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Literary Culture: "New Soviet Man" in the Mirror of Literature

Maurice Friedberg

The roots of Soviet literary culture extend beyond the establishment of the Soviet state itself. Maxim Gorky's *Mother* written, ironically, some years before the Bolshevik Revolution in the United States (the country, it might be noted, that also contributed to the cause of the tradition of May Day observances) is one hallmark of that culture *avant la lettre*. Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done*, a novel often cited in Communist hagiographies as the inspiration of generations of nineteenth-century Russian revolutionaries (including, significantly, the founder of Soviet state himself, as well as his martyred brother) is another. And yet, we submit, Soviet literary culture, properly speaking, came into being only in 1932, with the formation of the single Union of Soviet Writers and the proclamation of Socialist Realism as its sole literary creed. It is not only that during the 1920s non-Communist writers' organizations and their journals continued to function (their members and contributors were, indeed, the decade's most prominent authors) and independently operated publishing houses attempted to supply the public with books for which there was genuine demand. Other considerations argue for this periodization as well. Prior to 1932 the Party refused to endorse even those literary groupings that enthusiastically and sincerely tried to advance the Communist cause, such as the *Proletcult* or the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP). They attempted to accomplish this by painstaking extrapolation from the zigzags of Party dogma and shifting policy priorities of implications for writers of prose, dramatists and poets. The Party's reluctance to recognize any of the eagerly Bolshevik literary organizations as its authorized spokesmen was simply an expression of distrust. As enunciated before the Revolution by such theoreticians as Georgi Plekhanov (particularly in *Art and Society*, 1912-13) and Lenin himself (in his essay "On Party Organization and Party Literature," 1905), Russian Marxists, themselves strongly influenced by such native strains of the radical tradition as the so-called revolutionary democrats, attached great importance to literature's political potential. (That this view reflected conditions peculiar to Russia, a country where, in the absence of freedom of the press, parliamentary institutions and even a socially activist church, literature served as a sublimation for all of these, is another matter.) Not unexpectedly, therefore, the decision was made that the issue was far too vital to be delegated to poets and novelists, however well-intentioned. It was the Communist Party itself, and the Party alone, that was to decide on the ways and means of implementation in

literature of its objectives and tactics. Not that the Party failed to appreciate the usefulness of Soviet writing that was created prior to the establishment of the Writer's Union . Dmitri Furmanov's *Chapayev* (1923), a semi-documentary account of the taming of an undisciplined Civil War hero by a sober Bolshevik commissar, was one such novel; Fedor Gladkov's *Cement* (1925), the first important fictional portrayal of industrialization and of the formation of the new Soviet woman, was another; Alexander Fadeyev's *The Rout* (1927), a Tolstoyan tale of a band of Red guerrillas in the Far East, was a third. Together with Vladimir Mayakovsky's impassioned modernistic verse and Mikhail Sholokhov's two novels, *The Silent Don*, an epic canvas of the bloody fratricidal war that preceded the establishment of Soviet rule in the Cossack region, and his *Virgin Soil Upturned* which recounted the brutal collectivization of agriculture in the same area, all were to be retroactively -- if anachronistically -- claimed for Socialist Realism. Indeed, they were to be listed matter-of-factly among the masterpieces that Socialist Realism begot, as was the poetry of Mayakovsky as well as Furmanov's, Gladkov's and Fadeyev's novels, notwithstanding also the fact the *Silent Don* violates a number of the doctrine's central tenets as does also Mayakovsky's drama and verse. But then, inconsistency and compromises mark many features of Soviet literary culture which over the years was often forced to adjust its rigidly enunciated theoretical principles and their enforcement to realities imposed by the book market. An old American saying comes to mind, "you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make him drink." Try as they may, Soviet librarians could not, in the final analysis force the public to actually read the books they offered to it. It was this reader's veto power that accounts over the years of Soviet literary culture's many retreats from its cherished ideological goals. More often than not, however, in conditions that were established in 1932, individual authors intent on seeing their works in print would fashion their writings to what they perceived (or were actually told) were the desires of editors of literary journals or publishing houses. One such incident is described in a 1933 satirical story of Ilya Ilf and Evgenii Petrov. "How Soviet Robinson Crusoe Was Created" describes the process whereby a close replica of the children's classic is transformed into a run-of-the-mill Socialist Realist potboiler. The import, though unstated, of the story is that the circumstances created by the monopolistic nature of Soviet publishing deprived the hapless writer of the alternative available to writers elsewhere. Submitting his manuscript to another journal offered little hope, because the original editor's demands were not a reflection of his subjective tastes, but of political directives from above that left him with little latitude. That is attested by the remarkable degree of ideological, thematic and even artistic uniformity of the bulk of Soviet

writing beginning with the early 1930s.

Early in that decade it became apparent that the Communist Party placed very high hopes in the arts. The task that literary culture faced -- writers and poets above all, but also theatrical directors, filmmakers, composers, painters and even circus performers -- was that of the party's closest helpers in the more than ambitious task of creating the New Soviet Man, one that would be free of old "bourgeois" vices and values and embody Communist virtues. The New Soviet Man would unquestioningly place collective welfare over personal desires, work over pleasure, future goals over present difficulties. He would be implacable with foes of the Soviet cause and ever ready to serve it in any way that might be required. Last but not least, he would blindly accept the Communist Party's authority in defining in practice the elucidation of all of the above categories.

In literature (and to some extent in the arts as well) the method chosen to advance this goal was the creation of inspirational writing that would present the reader with models for emulation, in other words, a continuation of prerevolutionary tradition of Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done* and Gorky's *Mother*. The unintended irony of the decision was that both of these novels, and Gorky's in particular, were closely modelled on hagiography of the Russian Orthodox Church, and these saints' lives (*zhitiya*) had been in turn intended to inspire the faithful to imitation of Christ. Idealized models for emulation may also be found in neo-classical comedies and tragedies, even though, as a rule, they are far less interesting than the villains and rogues they oppose. *Starodum*, the spokesman for old virtues and moral rectitude in Denis Fonvizin's *Minor*, the only eighteenth-century play still often performed on the Russian stage, is a good example of such a model. Yet there is no arguing the fact that it is his brutish animal-like antagonists, the Prostakovs and Skotinins, that delight modern theatergoers. At the same time, placing the Positive Hero at the center of attributes of Soviet writing signified a break with traditions of nineteenth-century Russian classics which Socialist Realism claimed to continue. [1]For the fact of the matter is that truly positive heroes who can serve as models for impressionable readers are relatively scarce in classical Russian writing which is rarely overtly didactic. Eugene Onegin is not a paragon of virtue (nor, for that matter, is Tatyana) and Anna Karenina is not an ideal for emulation; neither is Raskolnikov, Uncle Vanya, Oblomov's friend Stoltz, any of the male protagonists of Turgenev or, for that matter any of Gogol's characters of either sex. Of the three whales on which the universe of Socialist Realism was to rest, only one, *ideinost'*, the requirement that a literary work (or, as the case may be, a canvas, a musical composition, a sculpture, etc.) embody a

significant idea, bore a degree of resemblance to the nineteenth-century Russian artistic traditions. (It is this particular trait which, more than any other, imparts to much of the classic literary legacy qualities associated with the concept of "high seriousness.") That requirement, however, was largely vitiated by the commandment of *partiinnost'*, which obligated the writer to eschew all pretense of objectivity and openly register his sympathies with positive values and hostility toward, say, bourgeois survivals in the consciousness of his characters. With the exception, characteristically, of such novels as Gorky's *Mother*, *partiinnost'* has few pre-Soviet antecedents. Lermontov clearly disapproved of Pechorin, but did not portray him as simply a repugnant villain. The same is true of Tolstoy's Vronsky and Karenin. Hélène Bezouhoff and even Napoleon Bonaparte; Dostoyevsky's Fedor Karamazov, his intellectual son Ivan and his half-wit natural son Smerdukov, and so on. The third requirement, that of *narodnost'*, or popular accessibility, could be (and was) interpreted in a variety of ways, though in practice it was used to banish overly difficult and experimental art. Its ultimate result was the disappearance of modernist tendencies from Soviet writing, ultra-traditional academic painting, and a theater and ballet which showed little change from Stanislavsky's stage and the Swan Lake in Imperial Russia. Most unique (and ultimately also most damaging) was the ideologically-inspired requirement of *tipichnost'*. Reality, the high priests of Socialist Realism decreed, was to be depicted "in its revolutionary development," it was to be future-oriented: the typical was not that which was, admittedly, typical of today, but that which was to become typical tomorrow. As Andrei Sinyavsky pointed out in his 1959 essay *On Social Realism*, this "visionary" portrayal of reality, while compatible enough with religious or phantasmagoric art, clashed with the trappings of traditional realistic prose that was obligatory in conventional Soviet writing. It resulted in hundreds of literary works in which familiar surroundings and realia of daily life were incongruously combined with contrived "future-oriented" psychology of Stalinist Positive Heroes. Such potboilers became particularly common during the last decade of the dictator's life. Not surprisingly, a great many of them, though published in high press runs and acclaimed by obedient Communist reviewers, met with little enthusiasm on the part of the reading public and millions of copies had to be pulped.

Occasionally, the "permanent" commandments of Socialist Realism were temporarily augmented by supplementary strictures. Although these were, in their essence, clearly derived from the core articles of faith, they sometimes represented their *reductio ad absurdum*. Thus, for example, the theory of the so-called conflictless drama that flared up briefly in the

wake of World War II, was rooted in the belief that with the steady progress of the Soviet cause (especially when viewed in its future-oriented "revolutionary development") there would, properly speaking, be no conflict on the stage between the harmful and the useful, the deformed and the beautiful, etc., etc., but only between the good and the better, the adequate and the exceptional, the competent and the brilliant. The new theory, needless to say, was discredited before long because, by depriving plays of their traditional moving force, it threatened to permanently destroy the Soviet theater. [2] Other than that, during the two decades between the official proclamation of Socialist Realism and the Soviet Union 's sole literary and artistic creed and Stalin's death in 1953, the condition of the country's literary culture at a specific point in time accurately reflected the stringency with which its articles of faith were being enforced. Most oppressive were the years 1946 to 1953, the period of Zhdanov 's witchhunts which included the expulsion from the Writers' Union of the poet Anna Akhmatova and the humorist Mikhail Zoshchenko, as well as the orgy of "anti-cosmopolitan" purges of Jews and other admirers of Western culture. (Curiously, neither Akhmatova nor Zoshchenko were charged with any anti-Soviet activity. Their crime was the more elusive quality of *bezydeinost'*, lack of *ideinost'*.) Somewhat paradoxically, the years 1934 to 1941 were relatively more relaxed, even though they included the period of mass terror, show trials of "enemies of the people," as well as the deportation and murder of scores of prominent authors, such as Isaac Babel and Osip Mandelstam. Most unexpectedly, however, the period of greatest permissiveness in literature coincided with the years of the nation's life-and-death struggle with German Nazi invaders. One obvious reason for this was relaxation of the Party's grip on the arts: the war was certainly no time for doctrinal Communist quibbles. Thus, hitherto proscribed motifs of religious faith and Russian, as distinct from Soviet, patriotism were not merely tolerated but often openly encouraged. In wartime conditions, *ideinost'*, *partiinnost'* and *tipichnost'* translated in literature into portrayal of hatred for the foreign invader and willingness to endure the ordeal in order to save Mother Russia. Authentic, non-politicized human feelings of sorrow, longing, camaraderie forged in battle and dreams of meeting again one's beloved were readmitted to Soviet poetry. Imperial Russian military traditions could once again be extolled in Russian drama and prose. Silenced non-Communist poets, such as Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak, reappeared in print, while such Party hacks as Aleskei Surkov demonstrated that they, too, were capable of depicting in their verse honest emotions. The war's grim truths found expression in such novels as Victor Nekrasov's *In the Trenches of Stalingrad*, and even to a degree in the writings of such Socialist Realist functionaries as Alexander Korneichuk

(*The Front*, a play), Konstantin Simonov (the novel *Days and Nights*) and, most significantly, Alexander Fadeyev. Long the head of the Writers' Union, Fadeyev had in his time signed, in effect, many a death sentence of fellow authors. After Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's crimes in 1956, Fadeyev committed suicide. The story of Fadeyev's *The Young Guard* is instructive. First published toward the end of the war, it gained immediate popularity. As William E. Harkins notes, Fadeyev's books became

. . . one of the most popular novels on the Second World War. It deals with the partisan resistance of young people living under the German occupation and is based in part on actual events. In spite of the somewhat conventional conception of patriotism which the book embodies, the characterizations are striking. [3]

Looking back at the literary legacy of these three decades of Socialist Realism, we detect a distinctive pattern of artistic successes and failures. Intentionally or not, a number of Soviet authors succeeded in producing works of lasting merit by contriving to restrict themselves to genres immune, as it were, to constraints of doctrinaire Socialist Realism. Foremost among these, of course, was the pseudo-genre of silence or writing "for the drawer" to which Issac Babel referred only half-ironically in the mid-1930s. It was this "genre" that produced the discovery, in the 1960s, of several brilliant satirical novels by Mikhail Bulgakov. First printed two decades after the author's death, these were important enough to warrant the reevaluation not only of Bulgakov's place in twentieth-century Russian literature, but of the broader field of Russian social and political satire during the 1920s and 1930s. Much of this unpublished writing was verse by the country's leading poets, including Akhmatova, Mandelshtam and Pasternak. Though some of it had earlier been printed abroad, the bulk was not allowed to appear in the USSR until long after Stalin's death.

Individual authors succeeded in navigating the stormy seas of Socialist Realism in a manner that allowed them to avoid the perilous reefs of *ofideinost'*, *partiinnost'*, *narodnost'* and *tipichnost'*. Clearly, none appeared remotely relevant to Mikhail Prishvin's tales of forests and animals or to historical novels set in the distant past, such as Vasili Yan's trilogy about the Mongol invasion in the thirteenth century. (Nor, for that matter, did they seem apposite for Aleksei N. Tolstoy's *Peter the Great*, even though the novel was but a thinly veiled paean of praise to Stalin.) Logically, the strictures of Socialist Realism also seemed inapplicable to writing that ostensibly satirized "bourgeois" mentality, such as the immensely popular short stories of Mikhail Zoshchenko and the widely read novels of Ilf and

Petrov, *The Twelve Chairs* and *Little Golden Calf*. This, incidentally, helps explain much of Zoshchenko's and Ilf and Petrov's reader appeal. Ordinary men and women identified with Zoshchenko's hapless protagonists and their endless tragicomic struggle with the hardships and absurdities of daily life in the Soviet state. They laughed at the unseemly reality that grandiloquent slogans could not conceal. They nodded at the unheroic city folk whose speech betrays dutiful reading of *Pravda* and attendance of indoctrination meetings, but whose actions continue to be shaped by such traditional emotions as greed, fear, and vanity. Those readers identified also with Ostap Bender, the picaresque hero of *The Twelve Chairs* and *Little Golden Calf* who is no bourgeois survivor but an honest-to-goodness Soviet crook, born of Soviet conditions which afford ample opportunity for his shenanigans. There was yet another reason for the great allure of these authors. Not one of these books is marred by the all of ubiquitous Soviet literary figure of the Positive Hero, that repository of Communist virtues whose annoyingly didactic pieties would place Ostap Bender and Zoshchenko's protagonists in a "correct" perspective. As for the possible usefulness of these books to the Bolshevik authorities, one can assume with confidence that the millions of Soviet readers of these books (and they were often, quite literally, read to shreds) gave little thought to the problem whether Zoshchenko or Ilf and Petrov did, in fact, intend to satirize "bourgeois" mentality. [4] Be that as it may, the fact remains that during periods of heightened ideological vigilance (such as, for instance, 1946-53) writings that merely appeared to avoid open affirmation of Communist militancy were, at best, not reprinted (this was the fate of Ilf and Petrov) or were openly denounced, as were Zoshchenko and Akhmatova. There was also a third category of Soviet writing that ignored the strictures of Socialist Realism with impunity. It consisted of a relatively small number of literary works (Mikhail Sholokhov's *Silent Don*, referred to earlier, is the best known single example) which the authorities found useful for one reason or another, and therefore turned a blind eye to their ideological defects. Most of the writings in this category appeared during World War II. Their obvious contributions to the war effort were apparently accepted as compensation for their shortcomings as Communist sermons. Victor Nekrasov's *In the Trenches of Stalingrad* was one such celebrated novel; Konstantin Simonov's *Days and Nights* was equally famous in its day.

What of the bulk of conventional Soviet writing? Much of it, as suggested above, remained unread. But thousands of such books, including scores of Stalin Prize-winning novels, were avidly read for rather curious reasons.

Soviet sociologists of literature define "Columbus complex" as the desire

to distil from fictional works a measure of purely factual information about the physical settings, customs and values that are portrayed in such books. Paradoxically, it was this curiosity, this quest for information that attracted tens of millions of Soviet readers to some of the worst Stalinist potboilers. Let me explain.

Aware of the artistic limitations of featuring ordinary workers and collective farmers as Positive Heroes and models for emulation (too many readers would, of course, find them quite unbelievable), Soviet literary artisans often preferred to portray in that role middle-level Party functionaries, factor directors, scientists and artists. All of these were members of what Milovan Djilas called the New Class, and rank and file readers had never known any such people personally. They had never seen the insides of their apartments or, for that matter, of their rest homes, shopping facilities and even hospitals. All of these were concealed from ordinary mortals. Countless Soviet readers wanted to find out what these exalted beings, those, as Orwell put it, more equal than the others, eat for dinner, how their wives dress, and how they socialize and with whom. As Vera S. Dunham pointed out, this New Class was a Soviet variant of the prerevolutionary Russian *meshchanstvo*:

It represents today, as it did before, a middle class mentality that is vulgar, imitative, greedy and ridden with prejudice. . . . In the Soviet world, meshchanstvo appears at every rung of the social scale. In one aspect it refers to the social climbing and careerism of the newly rich; in another to complacent vegetation. A vice admiral of the Soviet navy may be a meshchanin, and a professor may be easily be seen as wallowing in meshchanstvo as a post-office clerk or party official, to say nothing of their wives. In many ways in fact, meshchanstvo is a familial and feminine affair, and its pretentiousness expresses itself in the number and size of material acquisitions, but which the newly arrived aim to impress. Fervor for positions is a key trait. [5]

Significantly, similar curiosity about the life of the upper classes contributed, before the Revolution, to the great demand among the newly literate Russian urbana readers (and also, to some degree, peasant readers) for popular fiction that described the comings and goings of the rich and famous. In the Romanov Empire, educated Russians (both conservatives and radicals!) were alarmed by this trend:

Critics of popular literature were often animated by mutually exclusive visions of the Russia of the future, yet they shared the belief that the popular commercial literature of the marketplace was harmful and should

be supplanted by a more wholesome alternative . . . many critics expressed a common concern about what they called the "cynicism" of the commercial literature. By cynicism they meant the popular author's appeals to the worldly desires and materialistic daydreams, and the presentation of the attainment of earthly delights by fair means and foul. Criticism from clerics, state bureaucrats, Westernizers, the populists, liberal enlighteners, and Marxists varied in intensity and with time, but most were united in the view that the lower class reader and the market could not be left alone to determine the literary fare of "the reader from the people." [6]

While the exact degree of its success cannot, of course, be gauged with any degree of accuracy, it appears in retrospect that of the values Socialist Realist writing strove to foster over the years, none gained general acceptance -- not selfless labor enthusiasm and not concern for collective will over individual desires. The Communist Party and Comrade Stalin were feared, not loved. At the most, Soviet literature may have made a modest contribution to the strengthening of wartime Russia patriotism and hatred of the German invader. It would, indeed, have been ironical if Communist pulp fiction, like its prerevolutionary variety, contributed also to greater awareness of social inequality and economic injustice, to a sense of resentment on the part of the impoverished Soviet workers and peasants of the privileges enjoyed by the country's New Class in a society ostensibly dedicated to abolition of inequality.

But then, resentment of social inequality and economic injustice was also reinforced by the two other components of Soviet literary culture, the prerevolutionary Russian classics and translated West European and American writing. Indeed, as I argue at length elsewhere, [7] the selection and dissemination of both kinds of non-Soviet writing in the USSR heavily favored those books that supported the Soviet thesis that economic deprivation of ordinary people and unfair privileges of the ruling classes are endemic to capitalism. Textbooks and teachers in classrooms explained to the young that Turgenev and Tolstoy and Chekhov portray conditions that, fortunately, no longer obtain in Russia, while Balzac and Emile Zola, Heine and Dickens and Theodore Dreiser describe life that has changed but little in the capitalist West. Whether Soviet students at the time found such reasoning convincing is, of course, debatable. Still, be that as it may, reading Russian classics and translated Western literature certainly contributed to further sensitizing of Soviet students to social injustice.

The three components of Soviet literary culture prior to Stalin's death

occasionally reinforced each other's message. It may be argued, for instance, that such values as courage and self-denial are contained in the Russian classics, in scores of Soviet novels (particularly those with Civil War and World War II settings), as well as such perennial favorites of Russia 's young as Ethel Voynich's *The Gadfly* or the writings of Jack London. Indeed, several Soviet novels in this category, such as Nikolai Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered* and *Born of the Storm* as well as Arkadi Gaidar's *Timur and His Team*, achieved instantaneous renown. But there were also those where the revolutionary books clashed head-on with modern Soviet values. As I wrote thirty years ago:

Will he [the Soviet reader], perhaps think twice after reading Lermontov's lines about blue uniforms and obedient people? . . . Will he remain certain that Saltykov-Shchedrin's *Pompadours and Pompadouresses* all disappeared from Russia on November 7, 1917? That [Shchedrin's] Judas Golovlyov can quote only religious scriptures and drive people to insanity?. . . Will the reading of Pushkin and Turgenev leave him unshaken in the belief that peasants are unhappy only when exploited by individual masters? . . . Will any contemporary Soviet readers repeat the question posed many years ago by Nekrasov: "Who can be happy and free in Russia ?" More important -- are not some of the moral values found in the Russian classics in flagrant contradiction to those preached by the Soviet state? Is not the spirit of moderation and compromise that permeates the works of Turgenev the opposite of Communist intransigence? Does not Dostoevsky belie the assertion that religion is merely an opiate for the people and that addicts to this narcotic are simple and backward men? Do not his writings suggest that faith may aid reason rather than clash with it? How is the reader to reconcile Pushkin's glorification of the permanence of human friendship with the Soviet practice of renouncing old comrades on the slightest hint "from above? . . ." What about the contrast between the irreverent attitude toward political authority in the classics and Soviet reality?. . . What of the millions of copies of the fables of Krylov, some of which must be memorized by every Soviet schoolboy -- fables that preach such traditional virtues as truthfulness, honesty, goodness, charity, modesty, prudence, justice? Do not these help to unmask pretense and hypocrisy? Do they not help to discover that even the Soviet Emperor may, after all, be naked? [8]

The disintegration of Socialist Realism, which began almost immediately after Stalin's death in 1953, greatly intensified after Nikita Khrushchev's 1956 speech which exposed many of the dictator's crimes. Much of Soviet writing quickly jettisoned a number of its hallowed attributes, including its "inspirational" quality and Positive Heroes as carriers of Communist

virtues which readers would wish to emulate. Understandably, the relaxation of ideological pressures resulted in the hurried writing and publication of such muckraking novels as Ilya Ehrenburg's *The Thaw* (after which the first post-Stalin years were named), Vladimir Dudintsev's *Not By Bread Alone*, and also catapulted to fame Yevgeni Yevtushenko, a young poet of modest gifts. The values that this new Soviet writing championed were, not a non-Soviet observer, unexciting: honesty, truthfulness, sincerity. To millions of Soviet readers, however, their open articulation was of momentous significance. It implied a break with the Stalinist past and an attempt to reclaim the ethical legacy of pre-Soviet culture. Before long, another ethical category was rediscovered in published new fiction. Compassion, a concept with strongly religious overtones, emerged as a leitmotif of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's writings published in the USSR prior to the novelist's expulsion from the country. It is particularly prominent in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, one of the first literary works to portray the universe of Soviet concentration camps, and in the parable-like story *Matryona's Home*. Solzhenitsyn's *Ivan Denisovich*, an ordinary uneducated Russian trying only to survive in the Arctic hell of a Soviet camp, is the first of a new species of literary heroes, the System's Victim. Solzhenitsyn's other novels which had achieved fame in the West and which feature similar protagonists, such as *The First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*, were not allowed to be printed in the Soviet Union until shortly before the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. Neither was his monumental study of Soviet penal camps *Gulag Archipelago*.

Solzhenitsyn was not the first nor the only author to deal with the explosive subject. Scores of books had appeared in the West (ultimately, they were all published in Russia as well) that described Stalin's jails, torture and sub-Arctic camps, ranging from Evgeniia Ginzburg's *Journey into the Whirlwind* to Varlam Shalamov's *Kolyma Tales* with their understated events, such as Anatoli Pristavkin's *A Golden Cloud Settled for the Night*, an artistically impressive account of Stalin's deportations of entire ethnic groups from the Caucasus. Others were more ambitious, as was Anatoli Rybakov's massive novel *Children of the Arbat* with its pseudo-Tolstoyan canvas of Soviet society gradually destroyed by Stalinist terror. Still others, such as the series of Mikhail Shatrov's historical plays, attempted to pinpoint the precise time when Lenin's "idealistic" revolutionary Party was seized by Stalin's criminal clique.

All these, however, generally, probed individual manifestations of Stalinism. A broader panorama of Soviet society after a half century of Communist rule emerges from a substantial number of novels that

appeared in the 60s and 70s. They are particularly noteworthy for their depiction of three social groups, the younger members of the privileged New Class, educated urban women, and the peasantry. The first are depicted with clear authorial disapproval in several works of Yuri Trifonov, particularly in *The Exchange*, *The Long Goodbye*, *The House on the Embankment* and *The Old Man*. The sons and daughters (and grandsons and granddaughters) of Civil War heroes and hard-working builders of Soviet industry are nothing but ordinary greedy philistines or worse. Natalya Baranskaya *A Week Like Any Other* and I. Grekova's *Ladies' Hairdresser* and *The Hotel Manager* portray the unenviable lot of Soviet women driven to desperation by the demands of their jobs and families that are aggravated by perpetual shortages, waiting in lines and overcrowded apartments. Baranskaya and, especially, Grekova describe their heroines with profound concern that is occasionally tempered with gentle satire. By contrast, understatement is rare in works of authors identified with the so-called Village Prose school, and with good reason: conditions they depict call really for indignation and pity, a posture, it might be added, more traditional in Russian writing. Victor Terras defines Village Prose as

. . . a genre of post-war literature which deals in a sympathetic way with rural life and with people who are not in the mainstream of organized, Party-controlled, production-oriented life. The two mainsprings of this genre are, on the one hand, compassion with the social misfit or underdog and his alienated view of modern society, and on the other, a feeling that the very backwardness of a peasant unaffected by Party ideology and modern ways may have allowed him to retain certain values (Christian, or even pre-Christian, universally human) to which modern man is insensitive. [9]

Wolfgang Kasack, too, emphasizes that such works of Village Prose as Solzhenitsyn's *Matryona's House* did much to focus attention "on the human and especially the Christian religious values preserved in the central Russian village despite the conditions of poverty." He singles out for praise the novels of Valentin Rasputin which "convincingly defend the religious and universal human norms of tradition" as well as the writings of Vladimir Soloukhin which champion not only Russian villages but also the nation's cultural treasures such as "churches, monasteries, icons and noblemen's residences." [10] It should be noted, however, that side by side with their championship of the downtrodden Russian peasants, of Russian nationalism and of Christian values, some writers of Village Prose display also a darker side of that ideology. Not a few, such as Soloukhin and Victor Astafyev, are prone to jingoistic nationalism and xenophobia:

the later gained notoriety for his "Fishing for Gudgeon in Georgia " with its blatantly racist overtones, and for his virulently anti-Semitic letters to Natan Eidelman, the late literary historian. And it was Vasili Belov, a leading author of Village Prose, who published in 1986 *Everything Lies Ahead*, an unabashedly anti-Semitic novel.

Can one speak of a Soviet literary culture in post-Soviet Russia ? Yes, though with some obvious reservations, reflecting the demise of Socialist Realism. Gone are production novels, and Positive Heroes are no more. Instead, one finds such new subjects as religion, or more precisely the life of the clergy and the faithful, much in the manner of Nikolai Leskov. Sergei Kaledin's *Humble Cemetery* broke that taboo some years ago, and much of his later work deals with similar subject matters. Another innovation is reading matter (the Russian term, *chtivo*, is openly contemptuous) that hardly aspires to the lofty status of literature. The book market has been flooded of late with translations of Western thrillers, romances and soft porn. Some of these are venerable classics, such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*. Inevitably, there are Russian imitations, e.g., the "sequels" of the Mitchell novel, innumerable detective stories, and somewhat clumsy erotic novels of which Victor Erofeev's *Russian Beauty* is a good example (an updated nineteenth-century bawdy novel in verse Luka Mudishchev is another). It goes without saying that recent Russian writing in general is infinitely more relaxed in its treatment of human sexuality than it ever was in Soviet times. [11]

An important group of younger authors, freed from the constraints of Socialist Realism, is experimenting with non-realistic fiction. As Deming Brown observes:

In recent works of [Anatoli] Kim, [Ruslan] Kireev, [Vladimir] Orlov, and [Anatoli] Kurchatkin, the real and the unreal are made to co-exist in a mixture of the ordinary, the fantastic and the supernatural. Kim's mysticism and his increased interest in metaphysical matters, in fact, make him seem more a romantic than a realist; Orlov joins him in combining the romantic with the everyday. Orlov's use of phantasmagoria and Kurchatkin's depiction of dark powers at work in the otherwise ordinary world represent other kinds of departure from realism. Similarly, the use of parable by several of these authors seems at variance with realism. While Kurchatkin's anti-utopia [*Notes of an Extremist*] is realistic in its narrative manner, the story manifestly exceeds the bounds of the possible. [12]

All of the non-realistic works enumerated above were printed in established literary journals that have been hospitable of late to unconventional writing seeing in it one way to bolster their sagging circulations (*Novy mir* now has a press run of 29,000 and *Moskva*, 20,000; just a few years ago, during the perestroika, many journals printed millions of copies). Nevertheless a milestone in the recognition of the legitimacy of avant-garde writing was the launching in 1990, only months before the dissolution of the Soviet Union , of the "thick" journal *Vestnik novoi literatury*. With a press run of two thousand (a respectable enough figures nowadays in Russia), the St. Petersburg journal's editorial board includes some of the leading avant-garde authors: Viktor Erofeev, Viktor Krivulin, Evgeni Popov, Dmitri Prigov, Aleksandr Sidorov and Elena Shvarts. The seventh issue (1994) features verse by some of the leading modernist poets, including Lev Rubinshtein, Oleg Okhapkin, Sergei Ryzhenkov and the late Mikhail Dikovnin, as well as prose by Boris Kudriakov, Svetlana Vasilieva and Naum Brod. There is also a translation of a complex Hebrew novella by the late Shmuel Agnon.

The avant-garde authors, though no longer hounded by the Establishment are obviously destined to remain on the fringes of literary life. The mainstream remains resolutely committed to Soviet-style realism, and to concerns that characterized in undoctrinaire and undogmatic practitioners, such as Yuri Trifonov. Vladimir Tendryakov was, strictly speaking, Trifonov's contemporary, and he died a year before the advent of glasnost' and perestroika. Many of Tendryakov's works, however, were published posthumously and thus constitute a bridge to the older Soviet literary culture. Novels in this category include *An Assassination Attempt on Mirages* (written in 1977-1980, published in 1987) which speculates on historical events as they might have developed in the absence of Jesus Christ - or, in an analogy that suggests itself, of Lenin and Stalin. The novella *The Clear Waters of Kitezh* (written in 1977-1980, published in 1986) also belongs in that group. It relates the story of a lethargic provincial town that suddenly awakens to an impending geological disaster, but immediately reverts to its passive state when a forged "letter to the editor" suggests that higher authorities are not amused by the spontaneous outburst of initiative. The memoir *The Hunt* (written in 1971, published in 1988) similarly belongs among such "bridges." It recalls the year 1948, the height of the anti-Semitic, "anti-cosmopolitan" purges, the criminal behavior of the novelist and literary bureaucrat Fadeyev (who was to commit suicide after Khrushchev's "secret" speech of 1956), as well as the shameful silence of others, including Tendryakov himself, then only a student.

Andrei Bitov's *Pushkin House* was also a "bridge": published abroad in 1978, it was first printed in Russian in 1987. Filled with literary and historical allusions, it is a novel written to delight the educated elite. But then, most of Bitov's strongly introspective work, like that of Trifonov, describes intellectuals and conflicts and aspirations that are characteristic of that milieu.

One other author should be mentioned among the literary "bridges." He is Fazil Iskander, whose mock-epic *Sandro of Chegem*, an account of misadventures of a picaresque ne'er-do-well, had been published in the seventies and eighties - always in censored form - but was allowed to appear uncensored form only in 1988. Irreverent and playful, it offered the Russian reader an enticing picture of an exotic Caucasus inhabited by wise fools and incurable skeptics, *Sandro of Chegem* is, indeed, a 'bridge' that defies completion, Iskander continues to spin off from a variety of yarns.

A vastly popular subject of the first post-Soviet years (though its appeal seems to be moderating somewhat as of 1995) is Russian history. The country's past is regarded as a way of explaining Russia's idiosyncratic national destiny (particularly the riddle of the establishment in 1917 of the Bolshevik State, the years of Stalin's bloody dictatorship, and - if only by implication - of the roots of its eventual downfall) and also of what is perceived as the Russian national character. Events leading to the collapse of the Romanov Empire and the eventual proclamation of Communist rule are described in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's monumental novel *The Red Wheel*, whose sheer bulk, as I had opportunity to observe in late summer of 1994 in Moscow and in Siberia, scares off many potential readers. Anatoli Rybakov's *Children of the Arbat*, a "bridge" novel launched when the USSR was still in place, was concluded in 1994 with *Dust and Ashes*. The timespan of the novel is vast, from the early postrevolutionary years to World War II. Approximately the same period provides the setting for Vasili Aksyonov's *Generations of Winter*. Both Aksyonov and Rybakov offer intelligent analyses of Stalin's terror and convincing portraits of many historical personages including, of course, the dictator himself. Georgi Vladimov (like Aksyonov, an émigré, although in recent years the designation has been losing much of its meaning) published in the Moscow journal *Znamia* in May and June 1994 an impressive novel about the war itself, *The General and His Army*.

But then, there were historical novels a wide spectrum of periods and issues, ranging from Yuri Buyda's *Athalie*, which describes a dissolute Russian princess from the times of Catherine the Great (*Volga*, No. 11, 1993) and the historically even more remote *Clarch and Heraclea*, Yulia

Latynina's novel set in ancient Greece (*Druzhba narodov*, No. 1, 1994), to Yri Maslov's novella *Colonel Vysheslavtsev's Choice*. which portrays the chaos of the Civil War, and Vasili Belov's novel in progress *The Year of the Great Turnaround*. Belov, a leading exponent of Village Prose in the sixties and seventies, published his novel about the destruction of the traditional peasant way of life by Stalin's forced collectivization in *Nash sovremennik*, the leading journal of right-wing nationalistically-minded authors. Understandably, the problem of Russia 's unique historical mission and the riddle of the Russian soul agitates these authors more than it does their more liberal and cosmopolitan colleagues. Indeed, the subject is discussed in nearly every issue of *Nash sovremennik*. That is not to say that the non-nationalists shun the subject altogether. Moderates (Vyacheslav Pyetsukh, for example) deal with it too, as well as liberals and even émigrés, such as Fridrikh Gorenshteyn and Feliks Svetov. However, as already mentioned, interest in historical topics is on the decline. Years ago, the marxist Russian historian Mikhail Pokrovsky observed that history is politics projected into the past. A growing number of authors appear to eschew this indirect path in favor of head-on ideological fiction not unlike that of the Soviet era. Thus, Ivan Shevtsov, the reactionary Stalinist author of *The Ends of the Earth* (1961) in which villains read the then liberal *Novy mir* and translated Western fiction, bear suspiciously non-Russian names and have hooked noses, surfaced in the neo-Bolshevik journal *Molodaya gvardiya* (No. 11-12, 1993 and 1-2, 1994) with a novel entitled *The Blue Diamond*. Shevtosov's new opus reveals the true forces behind the Bolsheviks in 1917 (which are the same that oppress Russia at present) and features also a general who believes in the resurrection of a Soviet Russia. More disquieting is the appearance in the staunchly nationalistic and religious *Moskva* (No. 7, 1994) - the journal's tendency is faithfully reflected in its cover, which depicts St. George slaying a dragon - of three tales by Valentin Rasputin. A leading writer of prose in the 1960's and 1970's and foremost representative of Village Prose, Rasputin gradually shifted his political allegiances from moderate opposition to the Soviet regime to open entity to the post-Soviet Russia . For some years he wrote little fiction, devoting himself instead to environmentalist causes and journalism. The three tales in *Moskva* may signal his return to literary pursuits, albeit, in contrast to his earlier work that brought him international renown, highly politicized. The first story, *Senya Is On His Way*, relates the story of an elderly farmer who ire is aroused by the smut that inundates post-Soviet television. He writes to the Moscow television authorities who reply politely that they can understand the concerns of an aging man whose values differ from modern ones, "implying that elderly people are fools." The farmer is agitated when television shows unarmed people marching to occupy Ostankino television during the abortive putsch

of 1993. They were mowed down by professional soldiers, and after that the "radio in the kitchen kept shouting about the enemies of the people, Fascists and stormtroopers, while Senya had visions of twelve-year-old mothers plucked out from school for the purpose. . . ." -- the implication being that they were lured into prostitution, pornographic films and smutty television shows. Rasputin ends his story thusly - "Senya Is On His Way. He'll get there." In a similar vein "Young Russia" portrays young men and women corrupted by the new culture of easy money, casual sex and contempt for work, while "In a Siberian City" demonstrates that the new "democratically elected" authorities are arbitrary and cruel. The following exchange is worth noting. An upright opponent of the new democrats" calls a representative of the new authorities "an American bastard," to which the "American" replies, "and you are a Russian bastard." The Russian answers, "I am Russian, but not a bastard," and, significantly, the "American" democrat offers this rejoinder, "You mean there are Russians who are not bastards?" Rasputin's message to his readers is simple. The democrats, that is Yelstin and company, are simply American agents who hold the Russian nation in contempt.

During the closing decades of the Soviet regime right-wing literary journals frequently charged liberal Russian authors and slandering their country. The accusation was unfounded. What the liberals were intent on doing was a continuation of the venerable literary tradition of exposing social pathology and injustice. That tradition survives in post-Soviet Russia as well. Significantly, a large part of victims of social injustice portrayed in post-Soviet Russian writing are women. Their plight is described with much compassion by Tatiana Tolstaya, Victoria Tokareva and especially, by Ludmila Petrushevskaya. Petrushevskaya's frightening portrait of a middle-aged woman trying to care simultaneously for a daughter and her illegitimate child and for a senile mother is certainly memorable. [13] It is also, one may add, more timely than the oftentimes shrill writings of her nationalistic colleagues and more in keeping with the legacy of the great classics. As Pushkin expressed it in his "Monument," his claim to the affection of the Russian nation is rooted in his celebration of freedom in a cruel age, as well as in his appeals for compassion toward the fallen.

References

1. For an excellent treatment of the subject see Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr., *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature*, 2nd ed., (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975). Many thoughtful observations may also be found in Regine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, (Stanford:

Stanford University Press, 1992).

2. For a discussion of this episode in the history of Soviet theater, see this writer's "Russia's Conflictless Drama," *Nucleus, A Little Magazine* Vol. I, no. 3 (Winter 1954) pp. 100-02.

3. William E. Harkins, *Dictionary of Russian Literature* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 113.

4. Curiously, however, the issue continues to be debated in post-Soviet Russia. Thus, in 1992 Ludmila Saraskina argued, much as the late Arkadii Belinkov did in his 1976 book on Olesha, that Ilf and Petrov were sincerely helping the Communist Party to discredit the old Russian intelligentsia and its non-Soviet values. Benedikt Sarnov disagreed, claiming that in reality *The Twelve Chairs* and *Little Golden Calf* ridicule Soviet values. See *Oktiabr'*, No. 3 and 6, 1992.

5. Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Friction* (Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 19-20. There is of course, much irony in the fact that the philistine qualities of old Russia's *meshchanstvo* were routinely denounced before the Revolution by the liberal intelligentsia and, with special vehemence, by the Marxists and their allies.

6. Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read. Literary and Popular Literature, 1861-1917* (Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 298.

7. Maurice Friedberg, *Russian Classics in Soviet Jackets* (Columbia University Press, 1962) and *A Decade of Euphoria: Western Literature in Post-Stalin Russia* (Indiana University Press, 1977).

8. Maurice Friedberg, *Russian Classics in Soviet Jackets*, pp. 170-72.

9. Victor Terras (ed.), *Handbook of Russian Literature* (Yale University Press, 1985), p. 91.

10. Wolfgang Kasack, *Dictionary of Russian Literature Since 1917* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 447.

11. A good recent example is Marina Palei's novella *The Birthplace of Wind* (*Novy mir*, No. 12, 1994) which describes one patient's conversations with a psychiatrist.

12. Deming Brown, *The last Years of Soviet Russian Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 123.

13. Ludmila Petrushevskaya, "Vremia noch" (The Time Is Night), *Novy mir*, No. 2, 1992. Petrushevskaya continues here, as it were, her earlier work that exposes the physical and moral squalor of the intelligentsia milieu, such as *Nash krug* (Our Circle of Friends).
