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Academy Histories of Soviet Russian Literature

ISTORIJA RUSSKOI SOVETSKOI LITERATURY. 3 vols. Edited by *A. G. Dementiev* and *L. I. Timofeev*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1958-61. Vol. 1: 1917-29. 722 pp. 28.15 rubles. Vol. 2: 1929-41. 634 pp. 25 rubles. Vol. 3: 1941-57. 861 pp. 3.40 rubles.

ISTORIJA RUSSKOI SOVETSKOI LITERATURY. Izdanie vtoroe pererabotannoe i dopolnennoe. 4 vols. Edited by *A. G. Dementiev*, *L. M. Poliak*, and *L. I. Timofeev*. Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka," 1967-71. Vol. 1: 1917-29. 834 pp. 4 rubles. Vol. 2: 1930-41. 665 pp. 4 rubles. Vol. 3: 1941-53. 642 pp. 4 rubles. Vol. 4: 1954-65. 766 pp. 4 rubles.

These two editions are by far the most voluminous and ambitious histories of Soviet Russian literature ever published. Each is the fruit of the combined labor of some forty to fifty critics and scholars, most of whom are affiliated with the Gorky Institute of World Literature in the Academy of Sciences. Each volume covers a definite literary period and opens with a lengthy introduction. Composed of parts written by different authors, the introductions have a patchwork appearance. They also lack sufficient coordination with the rest of the material, with the result that identical statements and quotations are at times repeated. The introductions are followed by monographic essays, each encompassing the entire career of a selected writer. This portraiture approach precludes a grasp of the literary process as a whole. Moreover, it is a particularly unsuitable approach for this *History*, since the monographic sections are so overcrowded with reliable old-timers—the youngest, Konstantin Simonov, was born in 1915—that the essays on such writers as Fedin, Leonov, and Sholokhov, who made their major contributions in the 1920s and 1930s, must be relegated in the second edition to a volume covering the 1954-65 period.

The next two sections deal with literary journals and with the international ties of Soviet literature as seen primarily through the eyes of foreign Communist writers and sympathizers. In this section one learns that in the Arab countries the demand for Soviet war fiction has increased enormously, "especially in connection with the Israeli aggression" (2nd ed., 4:572). One may also learn that ten years ago Chinese writers looked upon Soviet literature as the model of socialist realism (3:512), but that during the

“cultural revolution” all Soviet publications were removed from the Peking bookstands and shops (4:571). The presence of such references to China in the second edition contradicts the editorial policy implemented in the same edition in the monographic essays, from which nearly all references to China were indiscriminately purged. Gone are not only Surkov’s lyrical outpourings about a free and happy China but also the highly favorable reports about Chinese translations of Furmanov and Mayakovsky or about the popularity of *The Iron Flood* and *Cement*, which according to the first edition had taught the Chinese people how to live and fight.

The last section—a large and useful one—is a chronicle of literary life. Among other things it contains information about various publications, literary organizations and polemics, writers’ congresses and conferences, and party resolutions pertaining to art and literature. The concluding volume of the first edition has a selected bibliography (with some important omissions) and an index of names; the last volume of the second edition has only the index.

Above all, *History of Soviet Russian Literature* is intended to be an authoritative political statement about a politically committed literature. The introduction to the last volume of the second edition states that “socialist realism sees its main task in the affirmation and strengthening of the Soviet system, in the active struggle for communism. . . . The example for literature is the activity of the Communist party” (p. 51). The selection of writers for monographic essays was dictated by the political considerations of the time. In the forty-three essays of the first edition there was no place for Pasternak, Akhmatova, Zoshchenko, Babel, Tynianov, Grin, Pilniak, Olesha, Zamiatin, Kaverin, Zabolotsky, or Mandelshtam. Only the first five receive monographic treatment in the second edition, although its eleven new essays include those on Lunacharsky, Prokofiev, Lugovskoy, and Shaginian, and both editions contain essays on Ostrovsky, Pavlenko, Surkov, Gorbato, the journalist Koltsov, and the symbolists Briusov and Blok. The nonconformist newcomers fared even worse. Bella Akhmadulina is mentioned twice, in passing, and Novella Matveeva only once. Solzhenitsyn and Iosif Brodsky are unpersons, as is Khrushchev in the second edition, having been replaced by Brezhnev.

Although political rhetoric is somewhat restrained in the second edition, there remains an abundance of clichés about the virtues of the Soviet state and man, Communist *partiinosť*, and militant socialist humanism. The first volume of that edition features a new ideological item, V. R. Shcherbina’s article, “V. I. Lenin and Soviet Art.” Soviet literature, in Shcherbina’s view, is the prototype of the future art, because as a part of mankind’s progress toward communism it reflects the most advanced artistic consciousness of the age. Refusing to recognize “modernistic” currents (symbolism, futurism,

imaginism, formalism, existentialism, etc.) as artistic trailblazers, Shcherbina and other authors contend that true artistic innovation lies not in experimentation with form, nor in the expression of creative individuality, but rather in the new content.

The intent to prove the high quality and innovative spirit of Soviet literature is evident in the attempts to show that the literature of the 1930s is not inferior to that of the 1920s, though it is admitted that the cult of personality adversely affected artistic truthfulness and caused great harm to satire. Nevertheless, it is categorically maintained, particularly in the second edition, that the disease did not penetrate deeply, since Soviet writers steadfastly opposed dogmatism and the false idealization of life. The achievements of the 1930s are said to have revealed themselves most graphically in the striving for a grand epic art exemplified by *The Life of Klim Samgin*, *The Quiet Don*, *The Way Through Hell*, and *The Last of Udege*. However, of these novels, only the mediocre *The Last of Udege* was written primarily in the 1930s. Two books of Alexei Tolstoy's trilogy and three-fourths of *The Life of Klim Samgin* and of *The Quiet Don* had been completed by 1930.

Both editions applaud party guidance over the arts, but endeavor to de-emphasize the party's role in the establishment of socialist realism. No mention is made of the proclamation of socialist realism by the editor of *Izvestiia*, I. M. Gronsky, on May 20, 1932, after it had been discussed and approved in the Central Committee of the party. It is also not noted that Gronsky was commissioned by the party to chair the Organizing Committee, which was created to enact the resolution adopted by the Central Committee on April 23, 1932, concerning the dissolution of RAPP and the formation of the Union of Soviet Writers. Both editions claim that the Organizing Committee was headed by Gorky. Actually, Gorky was only the honorary chairman and played no role whatsoever in the promulgation of socialist realism. Its principles were proclaimed by Gronsky and V. Ia. Kirpotin (the secretary of the Organizing Committee) at the first plenary session of the Committee (October 29–November 3, 1932) in the presence of nearly five hundred writers. There is no word about this in either of the editions. The staff of the second edition went a step further by deleting more than twenty lines of Zhdanov's pronouncements on socialist realism made at the First Writers' Congress.

This hushing-up and misrepresentation are also found elsewhere. Both editions allege that Lenin supported the development of a proletarian culture in Russia during the 1920s. Aside from Lenin's own statements on the subject, this can be disproved by (1) the admission of Bukharin, the champion of proletarian culture, that in dozens of conversations with him Lenin resolutely

argued against the creation of such a culture (*Krasnaia nov'*, 1925, no. 4, pp. 265–66), and (2) the corroboration of Bukharin's words by Frunze (M. V. Frunze, *Sobranie sochinenii*, 1927, 3:151). Soviet scholars and politicians conceal this evidence, as well as the fact that the Central Committee resolution of June 18, 1925, "On the Party Policy in the Field of Belles-Lettres," was written by Bukharin (*Oktiabr'*, 1925, no. 12, p. 167; V. Polonsky, *Na literaturnye temy*, 1927, p. 130).

A distinguishing feature of the *History* is its endeavor to represent the overwhelming majority of writers as ideologically at one with the Soviet regime. This effort is expressed much more strongly in the second edition. Apparently it was deemed essential to stress the unity of the party and creative intelligentsia for the fiftieth anniversary of the Soviet rule. In the second edition the term "fellow travelers" is declared non-Leninist, since Lenin used it in an opprobrious sense to characterize the S.R.'s and anarchists. Positive remarks about the fellow travelers are added, and references to their ideological defects are either deleted or toned down. Pilniak, for example, no longer portrays the Revolution with "predominantly black colors" (1st ed., 3:160). Babel's perception of reality has changed from "distorted" to "subjective" (2nd ed., 1:65). The "ideological lapses" of Vsevolod Ivanov have become merely "certain lapses" (1:308). More improvements of this kind are to be found in the essays on Esenin, Fedin, Leonov, Selvinsky, Trenev, Sergeev-Tsensky, and Malyshkin.

The Sovietization of writers, big names especially, was undoubtedly responsible for the addition of monographic essays on Akhmatova and Pasternak and had a striking effect on the treatment of Blok. Passages describing his non-Bolshevik views of the Revolution, his affiliation with the S.R.'s and the Kadets, and his disagreements with Gorky and Mayakovsky were carefully deleted from the second edition. References to the influence of Blok's courageous and truthful poetry on Soviet poets during World War II and to his "fearless sincerity" (1:280) were similarly deleted. This last deletion and the removal of Serafimovich's characterization of Chekhov as "a talent that is completely permeated with sincerity and truth" (1:193) speak for themselves.

The treatment of the leading proletarian writers in the second edition differs from that of Gorky and Mayakovsky. Changes in the essays on Furmanov, Demian Bedny, and Fadeev serve to increase their ideological and literary authority. The remarks concerning Bedny's artistic shortcomings have been stricken, the condemnation of his ideological mistakes of the 1930s has been markedly softened, and, most important, his 1936 libretto for Borodin's comic opera *Bogatyr'i*—the ill-fated libretto which was declared a slander of the heroic past of the Russian people and which cost Bedny his

party membership (1938)—has been completely rehabilitated. Bedny is said to have spoofed not the famous heroes of the *byliny* but rather their pseudo heroes.

New favorable comments on Gorky and Mayakovsky are scattered throughout the various sections of the second edition, but in monographic essays both of these authors are given a more sober evaluation. In the first edition A. D. Siniavsky painted a fairly conventional picture of Gorky, with emphasis on his orthodoxy. In the second edition E. B. Tager tries to delve into Gorky's contradictory psyche and to shed some light on Gorky's ideas about the irrationality of life, the apolitical character of literature, and the brutality of the Russian peasantry. It is likely that Siniavsky, preparing his essay on Gorky shortly after the Twentieth Party Congress, was not in a position to be iconoclastic. By contrast, his essay on a politically less significant author, Bagritsky, is perhaps the best of all the essays in either edition. Its merits lie in a perceptive discussion of Bagritsky's poetics, his romanticism, the tangibility of his imagery, and the relative consistency of lexicon, rhythm, and tropes within a given work. In the revised essay on Mayakovsky, A. N. Menshutin justly criticizes the habit of separating Mayakovsky from LEF, and engages in a more detailed analysis of Mayakovsky's poems. Although Menshutin defends the unity of Mayakovsky the lyricist and propagandist, he does acquaint the reader with the contrary views of non-Soviet scholars.

In the second edition the quality of the monographic essays is on the whole improved. New material has been added. In a number of essays a dampening of laudatory rhetoric is combined with a more frank, businesslike approach. Thus the essays on Trenev, Sergeev-Tsensky, Vishnevsky, Isakovsky, and especially Afinogenov are more meaningful in the second edition. Better essays which do not neglect artistic aspects of works include those by L. M. Poliak on Serafimovich and Babel, by M. A. Shcheglov on Vsevolod Ivanov, and by V. A. Kovalev on Leonov. Keen observations on the writers' world view and artistry are encountered in the essays on Prishvin and Tvardovsky. The critic Z. S. Paperny was probably unable to turn to *Doctor Zhivago* to elucidate Pasternak's attitude toward life, the Revolution, and World War II. As a result, his readable essay lacks a comprehensive examination of significant issues, ignores Pasternak's religious vein, and strangely asserts that Iurii Zhivago's poems have no direct relation to the plot of the novel.

Shallow or cautious essays—such as those on Zoshchenko, Pavlenko, Surkov, Lugovskoy, Prokofiev, Shaginian, or Bagritsky (in the second edition)—outnumber the satisfactory ones. Remarkably poor is the essay on Valentin Kataev—a model of the political approach, as is the essay on Tikhonov. A typically eulogistic piece has been written on Nikolai Ostrovsky.

A. V. Belinkov's essay on Tynianov is sharply distinguished from the rest in tone and content. It is a thinly veiled denunciation of Soviet dictatorship, which has turned art into obsequiousness.

In the chronicle section of the second edition many facts about the activities of the proletarian literary organizations of the 1920s are for some reason omitted. Also missing are the data which show that the number of literary magazines for 1924–25 shrank in comparison with 1923–24 from seventy-four to fifty-three (i.e., by 30 percent). On the other hand, one finds additions concerning Gorky, Furmanov, Pasternak, and the writers' participation in World War II.

The new index features a welcome addition: first names, patronymics, and dates of life extending into 1970. Some dates pertaining to purge victims (Lelevich, A. Lezhnev, Selivanovsky) differ from those supplied in other Soviet sources. The year of Bukharin's and P. P. Kriuchkov's deaths (1938) is erroneously given as 1937. The French journalist Boris Souvarine, who incidentally is still alive, is confused with B. A. Suvorin and listed as having died in 1939. The missing dates pertaining to Vera Alexandrova (1895–1966), D. V. Filosofov (d. 1940), and F. A. Stepun (d. 1965) betray a certain gap in the knowledge of Russian émigré publications. The names of particularly odious individuals, though they appear in the text, are barred from the index. Such is the treatment given to Averbakh, Bukharin, Trotsky, and Pasternak in the first edition, and to Trotsky, Zinoviev, and Anatolii Kuznetsov in the second.

Several of the factual inaccuracies in both editions appear in N. N. Maslin's essay on Sholokhov. The first book of *Virgin Soil Upturned* was not written immediately after the second book of *The Quiet Don*. Sholokhov turned to *Virgin Soil Upturned* late in 1930 when the third book of *The Quiet Don* was virtually completed. Part of it had already been serialized in *Oktiabr'* (1929), but further printing was halted until 1932 for political reasons. The action in *The Quiet Don* ends in 1922, not 1921. Grigorii Melekhov could not have served with Budenny in the winter of 1920, that is, when he was with the White Army. An officer's name in *The Quiet Don* is Kaparin, not Koparin, and a Cossack in *Virgin Soil Upturned* is called Grach, not Gonchar. The assertion that Sholokhov had later removed a passage added in 1953 to *The Quiet Don* (part 5, chap. 9) is no longer valid for the second edition of this *History*, since the passage in question, which describes the activities of revolutionary Cossacks, has been partially restored since 1965.

In the introductions to the first volumes LEF should be deciphered as Left Front of the Arts (not Art). VOAPP (Vsesoiuznoe Ob'edinenie Asotsiatsii Proletarskikh Pisatelei) could not have its statements printed in the journals *Na postu* (1923–25) and *Na literaturnom postu* (before 1928), for

VOAPP was formed in May 1928. The year 1925, given as the date of the formation of RAPP (Rossiiskaia Assotsiatsiia Proletarskikh Pisatelei), must be questioned. The term RAPP does not occur in Soviet publications until after the First Congress of Proletarian Writers (May 1928) had reorganized VAPP (Vsesoiuznaia Assotsiatsiia Proletarskikh Pisatelei) into VOAPP, and RAPP came into being as an organization uniting the writers of the Russian Federative Republic. The year 1925 is associated with the First All-Union Conference of Proletarian Writers, where a militant group of Napostovtsy (Oneguardists) assumed complete control over VAPP, which up to this point had officially been known as Vserossiiskaia Assotsiatsiia Proletarskikh Pisatelei. Since the new leaders of VAPP, and later of RAPP, were essentially the same Napostovtsy, and since both organizations had identical aims and similar structures, it is customary—though incorrect—to regard the year 1925, instead of 1928, as the time of RAPP's emergence.

The second edition mistitles Gorky's sketches "V bol'nom gorode" as "V bol'shom gorode," asserts that this piece and "Na ulitse" were published in *Novaia zhizn'* in 1917–19, instead of 1918 and 1917 respectively (1:196), and gives the wrong month for the date of the Central Committee resolution of April 23, 1932 (2:440, 480). In the chronicle section of both editions the date for the *Literaturnaia gazeta* editorial "Za rabotu!" should be May 29 (not 22), 1932.

Factual inaccuracies could have been eliminated by more careful editing. It is, however, the inherent political bias which, regardless of the caliber and intentions of their authors, makes both editions no more than a supplement to the best of their Western counterparts.