

ALEXEI TOLSTOY

ORDEAL

A Trilogy

THE SISTERS
1918
BLEAK MORNING



The Sisters



FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow 1953

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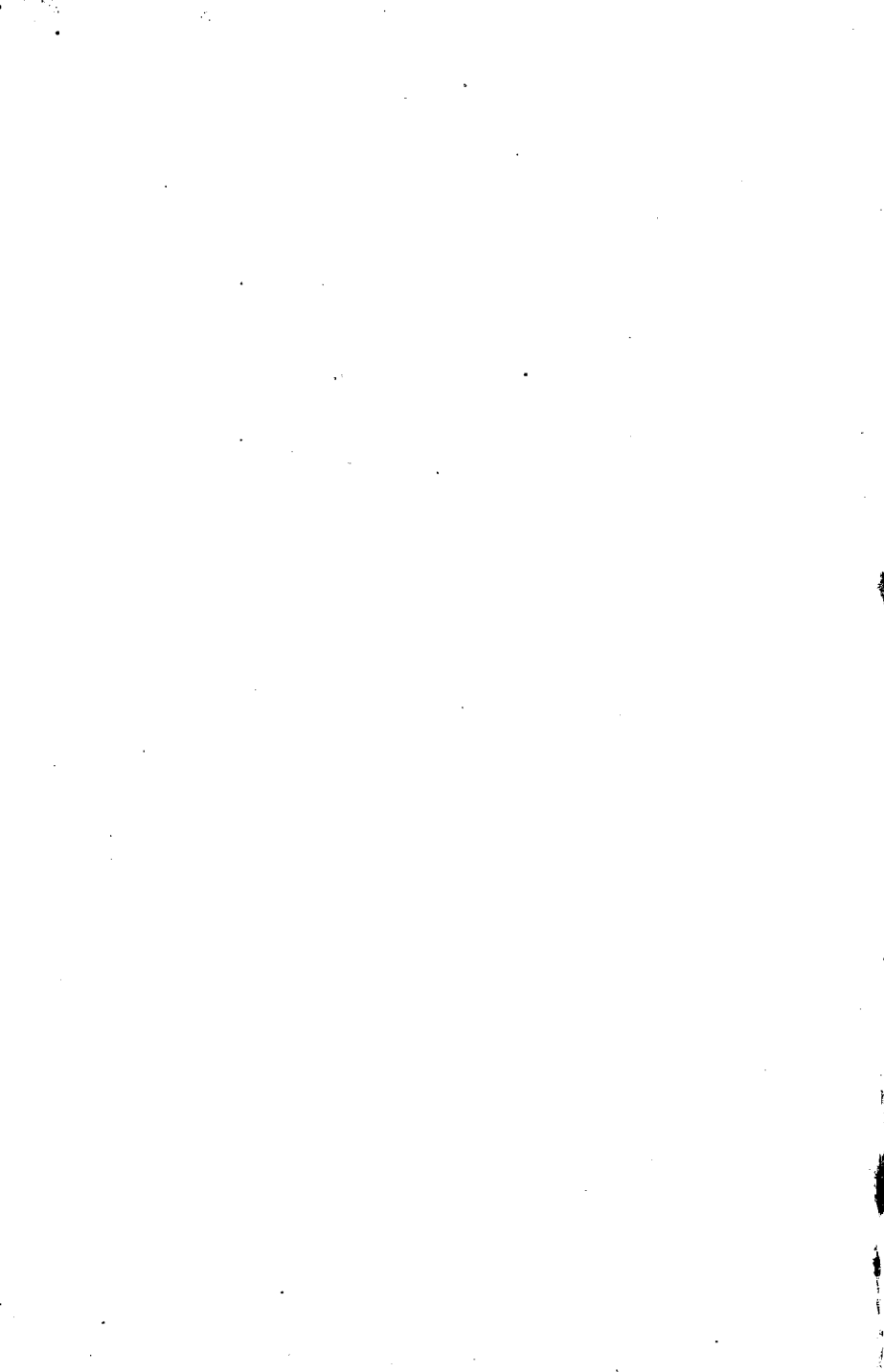
Alexei Tolstoy

ORDEAL

A Trilogy

STALIN PRIZE

1943



ALEXEI TOLSTOY

ORDEAL

A Trilogy

THE SISTERS
1918
BLEAK MORNING



The Sisters



FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE
Moscow 1953

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY IVY AND TATIANA LITVINOVA

BOOK DESIGN BY Y. KOGAN

ILLUMINATIONS AND TAILPIECES

BY V. SVESHNIKOV

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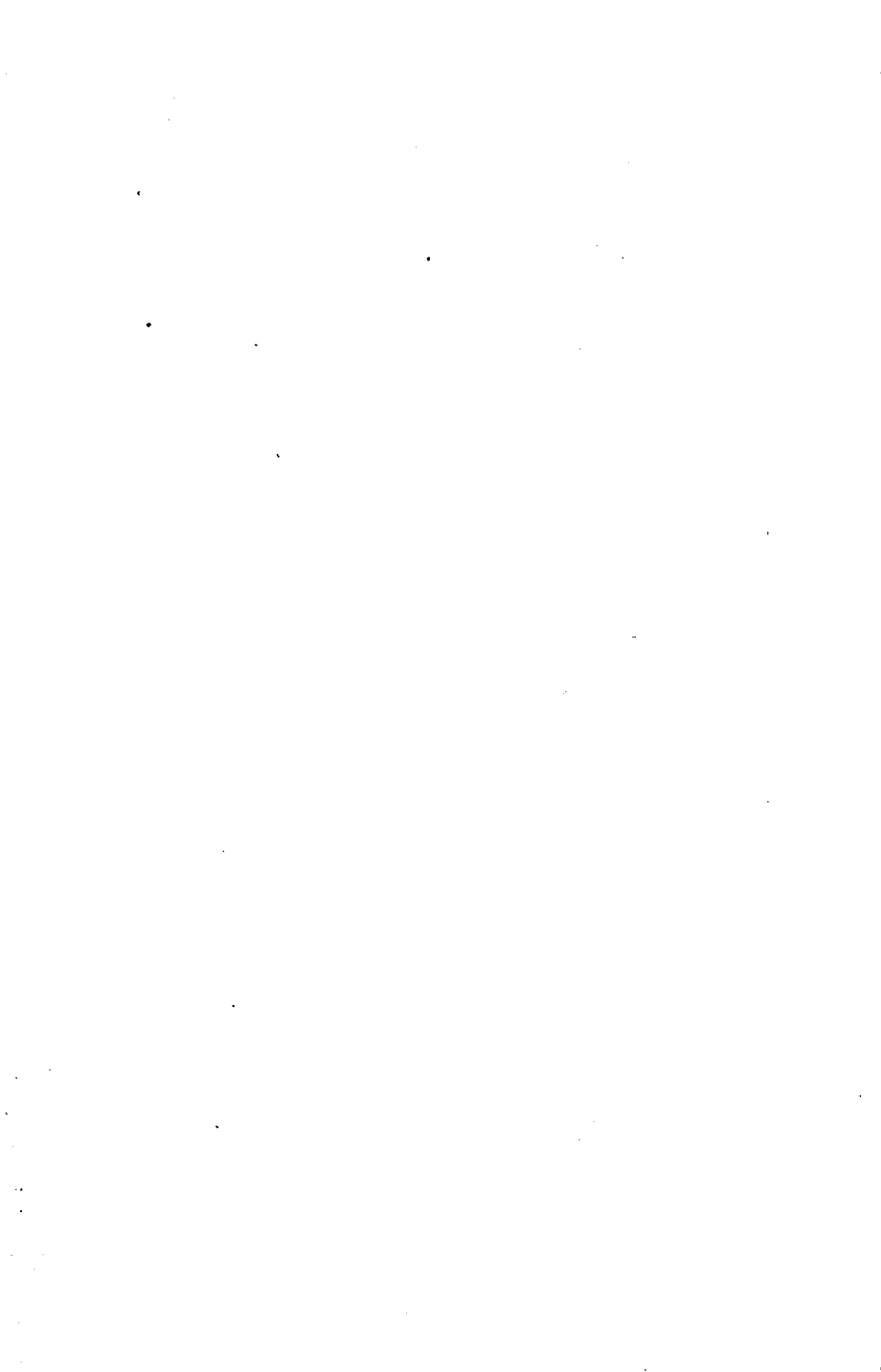
**ХОЖДЕНИЕ
ПО МУКАМ**

Трилогия

Сестры
Восемнадцатый год
Хмурое утро

*

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ
НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ
Москва 1953



Autobiographical Sketch

I GREW UP on a steppe farmstead about sixty miles from Samara. My father, Nikolai Alexeyevich Tolstoy was a Samara landowner. My mother, Alexandra Leontyevna, née Turgeneva (she was a grand-niece of Nikolai Ivanovich Turgenev*), left my father before my birth. Her second husband, my stepfather, Alexei Apollonovich Bostrom, was at the time a member of the Zemstvo for the town of Nikolayevsk (now Pugachevsk).

When she separated from my father, my mother left her three little children behind her—two sons, Alexander and Mstislav, and a daughter Elizaveta. She went from her home to enter upon a hard life, for the step she had taken meant the sundering of all family ties, as well as a break with aristocratic society. To leave one's husband was a crime, a disgrace, in the eyes of society she was no longer a decent woman, she had become a fallen woman. She was thus regarded by all, including her father, Leonti Borisovich Turgenev, and her mother, Ekaterina Alexandrovna.

Her great love for A. A. Bostrom was not the only thing which made her decide on this critical step; my mother was a very well-educated woman for her times, and a writer. (She was the author of the novels *The Unquiet Heart* and *A Remote Corner*, and later she wrote a series of books for children, of which the most popular was *My Friend*.) Samara society in the 'eighties, until exiled Marxists made their appearance there, presented a repulsive and depressing picture. Rich flour-mill owners, merchants, buying up the estates of the gentry, steppe landowners gradually falling into ruin, and

* Nikolai Ivanovich Turgenev (1789-1871)—financier and social worker. Opposed serfdom in Russia. Was sentenced to death for his part in the antitsarist rising of December 14, 1825. The sentence could not be carried out, owing to his absence from Russia.

dragging out their days in idleness and boredom, against a background of those middle-class vulgarians depicted with such loathing by Gorky. .

In this town, dusty, hideous, sinister, and in the surrounding suburbs, drink and depravity were the order of the day. When the small land proprietor, Alexei Apollonovich Bostrom, young, handsome, a liberal and a reader, a man with spiritual "demands," appeared on the scene, my mother was faced with a problem of life and death: to allow herself to decay in a filthy quagmire, or to enter upon a lofty, spiritual, pure way of life. And she went away to a new husband and a new life at Nikolayevsk. It was there that my mother wrote her two tales under the title *A Remote Corner*.

Alexei Apollonovich, a liberal and a "descendant of the 'sixties," group* (the words "the 'sixties" were always uttered with veneration, as denoting a sacred, lofty thing), unable to get on with the steppe landowners of Nikolayevsk, was not re-elected to the Zemstvo and went back with my mother and myself, now a child of two, to his farmstead at Sosnovka.

It was there that my childhood was passed. An orchard . . . reed-fringed ponds ringed with willows. . . . The steppe river Chagra. . . . The village children my only comrades. . . . Saddle horses. . . . The steppe, covered with tall, feathery grass, and the monotonous horizon broken only by funeral barrows. . . . The changing seasons, which seemed always to be huge events and new every time. . . . All this, and above all the fact that I grew up in solitude, helped to develop the dreamer in me.

When winter came and the snow lay in heaps on orchard and house, the howling of wolves was heard at nights. When the wind wailed in the chimneys the hanging lamp would be lit over the round table in the dining room, a poorly-furnished room with plaster walls, and my stepfather would read aloud—usually from Nekrasov, Lev Tolstoy or Turgenev,** and sometimes from the latest number of the *European Herald*.

* Men of the 'sixties—progressive, revolutionary-democratic writers of the eighteen-sixties, who criticized the Peasant Reform of February 19, 1861, and expatiated revolutionary slogans. The movement included N. G. Chernyshevsky, N. A. Dobrolyubov, A. I. Herzen, N. P. Ogarev, and others.

** Turgenev—the writer, Ivan Sergeyevich Turgenev (1818-1883).

My mother would knit a stocking while she listened. I would draw or colour the pictures in a story book. . . . There was nothing to disturb the peace of these evenings in the old wooden house, smelling of the heat from whitewashed stoves, heated by dried dung or straw, and one had to take a candle to move from one dark room to another.

I hardly read any children's books, probably I hadn't any. My favourite author was Turgenev. I began to hear his works read aloud in the winter evenings from the age of seven. Next in order of preference came Lev Tolstoy, Nekrasov, and Pushkin. (Dostoyevsky inspired a certain terror in our household—he was considered a "cruel" writer.)

My stepfather was a militant atheist and materialist. He had read Buckle, Spencer, Conte, and loved above all things arguments on ideological questions. This did not prevent him housing his labourers in tumble-down premises with a rotting floor and the walls alive with black beetles, or from feeding his servants on tainted meat.

Later on, when the Marxist exiles began to arrive, my stepfather got to know them, and had many a warm debate with them; but he never mastered *Capital*, contenting himself with the works of Kant and the English economists.

My mother was an atheist, too, but more, it seems to me, on principle than actually. She feared death, loved giving herself up to dreaming, and was always writing. My stepfather, however, inflicted his "ideology" rigorously upon her, and the teachers, country midwives and Zemstvo workers in her plays (none of which ever reached the theatre) uttered monologues fairly bursting with social significance.

From the age of ten I became a great reader, still within the range of the classics. But three years later, when my parents managed, not without difficulty (I received the lowest marks for all subjects in the entrance examination), to get me into the Syzran "Modern" High School, I discovered in the municipal library the works of Jules Verne, Fenimore Cooper and Mayne Reid, which I devoured eagerly, though my mother and stepfather contemptuously dubbed them "trash."

Until I started going to the Syzran High School I had been taught at home. My stepfather brought a teacher from Samara—

Arkadi Ivanovich Slovookhotov, a student of the ecclesiastical seminary, pock-marked and violently red-haired, a fine character, with whom I lived in close friendship, without, however, learning much from him, or overburdening myself with study. Slovookhotov was followed by an exiled Marxist. He stayed with us one winter, employed himself listlessly in giving me lessons in algebra, stared hopelessly at the iron ventilator revolving in the windowpane, was not easily dragged into theoretical arguments with my stepfather, and departed in the spring...

One winter—I was then about ten years old—my mother suggested to me that I might try and write a story. She was extremely anxious for me to be a writer. I struggled over the adventures of a boy called Stepka during many an evening, but I now remember nothing of this story save the phrase that the snow sparkled like diamonds in the rays of the moon. I had never seen diamonds, but I enjoyed the phrase. The story of Stepka was apparently not a success, for my mother never again forced creative labour upon me.

Up till the age of thirteen, till I entered the High School, I lived a dreamy, contemplative life. This did not, of course, prevent me from spending whole days at the haymaking, among the stubble, the threshing floor, and with the village boys at the river, or from going in the winter to friends among the peasants to listen to fairy stories, fables and songs, to have a game of knucklebones or cards ("Kings," "My trumps," etc.), to take part in a rousing game of fisticuffs among the snowdrifts.... Other pleasures were riding bareback on unbroken horses, and "dressing-up" at Christmas and New Year.

A profound impression, the traces of which have never been erased, was made upon my mind by the three years of famine, from 1891 to 1893. Great cracks appeared in the earth, the trees turned colour and shed their leaves and the crops stood brown and scorched. A murky wave of heat quivered low over the horizon, burning up every vestige of plant life.

The roofs of the houses in the villages lay bare and exposed, the straw having been used to feed the cattle, and the emaciated beasts which survived had to be tied to crossbeams, to keep them on their feet. My stepfather had the utmost difficulty in pulling his estate during these years, and ultimately, a few years later he was forced to sell it. The entire province of Samara passed into

the hands of Shekhobalov, a landed magnate who bought up estates of the gentry, and rented them to the peasants for whatever annual payment he chose to name.

In 1897 we left Sosnovka for good. It was sold to the "post-office" kulak, an individual who got his nickname having robbed the post office and hidden the money for the ten years of prescription, thus laying the foundation of his prosperity. We moved to Samara to a house in Saratovskaya Street purchased by my stepfather with the money left over after the mortgage on his estate had been paid and all bills met.

I graduated at the High School in Samara in the year 1901, and went to Petersburg to prepare for the university entrance examinations, entering the preparatory school of S. Voitinsky in Terioki, for the purpose. I passed the examinations for the Technological Institute, and was enrolled in the Department of Mechanics.

My first attempts at literature were made when I was sixteen—feeble verses written under the influence of Nekrasov and Nadson. I cannot recall what impulse made me write them, but suppose they must have been the fruit of vague aspirations seeking an outlet. The poems were but mediocre, and I gave up struggling over them.

Nevertheless I was continually being drawn towards a creative process of some sort, I loved notebooks, pen and ink... While still a student I returned again and again to my attempts at writing, but this was only the beginning of something which was unable to find a form for itself, or to come to completion...

I married early, at the age of nineteen. My wife was a medical student and up to the end of the year 1906 ours was the usual hard-working life of students. Like everyone else, I took part in student movements and strikes, and was a member of the Social-Democratic faction. I also worked on the dining-room committee of the Technological Institute. In 1903 I was nearly killed by a flying cobblestone during a demonstration in front of Kazan Cathedral, and was only saved by a book which happened to be thrust inside the breast of my coat.

When the higher educational institutions closed, in 1905, I went to Dresden, to study at the Polytechnicum for a year. There I again took up the writing of poetry, experimenting in revolutionary verses such as Tan-Bogoraz and even the youthful Bal-mont were then writing, and in lyrical forms. Returning to Samara

in the summer of 1906, I showed them to my mother. She told me sorrowfully that they were very mediocre. This notebook has not survived.

Every era has its own style, in which thoughts, sensations, and passions are cloaked. I had not yet acquired this new form, and was still unable to create it for myself.

In the summer of 1906 my mother died of meningitis, and I left for Petersburg to continue my studies at the Technological Institute.

A reactionary era had set in, and the Symbolists made their way to the footlights under its aegis....

It was an official of the Ministry for Ways and Communications, Konstantin Sergeyevich Vanderflit, a yachtsman, a crank, and a dreamer, who first acquainted me with their works, as represented by Vyacheslav Ivanov, Balmont and Andrei Byeli. In his attic on the Vasilyevsky Island he read me the verses of the Symbolists by the light of an oil lamp, expounding them with the warmth of his inimitable imagination.

It was then, in the spring of 1907, that I brought out my first volume of "decadent" verses, a derivative, naïve and worthless work. But it helped me to lay down a path for myself towards the assimilation of modern forms of poetry. A year later I had another book of verse ready, entitled *Beyond the Blue Rivers*. I am not ashamed of this book to this day. *Beyond the Blue Rivers* was the result of my first acquaintance with Russian folklore and Russian folk art.

After this I began my first attempts at prose—*Tales of a Magpie*. In these tales I endeavoured in fairy-tale form to express the impressions of my childhood. But I was able to do this with more success only many years later, in the story *Nikita's Childhood*.

It was the poet and translator M. Voloshin who started me on the writing of fiction. In the summer of 1909 I heard him read his translation of Henri de Régnier. The exquisitely chiselled images made a great impression on me. The Symbolists, with their search for form, and aesthetes like Régnier implanted in me conceptions of what I then lacked, and without which there can be no artistic creation—form and technique.

In the autumn of 1909 I wrote my first story *A Week in Turenovo* which was afterwards included in my *Volga Anthology*, and

subsequently in a longer volume entitled *Under the Old Lime Trees*, a collection of stories treating of that section of the landed proprietors and gentry whose estates were being gradually bought up by new land magnates like Shekhobalov.

Those landed gentry who, firmly rooted to the soil, had turned to intensive forms of husbandry, are not touched upon in my book. I did not know them.

Then came two novels: *The Lame Prince* and *The Eccentrics*, which brought to its close my first period of writing about the surroundings of my early youth.

Having exhausted my reminiscences, I turned to contemporary life. And here I came to grief. My novels and stories of this period were a failure, they did not bring out the characteristic features of the times. Now I understand the reason for this. I was still living in Symbolist circles, whose reactionary art rejected modern life, which was moving tempestuously and inexorably to meet the revolution.

The Symbolists had plunged into abstractions and mysticism, had repaired to their "ivory towers," where they hoped to be able to cultivate their talents and escape impending events.

Loving life as I did, I resisted abstractions and the idealistic outlook with all the force of my temperament. And that which had been useful to me in 1910, by 1913 had become a danger and an obstacle.

I fully realized that such a state of affairs could not go on. Always a diligent worker, I began to work harder than ever, but the results were melancholy, for I knew nothing about the people, and the real life of the country.

Then came the war. I was at the front as war correspondent for the *Russian Record*, and in 1916 went to England and France. I do not have my book of wartime articles republished any more, the tsarist censorship having made it impossible to express fully what I saw and experienced. Only a few stories from that period have found their way into my collected works.

But I had seen real life, I had taken part in it, tearing off the tightly buttoned black frock coat of the Symbolists. I had seen the Russian people.

I turned to the theme of Peter the Great in the very first months of the February Revolution. It must have been artistic intuition rather than conscious reasoning which made me seek in

this theme the key to the mystery of the Russian people, of Russian statesmanship. The late historian V. V. Kallash gave me much help in my new work. The treasure of the Russian language lay spread before me in all its brilliance, in all its force and genius. I had at last discovered the secret of literary construction: literary form is conditioned by the writer's own inner feelings, conveyed first by motion (gesture), and then through words (speech), in which the choice and arrangement of words are equivalent to gesticulation.

I date the beginning of my theatrical work as a dramatist to the first days of the war. Before 1913 I had written *The Oppressors*, a comedy which was performed at the Maly Theatre, Moscow. It evoked a fervent reaction in a section of the public, and was very soon prohibited by the director of the Imperial Theatres.

From 1914 to 1917 I wrote five plays, all of which were produced on the stage: *The Shot*, *The Evil One*, *The Darling*, *The Rocket*, and *The Bitter Blossom*.*

After the October Revolution I once again turned to fiction, working a rough draft of *Peter's Day*, and writing *Compassion!*, a story which was my first attempt to make a critical assessment of the Russian liberal intelligentsia in the light of the conflagration of the October Revolution.

In the autumn of 1918 I took my family to the Ukraine, spending the winter in Odessa, where I wrote a play *The Golden Book of Love* and *Cagliostro*, a long story. From Odessa I went with my family to Paris. And there, in July, 1919, I began my epic *Ordeal*.

The time spent as an emigré was the hardest period of my life. There I learned what it meant to be a pariah, a man cut off from his native land, weightless and barren, not wanted by anyone, in any circumstances whatever.

I threw myself with enthusiasm into writing *The Sisters* (the first part of *Ordeal*), *Nikita's Childhood* (a story), and *The Adventures of Nikita Roshchin* at the same time embarking upon a great work—the revising of all that was of any value among what I had written so far....

* *The Shot* is the early version of the play *Cuckoo Grass*. *The Bitter Blossom* is the first version of *The Reactionaries*, which in later versions appeared under the titles *Aquila* and the *Expulsion of the Prodigal*.

In the autumn of 1921 I moved to Berlin, and entered the *Smena Vekh* (Changing Landmarks) group.* This meant the instant breaking off of all relations with the emigré writers. My former friends "went into mourning" for me. In the spring of 1922 Alexei Maximovich Peshkov (Gorky) came to Berlin from the Soviet Union, and we became friends.

During my Berlin period I wrote *Aelita*, a novel, and the stories *Black Friday*, *The Murder of Antoine Ribeaux*, and *The Manuscript Found Under the Bed*, the most serious as to theme of all these works. At that time I also finally completed *Nikita's Childhood* and the first part of *Ordeal*.

In the spring of 1922 by way of a reply to the curses heaped upon me from Paris, I published my *Letter to Chaikovsky* (reprinted in *Izvestia*), and went with my family to Soviet Russia.

I started on two books after my return to my native land: *Ibicus* (a story) and *Blue Cities*, a shorter tale, written after a visit to the Ukraine. In addition, I worked on several short stories of less importance.

The *Letter to Chaikovsky*, dictated by my love for my native land and my desire once more to devote my powers to my native land and its building-up, was my passport, an unacceptable one to the Trotskyites, the "Left" groups, revolving in their orbit, and, consequently, to many of the leaders of the RAPW.**

* *Smena Vekh*—a political bourgeois movement, which sprung up among the White Russian intelligentsia in emigration in 1921. It assumed the name after publishing a collection of articles and essays under the title of "Smena Vekh" (Changing Landmarks). Having realized the hopelessness of ever overthrowing the Soviet Power, the *Smena Vekh* people counted on the internal collapse of the Soviet State as a result of the New Economic Policy. A. Tolstoy did not realize the full significance of the reactionary anti-Soviet tendencies of the *Smena Vekh* group. By the year 1922, however, after the publication of his *Letter to N. V. Chaikovsky*, it was obvious that A. Tolstoy was in many respects breaking off, not only with the White Guards as a whole, but with the *Smena Vekhites* also.

** RAPW—Russian Association of Proletarian Writers. A literary political organization, founded in 1925. In its initial stages it played a certain role in the struggle for proletarian literature. After numerous grave theoretical and political errors, it was dissolved in 1932.

In 1924 I went back to writing for the theatre, contributing *The Expulsion of the Prodigal*, *The Intrigues of the Empress* and *Azef*, the comedy *Wonders Never Cease*, *The Return of Youth* and three adaptations from novels—*The Riot of the Machines* by Capek, *Businessman* by Hasenklewer and *Anna Christie* by O'Neill.

The pressure brought to bear upon me by the RAPW increased with every year and finally assumed dimensions forcing me to abandon my work as a playwright for several years.

In 1926 I wrote *The Hyperboloid of Engineer Garin* (a novel), and a year after began work on the second part of *Ordeal*—the novel 1918.

All this time I worked unceasingly on the improvement of all that I had hitherto written.

In 1929 I returned to the theme of Peter the Great, in my play *On the Rack*, in which I still clung to certain "traditional" tendencies in the treatment of the epoch. By 1934 the play was completely rewritten by me and performed at the Alexandrinsky Theatre, Leningrad, and by 1937 gone through in its final form and given a new production by the same theatre.

The production of the first version of *Peter* at the Second Art Theatre was received with open hostility by the RAPW but was saved by Comrade Stalin, who, in the year 1929, had given the true historical estimate of the period of Peter.

In 1930 I wrote the first part of my novel *Peter I*. A year and a half later came the nonfictional *Black Gold*, worked over anew by me in 1938 and published under the title *The Emigrés*. I finished the second part of *Peter I* in 1934.

The two published parts of *Peter I* are a mere introduction to the third novel, work on which I have just embarked upon (autumn, 1943).*

What led me to the epoch of Peter I? It is not true that I chose this epoch as a foil to our own times. I was attracted by the sensation of the fulness of the unembellished creative forces

* Alexei Tolstoy was working on the third part of his novel *Peter I* all through the year 1944, and in the beginning of 1945. The grave illness, culminating in his death in February 1945, prevented him from finishing his book. Only the first six chapters of Part III were completed.—Ed.