

# The Return Of The Communist Party Membership Card - 1967

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## What could artists portray in the USSR?

The state-sponsored Union of Artists pursued the goal of "creating ideological, highly artistic works of art of all types and genres and works on art history, promoting the construction of communism in the USSR, strengthening the connection of members of the USSR Union of Artists with the practice of communist construction, developing socialist in content and national in form art of the peoples of the USSR, establishing the ideals of Soviet patriotism and proletarian internationalism in the activities of Soviet artists"

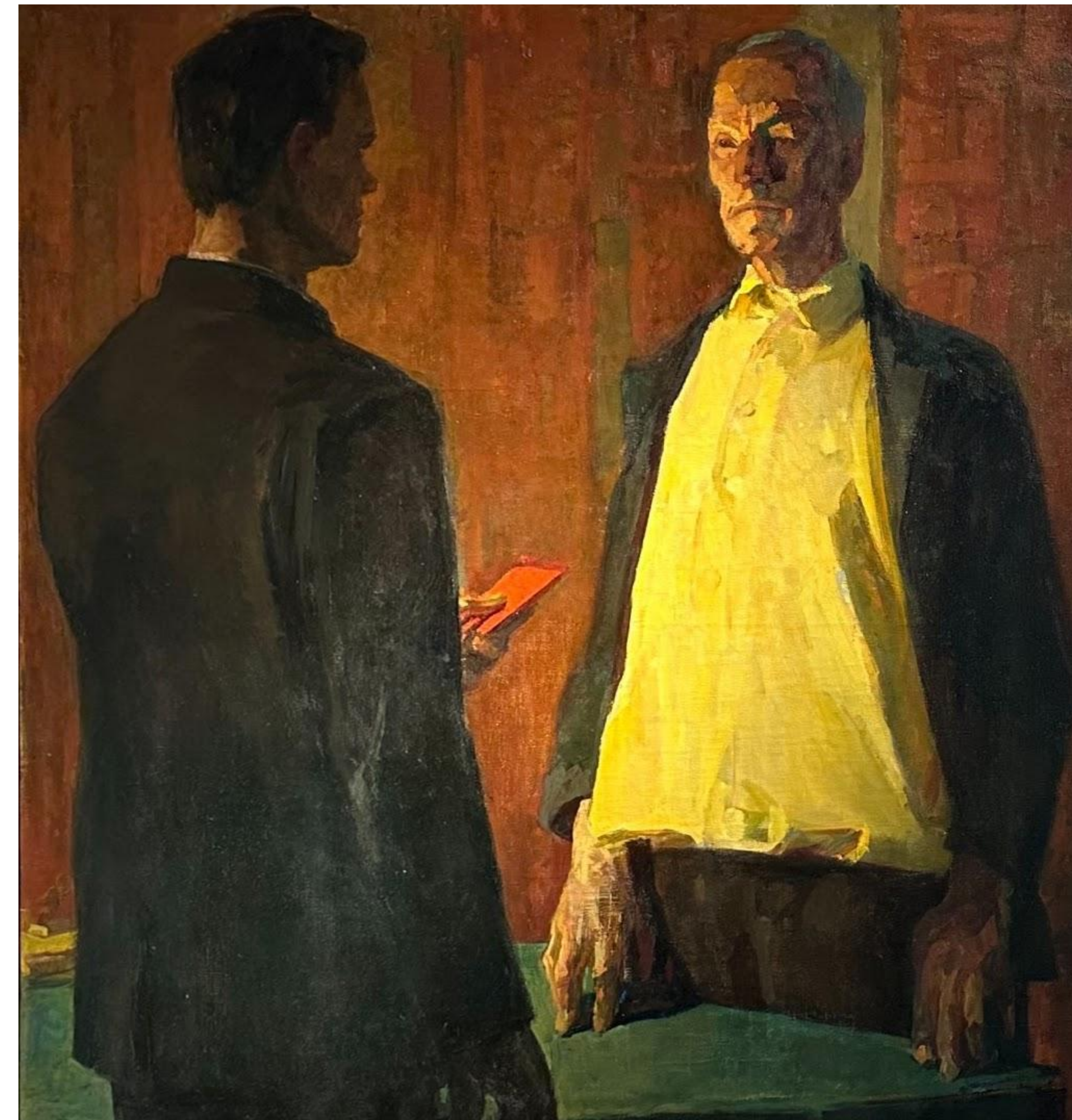
However, in addition to "basic moral values", Soviet cultural content also had a propaganda aspect, with limits on which artists could represent government figures, and requirements for how the USSR was portrayed.

There were separate artistic councils that performed the function of censorship and did not allow the works of many artists, considering their work to be "ideologically harmful." Their work was not simply suppressed, but these artists could be jailed if they critiqued Soviet life, though they were welcome to critique "capitalist" reality. For example, in July 1959, A. Dostanko, the chief engineer of the Institute for Designing Energy Facilities, was convicted under the article "Anti-Soviet Agitation and Propaganda" for sending photomontage caricatures of the Soviet system to Soviet newspapers.

## What is a Communist Party Membership Card?

Священный партбилет - sacred party (communist party) card was a highly important document within the USSR. to be promoted within the Soviet Union card carrying communists were put ahead of other applicants if even given a job. The document also gave you a right to vote inside the party. Careless storage or loss was seen as treasonous against the Soviet Union and could be penalized by severe sanctions, imprisonment and expulsion from the party. For responsible party workers, the loss of a party card was much more significant than the loss of a passport. Basically it came down to the loss of identity. Expulsion from the party was accompanied by the confiscation of this document, and the catchphrase "you'll put your party card on the table," which can be found in the films and literature of the time, became quite widespread. There have been cases when, during a student's studies at higher educational institutions, in order to eliminate competitors, their party membership cards were destroyed, which subsequently had administrative and political consequences for the cardholders.

The returning or re-issuing of your communist card can be seen as recognizing your reform as a person, a return of your state identity. The title could also be interpreted as having the opposite meaning of returning the card to the party. This ambiguity seems to be central to Belyakovas work.



Ida Solomonovna Belyakova,  
*Return of the Communist Party Membership Card* 1967  
Sam and Berry Shoen Collection of Soviet Art, Carthage College

## The meaning is left ambiguous

Belyakova represents two life size figures using dark colors and deep shadows. The background suggests shelves of books or archives, without any explicit labels or visual sign posts. The viewer can infer that this is a type of administrative or government space, yet it takes on the power of metaphor since it has no explicit location or identification. Both men appear well-dressed and serious, if not sinister, in their gestures and facial expressions, but it is unclear who is returning the card and who is receiving it. The saturated color and the title of the painting draw the viewer's attention to the bright red of the cover of the Communist Party Membership Card. The card is both the center and the focus of the painting based on its placement, the title, and the color choices of the artist. Its meaning, however, leaves room for interpretation.

## Ида Соломоновна Белякова - Ida Solomonovna Belyakova

Belyakova was born in 1905 in the Bryansk Oblast outside of Pochep, a predominantly Jewish populated town recorded as early as the seventeenth century. Her name also suggests a Jewish background, which may have informed her interactions with the state. Belyakova was a painter and began participating in state held exhibitions as early as 1936.

She graduated from the Moscow Art Institute and was a member of the Union of Artists of the USSR. Most of her work was likely commissioned by Soviet party members. In 1984 she illustrated a children's book called *Peter Molotok* (Петер Молоток). She participated in the famous All-Union Art Exhibition, which took place at the State Tretyakov Gallery from January to October 1946. Her works also appeared in the famous Soviet Russia show in Moscow in 1960.

Ida Belyakova was married to a military man. Few people knew that her husband Mikhail Belyakov was the brother of the famous light, Hero of the Soviet Union Alexander Belyakov. Belyakova lived and worked in Moscow, where she died in 1996. After Belyakova's death, the documents she carefully kept were thrown into the trash.



Ida Belyakova and her husband Mikhail Belyakov

## Conclusions

In spite of the strict rules governing the subjects Belyakova could paint and the threat of censorship, the style of her paintings pushes the boundaries of Social Realism. Rather than celebrating the USSR in straightforward terms, she brings ambiguity to her work, leaving the viewer with questions about her intended meaning.