieved in the struggle against bourgeois artistic influence, against formalism and naturalism, and that for as long as capitalism continued to exist as a global economic system there was a definite danger that formalism could influence Soviet art. He continued, ‘The Central Committee stated that the worship of decadent capitalist art is incompatible with the high status of the Soviet painter, that it contradicts Soviet patriotism’.

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5 The resolution ‘On the Organisation of an All-Union Committee on Art Affairs’ was passed by the Politburo on 16 December 1935. The committee unified the leadership of all arts affairs, including theatre, film, music, painting, sculpture, and photography. See RGASPI, fond 17, op. 3, delo 973, l. 3; cited in Katerina Clark, Evgeny Dobrenko, Andrei Artizov and Oleg Naumov, eds., *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917–1953* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 229.

6 The postwar denunciation of formalism erupted in 1946, when Zhdanov delivered a speech on the ideological failings of the magazines *Star* (Zvezda) and *Leningrad*, which featured works by the humorist Mikhail Zoshchenko and the poet Anna Akhmatova.

7 The Academy of Arts of the USSR existed between 1947 and 1992. Previously, known as the Imperial Academy of Arts (1764–1918), the State Free Art Workshops/Petrograd State Art Workshops (1918–1930), Leningrad Institute of Workers’ Fine Arts (1930–1932) and the All-Russian Academy of Arts (1932–1947).