

VYACHESLAV  
ZAVALISHIN

# EARLY SOVIET WRITERS

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## *Introduction*

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With a few happy exceptions, Soviet Russian literature of the last two decades repels the Western reader by its provincialism, lack of originality and spiritual impoverishment, and makes him wonder whether this is indeed all that is left of a great tradition, the tradition of Lev Tolstoi and Fyodor Dostoyevski. That Russian literature has lost its character and Russian writers their individuality since the revolution is self-evident.

The primary purpose of this book is to trace the course of the decline by following, at close range, the development of individual writers, with the emphasis on their written word rather than on biographical data.

Under the Bolshevik cultural policy—a planned and systematic attempt to stifle that which Aleksandr Blok called “the freedom of creation, the inner freedom”—some writers readily renounced their creative individuality, others under duress. The most talented often protested and rebelled. Boris Pasternak, for example, declared that the dictatorship of the proletariat need not be a dictatorship of the mediocre. Among the onetime rebels were Vladimir Mayakovski, Artyom Vesolyi and even Mikhail Sholokhov, who resigned himself but is still not wholly tamed. In the case of Andrei Platonov, on the other hand, the “inner freedom” was reduced to compassion; his work is one sustained plea for compassion. Aleksandr Grin, in a supreme revolt of the imagination against the Communist order of things, preserved his individuality by escaping, in his fantastic tales, to a romantic continent of his own creation. Others fell silent or were silenced. Still others joined the dictators



poets Nikolai Ushakov (1899- ) and Boris Likharev (1909- ), to whom Soviet critics have never been well disposed. Ushakov has been upbraided for pessimism, for pantheism, for lack of revolutionary fervor; and Likharev for being a follower of Gumilyov. His long poem "Central Asia," of which only fragments have been published,<sup>26</sup> was undoubtedly influenced by Gumilyov; perhaps for that reason it is the best poem produced by any of the Komsomol poets.

### 19. Pereval

The original members of the *Pereval* group, organized in 1924, were young men, newcomers to literature. Many of them had taken part in the Civil War. They had something to say, but lacked training and craftsmanship. Recognizing the need for knowledge and polish and opposed to the rigid dogmas, self-interest and squabbling of other cliques of writers, they banded together for the purpose of learning how to write well, with sincerity, observing literary amenities the while. It was by no means merely a group of "fellow travelers" or Party opponents which announced such aims. On the roster of *Pereval* from its early days were a good number of Communist writers who had formerly belonged to October or its affiliates—for instance, Svetlov, Golodnyi, Artyom Vesolyi, Nikolai Kutznetsov and Aleksandr Yasnyi. Among other Party writers who belonged to *Pereval* at various stages were Pyotr Pavlenko, Anna Karavayeva, Andrei Novikov, and Ivan Katayev.

#### ALEKSANDR VORONSKI (1884-1935)

The Communist critic and editor Voronski was the organizer and guiding spirit of the group, which took its name *Pereval* (Mountain Pass) from the title of one of his articles.<sup>1</sup>

In the eyes of latter-day Soviet Marxists, Voronski was at best a heretic. He has been reviled as a Bergsonian, a Freudian, a Trotskyist. In point of fact, he was a follower of Tolstoi and Dosto-

evski, and, as a literary critic, of Georgi Plekhanov and Apollon Grigor'yev.

In his article "Art as Cognition of Life, and the Present,"<sup>2</sup> Voronski looks at science and art as two ways of studying life and points out that great writers often discover truths long before science does, through the power of intuition.

Voronski's theory of "the shedding of the veils" (*snyatiye pokrovov*), synthesized from Tolstoi and Grigor'yev, meant, in practice, rejection of political propaganda in literature and insistence on utter sincerity. This stand led to serious conflicts with the Party. Himself a Marxist, Voronski disdained a dogmatic interpretation of Marxism. His broad-minded tolerance distinguishes him among the critics of note in the postrevolutionary period.

His best essays are collected in the volume *Literary Notes*, 1926,<sup>3</sup> in which he deplored the poverty, shallowness and provincialism of Soviet writing. Thanks to Voronski, the best in postrevolutionary literature appeared in the periodical *Krasnaya nov'* [Red Virgin Soil], which he founded in 1921 and directed until 1927, when he was dismissed as editor and expelled from the Party.

As a creative writer, Voronski received recognition with his two volumes of memoirs, *Live Waters and Still Waters*.<sup>4</sup>

His fiction is little known, although the tale *The Eye of the Hurricane*, 1931, for instance, like Tarasov-Rodionov's *Chocolate*, anticipates such political novels as Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. A quotation from Elisée Reclus serves as its epigraph:

Amid the darkness, there appears in the sky a whitish space, which the sailors call "the eye of the hurricane," as though they really saw in the hurricane a merciless deity descending from the skies to seize and drown them.<sup>5</sup>

War is the hurricane, the October Revolution the eye of the hurricane. Against an apocalyptic background, Voronski describes the despair of Valentin, a disillusioned revolutionary. The story is, apparently, a fragment of an unfinished work.

In 1933 he published a volume of stories,<sup>6</sup> the most interesting of which are "The Exhibit" and "Fedya Gveril'yas," both dealing with men whom the revolution had used, broken, and discarded.

Three short stories printed in a periodical in 1934 are Voronski's last published writing.<sup>7</sup> They were written during his exile from Moscow as a Trotskyist, and conveyed his yearning to return to active work in the capital. He did return, in the early thirties, but was arrested in 1935, and died in the same year in prison.<sup>8</sup>

After the "incubation period" of *Pereval*, as one of its members has called its first years,<sup>9</sup> two other good critics joined the group and served as mentors to the young writers—Abram Lezhnyov (pseudonym of Z. A. Gorelik, 1893- ?) and Dmitri Gorbov (1894- ).

Even during the "incubation period" two major talents of Soviet literature had made their appearance in the early "almanacs" published under the name *Pereval*.

#### ARTYOM VESYOLYI

(pseudonym of Nikolai Kochkurov, 1899- ?)

Vesyolyi was one of the founders of the *Pereval* organization. Like Andrei Platonov, the second to emerge as a writer of distinction in the early *Pereval* publications, Vesyolyi remained a member for a relatively brief time.

He occupies a special place in peasant literature as a modern Robber Nightingale (*Solovei-razboinik*, a folklore character) glorifying the elemental Pugachov-Razin forces of the revolution. Peaceful toil and problems of farming lie outside his interests.

*Rivers of Fire*, 1923-1924, is his best-known novel. Its two heroes, nicknamed Van'ka Gramofon and Mishka Krokodil,

rolled off a cruiser in the memorable year 1917. . . . Had Van'ka and Mishka been dressed in clerical garb, everyone would still have known them for navy men, by their dashing manner and ponderous juicy oaths.<sup>10</sup>

Mishka boasts of having personally "stirred up the revolution." He and Van'ka are "big-time fellows. . . . In their breasts, like a dog on a chain in a backyard, raged a huge, fanged, sailor's God."<sup>11</sup> To them the revolution is a new kind of religion.

Five years have gone by. The Civil War is over. Mishka and Van'ka are back in the navy. Again the enlisted men are treated

no better than before, and the officers put on the same old airs. The "revolutionary guys" are disgusted. The Red God has gone up in smoke.

Mishka and Van'ka are wholeheartedly on the side of the peasants' rebellion. They are born rioters and anarchists, and there is a streak of banditry in their nature; yet they yearn for justice and freedom for all, not merely license for the Communists. Vesyolyi had a sure understanding of the "elemental" revolutionaries almost unmatched by other Soviet writers.

Other excellent short stories followed *Rivers of Fire* in quick succession, notably "Pride," "Quick Justice," "Sky-Glow of Courage," and *The Wild Heart*.<sup>12</sup>

The Red Army commander who is the hero of "Pride" has contempt for the political commissars who, in his view, are stupidly trying to get inside men's souls with a propaganda leaflet. He has his own methods. When a Chechen-Ingush regiment refuses to fight, Chernoyarov taunts them into a suicidal charge on the enemy: "So you want to take a rest. . . . You're not soldiers but a bunch of old women. I'll give orders this very day to have you sent to the rear, to an old people's home."<sup>13</sup> A straightforward word born of fury and despair served the revolution better than a thousand propaganda leaflets.

In the story "Quick Justice" a tsarist colonel, convinced that only fanatics and lunatics die for a lost cause, joins the Bolshevik camp. Made director of a Red munitions plant, he drinks and rapes factory girls. Because of the desperate need for trained personnel, he gets away with such behavior until two Red Army soldiers, the father and the brother of one of the girls, come to visit her. When she complains to her father, he administers "quick justice" by shooting the colonel. Father and son hurriedly return to their unit. Cheka investigators follow them, but all the soldiers testify under oath that the two men had not left the camp.<sup>14</sup>

The revolutionary mob, though cruel, had its own ethics and an instinctive sense of justice. "A certain contrast is drawn between the fair and brotherly spirit of the partisans and the dry, impersonal and merciless Soviet law-enforcers, stirring up the dust in their cars," the critic M. Charnyi pointed out.<sup>15</sup>



The novel *Native Land*, 1926, Vesolyi's largest canvas, portrays the peasant mass turning in rebellion against the Bolsheviks after their short-lived alliance. The village is for the revolution but against Communism. Mit'ka, a leader, starts a revolt: "A rising in Yelabuga. Risings all over Simbirsk province. In Saratov too. Water in the boat and water under the boat,"<sup>16</sup> he tells his peasants. He is not at all sure of success, for, although loath to admit it, he cannot help feeling that the peasants have had enough of wars and revolutions. Along the way, some villages meet the insurgents with icons, some with bread and salt, and still others with grim and sullen faces. The old peasants are of the opinion that the government may be bad, but it is their own. The revolt fails because the muzhik's craving for peace is stronger than his desire to reform the world.

From the far North, in clattering freight cars, crossing the bread transports on their way, Red regiments poured down. . . . On the dirty walls of railroad stations, the paper appeals quivered under the wind like expectorated blood. . . . The city overran the village, the grass-roots resistance collapsed, and the insurgents fled, throwing away their pitchforks, pikes and guns along the roads, galloping, crawling, scattering to all sides, wild and terrible to see, as after the Mamai rout . . . my native land . . . smoke and fire without end.<sup>17</sup>

In a few broad, easy strokes Vesolyi makes all his characters three-dimensional and alive. The reader cannot help feeling that Vesolyi draws an invidious comparison between the peasants and the Party. His Communists, workers as well as Party officials, are people with withered, or withering, souls, whereas the village, still with its weddings and church holidays, dances and fairs, is painted in rich, vivid colors.

The Socialist Revolutionary Boris Ivanovich, who organized the revolt, and the school superintendent Yelena Sudakova oppose Communism precisely because they are acutely aware of the sterility and flatness of the Communist idea.

"In these days, when bare subsistence is such a crucial problem for most people, our inner life has grown dreadfully shallow, and there is no time for soul-searching,"<sup>18</sup>

Yelena writes in her diary.

Vesolyi's character Mit'ka might have rivaled Sholokhov's Grigori in *The Silent Don*, if the author, having been accused of "incorrigible anarchism"—he had once been an anarchist—had not deliberately subdued his colors in painting anti-Bolsheviks.

In 1932 Vesolyi published the novel *Russia Washed in Blood*, made up of the stories "Pride," "Quick Justice" and "Sky-Glow of Courage," now worked into one plot with a revised version of *Native Land*, again hastily and not very thoroughly cleansed of "anarchist leanings."<sup>19</sup>

In the thirties, Vesolyi, like Chapygin, sought refuge in history and wrote *Volga Rampage*,<sup>20</sup> a novel about Yermak.

Vesolyi's style is rough and careless, but vivid and bold, with an impetuosity that gives a rhythm of wind to his prose.

Despite his concessions to the demands of Bolshevik propaganda, his early work, especially *River of Fire*, continued to be held against him, and during the Yezhov purges he was dispatched to a concentration camp. The date of his death is not known.

#### ANDREI PLATONOV (1896-1951)

Andrei Platonov was one of the most remarkable of Soviet writers, again less because of literary skill than because of moral qualities. Although his stylistically most mature work came long after he had left the *Pereval* organization (he was a member for only a short time and then struck out as a lone wolf), he spoke from the beginning in his own distinctive voice. The germs of his later work, with its intense strain of compassion for luckless, fear-ridden men were already discernible in his first stories and soon invited the disfavor and vilification which he was to suffer throughout his life.

In his prose of the mid-1920's (he began as a poet) Platonov followed in the footsteps of Leskov, although he was also under the influence of Gogol and Remizov. Over and over again the same characters recur in Platonov's stories—the grandsons of Leskov's Levsha, that uncrowned king of self-taught men, the craftsman who shod a mechanical flea. His descendants have come down in life

## KEY MEMBERS OF PEREVAL AND STANDPATTERS)

Among those who made a little stir in the early almanacs published by *Pereval* were Vladimir Vetrov and Boris Guber. Vetrov's short novel "Breath of Cedar," 1924, is comparable with Artyom Vesolyi's tales in its bold conception, but indifferently written.<sup>43</sup>

Boris Guber (1903- ? ) attracted attention with his story "Sharashkin's Office," a disquieting picture of village life after the Civil War when, in the guise of Party commissars and "organizers," a new and more rapacious breed of vultures replaced the hereditary merchants and kulaks.<sup>44</sup> The savage struggle for power and money serves as background for the main theme, the loneliness of a woman hungry for love who finds only lust and hardness.

Guber's best story, "Chips," 1928, deals with a Civil War hero who is expelled from the Party when the "restoration" period begins and idealists become a hindrance.<sup>45</sup> His humorous story "The Notorious Shurka Shapkina," about a provincial *femme fatale*, was very popular for a time.<sup>46</sup>

Along with the hordes of speculators, the NEP produced also a good type of kulak, peasants who had adopted new farming methods and owed their prosperity to honest work and personal enterprise. The right kind of cooperative effort, from the ground up rather than imposed from above, had begun to take shape under the leadership of such men. Guber's story "Office Manager," 1928, develops this theme and foreshadows the indiscriminate liquidation of kulaks, the good with the bad.<sup>47</sup>

In the thirties the *Pereval* writers were forced to compromise. Several of them turned to reportage. In 1931 Guber published a book of competent sketches about a sovkhos.<sup>48</sup> His short novel "Indian Summer" of 1934 is a wistful, subdued picture of resigned kolkhoz peasants who have learned that rebellion is useless.<sup>49</sup>

Ivan Katayev's first well-known work "The Heart," 1928, is the story of a humane Communist who believed in the millennium to be brought about by cooperative effort, and saw his dreams betrayed.<sup>50</sup> He published two other tales in the same year, "The Wife" and "The Poet."<sup>51</sup> Katayev had enough individuality as an artist to

absorb the conflicting influences of Dostoyevski and Boris Zaitsev and produce a style of his own.

The publication of "Milk," 1930,<sup>52</sup> was an act of great courage on the part of Katayev. Himself a Party member, in the story he exposed the strong-arm methods employed by the Party in collectivizing agriculture and "liquidating the kulaks." One of the two central characters is an upstanding, prosperous Russian Baptist, Nilov, who runs a model milk farm on a cooperative basis with his sons and sons-in-law. He has lost two other sons who fought for the Reds in the Civil War, and is friendly to the Soviet regime. His fellow villagers look up to him, and the "instructor" sent down by the People's Commissariat of Agriculture is more or less forced to enlist his help in "organizing" the peasants. He also approves of Nilov personally, and they make a promising start. To the higher authorities, however, Nilov is just another kulak. The instructor receives orders to finish him off, and obeys, though he feels very sorry for him. Katayev's open sympathy for the victims of the campaign was not expressed with impunity, although punishment was deferred for several years.

He continued to be indiscreet. The collection of sketches published in 1934, *Man on a Mountain*, was in its entirety a veiled protest against the reduction of men to the role of mere cogs in a machine.<sup>53</sup>

His story "Encounter"<sup>54</sup> and the beginning of "Khamovniki"<sup>55</sup> (name of a Moscow suburb) appeared in the same year. "Encounter," which deals with the political sections of machine tractor stations, contrasts the living conditions of Party workers and of ordinary peasants. Katayev touched warily on the peasants' hatred of their Party bosses, and on this occasion was at pains to make it clear that the latter were not particularly to blame. They were average, often decent men who enjoyed their privileges without thinking whether they deserved them or not.

Nikolai Zarudin's two volumes of undistinguished verse, *Cherry-Blossom Snow*, 1923,<sup>56</sup> and *Through the Fields of Youth*, 1928,<sup>57</sup> which show some influence of Blok and Yesenin, are far less interesting than his prose. In fact, he is a better poet in prose than in verse. His story "Antiquity," recreating old Russia and the loveli-



Skoropadski's administration is pictured as a grotesque provincial imitation of the Russian monarchy. Bulgakov saw an ironic prank of fate in the fact that Skoropadski was proclaimed hetman in the Kiev circus building. Against this background the assassination of the Imperial family assumed a particularly tragic significance.

"They have all been murdered," says Myshlayevski, "the Tsar and the Tsarina and the Heir."

The Whites are slow to accept the unbelievable news. Yelena raises her glass and cries hysterically: "Even if that is true . . . It does not matter, I toast them, I toast them!"<sup>1</sup>

Skoropadski's rule crumbled for the same reasons as the Russian monarchy. The Hetman was a typical country squire, and the Ukrainian peasants had no more use for him than the Russian peasants had for their squires. In Bulgakov's novel one of the characters, Aleksei Turbin, gives his impression of what is in the back of the peasants' mind:

"All land to the peasants."

"Three hundred acres to each."

"No landlords for evermore. And a good formal deed, properly stamped, for every piece of land, clearly saying that it is given in perpetuity, to be passed from father to son, from son to grandson, and so forth."

"No riff-raff from the city to come and demand grain. The grain is ours and we keep it. What we can't use up ourselves, we hide in the ground."

"Kerosene to be brought from the city."<sup>2</sup>

Bulgakov satirized the idea of an effective peasant revolution. The muzhik was the backbone of the nation, but there was no need to idealize him. It was futile to expect great things of him. Bulgakov saw that the opponents of Bolshevism carried their defeat in themselves, and his pessimism on this score served in the eyes of certain critics as an antidote to the anarchic individualism of writers like Artyom Vesolyi.

Skoropadski's farcical reign was followed by the equally farcical and more bloody reign of Simon Petlyura. The ruling elite had nothing acceptable and constructive to offer.

As Bulgakov characterized them, the Whites were always heroic

at the front, but at the rear, where the situation also demanded sacrifices, the only thought of the upper classes was how to preserve a pleasant, easy life. Their hatred of Bolshevism was not open, fighting hatred; it was a cowardly hatred hissing from a dark corner. *The White Guard* is the story of the gradual transformation of heroes into frightened little people in the face of the terrible power of Bolshevism.

After *The White Guard* Bulgakov turned from realism to fantasy and satire—a logical application of his flair for combining laughter and terror. "The Fateful Eggs," 1925,<sup>3</sup> is a fantastic tale in the manner of H. G. Wells' *The Food of the Gods*. It castigates the Bolsheviks' mania for launching projects without regard for consequences and their practice of hanging the blame on some scapegoat when the results were an unpleasant surprise to themselves.

In "Fateful Eggs" they decide to counteract a calamitous epidemic of poultry disease with the "life rays" discovered by Professor Persikov. The miraculous stimulation of procreative powers through the use of these rays is expected quickly to rebuild the poultry population. The job is assigned to a "man of action," Rokk (whose symbolic name accounts for the pun in the Russian title; the pronunciation is the same as of the word *rok*, meaning "fate"). In vain, the professor protests that the rays have not been sufficiently studied, the apparatus needs testing, and so on. To complicate matters, Rokk in his hurry uses eggs from the wrong incubator. Instead of the oversized hens anticipated, giant snakes, lizards and crocodiles hatch out and multiply with such speed that the army has to be called in to exterminate them. This is finally achieved, though not without the aid of Russia's most ancient and reliable ally, the winter frosts.

At the height of the "war," the enraged and frightened populace smashes up Persikov's laboratory and kills the professor. The police fail to prevent his murder, though they had been most efficient in protecting him from the lucrative offers of foreigners to come and work on his invention abroad. The Party evidently was only too glad to have the mob visit its fury on Persikov.

Professor Persikov typifies the great scholars whom the Bolsheviks used despite their opposition to Bolshevism. Rokk repre-