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The literary situation

In recent years the term “Soviet literature” has become an increasingly awkward one. Soviet authorities insist that a monolithic, multinational literature has been created, embracing all the peoples of the Soviet Union, including numerous minority linguistic and ethnic groups. Nearly all of the noteworthy literature in the USSR, however, has been written in the Russian language.

It can be argued, moreover, that the community of good writing has become so disorganized and fragmented that the term Soviet literature is virtually meaningless. If one is to accept official judgments from the Soviet government, for example, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn can no longer be termed a Soviet writer. Many others have gradually been excluded, and we are now faced with a situation in which a great deal of the most interesting writing in the Soviet Union is not published there. Numerous writers living in the USSR, such as Vladimir Voinovich, have had to resort to *foreign* publication of their best works. But are these works not Soviet literature? Likewise, are we to consider the works of such persons as Nadezhda Mandelstam and Andrei Amalrik, who have *only* been published abroad, as being beyond the scope of Soviet literature? Finally, what do we call the writing of such persons as Solzhenitsyn, Viktor Nekrasov, and Naum Korzhavin, who are now in exile? Did it cease to be Soviet literature the moment they crossed the border?

If all of these questions are answered in the affirmative, what remains is that which is currently published in Soviet books and periodicals, and it immediately becomes evident that this remainder is largely a literature of pretense, if only because it is heavily screened and censored, and governed by complex and crippling inhibitions and prohibitions. In it one often finds the same concerns and themes as in literature that has to be pub-

lished abroad although, as a rule, these domestic publications cannot be as candid and comprehensive in their exploration of social, moral, and ideological problems. But, regardless of whether works are published inside or outside the USSR, all of them have emerged from the same society. The kinship among them is so close that, for the purposes of the present book, the term Soviet literature will be applied to all of them.

In the period immediately preceding the one with which this book is concerned, Soviet literature reached its nadir. During World War II official controls had relaxed somewhat, but within a year after the war's end they were retightened to an unprecedented degree of harshness and viciousness. In an atmosphere of extreme cultural isolation, the authorities demanded that literature perform the narrow educational and organizational role of instructing the reader in detail about ideological values and standards of social behavior. Writers who failed to conform were denounced and silenced. The Party leaders selected the main themes and topics of literature and carefully supervised its ideological content, of which the chief ingredients were chauvinism (of both a Soviet and a Great Russian variety), hatred of things foreign (especially Western), praise of the superior "new Soviet man" and, last but not least, glorification of Stalin.

The genres that best lent themselves to these demands were the long novel and the narrative poem of epic proportions. For their material, writers and poets had a number of immediately utilitarian topics from which to choose. Among them was the recent war, which not only provided limitless examples of patriotic heroism on the part of Soviet man but also could be used to demonstrate the leading role of the Party, the personal greatness of Stalin, and the beneficence of his regime. Another topic was the corrupt West – most notably America – morally degraded and effete but still a hotbed of anti-Soviet conspiracy and atomic warmongering guided from Wall Street. Postwar reconstruction was a major topic: the fulfillment of the new five-year plans and rehabilitation of collective farms through socialist competition, in the face of obstacles from socially backward elements. Here again, writers emphasized the guiding function of the Party, and work as a measure of devotion to society and the most noble expression of the human personality.

Writers were allowed to concern themselves with problems of personal postwar adjustment, such as the disruption of families, shifts of affection among husbands and wives, and the search of returning soldiers for peacetime vocations. The welfare and felicity of the individual in these respects, however, was clearly a matter of secondary importance. What counted

most was the individual's sense of social discipline, his freedom from materialistic longing for consumer goods and "bourgeois" comforts, and his willingness to get back to work without pausing for a rest after the ordeal of the war.

A few good novels and poems – one thinks of Vera Panova's *Fellow Travellers* (*Sputniki*, translated as *The Train*) and Aleksandr Tvardovsky's *The House by the Road* (*Dom u dorogi*) – did emerge during this period. But for the most part a vast, dull, mass literature of make-believe was produced under the guise of socialist realism. Writers either avoided dealing with moral and social evil in its real quality and dimensions, glossed over it, presented it in such a way as to mislead the reader about its causes, or tried to create the impression that it was being eradicated through the relentless march of progress of the Soviet state. Working under tight restrictions, they were frequently forced to revise and rewrite to insure exact conformity. It is surprising that under such circumstances Soviet literature was not killed outright.

It would be inaccurate, however, to portray Soviet writers in the Stalin period merely as a group of slaves, forced against their will to follow a set of formulas. There were then, as now, opportunists who cynically accepted the formulas as the price of wealth and literary prominence. A far larger number, sharing the illusions of a multitude of their compatriots, sincerely and willingly submitted to the prevailing doctrine and its concomitant discipline, wholeheartedly believed that what they were writing was essentially the truth, and were firmly convinced of the aesthetic superiority of current Soviet literary ideology. But there existed all along a cultural substratum: a small, embattled minority of individuals who maintained a creative interest in good literature.

The first public stirrings of this continued interest became evident shortly after Stalin's death in March 1953. The following month, the poet Olga Berggolts published an article deploring the absence of lyricism in contemporary verse and pleading for more attention to personal feeling – love, for example.¹ In October 1953, Ilya Ehrenburg proclaimed in an article that the writer has an obligation to explore the inner world of man and not merely to engage in dutiful descriptions of social and economic life.² The most outspoken and challenging expression of dissatisfaction with the contemporary situation, however, appeared in December in Vladimir Pomerantsev's essay "On Sincerity in Literature,"³ in which the critic attacked the ingrained conformism among Soviet writers, the wooden didacticism of their works, and their habit of prettifying, "varnishing," the reality of the Soviet scene. Pomerantsev's article – both at-

tacked and defended in the following months – became the landmark of a new era of increased freedom in literary discussion and creation.

Within a year after the death of Stalin, works had begun to appear that indicated that Soviet literature was indeed becoming more sincere, humane, and truthful. Examples were Vera Panova's *Seasons* (*Vremena goda*, translated as *Span of the Year*), Viktor Nekrasov's *In One's Home City* (*V rodnom gorode*), and the first part of Ehrenburg's *The Thaw* (*Ottepel'*). The journal *The Banner* (*Znamya*) published poems by Boris Pasternak which, it later turned out, were part of the novel *Doctor Zhivago*. These works, however, constituted merely a modest outpouring of newly oriented literature, and when the Second Congress of Soviet Writers met in December 1954, various speeches made it evident that the Party leadership was prepared to tolerate only a severely limited liberalization in literary publication. Speakers at the Congress also spotlighted the existence of two broad factions in the literary world – liberal and conservative – which were destined for hot contention in the ensuing years. But, for the time being, these two camps maintained a nervous standoff.

The most dramatic change in the literary climate came in 1956. Encouraged by the reformist message of the Twentieth Party Congress and the relative candor of Khrushchev's secret speech to the Congress in which he denounced some of the iniquity of the Stalin regime, writers increasingly insisted on telling the truth about the quality of Soviet life. Numerous stories and novels appeared, protesting against the blatant injustice that prevailed in the country and emphasizing the immense gulf that existed between the Soviet people and their leaders. Vladimir Dudintsev's novel *Not By Bread Alone* (*Ne khlebov edinyim*) caused an enormous uproar by emphasizing these themes, and two large almanacs entitled *Literary Moscow* (*Literaturnaya Moskva*) contained a number of similarly disturbing shorter works. Such writings, it should be added, implicitly questioned the viability of socialist realism as a guiding doctrine. At the same time, verse by previously suppressed poets such as Anna Akhmatova, Nikolai Zabolotsky, Leonid Martynov, and Boris Slutsky began to appear, together with poetry by challenging youngsters such as Andrei Voznesensky and Evgeny Evtushenko.

By late 1956 the authorities (who had also been profoundly disturbed by the libertarian rebellion in Hungary) had taken fright at these manifestations of protest and liberalism. The year 1957, then, produced a series of reflexes to counter such manifestations. A number of the writers and publications mentioned above, along with many others of similar inclination, were subjected to official attacks in the press, in public meetings, and

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Excerpt

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in closed meetings within the Writers' Union (although their defenders were also given some voice). Khrushchev personally intervened in literary affairs, addressing groups of writers and supporting the reactionaries among them, admonishing the literary community to adhere to the principles of socialist realism and warning them against the cardinal liberal sin of "revisionism." In addition to such attempts at direct political intimidation, the authorities undertook a series of administrative measures to keep literature in line. They shuffled the editorial staffs of certain offending publications and closed down others; they created new, more tractable literary newspapers and journals; and they manipulated the organization and leadership of the Writers' Union to combat the upsurge of liberal influence.

The events of 1956 and 1957 dramatized as never before the opposition between two loosely grouped but clearly discernible literary camps. A period of open warfare lasting nearly a decade ensued between the liberals (pejoratively called "revisionists") and the conservatives (pejoratively called "dogmatists"). Conservative writers, editors and critics such as Anatoli Sofronov, Vsevolod Kochetov, and Vladimir Ermilov used the press and various Party organizations to attack the ideas and question the loyalty of such writers as Dudintsev, Vasili Aksenov, and Voznesensky. Vehement counterattacks through the same media came from such liberals as Konstantin Paustovsky, Viktor Nekrasov, and Aleksandr Tvardovsky. A prominent center of the struggle was the Writers' Union, not only in its open meetings and congresses but, even more influentially, in the process of appointing editorial boards and allocating administrative and advisory posts.

The liberals, who considered themselves loyal Communists, argued in general for a moderately flexible interpretation of communist ideology. In urging the creation of a more "truthful" Soviet literature, they specified more freedom of experimentation, greater topical latitude and variety, and a less paternalistic concern over what the Soviet reader should and should not be permitted to know. They were therefore inclined to oppose official coercion of writers and state control over literature in general, including censorship. Dogma, they believed, should be replaced by the writer's personal, individualized quest for the truth. In contrast, the conservatives emphasized the obligation of literature to serve the Party and to maintain a strict devotion to the Party line. This meant, of course, the observance of severe official controls over literature. Believing that de-Stalinization had gone too far, the conservatives felt that, just as the Stalinist social system had been basically a good one and should not be fundamentally changed, so there should be no relaxation in the administration of literature. The

style and content of Soviet writing, moreover, should remain hortatory, heroic, and dutifully propagandistic.

By 1958 the Party leadership had arrived at a policy of cautious tolerance of the contention between liberals and conservatives. Although the authorities continued to be inflexible on major issues – for example, refusing to allow Pasternak to accept the Nobel Prize – they distributed political favors between opposing factions with a more-or-less even hand. At the Third Writers' Congress in May 1959, Khrushchev urged the writing community to settle its disputes internally and, although he made it clear that writers would not be given freedom to create as they pleased, he affirmed that literary criticism was the province of professionals, not the government, and that erring writers should be guided to the correct path gently, not castigated. In the next few years this policy of moderation encouraged the best writers of the Soviet Union, including many who had only recently been chastised and silenced, to publish works of great interest.

Although the government was guarded and tentative in relaxing controls over literature, and sporadically tightened them on occasion, the change in the literary climate was dramatic. The liberal intelligentsia was experiencing a new sense of identity and purpose, and the literary atmosphere had become lively. The search for new values and positive ideals involved not only open contention between two broadly defined literary factions but also a fresh definition of the civic mission of the writer. Informed and inquiring readers now expected the writer not merely to affirm and document official theses but to think critically, to question, to stir things up. As both writers and readers were permitted to learn more of the truth about the past and present, the literary scene – the main locus of national self-examination and moral reevaluation – became genuinely exciting.

The high point in the period of relative tolerance came in the autumn of 1962, which featured public readings by liberal poets before huge and enthusiastic audiences, the publication of such unprecedentedly frank works as Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and Evtushenko's "The Heirs of Stalin," and increased representation of liberals on editorial boards and in the Writers' Union. By December of 1962, liberal activity and influence had assumed the proportions of a revolt, and once again Khrushchev and his cultural advisers intervened, holding disciplinary meetings with leading writers and editors and encouraging press attacks from conservatives. Repressive measures continued through the spring of 1963, but the liberals remained defiant. By June of 1963, Khrushchev had

largely abandoned his attempts at intimidation. However, the publication of works of liberal orientation never again reached the intensity of the autumn of 1962.

(A factor that always influenced official policies on literature was the Soviet position in international affairs at any given time. For example, not only the Hungarian uprising of 1956 but also the Cuban missile crisis in the fall of 1962 affected the government's behavior toward writers. The influence worked in various and often strange ways. The publication in *Pravda* on October 21, 1962 of Evtushenko's liberal "The Heirs of Stalin," a poem warning against a return to Stalinism, was a feature of Khrushchev's attempt to combat his hardline critics following his loss of face in the confrontation with President Kennedy over Cuba. On the other hand, this loss of face on the international scene caused the general tightening of literary controls in December 1962. When foreign affairs place the Soviet leaders in difficult situations, they seem invariably to crack down on literature. Thus, it might have been expected that the policy of détente in the 1970s would have encouraged a relaxation at home. The opposite occurred: the increase in traffic and communication between East and West spurred the authorities to increased ideological and political vigilance and correspondingly severe control over literary publication.)

Although liberals continued to be aggressive and, when possible, vociferous, their influence was gradually eroded after 1963. They continued to press for a relaxation of the principles of socialist realism, and Soviet literature quietly continued its self-liberation from those principles. On the other hand, the government did nothing to encourage the expression of liberal opinion, preferring to cope with it through a policy of containment. In anticipation of the Fourth Writers' Congress in 1967, for example, Solzhenitsyn launched a passionate appeal for the abolition of censorship, and petitions were circulated supporting him, but the Congress itself was prohibited from discussing this or any other controversial issue of importance. When Soviet troops occupied Czechoslovakia in 1968, the liberal writing community was forced to remain virtually silent.

Meanwhile the post-Stalin intellectual ferment had produced new literary phenomena. Encouraged by the partial loosening of controls, a number of writers had ventured beyond permissible ideological, political, and aesthetic limits. One result was the phenomenon of *samizdat* – the wide circulation of unpublishable manuscripts and even underground magazines. Also, writers who despaired of seeing their works in print in the USSR began sending them abroad for publication. The first of those to be apprehended were Andrei Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel, who in 1966

were tried and given harsh sentences in concentration camps. A number of their supporters, and subsequently the supporters of *those* supporters, were similarly sentenced. Protest against these and other manifestations of tightening political screws led in turn to an official policy of selective terror, directed against expressions of dissent. The KGB became increasingly active in literary affairs. The year 1966 was pivotal, marking the end of the period that had come to be known as the Thaw. The trial of Sin-yavsky and Daniel set in motion a series of repressive measures that not only forced dissidence underground but also adversely affected the quality of published literature.

A decade after the 1962 flowering of liberal literary activity, the situation had changed markedly. Although the general sympathies of writers had probably not changed as greatly as appeared on the surface, the authorities had succeeded in muffling the arguments between liberals and conservatives, and the seeming absence of disagreement created the impression of a monolith. On the other hand, it was clear that although some erstwhile liberals, such as Evtushenko, had been tamed, others had become radicalized by attempts to intimidate them. Many of these were so disaffected that they either wound up in prison or were forced to emigrate.

The relationship between literature and politics in the Soviet Union has been, and remains, Byzantine. Decisions to publish or not to publish a given work, to promote or not to promote the cause of a certain writer or periodical, are often the result of complex and carefully hidden intrigue that involves not only the Central Committee of the Communist Party but also the leaders at the very top. Some prestigious writers have great personal influence with political insiders and have used it to defend their literary friends and harm their literary enemies. The events of the two decades with which the present study is concerned have shown that literature has not been as easy to manipulate as it was under Stalin. Nevertheless, although the elaborate machinery of control is often creaky and inefficient, it works.

The most visible and prominent instrument of control is the Union of Soviet Writers, which holds a monopoly on all official literary activity. Nominally the Union's policies are set and its administration democratically elected at regional and nationwide writers' congresses. In a strictly formal sense the Union is run by a board elected at the congresses. The board in turn elects a secretariat, which in actual practice administers the Union. Even closer to actuality is, within the secretariat, an uncharted inner circle of five or six who meet daily and make the key decisions.

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These decisions are guided primarily not by the opinions of the board, its chairman, or the secretariat, but by the Central Committee of the Communist Party and its Politburo. And many, if not all, of the members of the inner circle are also representatives of the KGB. Moreover, the censorship apparatus, Glavlit – with which the Union must deal constantly as proprietor of all literary magazines and newspapers and as owner of the largest literary publishing house – is also influenced by the KGB.

A great deal of the Union's activity involves the supervision of the editorial policies and operation of its publishing network. The Union runs a literary institute, which gives a five-year training course to young writers, poets, and critics. A considerable amount of Union administrators' time is spent in examining and discussing manuscripts, because they have assumed the all-important ideological responsibility for deciding how individual works should be shaped. Although the preliminaries may be complicated, the essential process is simple: a writer is called on the carpet and told how he must change his book if he wants it published.

The Writers' Union handsomely rewards obedience and conformity. Members in good standing enjoy benefits vastly exceeding those of ordinary citizens – access to foreign films never available to the general public, a special tailor shop, clubs with excellent restaurants, preferential treatment in hotels. More fundamentally – depending on their incomes, which are usually quite respectable and often very large – they enjoy greatly superior living and working conditions. These include hard-to-get new apartments or loans to purchase units in cooperative apartment buildings for writers, summer cottages, seaside resorts, and Houses of Creativity – pleasantly located rural working hideaways with full hotel services. Even in fallow periods a writer of demonstrated talent is assured of liberal monetary allowances, to be repaid from future royalties. If he needs a field trip to gather material and atmosphere, the Union will provide a generous advance.

Not all of this largesse comes, strictly speaking, from the Union itself. Much of it is provided by a subsidiary organization called the Literary Fund (Litfund), whose huge income is derived from members' dues. Its expenditures include not only the above-mentioned advances for field trips, loans, clubs, and apartment buildings but also sanatoriums, special bookstores, resorts and medical clinics for writers, as well as nurseries, kindergartens, and summer camps for their children.

Loosely grouped together as a kind of institutionalized élite, Union members not only are encouraged to develop feelings of social and political

solidarity but are also subtly induced to regard their way of life not as a privilege but as a right. Their favored position ties them closely to the establishment, tends to cushion them against the sharper edges of Soviet society, and can also screen them off from the masses whose teachers and spokesmen they purport to be. Only a strong penchant for independent thinking, dedicated curiosity, and persistent effort of will can save them from a smug, pleasantly narcotized conformity.

Many Union members, however, have been alertly independent and in intimate contact with social reality. As we have seen, they have taken advantage of their relative affluence and favorable working conditions to write unorthodox works that cannot be published and either remain “in the drawer” or circulate clandestinely. Moreover, the doctrinal squabbles that have come to the surface have shown that there has sometimes been a formidable amount of bold and stubborn dissidence within the Union. Over the years the authorities have developed various means of dealing with overly independent or recalcitrant writers.

The mildest device is appeasement. Sometimes editors in Moscow or Leningrad are permitted to publish controversial authors just to boost the circulation of their magazines, to compete commercially. Works that cannot be printed in these large central journals sometimes find a haven in provincial journals – in Georgia, Kazakhstan, or Siberia. Also, there are magazines of high quality but low circulation in which a writer can say relatively daring things to a limited audience. Publication under all these circumstances is a carefully controlled safety valve.

Consultation of the writer with Union representatives and committees constitutes another relatively tender means of guidance. The writer is expected to submit to their “comradely” review of his manuscript, including a scrutiny of his themes and topics, his manner of writing, and its political and ideological tenor – and to heed their advice. Suggestions and criticism of this nature may indeed be beneficial to a conformist or politically prudent writer – they are, among other things, one form of self-censorship by the writing community – but clearly many writers would prefer to dispense with this corporate assistance.

When dissident writers unite to form factions within the Union, more abrupt and sweeping measures can be taken. By 1958, for example, the Moscow branch had become a hotbed of liberalism, and the Moscow dissidents were strongly influencing the central policies of the Union. Accordingly, the authorities stepped in and organized a Russian Republic Writers’ Union, which partially engulfed the Moscow branch and replaced its malcontents with more tractable, if less gifted, provincials.