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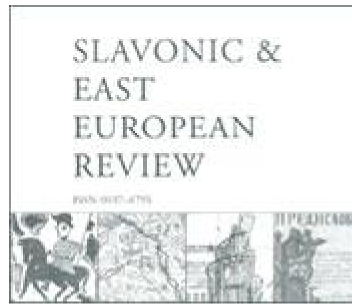

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HISTORICAL SENSE IN SOVIET FICTION

THE growth of popular interest in history since the world war has not increased the sales of Gibbon and Klyuchevsky. As Heine observed, the people want their history " handed to them by the poet, not by the historian." Our history-minded public has flocked to the pages of Strachey and Maurois, to Thomas Mann's *Joseph* and to Feuchtwanger's *Josephus*, not to mention the millions who have swarmed to the celluloid versions of history and biography, be it of Robin Hood or François Villon, of Henry VIII or Marie Antoinette, of Pasteur or Zola, of Juarez or the setting of *Gone with the Wind*. The demand for historical novels and films has been supplied rather adequately, speaking of quantity.

One would naturally expect a heightened interest in history in the Soviet Union, where life and thought are dominated by Historical Materialism. This interest was manifested, indeed, both in the drama and the novel at the very outset of the new order. To be sure, over-zealous critics and censors frowned upon any flight from the present as an evasion, as a sign of indifference or even hostility toward the existing régime. There is no doubt that many a writer turns to the past because of his disgust with contemporary conditions. Flaubert admitted that much, in motivating his escape from the actuality of *Bovary* to the remoteness of *Salammbô*.[1] Draconian censorship, whether under autocracy or under dictatorship, is also apt to chase an author into a chronologically safer zone. The rule of Nicholas I made it impossible for Pushkin to deal with more recent issues than those of the time of Boris Godunov or of Peter the Great or, as a special concession, of Catherine II. One century later, the all-powerful RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) frowned upon all literary efforts that could not be regarded as immediately helpful to the Five Years Plan. With the disbandment of RAPP, in 1932, and the acceptance of Socialist Realism as *the* Soviet school of art and literature, the historical novel and drama quickly gained recognition and popularity. Moreover, the early resentment to individual heroes in fiction has gone the way of other extreme phobias : the most successful novels and stage and screen productions within the last years have been fictionised biographies, with the central figure of a Bolotnikov, Razin, Peter, Pugachev, Pushkin, Griboyedov, Lenin, Chapayev, looming against the setting of a given period. The latest Soviet cry is Eisenstein's film portraying Alexander Nevsky, a sainted prince of the 13th century.

[1] . . . . . . " j'éprouve le besoin de sortir du monde moderne, où ma plume s'est trop trempée et qui d'ailleurs me fatigue autant à reproduire qu'il me dégoute à voir." *Correspondence*. Letter 523.

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Whatever the reasons for the increased world interest in past history, in Soviet Russia this phenomenon clearly points to a growing sense of historical continuity, as a result of the revolutionary experience and the spread of the Marxian outlook. The difference between Soviet and non-Soviet historical fiction in present day Europe is exemplified by such representatives of the two groups as Lion Feuchtwanger and Alexis Tolstoy.

In his somewhat apologetic address on "The Meaning and Meaninglessness of Historical Novels," Feuchtwanger admits that his only aim as a writer is the expression of his personal *Weltanschauung*. When he chooses a remote period it is due not to his interest in the past and desire to reconstruct it, but to his need of a perspective for the reflection of his own "contemporary and subjective views." The historical setting is for him only a means of stylisation, of making his theme stand out, sublimated above the personal and specific, and as "the easiest way for creating the illusion of reality." Thus, his favourite theme—the conflict between nationalism and internationalism—he lifts out of the tear-stained present and objectivises it in the time of Josephus Flavius.

There is a different reason for Alexis Tolstoy's ventures into the past. Ever since the revolution his mind has been tossing from the present into an utopian future (his novel *Aelita*), and back to the 17th century. His trilogy of modern life, begun with *A Pilgrimage of Sorrows*, is arrested on the second volume, 1918, while he works on his ambitious *Peter I*, but he is hardly through with the first half of *Peter*, when his attention is diverted to an episode in the recent civil war, and he produces his latest novel, *Bread*. We may consider this restlessness in the light of Tolstoy's personal tribulations and efforts at self-adjustment, at reconciling his past as a Count and White emigrant with his present loyalty to the Soviet order and position of deputy in the Supreme Council. His gropings are suggested in the following statement:

"One may comprehend contemporary life by means of reason, logic, feeling, but the artist grasps it through fictional images. My road from the *Trilogy* to *Peter I* is the road of becoming permeated, artistically, with our epoch. I regard the epoch in its *movement*, and not as a stationary fragment of time. One of my critics has justly, I believe, observed that *Peter I* is 'an approach to our present from the distant rear.'"

Feuchtwanger is preoccupied with his subjective views, and in his eagerness to express them he merely transplants them into another period. He assures us that *all* novels are thus motivated,

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including Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. The truth is that both the great and the lesser Tolstoy are more fastidious in their treatment of past events than Feuchtwanger, to whom these are " only a symbol and as far as possible a correct reflection of [the author's] own time and of his own, modern and subjective views." The Tolstoys apply their " subjective views " not to the modernisation of past history, but to an understanding and interpretation of its course and its laws. Right or wrong, Leo Tolstoy presented in *War and Peace* his philosophy of history, which he strove to illustrate by the unfolding of events and characters. If this theory of his fails to merge with the narrative, and hangs loose like a not indispensable appendix, it may be due in part to its amateurish quality. In this respect Alexis Tolstoy has fared better. Whatever his inborn tendencies and traditions, he could hardly escape the contagious effect of historical materialism, with which the air of Russia has been charged since November, 1917. An effort to think and act scientifically has marked every phase of Soviet life, from agriculture and industry to education and art. Alexis Tolstoy delves into the past in order to understand the present. By studying and revealing the processes of history he points to its continuity and throws into relief the links in the chain of social evolution. Regarding each epoch " in its movement," Tolstoy visualises the interlacing of yesterday and today. His Tsar Peter, a crowned revolutionary breaking traditions and conventions, facing without fear the gigantic task of rousing a backward and apathetic nation, inevitably brings to one's mind his remote heir, Lenin. More: the social forces encountered by Peter, the privileged and inefficient gentry, the nascent class of merchants and industrialists, the lazy, spiritless, ignorant clergy, and the corrupt bureaucracy, these very elements are drawn by Tolstoy so as to make one recall their counterparts at the outbreak of the Bolshevik revolution. In his quest of meaning and purpose in history Tolstoy feels impelled to leap from the present to the past, and back again.

The evolution of Alexis Tolstoy is typical of the evolution of other Soviet writers who had started as opponents of the new order, or at best as " fellow-travellers " (the label applied by Trotsky to partly sympathetic authors). Like Tynyanov, Olga Forsh, Grossman, and a few other historical novelists, Tolstoy at first turned to the past because of his misgivings about the present. In a story published several years ago under the title *Peter's Day*, he laid emphasis on the Tsar's cruelty, his waste of human life, his violent methods and measures, and their puny results. Peter is patheti-

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cally alone, surrounded by unscrupulous, greedy officials and by a hostile populace. One feels the author's melancholy mood, transferred from the present to the past. Later, in the completed portion of the novel, *Peter I*, one is aware of the change in outlook and perspective that has meanwhile taken place in Alexis Tolstoy. For now Peter's violence and dictatorial tactics are implicitly justified by the backwardness of the people, their placidity and stubbornness fostered by an obscurantist clergy. Nor is Peter quite alone in his endeavours. Indifferent to caste and class, the revolutionary monarch picks his men for their ability and open-mindedness, and gradually builds up a more or less dependable personnel. By encouraging trade and industry Peter brings to the fore the merchant class and the more enterprising peasants, and pits these against the arrogant, sluggish gentry. Unlike the dispirited story, the novel implies an historical optimism, a confidence in the laws that rule the processes of social development.

Another typical case may be cited, that of Yury Tynyanov, not long ago a leading figure among the Formalists, the non-social, non-political writers, whose chief concern is form and the formal features of literature and literary history. In his *Historical Tales*, in his *Kyukhlya*, *Wax Doll*, and *Death of Vazir Mukhtar*, Tynyanov presented history not in its process, or " movement," as Alexis Tolstoy words it, but as an after-effect. He would take an important event, such as the death of Peter the Great (*Wax Doll*), or the Decembrist uprising of 1825 (in the other two novels), and make it glimmer in the background of his narrative, as a prelude, as a cause. The story itself showed with analytical keenness the disintegration that followed the event in the background, followed it inexorably, almost fatalistically. His work had the air of hopelessness and futility. Quite different is his latest novel, *Pushkin*, of which the first volume appeared in time for the centenary of the poet's death, January, 1937. Here we have growth becoming the transition from childhood to boyhood and into youth. A fictionised biography, *Pushkin* is at the same time an historical novel, in that the main character is portrayed as part of, and along with, the social order of a given period, rather than as its dominant note. Not less subtle and psychologically intricate than Tynyanov's former novels, *Pushkin* is free from the futilitarian gloom that pervaded those.

Soviet literature, after a brief phase of iconoclasm, has followed and furthered the traditions of 19th-century Russian literature. This holds true, of course, also of the historical novel. Pushkin, in *The Moor of Peter the Great*, and in *The Captain's Daughter*,

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introduced some of the best elements of Walter Scott, such as the pre-eminence given to secondary characters in the more dramatic situations, and conveying the sense of time and place in the presentation of local colour and social conditions. Gogol's *Taras Bulba* is another offshoot of the *Waverly* vogue. Minor novelists continued to write in that vein for generations. In *War and Peace* Leo Tolstoy raised the historical novel to a peak which still remains unsurpassed. His is the work of an artist, psychologist, historian, philosopher combined. Aside from the fact that he makes his historical and fictional characters move as living entities, Tolstoy is one of the first, if not *the* first, novelist to scruple about documentary evidence, which he manages to blend imperceptibly with the flow of the story (the chapters on the philosophy of history are designed to stand apart). *War and Peace* has served as a model for numerous novelists, from Merezhkovsky and Aldanov to some of the best Soviet authors, notably Fadeyev and Sholokhov.

This Tolstoyan tradition has been followed, furthered, and deepened in the Soviet historical novel, in conformity with the tenets of Socialist Realism. One of these implicit tenets is historical continuity, the sequential link between the past and the present and even, potentially, the future. While the writer is no longer required, as under the RAPP, to be thoroughly versed in Marxian dialectics, he is expected to adhere to the basic principle of Scientific Socialism—evolutionism. Hence the careful treatment of history in fiction: the Soviet novelist will not tamper with the past any more than he would with the present, or he might bring upon himself the murderous censure of Marxian readers and critics. Never before has the historical novel employed documentation so generously, yet with such prudence, cleverly merging memoirs, diaries, official decrees, with the imaginary element of the story. One recalls how in Merezhkovsky, notably in his *Leonardo da Vinci* and *Peter and Alexis*, the documentary material is often isolated and detached from the body of the narrative. In Tynyanov, Forsh, Alexis Tolstoy, and other Soviet novelists, one finds a happy synthesis of fact and fiction. The feeling of the period and of its salient features is not obscured by the imaginary characters and scenes, nor does the author's conscientious presentation of history dam the natural course of the story.

The propriety of an individual hero in socialist fiction has been discussed at great length by Soviet critics. Having at last decided this question affirmatively, the critics had to face, next, the task of making the present-day individual speak for the collective mass, the

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task of showing the compatibility of the two. It has been no easy problem to shake off the powerful heritage of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, who assigned a paramount place to the personal emotions and thoughts of their highly reflective and introspective characters. Soviet mentality militates against such self-centred individualism, though it accepts the idea of a fully developed individuality functioning within the framework, and for the benefit, of the community. The new generation, free from the necessity of breaking age-old traditions, has made startling advances toward this synthetic goal, but in literature the subject has not yet found adequate treatment. Such objective observers of life and letters as the late Maxim Gorky, for example, have lamented the lagging of fiction behind reality, and its failure to produce a character commensurate with the stature of the new man. This difficulty may have furnished another reason for the ever more frequent turn of writers to historical fiction. Constructive socialism has robbed them of one of the oldest themes in literature : man's conflict with his social environment. Once in the non-socialistic past, they find it simpler to portray the individual, and to dramatise his conflicts with the collective. The more remote the period, the easier it is to bring out its peculiar conditions and characters, with the aid of historical material. A. Chapygin renders the main character in *Stepan Razin* more memorable by means of an abundance of 17th-century details of everyday life, dress, speech, class relationships. Chapygin employs Walter Scott's method of vivifying the story with local colour, but at the same time Chapygin is more meticulously exact in his historical, geographic, and ethnographic features. Through the hero, Razin, he makes us visualise the plight of the serfs and the pathos of their first mass uprising. A similar style of individualising the characters and the periods through historically correct local colour, we find in G. Storm, in his portrayal both of Ivan Bolotnikov, in the 17th century, and of Michael Lomonosov, in the 18th. Artem Vesely, in his *Gulyay Volga*, draws the conqueror of Siberia, Yermak, in a like manner, not sparing in colourful details and linguistic peculiarities when portraying the Cossacks in the time of Ivan the Terrible. Others perhaps go too far in their effort to peculiarise the past. Olga Forsh, for instance, exaggerates the speech and manners of Gogol (in *Contemporaries*), and of even more recent personages (in *Cladin Stone*). On the other hand, a number of novelists have chosen for their subject foreign scenes in the remote or recent past, profiting from the double perspective of time *and* space. I may mention one such novel, *Barricades*, by P. Pavlenko (at present co-operating with Upton Sinclair in writing a novel laid in the

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United States and the Soviet Union). Following the method outlined above, equipped with an historical sense, and intimately informed about the period, Pavlenko reconstructs Paris of the time of the Commune with a vividness and fidelity that neatly blend fact and invention. Paris of 1871 is made to live and move, its surging masses studded with such individuals as the temperamental Courbet, the conceited Dumas, the budding Anatole France, and nameless representatives of the "divine average." "There is no individual hero: history is the hero, as it reaches out back to causes and forward to effects."

What makes a novel historical? Turgenev's Rudins, Bazarovs, Litvinovs, Nezhdanovs represent historical phases in 19th-centur Russia, yet the novels in which these characters appear are regarded as historical. In a sense, every social novel has an historica significance. In the strictly historical novel, however, the period is of paramount importance, while the characters and episodes bear a subordinate value. It suggests a definite philosophy of history, linking the past with the present, and introducing order into the chaos of recorded facts. Such a novel is *War and Peace*, and by the same token *Anna Karenina* is not one.

Applying this criterion to Soviet fiction, we often find the line of demarcation hardly perceptible. Consciously or subconsciously, the portrayers of the recent civil wars and of present-day changes in Soviet society are endowed with the pre-requisites of an historical novelist. Furmanov's *Chapayev*, Fadeyev's *Rout* (in English: *Nineteen*), Sholokhov's *Quiet Don* and *Virgin Soil Upturned* (in English: *Seeds of Tomorrow*), Virta's *Solitude*, and a dozen or so other novels of the last two decades are decidedly permeated with an historical sense. The adventures they describe, the clashes and struggles, the mass movements and the individual fortunes appear not episodic, nor as isolated fragments of time and space, but as parts of the unifying process of transformation that has gripped the nation. You have in these novels exemplars of Socialist Realism, which differs from non-Socialist Realism mainly in that it is not preoccupied with a negative criticism of the present, but is constructively analytical, by means of trying to understand the present through the past and the past through the present. From this understanding flows a dynamic optimism, and confidence in the future. For, to paraphrase the words of Marx concerning philosophers, the Russians today are engaged not only in interpreting history: they are making history.

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