



Nikolai Nikolaevich Yakovenko

(1919 - 2000)

Before the Storm 1982

oil on canvas

In this rural scene, wind whips around three village women as they work together to wrestle a tarp over a haystack. In the background, a man hurriedly builds up another hay pile as the sky above churns with an incoming storm. The foregrounded woman struggles barefoot as she stretches upward, her face chapped by the wind.



By the time Yakovenko painted this scene in 1982, Soviet villages were no longer the heart of everyday life; instead, they had become a memory. Beginning in the 1960s and accelerating through the 1980s, millions of Soviet citizens left the countryside for the cities. Urban life promised modern jobs, education, and access to goods. However, the cost was steep, with entire villages emptied out. The older generations often stayed behind, and these villages became places to visit one's grandparents rather than call home.

And yet, even as people turned away from village life, they also began to romanticize it. A wave of nostalgia swept through late Soviet culture. Village life came to symbolize something pure, rooted, and resilient. It was imagined as morally richer than the alienating, often exhausting experience of Soviet city life. In film, literature, and painting (including this one) rural scenes stood in for vanishing traditions and values. The urban populace yearned for this rhapsodic version of shared labor, straightforward tasks, family unity, and deep cultural memory. But the idealization didn't always match reality.

For decades, the Soviet regime had tried to erase the cultural uniqueness of these villages. Under Stalin in the 1930s and 1940s, entire ethnic groups were deported. Native languages, religions, and customs were stamped out. Khrushchev's modernization campaign in the 1950s continued this process, aiming to overcome what the state called "peasant backwardness." Religion, especially strong in rural areas, was seen as incompatible with Communist ideals. Churches were shuttered and traditions dismissed.

Amazingly, the village persisted, even functioning as a kind of sanctuary. Located on the margins, it protected the very languages and customs that the state tried to erase. Over time, it came to represent a cultural homeland, not necessarily because of what it still was, but because of what people hoped it had once been.

It's not just cultural loss that haunted the idea of the village, it was environmental as well. During the late Soviet period, environmental destruction reached staggering levels. The government diverted rivers for massive agricultural projects, drying up bodies of water like the Aral Sea. Polluted lakes, poisoned soil, and nuclear testing left entire rural communities sick and silenced. Chernobyl would explode just four years after this painting was made. By then, the countryside was not only depopulated but damaged, as well.

In this sense, Yakovenko's storm feels prophetic. It's not just a change in weather, but a portent of coming man-made destruction. It is a farewell to the village as a living, breathing way of life and an elegy for all it carried with it: memories, beliefs, languages, and the fragile balance between people and the land.

And yet, in this painting, the village still stands.

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