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AFTERWORD: RUSSIAN LITERATURE IN THE 1980s

The decade of the 1980s divides neatly into two equal halves. Over the first half hung the shadow of the gloomy "period of stagnation" which is rightly associated with the name of Leonid Brezhnev, one of the most dull-witted and predatory political figures of this century.

Brezhnev wanted to be a writer. In 1978–79 he published his autobiographical sketches *Malaya zemlya* (the name given to a portion of the Kerch Peninsula, scene of fierce fighting during World War II, where Brezhnev was a political commissar), *Rebirth* (*Vozrozhdenie*), and *Virgin Lands* (*Tselina*). Although they were nothing more than brochures written in bureaucratese by ghostwriters, Brezhnev was immediately honored with a Lenin Prize, the highest Soviet literary award. Moreover, the literary journals and papers in Russia outdid one another in extolling the author of this "trilogy," holding up his talent as an example for all, exclaiming over his brilliant metaphors, his vivid epithets and similes, and his lively dialogue. Moscow and Leningrad writers would gather for solemn discussions of the Brezhnev "trilogy" in obedience to party command.

Is it any wonder that so-called "secretarial literature" flourished luxuriantly at precisely this time? If everybody agreed that the country's leading writer was the incredibly mediocre and perhaps even only semi-literate General Secretary of the party Central Committee, then what was to prevent the various Secretaries of the Union of Soviet Writers from publishing their writings in multi-volume editions? To be sure, Brezhnev exercised such unlimited power that he could award himself a Lenin prize, while the secretaries of the Writers Union could not do as much – but still they controlled such publishing houses as "Soviet Writer," "Artistic Literature," and "Young Guard." Between 1981 and 1985 Yuri Bondarev's works were published fifty times in printings totalling 5,868,000 copies; Alexander Chakovsky saw his works appear forty times in a total of 3,901,000 copies; Georgy Markov thirty-two times in 4,129,000 copies; and Peter Proskurin twenty-one times in 2,615,000 copies. We might also glance at the figures for the poets. Stanislav Kunyaev, a dedicated communist,

published at least one book a year from 1976 through 1986, and in some years two or three books; between 1976 and 1982 Felix Chuev published a minimum of one book a year, and sometimes as many as four, for total print runs of 160,000. We should contrast these fantastic figures with the editions of the works of Anna Akhmatova and Boris Pasternak over this same period: five each.

Soviet Russia is said to be the country with the greatest number of readers in the world. But, as the sociologist Sergey Shvedov has asked: "What precisely did the country read?" The answer is that at the conclusion of the Brezhnev era the country read "secretaries." These were primarily lengthy, sometimes multi-volume epic novels, extolling the party and its leaders, written by such as Chakovsky, Proskurin, Markov, and Bondarev.

Genuine literature, on the other hand, was being created by writers who, though skeptical about the future, though risking their freedom and even their lives, wrote books as their consciences dictated, and kept them in desk drawers until better days arrived. Thus eventually there emerged such works as Anatoly Rybakov's (1911–) *Children of the Arbat* (*Deti Arbata*), Anatoly Pristavkin's (1931–) *A Golden Cloud Spent the Night* (*Nochevala tuchka zolotaya*), Izrail Metter's (1909–) *Fifth Corner* (*Pyaty ugol*), Vasily Grossman's *Forever Flowing* (*Vse techet*), Alexander Bek's (1903–72) *New Assignment* (*Novoe naznáchenie*), Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *First Circle* and *Cancer Ward*, and many others.

And yet this period was still better than the Stalinist decades: sometimes manuscripts would win their freedom, and – with or without their authors' consent – begin to circulate, first in *samizdat*, then in *tamizdat*. In the 1970s and 1980s there existed a third method of circulating literary texts. A limited number of copies would be printed marked "secret," "for official use only." These editions were meant for those at the top of the *nomenklatura*: members of the Central Committee, or even only the Politburo. Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was first published in this way after it had been suppressed at the personal demand of Dolores Ibarruri (La Pasionaria); later it appeared in Hemingway's collected works. This form of secret publication was called *khamizdat*, from the word *kham*, meaning 'boor.' It was far from secure, since the sons and daughters of top officials frequently sympathized with the democratic movement and photocopied or retyped the sensational forbidden books that fell into their hands. *Khamizdat* was a reliable source for *samizdat*, which in turn regularly supplied *tamizdat*.

Just as there was in the Soviet Union a black market economy existing alongside the official "socialist" economy, so alongside the "secretarial" literature there was a black market literature, one with much more intimate links to the reading public, and one which it proved impossible to extirpate through KGB terror. "Undesirable"

literary works continued to spread their influence, to the point where the country suffered from a national schizophrenia. In one of his songs the poet Alexander Galich used to assert quite optimistically: "There's a 'Yauza' brand taperecorder – that's all, but that's enough! ... An 'Erika' makes four copies – that's all, but that's enough!" The 'Yauza' taperecorder and the 'Erika' typewriter in those years were very important tools with which to keep literary works alive. Galich was quite right in that.

But he was wrong to claim that this was enough. To be sure, a short work like *Forever Flowing* or an enormous novel like *The First Circle* would circulate in typescript, but nocturnal reading behind closed doors could not sustain normal literary life, which requires dialogue between reader and writer, open critical discussion in the press, a natural progression from one book to another – in a word, what we call the "literary process." *Samizdat* could not manage that.

Tamizdat could not manage it either. Books published abroad could make their way into the Soviet Union, but only with great difficulty. Publishing houses in France (YMCA Press, Syntaxis), Germany (Posev), England (Overseas Publications), America (Ardis), or Switzerland (L'Age d'Homme) published numerous books by many writers in the 1970s and 1980s. They also issued series of historical and literary memoirs, almanacs, and "thick journals." Despite all the difficulties these publications encountered in reaching the Soviet reader, despite the attempted suppression of freedom of speech, the literature of socialist realism lost its monopoly and had to confront powerful competition. The struggle was joined between genuine literature and imitation literature, between falsehood supported by the apparatus of the state and unarmed truth, which disposed of neither financial resources nor printing presses.

To be sure, the literary situation in the Soviet Union was not as clear-cut as this. "Secretarial literature" was dominant, of course, but even within its shadow there appeared writers who contrived to speak of reality in a conscientious and honorable way. Among them were the "village writers" (*derevenshchiki*), more prominent in earlier years, but still active at this point (Fyodor Abramov worked almost until his death in 1983). Among them was Mikhail Alekseev (1918–), a writer of modest talent, whose *Pugnacious Fellows* (*Drachuny*, 1982) depicts the forced collectivization and artificial famine of 1932–33 with extraordinary frankness.

Among the works of more recent village writers one should mention Viktor Astafev's *Melancholy Detective Story* (*Pechalny detektiv*, 1986), which offers a nightmarish depiction of Soviet provincial life from which there is no escape: drunkenness, violence, general hostility among people, and irreversible social decomposition are its hallmarks. Valentin Rasputin's *Fire* (*Pozhar*, 1985) is scarcely more optimistic, for it describes the degradation of people incapable of forming any sort of

community. Neither author even attempts to analyze the social causes of this moral decline, limiting himself to depicting an irreversible descent into the abyss. Evidently it is too soon yet to speak of causes, for the structure of society has not been analyzed.

Other Soviet prose works of intellectual integrity from the early 1980s also testify to their authors' inability to grasp the motivating forces of life in the present and the recent past. In fact they deal with the present only infrequently, and even then not in detail. Among such works are Daniil Granin's *Picture* (*Kartina*, 1980); Sergey Zalygin's novel *After the Storm* (*Posle buri*, 2 vols., 1982–86), which describes the dramatic fate of a White officer living with forged documents in the 1920s; and a fantastic novel by Vladimir Orlov, *Danilov the Violist* (*Altist Danilov*, 1980), which builds upon many of Bulgakov's artistic devices.

The topic of the Second World War has still not been exhausted, for it permits greater honesty than do subjects from contemporary everyday life. Here there stand out a posthumously published novel by Vitaly Syomin (1927–78), *The Dam* (*Plotina*, 1981), a story set in a prisoner-of-war camp and recounted in an almost uncompromisingly direct manner; and Grigory Baklanov's (1923–) lyrical prose work *Forever Nineteen* (*Naveki – devyatnadtsatiletnie*, 1979).

At this same time there emerged on the scene the so-called "generation of the forty-year-olds," among whom are to be found several quite remarkable prosewriters: Vladimir Makanin (1937–), Anatoly Kurchatkin (1944–), Lyudmila Petrushevskaya (1938– , now one of the finest playwrights of the contemporary theater), Anatoly Kim (1939–), and Vladimir Krupin (1941–), whose novel *Living Water* (*Zhivaya voda*, 1980) aroused much comment by its vivid style and unusual poetic imagery.

Vladimir Makanin is a particularly interesting writer. He first attracted notice in the mid 1960s with his novel *Straight Line* (*Pryamaya liniya*). Makanin does not care about social questions: indeed he quite demonstratively ignores them, which is typical of his generation. He is not concerned with ephemeral political problems, but rather with existential propositions, the feelings of the living individual and the state of his soul, which suffers in loneliness, and perishes within the collective which would seem to be its salvation but in fact reduces it to the lowest common denominator. The hopelessness of the contemporary situation emerges in Makanin's works of various sorts: *Voices* (*Golosa*), *Loss* (*Utrata*), *Blue and Red* (*Goluboe i krasnoe*), *Where Heaven and Hills Were Joined* (*Gde skhodilos nebo s kholmami*), and *A Man and a Woman* (*Odin i odna*, 1983). In this last piece a man and a woman who have once been together in the 1960s, are shown leading a hopelessly lonely existence, isolated not only from each other but also from the world around them, their society, their epoch. It is understandable that *A Man and a Woman* should not have seen print in Brezhnev's time: it

was published five years after it was written. The censors knew what they were about. They were capable of deciphering quite complicated subtexts: through the veil of Makanin's existentialism they could perceive his contemptuous negation of an inhumane party bureaucracy which was quite inhospitable to any spiritual aspirations and stifled all hope. The work appeared in 1987, one of the most remarkable years of the decade. Indeed the three years 1987–89 will go down in Russian cultural history as miraculous ones.

AFTER THE EVENTS of April 1985, when a new period in the country's development commenced with Mikhail Gorbachev's accession to power, and also after the eighth Congress of Writers in the summer of 1986, Russian literature experienced an upheaval surpassing anything known to the history not only of Russian culture, but of world culture generally. The walls of censorship which had stood firm for seventy years suddenly collapsed – those walls which had separated one literature from another, and the second from a third. Everyone had assumed that the walls intended to isolate socialist realist literature from the suspected or openly anti-soviet works which circulated in subversive *samizdat* and acquired global renown through hostile *tamizdat* would endure forever. The very notion that these tendencies might ever merge was itself subversive, for it implied doubt in the doctrine of class struggle as the engine of the historical process, or even its negation in the name of general human values. And yet Gorbachev himself, at a reception in 1987 for numerous guests invited from all over the world, affirmed exactly that. Referring – for obvious prudential reasons – to a formulation of Lenin's which nobody had ever heard of, he proclaimed the superiority of general human values over class values. Gorbachev's formulation in essence amounted to an ideological revolution, one which overthrew not only Leninism, but Marxism as well.

In any case, the Gorbachev formulation played an enormous part in the reorientation of Soviet ideology. For example, in June 1989 Chingiz Aitmatov – who is personally quite close to Gorbachev – declared before the Congress of Peoples' Deputies of the USSR words to the effect that genuine socialism was to be found, not in the Soviet Union, but, for example, in Holland, Canada, Sweden, "not to mention Switzerland" – Switzerland, which until

then had always been considered the very headquarters of finance capital. Shortly afterwards the newspaper *Literary Gazette*, then still edited by the unrepentant Stalinist Alexander Chakovsky, printed an article which analyzed the social order prevailing in the United States and decided that the United States had created the best extant protections for labor, the just norms of a governmental structure based upon law, and a high level of democracy (not "bourgeois democracy" but democracy pure and simple).

One by one, the restrictions isolating the USSR from the West were eliminated. Only months later borders were opened which for seven decades had been defended by heavily armed border guards. The weekly *Moscow News* (*Moskovskie novosti*), published in several languages, printed an article declaring that the intellectuals exiled to the West during the 1970s had been forced out by unintelligent bureaucrats and that Soviet citizenship should be restored immediately to all these so-called émigrés. This piece, headed "Magnanimity" ("Velikodushie"), provoked a rejoinder from another writer (Efim Etkind) polemically entitled "Justice" ("Spravedlivost"): this argued that restoring to innocent writers and scholars the citizenship of which they had been illegally deprived, and who had been forcibly driven from their country, was not an act of magnanimity, but rather one of simple justice. This latter viewpoint was affirmed in short order when the Supreme Soviet restored citizenship to Mstislav Rostropovich, Galina Vishnevskaya, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Vladimir Voynovich, Georgy Vladimov, Vasily Aksyonov, and others.

For the first time in seventy years this group of émigrés was acknowledged as an equal and even an extraordinarily valuable segment of Russian culture. Once upon a time Vladimir Mayakovsky had been quite overbearing toward the politically almost neutral Fyodor Chaliapin, and had even abused Gorky when the latter was living in Italy. As late as 1988, at a meeting at the Russian Research Center of Harvard University, Alexander Chakovsky called the émigrés traitors to the fatherland.

But now writers and works which had been for so many years exiled, forbidden, and execrated have flooded into Russian literature. Two Russias have been united: one exiled, the other exiling.