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978-0-521-10986-4 - Novy Mir: A Case Study in the Politics of Literature 1952-1958

Edith Rogovin Frankel

Excerpt

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## Introduction

The relationship between literature and politics has been more pronounced in modern Russia than in any other major European country. This is not to say that there have not been Russian critics who have been concerned with the intrinsic artistic merit of a work, or Russian writers who have been guided by purely aesthetic norms. However, at least from the time of Radishchev and Pushkin, the state has imposed controls on the writer, and even in tsarist times this fact persistently undermined the concept of literature as falling within the strictly private domain. Apart from critics and writers consciously committed to the cause of social change, for example, Chernyshevsky and Gorky, there were others of a religious or conservative bent (Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy) or of a more detached nature (Turgenev, Chekhov) who found themselves involved in politics and political issues.

Despite the profound changes which have taken place in Russian politics and society since the October Revolution, the tsarist era has left its mark on Soviet literary life in at least three basic respects. First and most obviously, the tradition of censorship was taken over without break by the new regime – although since the 1930s it has proved far more inclusive and efficient than in the pre-1917 period. Second, and ironically, the concept of literature as didactic and utilitarian, associated in the nineteenth century with the radical opposition – Belinsky, Dobrolyubov and Pisarev – has been adopted into the Soviet theory of literature. As a result, to the prohibitions imposed by the *ancien régime*, under which statements of a certain type were forbidden, have been added a series of positive demands on the writer: his work must be imbued with the spirit of the one authorized aesthetic doctrine, socialist realism.

Finally, however, the legacy of the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia has survived in the thinking of members of the intellectual community. The idea that the creative artist owes his ultimate loyalty to his own vision of the truth, that he belongs to his own

sub-group which has its own rules different from and even superior to those of the state – has survived through the Soviet period and reasserts itself given the slightest opportunity.

These three factors combined to shape a journal such as *Novy Mir* in the period after the rise of Stalin. The journal at once reflected imposed limitations, ideological demands and restiveness within the literary community.

The ‘thick’ journal has had a long and distinguished history in Russian literature.<sup>1</sup> The tradition of this kind of publication has continued from the tsarist era, in modified form, to the present day and a number of such journals are published monthly in the Soviet Union. Of these, *Novy Mir* was the best known and had the most interesting contents in the postwar years. (Besides works of literature, *Novy Mir* has carried on the tradition of the ‘thick’ journal by regularly publishing articles on science, current affairs, economics and literary criticism.)

However, given the fact that its freedom of publication is so limited, what is the value of studying a Soviet periodical?

For a variety of reasons the journal provides an excellent yardstick for gauging the relationship of the regime to the creative intelligentsia at any given time. First, as a publication which appears every month, *Novy Mir* is in a good position to reflect any variations in official policy. Within a period of some two months, the journal can respond in its pages to the latest political changes, demands, relaxations. Rapid shifts in policy can be made far more quickly in a periodical than by the book-publishing houses. And while the daily press clearly is even more subject to instantaneous change, it does not publish *belles lettres* to any significant extent, is more overtly political and therefore even more closely watched.

Because of the frequency of a journal’s appearance, the critics also have the opportunity to respond rapidly to its contents. Critics are, in a way, the last stage of the official control system over literature. At best, they do provide a relatively spontaneous reaction to what is published. But very often they make the final pronouncement over a work which, perhaps hastily or inadvertently, was allowed through the censor’s sieve. Thus, even the official decision to publish a work can be reversed *ex post facto* by a series of negative articles by key critics.

On the other hand, the liberal intelligentsia has the opportunity to exploit any relaxation of official policy by responding quickly to

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changes in the air. And for two decades *Novy Mir* made use of this opportunity more consistently than any other Soviet journal.<sup>2</sup> Assuming that strict adherence to long-established Party policies is the easiest option in Soviet Russia (and that which is usually chosen), we can learn most from a journal which showed a predilection for change, which seized every opening to publish intellectually and artistically challenging material.

This is a study of *Novy Mir* during one of the most politically crucial periods of Soviet history. Starting with the year 1952 – the last year of Stalin’s life – it opens with a study of literary politics under Stalin and then traces developments during the years of political flux – generally termed the ‘thaw’ – which culminated in the overthrow of Khrushchev’s opponents. For purposes of this investigation, the span from 1952 to 1958 is broken into three periods, each of which saw *Novy Mir* publish exceptional or ground-breaking material only to be attacked and eventually forced to retreat. But, despite the important resemblances, each of these three crises was in many essential ways unique. The detailed study of these official campaigns against the journal casts light on Soviet literary policy in general as it has developed since the nineteen fifties.

Recognized as the best literary journal of the nineteen fifties and sixties, *Novy Mir* played a significant role in intellectual developments during the thaw and in the following years, partly as a barometer of policy change but also as a pioneer in the formulation of publishing policy. Indeed, at a time when publishing abroad was a rare practice for Soviet authors and the institution of *samizdat* was at best nascent, *Novy Mir* performed an indisputably significant function: it was the principal forum for the liberal Soviet intelligentsia. This was expressed succinctly by Andrei Sinyavsky, who described *Novy Mir* as:

such a decent, interesting journal with which the liberal intelligentsia lived for a long time, and a journal which somehow resounded abroad and, in general... the best Soviet journal.<sup>3</sup>

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## 1

## Literary policy under Stalin, 1952–1953

I have been looking through the files of *Literaturnaya Gazeta* [1952]: everything appeared most satisfactory. The paper noted that Grossman's novel *Za pravoe delo* . . . had appeared in *Novy Mir*, but the reviewers ignored it.

Ilya Ehrenburg, *Post-War Years: 1945–54*

In recent years Western scholars have been deeply interested in determining the nature and degree of change which has taken place in the Soviet Union since Stalin's death.<sup>1</sup> Numerous works have analyzed and assessed the transformation of post-Stalin Russia: changes in economic policy, in the effectiveness of group pressures on policy-making, in the use and role of terror, and in the area of public discourse, debate and cultural creativity. But relatively little effort has been made to establish a reliable gauge with which to measure change.<sup>2</sup> Studies of what was happening in specific areas of interest during the late Stalin years – studies in detail – have been few and far between, so that comparisons have often been based on well-documented research covering the recent period but on generalizations in discussing the Stalinist era. One exception has been Marshall Shulman's study of Stalin's foreign policy,<sup>3</sup> which emphasized its complexity and broad range of options.

The field of literature under the Stalinist regime likewise was not monochromatic. A study of literary developments during the last year of Stalin's life – as evidenced both in general literary publications and specifically in *Novy Mir* – illustrates an intertwining of political and literary policies, each motivated by its own set of interests.

The general view of internal Soviet politics in the early nineteen fifties is that the increasing repression and pre-purge tension were irreconcilable with a loosening of literary bonds. And yet an examination of the period shows that both trends – a policy of mounting intimidation by the state and an officially sanctioned 'liberalization' in the literary sphere – coexisted in the Soviet Union in 1952.

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Soviet internal policy at this time was characterized by the renewed attack on bourgeois nationalism, the instigation of the Doctors' Plot and the proliferation of the vigilance campaign. On the other hand, foreign policy provided a contrast – the broad alliance policy and the development of the peace movement after 1949 represented a 'rightist' approach.<sup>4</sup> A similar absence of consistent correlation between all aspects of Soviet policy had been seen at other times: in the mid nineteen thirties, for example, the beginning of the Great Purge was coupled with an official veneration of law and order, with propaganda for the new constitution and, in foreign affairs, with the pursuit of the Popular Front.

In 1952 the contrast was not limited to an emphasis 'on "peaceful coexistence" in foreign policy and strict ideological conformity at home'.<sup>5</sup> A multi-level policy was also to be seen in the field of literature, where, for approximately ten months, an atmosphere of relaxation, albeit strictly limited, was to be felt.

This modification in the firm attitude of the Party towards literature was first felt as early as February, 1952.<sup>6</sup> Although prose was the object of some of the reforming criticism, the main brunt of the campaign was felt by drama. There ensued a series of articles condemning the so-called 'no-conflict theory' which had dominated postwar Soviet drama.<sup>7</sup> The single most famous – and most outspoken – statement on the subject was made by the playwright Nikolai Virta in March of that year. In it he tried to explain his own role in the development of the 'theory'.

It arose as a consequence of 'cold observations of the mind'<sup>8</sup> on the manner in which those of our plays which contain sharp life conflicts passed through the barbed-wire obstacles of the agencies in charge of the repertoire... everything living, true to life, sharp, fresh and unsteretyped was combed out and smoothed over to the point where it was no longer recognizable. Every bold, unsteretyped word in a play had to be defended at the cost of the playwright's nerve and the play's quality... each of us has accumulated a great deal of bitter experience in ten years about which, for some reason, it has been the custom to keep quiet.<sup>9</sup>

Virta placed much of the blame on those people who destroyed plays and who were guided 'not by the interests of Soviet art but by a wild rabbit fear of the hypothetical possibility of a mistake, mortal fear of taking any risk or responsibility for risk'. His own initial adherence to the no-conflict theory had been the result of his search for 'a creative way out'. Perhaps, he had thought, the period of sharp conflicts in drama really had passed. But,

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no, this stupid and spurious theory did not arise because 'everything was fine!' It is not because 'everything is fine' that Pogodin writes a play about the beginning of the century, while Virta, who spent two years in a Russian village, wrote a play about peasants of the People's Democracies!

Although, of course, the atmosphere of suppression which Virta here described does not surprise us, what is notable is that he expressed his views publicly – and in the way that he did. His candid remarks during what was assuredly an extraordinarily repressive period, his attack on problems of censorship and publication policy, and the fact that his statement was not a unique utterance but part of a concerted campaign in the press to revise established literary doctrine all make this a most noteworthy article. What is interesting is not that a writer in the Soviet Union in the early 1950s should have felt bitterness and helplessness at his plight, nor necessarily that he should have committed these thoughts to paper, but that a publication such as *Sovetskoe Iskusstvo*, of conservative leanings and quite orthodox editorial policy, should have taken it upon itself to publish them. One can only assume that the editors – and there had been no recent significant changes of the board – deemed the article appropriate to the current literary mood.

Although Virta's article, and others, were subsequently attacked in the Soviet press,<sup>10</sup> the crusade against the no-conflict theory continued throughout the summer and into the autumn of 1952, with concomitant demands for the portrayal of more well-delineated negative characters and for more and better comedies. It proceeded with varying degrees of fervor beyond the 19th Party Congress and extended to include not only drama but other prose forms as well. Malenkov's speech at the 19th Party Congress in October did little to clarify the literary situation.<sup>11</sup> Nothing really new was said in the few paragraphs devoted to the subject. One thing that his speech did not do, however, was put any further brake on the limited process of innovation which had been emergent since the previous spring. Literary events were apparently to proceed along their course without a strong directive from the top at this point.

In January, 1953 – on the same day that the Doctors' Plot was announced in the press – I. Pitlyar published an article demanding that more attention be paid to the material details of life: 'What enormous artistic and editorial possibilities open up before the writer who is not afraid to be truthful in portraying the material conditions of people's existence... Those writers who wave aside the so-called

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“details of life” are sinning against the truth of life.”<sup>12</sup> This sentiment, uttered here at the beginning of a repressive swing in Soviet literature, would later be a central theme in the literary criticism of the early thaw.

A situation in which articles calling for conflict, for innovation, for a description of negative characteristics of Soviet life appeared simultaneously with attacks on nationalism in literature, with Great-Russian chauvinism, with virulent anti-semitism and a campaign to induce mass paranoia was clearly anomalous. There was a build-up of fear and distrust, but there was the opposite, too, which cannot be ignored. Explaining this concurrence of apparently contradictory trends is by no means simple.

There are a number of possible explanations and there is probably some truth in each. First, there was the state of drama itself. It is certainly plausible that the attack on the no-conflict technique was nothing more than an attempt to cure the ills which had beset the theater for some time. Evidence of the low level of dramatic endeavor (half-empty theaters and the popularity of the classics over contemporary plays) is overwhelming, and it is not unlikely that a main goal was to raise the theater to the point where it could at least be a meaningful instrument of education or propaganda. Demands for more constructive criticism, for a reorganization of responsible committees, and attacks on dull, insipid plays all point in this direction.

If, however, one considers the period preceding Stalin's death as a whole, and not just in terms of literary development, one perceives other possibilities. Seeing the build-up of insecurity and tension throughout the year 1952, which reached a frenzy early in 1953, one is struck by a certain similarity between the vigilance campaign and the attack on the 'no-conflict' theory. The vigilance campaign, in essence, warned that no one was to be trusted, that all sorts of subversive elements lurked in the background of Soviet society, that one should be on guard against every conceivable danger, whether from doctors, embezzlers, bourgeois nationalists or petty criminals. Implied in the campaign against the doctrine of no conflict was the assertion that it was wrong to assume that Soviet society had reached that point of development where there was no socio-political danger left. Drama could not yet be written in which the only opposition present in a play was that between good and better. Evil remained in society and ought to be presented in the theater, with the aim of

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rooting it out. In other words, in order to expose enemies the Soviet citizen had to know how to recognize them.

There is, finally, the possibility which we cannot entirely discount: that this 'liberal' swing was simply to be used as a bait to draw out those whom Anatoly Surov had referred to as the 'keepers of silence'<sup>13</sup> from their lairs, with the ultimate intention of repression. It is widely held that a major purge was in the offing on the eve of Stalin's death; perhaps this campaign was simply to be used as a mouse trap.

Whatever the ulterior motives may have been, the fact is that in 1952 writers and editors did find that they had somewhat more scope, more 'elbow room', limited though it still was. This became evident not only in the remarkable candor of some writers, but also in the demands made on the writers as a whole. The attack on the no-conflict theory permitted a less stereotyped publication policy. In order to demonstrate this point, let us look at the output of *Novy Mir*, the most experimental journal in the fifties and the one quickest to reflect a change of policy.

Two major works appeared in its pages in the summer and early autumn of 1952 – as well as some lesser items – which distinguished that literary season and differentiated it from the Stalinist model. Almost predictably, *Novy Mir* was to be the object of a severe concerted attack launched against it by the Party press and the Writers Union several months later.

In the July, 1952 issue of *Novy Mir* the first instalment of Vasily Grossman's *Za pravoe delo* (For the Just Cause) appeared.<sup>14</sup> This was a lengthy novel which centered on the Battle of Stalingrad and followed a number of individuals and families whose lives were caught up in the war and whose fates were interrelated. Long sections of the book were devoted to discussions of a philosophical nature among the participants – soldiers, professors, students – on the causes of the war.

It is indicative of the indecisive official attitude – and the amount of permissiveness – that the novel received some excellent, or at worst mixed, reviews at the end of 1952.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, *For the Just Cause* was virtually ignored in the beginning. Ilya Ehrenburg noted this fact in his memoirs, recalling that he considered this a positive development. 'I have been looking through the files of *Literaturnaya Gazeta* [for 1952]', he wrote. 'Everything appeared most satisfactory. The paper



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2 Vasily Grossman, author of *For the Just Cause*

noted that Grossman's novel *Za pravoe delo* . . . had appeared in *Novy Mir*, but the reviewers ignored it.<sup>16</sup>

In fact – as Ehrenburg clearly understood – the novel did contain sections which could well have been alarming to the Soviet reviewer. The following excerpts are from a passage in which an academic, Chepyzhin – one of the central characters – propounded his views in a conversation with Professor Shtrum.

Look, imagine that in some little town there are people known for their learning, honor, humanity, goodness. And they were well known to every old person and child there. They enriched the town life, enlarged it – they taught in the schools, in the universities, wrote books and wrote in the workers' newspapers and in scientific journals; they worked and struggled for the freedom of labor. . . . But when night fell, out onto the streets came other people whom few in the town knew, whose life and affairs were dirty and secret. They feared the light, walked stealthily in the darkness, in the shadow of buildings. But there came a time when the coarse dark power of Hitler burst into life, with the intention of changing its most fundamental law. They started to throw cultured people who had illuminated life into camps, into prisons. Others fell in the struggle, others went into hiding. They

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were no longer to be seen during the day on the streets, at factories, at schools, at workers' meetings. The books they had written blazed. But those who had been hidden by the night came out noisily into the light and filled the world with themselves and their terrible deeds. And it seemed that the people had been transformed, had become a people of evil and dishonor. But look here, it isn't so! Understand that it isn't so! The energy contained in a people's wisdom, in a people's moral sense, in a people's goodness is eternal, whatever fascism might do to destroy it. [It continues to live, temporarily dispersed. It accumulates in nodes. It gathers around itself indestructible microscopic diamond crystals which can cut both steel and glass. And those popular champions who were killed transmitted their spiritual strength, their energy to others, teaching them how to live and how to die. And their strength was not destroyed together with the corpses of the dead, but continues to live in the living. I am convinced that the Nazi evil is powerless to kill the energy of the people. It has only disappeared from view, but quantitatively it is undiminished in the people. Do you understand me? Do you follow my line of thought?]<sup>17</sup>

Chepyzhin then went on to discuss the psychology of social change:

You see, all sorts of things are mixed in man, many of which are unconscious, hidden, secret, false. Often, a man, living under normal social conditions, doesn't himself know of the vaults and cellars of his soul. But a social catastrophe occurred, and out of the cellar came every evil spirit, they rustled and ran out through the clean, light rooms. [The flour fell and the chaff rose outside. It wasn't the relationship of things that changed, but the position of the parts of the moral, spiritual structure of man which was altered.]<sup>18</sup>

It is not at all surprising that, when the attack finally came, the critics singled out these passages. Chepyzhin, wrote one, taught an 'idealist philosophy', which the author himself obviously espoused.<sup>19</sup>

It does not require much imagination to see Grossman–Chepyzhin's description of the coming of Hitlerism as a commentary on Stalinist Russia. Especially in the light of his later work *Forever Flowing*,<sup>20</sup> it is clear that Grossman was highly sensitive to, and understandably obsessed with, the evils which had been committed in Soviet Russia during his lifetime. His concentration in this section on the intelligentsia and its difficult fate was at least as applicable to the Soviet as to the German situation. This is a striking example of the not-infrequent practice of political criticism by analogy, in which the dissenting writer attacks a feature of his own contemporary society through reference to tsarist times or to foreign and hostile countries. Of course, the official critics could not directly expose this type of invidious comparison, for to do so would be to admit that they themselves had recognized the forbidden parallel.