

**★
Russian Literature
under Lenin and Stalin
1917-1953**

University of Oklahoma Press : Norman

by Gleb Struve

1971

mitigated villains. One of the most idealized figures is the Communist agitator Bunchuk, who becomes leader of a machine-gun section and is in the end shot by several Cossacks who have gone over to the Whites. But even Bunchuk is shown as a three-dimensional figure—with all the human failings—and not as a paragon of Communist virtues. Nor does Sholokhov attempt to deny heroism to the opponents of Bolshevism. There is a touch of grandeur in the description of the death of the Cossack officer Kalmykov, who is shot by Bunchuk. The Cossack Ataman Kaledin, who collaborated with the Whites, is also portrayed without the usual prejudice and hostility, and there is a sense of real tragedy in the scene preceding his suicide. Sholokhov's principal character, Melekhov, with whom the author is obviously very much in sympathy, personifies the deep cleavage among the Cossacks. He is shown changing sides and deserting the Reds, and in the third volume we even see him fighting on the side of the Whites. The fourth volume was written with the specific object of setting this straight and of showing Melekhov's final change of heart, but the ending is somewhat ambiguous, and Melekhov's adherence to the new order of things somehow incomplete. Throughout the novel one feels that Sholokhov himself, while his reason approves the Communist Revolution, cannot help subconsciously regretting the loss of much in the traditional mode of the Cossack life which the Revolution has swept away. While the novel has unquestionably been overpraised and many defects of its language and composition overlooked, it is, if not a classic, a work of great breadth, giving a truthful and impartial picture of the revolutionary blizzard that swept over Russia, carrying with it many human lives and affecting individual destinies.

Sholokhov's second major work will be discussed in Chapter 18.

**Tarasov-Rodionov
(1885-1937?)**

Alexander Ignatyevich Tarasov-Rodionov, a Bolshevik from 1905, took an active part in the 1917 Revolution and commanded Red Army divisions in the Civil War of 1919-20. After demobilization he worked for a time as examining magistrate attached to the Supreme Tribunal of the Republic. His novel *Shokolad* (*Chocolate*, 1922) was one of the first Communist contributions to the revival of prose fiction. Its theme aroused a good deal of controversy. It is the story of the framing of a certain Zudin, chairman of a local Cheka, who becomes innocently entangled with a beautiful girl, a former ballerina and a counterrevolutionary agent, to whom out of pity he gives a job in his office. Suspicions are aroused among his colleagues, and an investigation is ordered from the center. Although Zudin's friends and colleagues who are appointed to the commission that is to investigate his "crimes" are convinced of his fundamental innocence, they agree with the investigator sent from Moscow who demands that Zudin be shot. Their motives are rather involved. The working masses, they say, will never believe in Zudin's innocence, and it is their duty to impress on the masses that

the Revolution spares no one who betrays its cause, no matter how highly placed. The novel ends with Zudin bidding farewell to his wife. To comfort her, he pretends that the party, while announcing his execution, is sending him on a long and secret mission to Australia. Soviet critics regarded the author's main thesis—the sacrifice of a good and honest Communist to the ignorance and prejudice of the masses—as an ideological error, and the novel was attacked for being untrue to life. While not without interest for the light it throws on the early workings of the Cheka, *Chocolate* is poor literature. The characters, beginning with Zudin himself, are unreal; the story smacks of cheap melodrama; the style is poor. Tarasov-Rodionov's hashed, pseudopoetic prose obviously belongs to the Pilnyak school, but he lacks utterly Pilnyak's sense of language.

In 1928, Tarasov-Rodionov published *Fevral'* (*February*), the first volume of *Tyazhelye shagi* (*Heavy Steps*), which was intended as a vast chronicle-novel about the Revolution of 1917. The second volume, *Iyul'* (*July*), appeared a few years later. The third volume (presumably to be called *October*) apparently remained unpublished, and probably unfinished. A volume of stories, *Svetly kray* (*Bright Land*), published in 1934, seems to have been his last published work. In 1937 he was denounced as a Trotskyite and disappeared.

Alexander Georgievich Malyshkin attracted attention in 1924 with his *Padenie Daira* (*The Fall of Dair*), which was written in 1921. As its subject it had one of the principal episodes of the Civil War—the Red Army breakthrough at Perekop, which brought about the end of the last organized center of anti-Bolshevik resistance in the Crimea. This work is a typical specimen of "dynamic" prose. There is no psychology in it, no individualized characters; the center of interest is in the masses, in the clash of the Red and White forces, which is shown with something of epic grandeur. The heightened, rhythmical diction is derived from Bely and Pilnyak; however, along with other Soviet writers, Malyshkin later evolved toward realism. In his novel *Sevastopol* (1929), he gave a picture of the Revolution as it affected the Black Sea fleet. Its hero, Shelekhov, is a sailor from the intelligentsia who gradually, but not without some relapses, comes to espouse the cause of the Communist Revolution. Malyshkin's main thesis is that men like Shelekhov can find their place in the Revolution, provided they give up aspiring for high positions and accept being useful but inconspicuous pawns in the new order.

**Malyshkin
(1890-1938)**

Artyom Vesoly (pseudonym of Nikolay Kochkurov) is one of the few true proletarians in the ranks of proletarian literature. His father was a Volga stevedore, and Vesoly himself worked as a factory hand and drayman. A member of the Communist party, he fought in the Civil War, and

**Vesoly
(1899-1939)**

most of his work before 1928 has the Civil War as its subject. His characters are soldiers, sailors, peasant guerrillas, and other "instinctive" revolutionaries. In his stories, which are collected in two volumes, *Gorkaya krov* (*Bitter Blood*) and *Dikoye serdtse* (*The Wild Heart*), Vesoly concentrates on the elemental, irrational, and destructive aspects of the Revolution. He prefers the first person narrative and the *skaz* manner. In his novels, *Strana rodnaya* (*My Country*) and *Rossiya krovuyu umytaya* (*Russia Washed in Blood*), verbal ornamentation plays a more important part than the plot. Of all the proletarian writers he stands closest to Pilnyak (except for his Communist orthodoxy), while in some of his earlier stories his short staccato sentences recall Mayakovsky's verse. *Russia Washed in Blood* is a colorful picture of the first phase of the Revolution, in the center of which stands the mass desertion of soldiers from the front. Like many other writers of the same type, Vesoly was purged in 1937.

Semyonov
(1893-1942)

Sergey Alexandrovich Semyonov, son of a Petersburg factory worker, is another true proletarian. He joined the Communist party in 1917 and made his debut in literature in 1922 with the novel *Golod* (*Hunger*), written in the form of a diary and giving a naturalistic description of starving workmen in revolutionary Petrograd. This was followed by a number of stories of workers' life. Considerable attention was aroused by Semyonov's long work *Natalya Tarpova* (1927). It is a social-psychological problem novel, dealing with the life of the Communist party and with the problems of marriage, family life, cultural work, ideology, and so on. Its heroine is a woman, an active member of a Communist organization, who is shown in both her political and her private life against the background of the NEP. As in the case of Libedinsky's novels, its value is mostly documentary.

Chapter 10. SOME PRE-REVOLUTIONARY WRITERS

After 1921 several pre-Revolutionary prose writers whom the Revolution had at first silenced or driven away made a gradual reappearance in literature. There were also those who from the very first had sympathized with the Revolution but did not come to play a part in post-Revolutionary literature until it had reverted to traditional realism. The work of the most important among these older writers, who can now be justly regarded as part of Soviet literature, will be discussed in this chapter.

Count Alexey N. Tolstoy joined the ranks of Soviet writers in 1922. Before that, he had taken sides with the anti-Bolshevik White movement. In 1919 he emigrated abroad and lived first in Paris and then in Berlin. His return to Russia in 1923 was dictated largely by personal considerations, in which the purely financial difficulties of *émigré* existence played not a small part. But it was also connected with the so-called "Change-of-Landmarks" movement among the *émigrés*, when a comparatively small number of them—scholars, writers, and journalists—decided to bow before the Revolution as a force that had won the day and accept it as a fact, without, however, subscribing to its Marxist ideology. Tolstoy's return was a great acquisition for the young Soviet literature. A man of great natural gifts, a master of excellent Russian prose, one of the principal representatives of that Neorealism which combined the best traditions of nineteenth-century Russian literature with some modernist achievements, Tolstoy could certainly count on being lionized in the country where the dearth of good prose fiction was still badly felt.

Tolsto
(1882-

However, it took Tolstoy a long time to find a real place for himself in Soviet literature. He was always at his best in describing real life, especially the life he knew well. His pictures of the decaying gentry in *Khromoy barin* (*The Lame Squire*), and in numerous pre-Revolutionary stories and plays, were his best work. His post-Revolutionary work was handicapped for a long time by his inability to hit upon a congenial theme. Fundamentally a man of the past, a cross between a country gentleman and a literary bohemian, he felt lost in the melting pot of post-Revolutionary Russia. As a former *émigré* he had to tread warily. Reluctant to draw upon the recent past, he wisely abstained at first from portraying and interpreting the unfamiliar present. Hence his escapes into the realm of fantasy and attempts to clothe fantastic plots with revolutionary ideas.

the mid-thirties. In the present section, going beyond the strictly chronological limits of this chapter, I shall discuss the novels which appeared before 1937; those which appeared later will be mentioned in subsequent chapters.

It has been said that revolutions are propitious to historical studies and to the spirit of history.¹ It is very doubtful, however, whether this statement, without serious qualifications, is applicable to the Russian Revolution. In its later phases especially, the Revolution proved to be much more propitious to the revision, and even falsification, of history. It is nevertheless true that, so far as the literature of the Revolution tried to grasp the meaning of events and not merely to record them, it had to analyze their genesis and treat them in historical perspective. A Soviet critic stressed the influence of the present on the interpretation of the past when he wrote in 1936:

Popular mass movements are legitimately becoming the principal theme of the Soviet historical novel. The reassessment of the historical role of the people, the rehabilitation of its past heroes—all this has been suggested to our novelists by the present-day practice of millions of toilers.²

The same critic said that "the pedigree of the Revolution" was naturally one of the main subjects of Soviet historical fiction.³

Hence, during the period under examination, especially in its early part, there were a number of Soviet novels containing historical material about the Revolution of 1917 itself and of purely historical novels about its more or less distant antecedents. The first type of novel is exemplified by Tarasov-Rodionov's *February* and Sholokhov's *The Quiet Don*.

The Revolution of 1905 and the revolutionary movement which preceded it also quite naturally attracted the attention of Soviet novelists. It was the subject, for instance, of *Kolokol* (*The Bells*, 1926), by Ivan Evdokimov (1887-1941), and of *Goryachiy tsekh* (*Hot Workshop*, 1932), by Olga Forsh (of whom more will be said later).

The same period is treated in *Tsushima*, a novel about the Russo-Japanese War by Alexey Novikov-Priboy (1877-1944). A professional sailor, he began writing long before the Revolution, but his first book of stories did not appear until 1917. He was known mostly as the author of vivid but unpretentious sea yarns written from a revolutionary standpoint. The subject of *Tsushima* is the notorious disaster of the Russian fleet. The novel is an eyewitness account of the progress of Admiral Rozhestvensky's fleet around the world toward its doom at Tsushima. The first part gives a detailed, realistic picture of the sailors' daily life and routine. The second part is

¹ D. S. Mirsky, "Der russische historische Roman der Gegenwart," *Slavische Rundschau*, No. 1 (1932).

² M. Serebryansky, *Sovetskiy istoricheskiy roman* (*The Soviet Historical Novel*), 50-51.

³ *Ibid.*, 53.

centered around the battle itself, in which the author was taken prisoner by the Japanese. It is almost nonfictional in its documentary character and does not aim at a creative interpretation of history.

Some Soviet writers sought subjects for their historical novels in the revolutionary movements of the more remote past. Their novels are more strictly historical, but they are also essentially revolutionary in inspiration and approach. To these historical-revolutionary novels belongs *Odety kamnem* (*Clad with Stone*, 1927), by Olga Dmitrievna Forsh (1875-1961), who before the Revolution wrote stories under the pseudonym A. Terek. *Clad with Stone* is a novel about the Russian revolutionaries of the 1870's and 1880's, written in the form of a diary. In Forsh's approach to historical fiction may be seen some influence of Merezhkovsky and the Symbolists, and her historical novels are never purely historical, for they also contain philosophical and psychological elements.

Alexey Pavlovich Chapygin (1870-1937), a pre-Revolutionary writer of peasant origin, first attracted attention in 1915 with his novel *Bely skit* (*White Hermitage*), of which Gorky thought very highly. In 1926-27, Chapygin made a spectacular comeback to literature with his thousand-page-long historical novel *Stepan Razin*, about the picturesque brigand leader of the Cossack rebellion in the seventeenth century, who is one of the favorite heroes of Russian folk poetry. Chapygin painted a vast canvas of one of the most turbulent periods in Russian history, a period which he not only knew but also felt. The novel is spoiled, however, by overminute descriptions and a highly stylized language, while the figure of Razin is also stylized and idealized. Chapygin's second historical novel, *Gulyashchie lyudi* (*Itinerant People*, 1935), also had the seventeenth century for its setting and a popular revolt for its subject. Almost as long as his first novel, it gave an interesting picture of the religious struggle and social unrest in that period.

In *Povest' o Bolotnikove* (*The Tale About Bolotnikov*, 1929), by Georgy Storm, we are taken still further back in Russian history. Bolotnikov was one of the leaders of the rebel Cossacks and peasants during the "Time of Troubles" on the threshold of the seventeenth century. Storm's novel is much shorter than Chapygin's and the writing much more impressionistic. It is a series of graphically told episodes set against a background of rapidly changing scenery. Most of its characters are historical, but since historical documentation is often wanting for them, the author took some liberties in attempting their psychological reconstruction. This is especially true of the colorful figure of Bolotnikov himself. History and fiction are skillfully blended, and ingenious use is made of passages from historical documents. Freely used archaic terms lend the language a spicy flavor, but on the whole stylization is kept within bounds.

Another historical "mass" novel is Artyom Vesoly's *Gulyay-Volga*

(*Volga on the Spree*, 1934), which is a chronicle of Ermak's expedition to Siberia. Written in a lyrical vein, as is usual with Vesoly, it is stylized to resemble folk songs, while Vesoly's characters are patterned on his revolutionary partisans and unfortunately lack both individuality and historical verisimilitude.

The life of runaway Siberian peasants and of workers in state mines under Catherine II was the subject of a novel by Anna Karavayeva (b. 1893), entitled *Zolotoy klyuv* (*The Golden Beak*). Karavayeva belonged to the proletarian October group and had earlier specialized in describing social collisions in the post-Revolutionary village. In her historical novel she made considerable use of little-known historical documents.

Non-Russian revolutionary subjects came in for a lesser share of attention. Among the novels which dealt with the French Revolution may be mentioned Ehrenburg's *Zagovor ravnykh* (*The Conspiracy of Equals*, 1928), the subject of which is the Babeuf movement; and *Chorny konsul* (*The Black Consul*, 1931), by Anatoly Vinogradov (1888-1946), which tells the story of Toussaint L'Ouverture's rising in Haiti. The Paris Commune of 1870 is the subject of Peter Pavlenko's short novel *Barrikady* (*Barricades*, 1932).

The Biographical Novel

To the second group of Soviet historical novels of this period belong many novelized literary biographies or novels about prominent figures in literature, art, and science. Many of them were "escapist" in character; that is, their authors did not feel inclined or capable to deal with contemporary life and its problems—either because they feared to walk where angels tread or because, like their predecessors the Symbolists, they failed to find inspiration in contemporary life.

It is interesting to note, however, that the authors of these biographical novels included several literary scholars. The novel which launched the fashion for literary-historical novels—the Soviet counterpart of Lytton Strachey and André Maurois—was *Kyukhlya* (1925), by Yury Nikolayevich Tynyanov (1894-1944). A literary historian of note, one of the leaders of the Formalist school in literary science and an authority on the Pushkin period, Tynyanov brought to this new genre of fiction his great literary erudition and his feeling for the period. The hero of *Kyukhlya* was Wilhelm Küchelbecker, one of Pushkin's schoolfellows and friends, himself a poet and playwright, who became implicated in the Decembrist conspiracy of 1825 and was exiled to Siberia. Tynyanov's work was based on a meticulous study of the documents. But with all its unquestionable historicity, the novel was also an interesting psychological study of a literary and political Don Quixote, a kindhearted but muddleheaded idealist, lovable and ridiculous, whose life contained the seeds of tragedy. Because of the discrepancy be-

tween his lofty aspirations and his inadequate powers of self-expression, he ended in failure and frustration. Küchelbecker's fate is shown also as part of the social pattern of the period. Pushkin, Griboyedov, Zhukovsky, and other well-known historical figures appear in the novel, and the whole background picture is excellently drawn.

Tynyanov's second novel was *Smert' Vazir-Mukhtara* (*The Death of Wazir-Muchtar*, 1929). Wazir-Muchtar was the official Persian title of Alexander Griboyedov, the famous author of *The Misfortune of Being Clever* and Russian minister to Persia, one of the most interesting and enigmatic figures in Russian literature. Tynyanov's novel, published in connection with the centenary of Griboyedov's death (he was assassinated by the Teheran mob in 1829), was not a full-length biography but covered only the last year of Griboyedov's life, from the moment when he returned from Persia with the Treaty of Turkmanchay in his pocket. At that moment his reputation as a diplomat—so different from his posthumous fame as a writer—had reached its climax.

By concentrating on this last year of Griboyedov's life, which marked the beginning of a steady progress toward the inevitable doom, Tynyanov tried to emphasize the tragic essence of Griboyedov's personality, to convey that "acrid smell of fate" which Griboyedov diffused around him. But he failed in what André Maurois regarded as the essential thing in the art of biography—namely, discovering the keynote to the life and personality of the model. Instead of a portrait, Tynyanov gives us a mirror broken into many fragments, in which we see reflected separate features of his model, but no synthesis is achieved. Instead of conveying a sense of doom, Tynyanov relates but a series of disjointed anecdotes in which can be discerned only a persistent tendency to caricature and to mock. Tynyanov's historical characters are helpless puppets and his attitude toward history a caricature of Tolstoy's. The style is reminiscent of Andrey Bely's, but Tynyanov's "Belyisms" are at times annoyingly obtrusive. For all its defects, however, *The Death of Wazir-Muchtar* is an interesting and original work, more original in fact than *Kyukhlya*. Its very defects result from the author's attempt to rise above the ordinary level of historical fiction, to present the problem of Griboyedov as the tragic problem of the individual battling with his own destiny, and at the same time to renovate the novel structurally.

Tynyanov's third and last historical novel was *Pushkin* (1936-37), a full-length fictional biography of the great Russian poet. As the new fashion demanded, it was written more simply and realistically than the Griboyedov novel, but lacked the latter's originality as well as the poetic unity and inevitability of *Kyukhlya*. Tynyanov also wrote three shorter historical stories, "Podporuchik Kizhe" ("Lieutenant Kizhe"), "Maloletny Vitushishnikov" ("Minor Vitushishnikov"), and "Voskovaya persona" ("The Wax Figure"), set respectively in the reigns of Paul I, Nicholas I, and Peter the Great. All