RUSSIAN WRITERS AND SOVIET SOCIETY

1917-1978

Ronald Hingley

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Russian Writers and Soviet Society 1917–1978

Век мой, зверь мой, кто сумеет
Заглянуть в твои зрачки
И своею кровью склеит
Двух столетий позвонки?

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Introduction

This volume is a companion to my earlier *Russian Writers and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (1967; second, revised edition, 1977).

The interplay of modern Russian social and literary forces makes an exhilarating study with many aspects unprecedented in the world's pre-1917 cultural history. Yet by no means all established traditions have been cast aside in the new epoch. For example, belles-lettres still fulfil, in Soviet Russian as formerly in Imperial Russian society, a significant function somewhat differing from that which they have in any Western country. Imaginative literature – whether published in Russia, secretly circulated there, or brought out abroad – is traditionally a major vehicle for such political controversy as Tsarist and post-Tsarist conditions have permitted. It is – again by tradition – a source from which readers expect not merely to derive entertainment, but also to learn how life should be lived. It is, further, the window through which we can catch glimpses, true and distorted, of Russia; and how often it happens, paradoxically, that the very distortions provide the truest insights.

Imaginative writings of the Soviet period can provide clues, such as nothing else will furnish, to a newly evolved civilization fascinating to outsiders. Thus the study of the literature transcends the literary element that it comprehends, being indispensable to the historian, sociologist and student of current affairs. Modern Russian belles-lettres would therefore be well worth examining even if they lacked literary merit; as indeed certain of the most socially significant writings arguably do. But it does not follow that the literature as a whole is ill equipped to hold its ground purely as literature. On the contrary, it exhibits enormous variety and originality, together with a formidable capacity to shock, tantalize, surprise and delight.

That these facts are generally recognized is suggested by the large

array of modern Russian literary works – including novels, short stories, poetry and memoirs – published in English and other languages over the years, and especially in the last two decades. We also have some admirable literary histories, beginning with the two by Gleb Struve, and including those of Deming Brown and Edward J. Brown, to mention only a few among the valuable aids to study that are included in the Bibliography. But what we do not have is a single work adequately and compendiously treating the literature of the whole period in its social context, not chronologically but topic by topic. That is what is offered here, as an adjunct to such differently conceived studies as those mentioned above and not with the remotest suggestion of superseding either them or another contribution which, among the many surveys of modern Russian literature, is probably the least remote from the present volume in scope and intention. This is Boris Thomson's useful *The Premature Revolution*, which – like the studies indicated above and others too numerous to mention – has had some influence on the pages that follow. However, closely concerned though Professor Thomson is with the Soviet socio-literary context, his book differs radically from mine in its approach and structural pattern, besides covering a much shorter time span (1917–46, treated chronologically in two sections separated by the year 1928).

It has been a rewarding experience to prepare this sequel to my earlier book on Russian writers and their society. But this later work has proved the harder task by far; indeed, it was through contemplation of the many cogent reasons why the assignment could not conceivably be undertaken that its challenge began to seem irresistible. Through accepting it I returned to twentieth-century Russian studies for the first time since completing my biography of Stalin in late 1972. That investigation has provided valuable insights into the background of the present work, for so intimate has been the interpenetration of politics and letters in the Soviet era that it was a master politician who chiefly determined the course of literary history, not any combination of writers. The subject falls, as we shall see, into three clearly differentiated periods: before Stalin, during Stalin and after Stalin.

The most significant twentieth-century works are likely to be less familiar to potential users of this study than are those of the previous age. For example, in my *Russian Writers and Society in the Nineteenth Century* the main works of Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Chekhov could be taken as common ground. But even the best-known

of later Russian writers – including Sholokhov, Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn – cannot simply be paraded as a sequence of known factors. Still less may such assumptions be made about the many relatively obscure authors and works that clamour for inclusion far more insistently when the twentieth, as opposed to the nineteenth, century is the theme. Even so there are important writers and works that have not found mention for lack of space.

The present study is, accordingly, considerably longer than its predecessor, and it includes (in Chapters 2–4) certain material such as barely figures in the earlier book: a chronological review of the main historical events; an analysis of interacting Russian and foreign influences at home and abroad; a general review of the various literary genres. The incorporation of these passages was dictated by the material itself, for my book has insisted on being constructed on the 'zooming' principle, to express the matter in cinematic terms: it begins with long-distance shots and moves from panorama to close-up, except that the zoom is here designed to be leisurely and deliberate rather than a sudden swoop. Part One accordingly frames the subject in its widest historical and literary dimensions, beginning with a discussion of the ordeals and upheavals that outside observers must take especial pains to include in their sympathies. Part Two examines the literary implications of the country's social and political composition – its peoples, its power structure, its class system and its patterns of domestic life – through a medium-angle lens that enables us to take in more detail without forgetting the wider perspectives. Finally, in Part Three we focus on the literary profession in such detail as space permits: the movements and theories; the control mechanisms; the psychology of writers who accept or reject official pressures in varying degrees; the technical processes whereby a literary work progresses from pen to print. By contrast, *Russian Writers and Society in the Nineteenth Century* follows a different, rather looser plan.

Another difference between the two volumes is that an attempt was made in the earlier study to supply information which the great Russian authors, writing largely for a domestic audience, assumed their readers to possess, but which was not in fact easily available to the foreign reader. With the Soviet period such an aim seemed inappropriate, since the writers concerned have often been obliged to operate within a framework imposed by non-literary authority, while it is Western specialists who have preferential access to much information about

Russian society that is sedulously concealed from its rank and file. Soviet-domiciled Russians do of course feel the texture and vibrations of their milieu with greater sensitivity than that to which foreigners can aspire. On the other hand, foreigners can obtain Russian literary material and can probe its conditioning factors far more easily. Even Soviet-published works can often be bought, borrowed, consulted or (I suppose) stolen with less difficulty in London, Paris or New York – and perhaps in Hoboken, Le Touquet or Minchinhampton – than is possible in Moscow or Leningrad, not to mention the host of officially disapproved works that are easily obtainable in the West but can only be consulted with difficulty and risk in the USSR itself. To this we must add that some Soviet-published literary material is unrepresentative: not least in the case of deceased authors whose work is issued selectively, ideologically sensitive items tending to be omitted.

A special responsibility is accordingly placed upon the foreign specialist in modern Russian literature. Not only can he obtain the source material with comparative ease, but he is also free to judge the issues unhampered by extraneous political pressure. The result is that, far from supplying information such as Russian writers might reasonably assume their readers to possess, this new study furnishes much information which writers of the Soviet period might well assume their readers not to have the remotest chance of possessing; which even the writers themselves may not possess; and which many of them would probably be glad to have.

One feature of a study such as this is that its compiler need not obtrude aesthetic evaluations, especially as certain authors have a place in the book independent of the quality of their writings. For example, whatever we may think of Nikolay Ostrovsky's *How the Steel was Tempered* (1932–4) or of Vladimir Dudintsev's *Not by Bread Alone* (1956) as works of art, their social significance dictates that they must be mentioned here. Moreover, as is illustrated by the fortunes of these particular novels – the former still an honoured Soviet classic, the latter now forgotten or disgraced – we must beware of correlating a work's literary quality with the degree of its acceptability to Soviet authority. The same is true on a more exalted level. Broadly speaking, Mayakovsky, Sholokhov and Leonov have been politically respectable, whereas Solzhenitsyn and Pasternak (especially Pasternak the prose writer) have not. As these names indicate, there is no monopoly of literary excellence, any more than there is of literary incompetence, on

either side of the barrier formed by ideological acceptability; nor, as will be seen below, is that barrier itself permanently fixed, for it has been shifted again and again owing to fluctuations in the official 'line'.

This brings out a further difference between this volume and its earlier companion. The previous study was devoted to an obsolete social system, that of the Tsars, which can be studied dispassionately because it long ago collapsed. This later book, by contrast, scrutinizes a militantly expansive and live society unceasingly engaged in publicizing its own official view of itself: a practice that makes it all the more essential for the outside observer to cultivate as objective an approach as he can contrive.

An attempt has been made here, as in the previous volume, to enliven the text with references to literary works. That these allusions should be somewhat impressionistic is inevitable since there could be no question of supplying a systematic description of the literary themes as a whole. Had this been attempted it would have been necessary to compile an entire library rather than a single book. When, therefore, observations on (say) Siberia are illustrated from belles-lettres, there has been no intention of supplying an exhaustive account of the Siberian theme in literature.

Though 'Soviet society' appears in the book's title, and though reference is repeatedly made in the text to such concepts as Soviet Russia, Soviet literary authority, Soviet citizens and the like, attentive readers may already have noticed that such expressions as Soviet literature, Soviet fiction and Soviet writers are scrupulously avoided except in quotations from other authorities. Preferring to speak of modern Russian writers resident in the USSR, or of Russian literature in the Soviet period, I not only depart from usage in the country of origin, where authors are regularly designated as Soviet writers, but also diverge from Western authorities on the subject, who tend to employ such terms while sometimes while making it clear that they deplore them. In his study, *Soviet Russian Literature Since Stalin* (1978), Deming Brown flies one of these expressions at his mast-head, and I think no worse of his valuable book for that; but I have not followed his practice.

The inconvenience of 'Soviet literature' and the like derives from the ambiguity, especially in the literary context, of the word Soviet. It possesses two distinct connotations, the one territorial and the other

ideological, while lending itself all too easily to employment in a vague sense – part territorial, part ideological – which blurs the distinction and is often downright misleading.

Used in the territorial sense, 'Soviet author' designates a citizen of the USSR, resident in that country and writing in one of its languages – by no means necessarily in Russian. The Russian language is, after all, only the chief tongue among several score that are spoken in the Soviet Union, and in which literary works have been written. Unconcerned here with Chukchi, Lithuanian, Ukrainian or Uzbek, or with any of the other non-Russian Soviet literatures of the USSR from Abkhazian to Yakut, I might have accepted the term 'Soviet *Russian* literature' were it not that this would seem to exclude from consideration modern Russian literature written in emigration. Such self-limitation seemed undesirable, not only because émigré Russian literature has included many notable contributions, but also because so many émigré writers have remained conscious of their ties with the motherland, and have not grown new skins at the moment of quitting Soviet territory. Ivan Bunin, one of the most eminent modern Russian writers and the first (in 1933) of his country's four literary Nobel Prize winners, continued to follow literary developments in his homeland from French emigration. Moreover, though Bunin's writings lay for many years under the ban of silence imposed at home on the work of émigrés, much of his *œuvre* did eventually come to be published in the USSR after his death.[1] Another well-known literary expatriate, Vladimir Nabokov, founded his career by publishing – in Western Europe, in the 1920s and 1930s and in obscurity so far as the world at large was then concerned – eight novels, and also poems and short stories, in his native tongue, using the pseudonym 'Vladimir Sirin'. He too will be kept in mind, though he naturally tends to vanish from our spectrum when, in 1940, he begins writing and publishing directly in English: his best-selling novel *Lolita* (1955) is more a work of American than of Russian literature.

Though émigré literature will only be considered incidentally it could not have been left entirely out of account since emigration need not be, as it was for Bunin and Nabokov, a permanent condition. Not a few important writers were temporary émigrés only, and for varying periods, as designated. They include Maksim Gorky (1921–31), Aleksandr Kuprin (1919–37), Aleksey Tolstoy (1918–23) and Marina Tsvetayeva (1922–39). Another leading figure, Ilya Ehrenburg, was

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largely resident in Western Europe in the 1920s and 1930s while he continued to revisit Soviet Russia, hovering between expatriate status and that of a Soviet citizen temporarily residing abroad.

A further difficulty is this: that, besides implying residence in and citizenship of the USSR, 'Soviet' can also denote something not necessarily correlated with territorial associations: acceptance of the country's official ideology. Many are those writers who, though indisputably Soviet by citizenship and residence, have yet been denounced in their native press as anti-Soviet, or who have even been accorded the status of what foreign observers sometimes call 'unpersons': that is, their names have ceased to appear in print, disappearing from reference works and from the indexes to the literary journals in which their writings have appeared.

The most celebrated of such 'unpersons' is now Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who is bound to figure prominently in any study such as this, and who has repeatedly indicated that he considers himself a Russian and not a Soviet writer. Yet even Solzhenitsyn was published for a few years in the Soviet press, thus enjoying a measure of temporary official acceptance that would entitle him to be termed, on any mechanical interpretation of the word, a Soviet author in part, if only in minuscule part. Other authors – the novelist Vladimir Maksimov, for example – have published, in their native land, work that we infer to have been officially acceptable (and therefore 'Soviet') from the mere fact of its appearance in a Soviet publication, but have emigrated in the end and brought out further writings issued under foreign imprint and therefore by implication non-Soviet, un-Soviet or anti-Soviet. Then again, Andrey Sinyavsky was publishing certain writings under his own name in the Soviet Union while other works of his were appearing simultaneously in the West under the pseudonym 'Abram Tertz'.

To these complexities it must be added that ideological disgrace need not, in the USSR, necessarily prove any more permanent a condition than foreign residence: witness the numerous writers first consigned to oblivion – and also, in many instances, to physical extinction – only to be rehabilitated and republished later in keeping with fluctuations in official literary policy: Babel, Pilnyak, Mandelstam and many others. Such writers are, from the official point of view, now Soviet, now unmentionable or anti-Soviet.

Even if the term Soviet were less fluid than it is, we could no longer continue to divide Russian writings of the modern period into two

categories, Soviet and émigré, as was once the custom. Gleb Struve has spoken of two streams in the modern literature – currents which, though they might conceivably become reunited in the future, he has treated separately in two important books. However, as mention of Pasternak, Sinyavsky and Solzhenitsyn reminds us, a third major stream has formed in modern Russian literature since the terminal dates of Struve's works (the mid-1950s) and has rendered the boundary line between Soviet and émigré literature still more difficult to draw. The new stream consists of literary works which, though written by Soviet citizens and on Soviet soil, have proved, or have seemed qualified to prove, unacceptable for publication in their country of origin, but which have found their way to foreign countries, there to be published, both in Russian and in translation, often after privately circulating at home in typescript or manuscript copies. To this category belong most of Solzhenitsyn's longer works – published abroad, but not in the Soviet Union. We may also instance *A Precocious Autobiography* (1963) by the poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, which he published abroad without so far as is known clearing this with the Soviet authorities. Of such writings Pasternak's novel *Doctor Zhivago* (1957) was the earliest notable example in the post-Stalin period. Russians themselves term these works *samizdat* ('self-publications') when they circulate clandestinely.

To the many examples of *samizdat* belles-lettres that reach a foreign readership we shall allude, for want of a better term, as 'Export Only' literature. The term must not, however, be taken as implying that a given author was necessarily responsible for sending his work abroad in the first place; or even that he was aware of its being sent abroad. Still less should 'Export Only' be taken as suggesting that he sought or derived any financial benefit from the transaction.

What with one and the same authors now emigrating and now repatriating themselves; publishing now officially, now unofficially, now at home, now abroad; re-editing or restoring on foreign soil the text of their own Soviet-published or *samizdat*-circulated works; and what with the fluctuating political line whereby individual authors are liable to sudden disgrace, but also to eventual gradual rehabilitation, so that they are now acceptable and now unacceptable to the authorities, and that in varying degree – the term Soviet, as applied to works of literature, and even more as applied to their creators, seems to offer nothing but pitfalls. Mercifully few are the literary loyalists, however

extreme, who have never betrayed any tendency to deviate from one-hundred-per-cent political orthodoxy, just as there are few Russian defectors, dissidents and oppositionists who consider their motherland and its way of arranging its affairs to be unrelievedly black as the pit from pole to pole. Rather, then, than attempt to assess the degree of Soviet and non-Soviet components in every individual's residential and ideological dossier, I boldly call these writers and their literature Russian; and with all the more confidence since this is not a history of modern Russian literature, but considers its subjects in relation to the society from which, whatever their place of residence and ideological leanings, they all sprang and have drawn their cultural sustenance. It is therefore a pleasure to welcome Wolfgang Kasack's recent *Lexikon der russischen Literatur ab 1917* ('Lexicon of Post-1917 Russian Literature') as a major reference work straddling Soviet-published, Export Only and émigré literature without discriminating for or against any of them.

How many currents are there, then, in modern Russian literature? By contrast with Struve's two streams others have asserted that there is only one stream.[2] For myself, as one who tends to stress the individual rather than the collective element in artistic creation, I incline to equate their total with the total of authors. In place of one or two channels I discern a very watery labyrinth or delta of interlinking rivers, torrents, trickles and backwaters; not to mention dried up wadis, sewers, soakaways and septic tanks. Many of these will be charted or at least sighted on the pages that follow.

The transliteration of Russian names is as laid down in *The Oxford Chekhov* (London, 1964–80), edited by myself: see vol. 3, pages xi–xii. Christian names have not been anglicized so that we have 'Mikhail', for example, rather than 'Michael'; the feminine endings (where they exist) of surnames are also preserved, so that we have 'Anna Akhmatova', and not the obviously inadmissible 'Anna Akhmatov'; with the name Mandelstam I have been guided by the preference of those who bear or bore it, and with Ehrenburg, Khrushchev and certain other names I defer to common practice rather than to transliterational consistency which would have dictated 'Erenburg' and 'Khrushchov'.

Translations into English contained in the text are my own, except where otherwise indicated. For the period preceding 1 February 1918

dates are given in the Old Style as followed in Russia before then; for the twentieth century the equivalent of these dates, in the calendar used by the rest of the civilized world, is obtained by adding thirteen days. Thus 2 March (Old Style) equals 15 March (New Style).

Over the designation of Russian works quoted in the text difficulties have arisen rendering it impracticable and indeed impossible to use, in every case, the titles employed in published translations into English. In the first place some of the works concerned have never been translated at all, though it is difficult in the case of shorter items to be certain of this in every instance. And, secondly, not a few works have been translated more than once, and under different titles. To consider a specific instance, Sholokhov's two-part novel of 1932–59, *Podnyataya tselina*, has appeared in English as *Virgin Soil Upturned* (a correct literal translation) in the version of R. Daglish (Moscow, 1956–60). The same title had also been used by an earlier translator, 'Stephen Garry' (H. C. Stevens), for his London-published version of the first part of the novel (1935); but this same text was simultaneously brought out in the USA as *Seeds of Tomorrow*. Part Two of the same novel appeared as *Harvest on the Don* in H. C. Stevens's translation (1961).

One can become dizzy contemplating these and greater complexities, and I have accordingly adopted the following procedure. Wherever a published translation of a longer work uses a title closely approximating to a literal translation of the Russian title, I have adopted that title in my text: in the instance under review, *Virgin Soil Upturned*. But where a published title diverges markedly, I retain a more literal translation, if necessary one of my own. Thus, Pavel Nilin's *Zhestokost* (1956) appears in my text as *Cruelty*, and not as *Comrade Venka* (the title of J. Barnes's translation).

These details will seem insufficient to those who would have preferred a fuller account of English translations, giving translators' names, places, dates of publication and so on. Had this been implemented, however, the resultant bibliographical material would have swamped the book, and self-denial has been practised the more willingly in view of the fact that many of the items concerned are now out of print. Anyone seeking further information under this head can find some of it in earlier bibliographies: those contained in the studies, as cited in my own Bibliography, of Vera Alexandrova, and of Edward J. Brown (1963), Marc Slonim (1964), George Gibian (1967) and Gleb Struve (1972).

When quoting the titles of Russian imaginative works in English I italicize universally, thus infringing the convention whereby the titles of short stories and short poems are given in Roman type.

I am most grateful to the publishers of this book for kindly permitting me to incorporate, in modified form, some brief material (page 18 ff.) on geographical and climatic features from my *Russian Writers and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (2nd edition, pages 32–35). For assistance in preparing the text I am, as repeatedly in the past, greatly indebted to my wife and to Dr Jeremy Newton. I am also deeply grateful to Dr Jennifer Baines for help with material and for our discussions of Mandelstam and other poets; to Dr Geoffrey Hosking of the University of Essex for loan of the typescript of his book *Beyond Socialist Realism*, an outstandingly useful study of recent literary trends; to Dr Gregory Walker of the Bodleian Library, Oxford, for lending the typescript of unpublished material by himself on Soviet publishing conditions (see also Bibliography); also for advice on the technicalities of the same, and for the loan of material, to Mr Richard Newnham of the Pergamon Press, Oxford; to my colleague Archie Brown for the loan of material and useful advice; to my colleagues Max Hayward and Harry Willetts from whose insights into the USSR and its literary complexities I have benefited for over twenty years. I am also grateful to members of the Soviet Literature Study Group for insights gained at their annual conferences, and not least during the lively discussion following the paper which I presented to them in Oxford on 19 September 1978, and which was devoted to the aims and scope of the present – then unpublished – book.

Finally, I most particularly thank Dr Michael Nicholson of the University of Lancaster for sending me, over the years, much rich and varied material, and also for his kindness in subjecting my typescript to rigorous scrutiny at a late stage in its evolution. From his criticism and scholarship, as deployed during a marathon 26-hour editorial reading of the text in my house, the finished article has greatly benefited.

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