

THE SOVIET NOVEL

HISTORY AS RITUAL



**KATERINA
CLARK**

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD

The Soviet Novel

History as Ritual

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With a new Afterword
by the Author

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The Soviet Novel

For my mother and father

Preface

When, in some chance encounter at a professional gathering, I am politely asked what I “do,” I find myself in the unhappy position of having to admit that I work on the Soviet novel. Usually my interlocutor tries to help me out at first by suggesting, if he knows anything about Soviet literature, that of course that must mean that I am working on one of the more respectable writers, such as Platonov, Bulgakov, Pasternak, or Solzhenitsyn. “No? . . . Well, I suppose even someone like Fedin. . . . Not really? . . . Oh!” Then follows that dreadful pause when it all comes out: my work is on the *Soviet* Soviet novel, on those hundreds of unreadable texts that serve as examples of Socialist Realism. That is to say, I do not look at good novels that happen to have been published in the Soviet Union, or even at good examples from typical Soviet fiction, but actually at those works whose authors have *deliberately* followed the conventions of Socialist Realism. It is then that my leprous nose comes finally into view. My interlocutor’s response is either to back out of the conversation or to mutter words of sympathy and amazement: “How do you ever manage to get through them!”

Soviet Socialist Realism is virtually a taboo topic in Western Slavic scholarship. It is not entirely taboo, for it can be discussed, but preferably only in tones of outrage, bemusement, derision, or elegy. Three main arguments underpin this collective judgment. First, it is felt to be intellectually suspect—or simply a waste of time—to analyze what is patently bad literature. The history of Soviet literature, it is felt, provides a classic case of that familiar pattern in which political revolution becomes cultural devolution. Between constant state interference in the business of literature and Socialist Realism’s doctrine of mandatory *partijnost’* (or “Party-mindedness,” i.e., the stipulation that all works be infused with the Party’s point of view), literature’s natural evolution was tampered with, and with disastrous results. Hence the bathetic decline from

the great prose works of a Dostoevsky or a Tolstoy to those of a Nikolay Ostrovsky or a Gladkov. Second, it is argued that it is virtually immoral to devote attention to a tradition that has developed at the cost of so many violations of intellectual freedom and integrity, of so much human suffering. Finally, it is felt that Socialist Realism is itself so lifeless and dull that any study of it would of necessity be hopelessly pedestrian (unless, of course, enlivened by tales of infamy or by acerbic comments).

All three are very powerful arguments, and their impact has been such that very few scholars have undertaken to write on Soviet Socialist Realism *per se*. It is considered far more worthy to write on dissidents or at least on the *less* conformist writers within Soviet literature—on those who might be expected to show some spark of originality or by acerbic comments.

Only a few topics are recognized as valid for those who want to study mainstream Soviet literature rather than its dissident fringes. One can, for instance, chronicle the literary politics in terms of rival factions, interference from above, forced rewritings of manuscripts, etc. Alternatively, one can describe the various theoretical positions taken in that ongoing debate over what “Socialist Realism” really means. Or, again, one can discuss why Socialist Realism is bad literature. Or, finally, one can undertake a thematic study on the grounds that this will either reveal the absurdity of most Socialist Realism or provide useful data on changing Soviet attitudes, mores, etc. Some supporters of this approach have even pointed out the intelligence advantages of looking at Soviet novels: by reading *The Regional Party Secretary* (1961), written by that arch “hard-liner” Vs. Kochetov, for instance, one learns of a special hot line that connects regional party managers directly with their bosses.¹ There is also a place for a general history of Soviet literature, one that sets out the various periods and describes the most important works published in each; but Gleb Struve’s *Russian Literature under Lenin and Stalin, 1917–1953* already performs that function very well.

While not denying the value of these various kinds of studies, I would like to argue for a different approach, one that has thus far gone largely unexplored.

The underlying assumption that has inspired most accounts of Soviet Socialist Realism to date (other than those written by sym-

pathizers) is that the repressive climate of the Soviet Union has resulted in bad literature. Trying to determine whether Socialist Realism is or is not "bad literature" is not, however, the most fruitful approach. Some of the problems derive from applying Western "highbrow" literary criteria in studying a literature that was not intended to meet them. It is easy for us to compare works by Melville, Flaubert, and Dickens, because their novels perform a fairly homogeneous aesthetic function in the literary systems of America, France, and England. But there has always been a distinction between modern Russian and other Western literature, and this distinction became exacerbated under the Soviets. It is a cliché in talking about nineteenth-century Russian literature that it performed a social function not just as literature but also as a forum for intellectual and political debates, which the censor kept out of the more expected channels. In Soviet literature this extraliterary dimension has become so paramount that the texts themselves insist that they not be treated as high literature. Until recently Soviet critics rarely gave a work's "literary" merits more than a passing mention.

The Soviet novel performs a totally different function from the one the novel normally performs in the West, and this difference in function has given rise to a different kind of text. The differences extend right across the board—in the type of plot that is used, in mode of characterization, point of view, etc. Consequently, the body of methodology that has been developed for dealing with literature in the modern Western context is not self-evidently the most appropriate optic through which to view what is essentially a structurally different phenomenon. It would be more meaningful to ask whether the institution of Soviet Socialist Realism is adequate to its function than whether it has literary respectability. That question will not be engaged here, since the chosen task is to describe and analyze rather than to evaluate.

Rather than berate Ostrovsky for not being Henry James, we might get further if we discussed his novels in the context of types of literature that perform a more analogous function. The Socialist Realist novel was intended to be a form of popular literature (or, at most, middlebrow), and like most varieties of popular literature it is formulaic. It thus lends itself to a comparison with other varieties of popular formulaic literature, such as detective stories and serial

novels. Unlike most such fiction, however, it is also highly didactic (but not unlike all: elsewhere I have compared it to the novels of Arthur Hailey, a comparison that works well in most respects),² and could thus be looked at as a case study in literary didacticism (a topic that has not in fact been taken up in this book). The Socialist Realist novel forms a tradition that rests on canonical exemplars. Consequently, medievalists who study the conventions of hagiography and other such texts tied to a canon will find much in common between the distinctive features of their texts and those of the Soviet novel. Finally, the Soviet novel's major function since at least 1932–34, the time when the canon was instituted, has been to serve as the official repository of state myths.³ For this reason, studies of the Soviet novelistic tradition can be conducted in much the same ways as structural studies of myth.

In short, the arsenal of analytical tools developed for treating folkloric texts and other formulaic genres, such as serial novels and hagiography, seems to be more efficient for studying Soviet texts than the tools developed for analyzing modern highbrow literature. This book therefore has something of an anthropological bias and contains several quasi-structuralist studies of the Soviet novel. The methodology used is indebted to the Soviet medievalist D. S. Likhachev and the literary theorist M. Bakhtin, but it also draws on the work of a large number of anthropologists, including V. Propp, A. Van Gennep, M. Gluckman, V. Turner, and C. Lévi-Strauss, and on the scholar of myth M. Eliade.

As can be appreciated from the diverse approaches these names suggest, the methodology used here for analyzing Soviet texts has been eclectic. Indeed, no one methodology has been applied with sufficient rigor to please a structuralist purist. This is because the book's ultimate aim is not to produce a structural study per se—that is, a highly abstract and generalized ahistorical analysis of the conventional Soviet novel—but to give a *dynamic* account of the novel's evolution, seen in the general context of Soviet culture.

The question how a tradition as singular as that of the Soviet novel ever came to be is a very intriguing one. That is not, however, the only reason why this study eschews the temptation to rest with a purely synchronic analysis. The main reason for that is the limitations of a purely structural approach. When one considers the Soviet novel in a context that aligns it with other text types that are

themselves manifestly dissimilar in some crucial respects (such as folklore, hagiography, and detective stories), much of the novel's singularity and specificity will clearly be lost. Additionally, in a strictly structural analysis an important dimension—the ideological—is left out. The problem of literature's relationship to its political and social environment, and the dependence of *meaning* on factors external to the texts themselves, cannot be treated properly without introducing a historical or extratextual dimension. The interrelationship of the intrinsic and the extrinsic is always an interesting question, but it becomes especially acute in the case of Soviet literature because of the marginal importance of the aesthetic function in texts and the unusually great importance of politics and ideology. In dealing with such aspects, however, it is not sufficient to demonstrate how, over time, official values have been imposed upon literature, *since these official values have themselves been culturally determined.*

Here anthropology once again provides useful analytical tools with which to study Socialist Realist texts. There is a need to look at Socialist Realism from the point of view of the semiotics of culture, to discriminate the meaning of texts and the tradition they form, as opposed to their brute structure, by appealing to differences in different culture systems. As Tynyanov and Jakobson pointed out in 1928, "the history of a system is in turn a system."⁴ Thus, rather than a comparative study of the Socialist Realist novel and other text types, what I have attempted here is an interpretive cultural history that uses the novel (and novella) as its focus because the novel is *the* privileged genre of Soviet Socialist Realism, occupying the same structural slot as the opera does in China. I have done this by using a composite approach, involving methods from history, anthropology, and, to a lesser extent, literary theory. By anthropologizing history and historicizing anthropology, I have hoped to avoid both the excesses of the ahistorical scientism of most structuralisms, on the one hand, and, on the other, the monological mystifications of historical accounts, most of which labor under the disadvantages of a particularist naiveté.

In meeting the realities of present-day publishing I have had to make radical cuts in my original manuscript. I have tried to retain my basic ideas and the historical scope of the book at the cost of reducing the number of examples and the coverage of the most

familiar aspects of Soviet literary history and politics. I have provided a bibliography of the most basic Western sources on these topics.

I cannot possibly thank all those who have helped me during the six years of this book's preparation. I owe a special debt of gratitude to Harry Rigby, who first made me aware of the questions about Soviet literature and society that I am still trying to answer. Others who have helped by reading the manuscript and making valuable comments include Grace Hucko, Geoffrey Hosking, Gary Saul Morson, Richard Pope, Jane Andelman Taubman, Robert Tucker, and Mikhail Ulman. Kay Stephenson deserves mention, not only for her superb typing but also for her editorial help, and I am grateful to Gianna Kirtley for pitching in, as usual, when things got hectic. I would also like to thank my husband, Michael, for doing all of the above things—and more. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to two institutions: to Wesleyan University for its generous faculty research grants, which enabled me to make four trips to the Soviet Union to do research for this book, and to the University of Texas at Austin for a grant toward the cost of manuscript preparation.

Note on Transliteration

This book uses two different systems of transliteration. In the text, Russian names and titles are rendered so that they will indicate for the nonspecialist the approximate Russian pronunciation (i.e., *kh* is used rather than *x*, *zh* rather than *ž*, hard and soft signs are not indicated, etc.). For Russian words cited in the text and for Russian sources in the Notes and Bibliography, however, the I.P.A. system is used. By this system the following special signs have the approximate values indicated below:

- ' *soft sign*, indicating that the preceding consonant is "softened" (i.e., palatalized)
- " *hard sign*, indicating that the preceding consonant is not palatalized
- c *ts*
- č *ch*
- j *y* as in *yes*
- š *sh*
- šč *shch*
- x *h*
- y *i* as in *bill*
- ž *zh*

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The Soviet Novel

What is Socialist Realism? It is not, first of all, a *single* doctrine. We now recognize that that old bogey, “monolithic communism,” does not exist—that there are, instead, many different communisms. In much the same way, there are many different Socialist Realisms. Different countries, different political parties, and critics with different *partis pris* have each evolved different definitions of it.

Even if Socialist Realism is confined to the meaning “officially sponsored Soviet literature,” it soon becomes apparent that among the various canonical accounts of it there is no *one* that is incontrovertible or in any sense comprehensive. Some official pronouncements on the theory of Socialist Realism have been important (e.g., that literature should be “optimistic,” that it should be accessible to the masses, that it should be “party-minded”), but they are too general to have guided such a distinctive practice.

It is not in theoretical writings but in practical examples that one should look for an answer to the question What is Socialist Realism? Soviet scholars have been arguing since the term was coined in 1932 over what it means, and their debates are, in essence, mere academic hairsplitting. Scholars still argue, for instance, as to how much “realism” and how much “romanticism” it should entail.¹ In the meantime, Socialist Realism has long since evolved into a highly conventionalized literary practice. Consequently, instead of going into the Byzantine arguments that surround the question What is Socialist Realism?, I shall use a strictly pragmatic approach and define Soviet Socialist Realism as a canonical doctrine defined by its patristic texts.

Nowhere has Soviet Socialist Realism been more conventionalized than in the subject of this inquiry, the novel. Although the clichés of the novel are in some measure officially fostered, the source for them has not been theoretical pronouncements but, rather, official “model” novels. Ever since 1932, when the