

# Russian Writers on the Road to a Civil Society<sup>\*</sup>

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After Stalin's death, during the Thaw Soviet artists maintained a dialogue with the state while attempting to establish their own value systems. Certain books, such as *Taruskie stranitsy* ('Pages from Tarusa') and the second volume of *Literaturnaia Moskva* ('Literary Moscow'), appeared that were organized around their editors' own discretion and tastes, rather than political requirements (Aliger et al. 1956; Koblikov et al. 1961). It was in these publications that writers such as Bulat Okudzhava and Vladimir Maksimov made their literary debuts.

These, though, were exceptions to the rule, and they were in any case unable to change the existing situation to any real degree. Nevertheless, writers, in their very diverse ways, were the first to attempt to create an open society. These attempts can be put into two categories: firstly, publication abroad, and secondly, dialogue with the political leadership.

One of the first works to appear abroad was Boris Pasternak's novel *Doktor Zhivago* ('Doctor Zhivago'), published in Italy in 1957. It is now clear that the ensuing scandal was whipped up by conservative writers, such as Alexei Surkov, Konstantin Simonov and Konstantin Fedin, who were close to the political leadership and who were governed largely by feelings of envy. If this novel had appeared in a free press, it is possible it would not have aroused excessive interest. Even though the novel is imbued with the spirit of freedom, there nevertheless would have been critics prepared to ascribe it to the prevailing current of socialist realism. By being published in the West, *Doctor Zhivago* was the first post-Stalin work to break through the borders of the closed society.

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Subsequent Western publication was to lead to criminal proceedings against Andrei Siniavskii and Iulii Daniel', and to expulsions from Russia itself, beginning with the now forgotten Valerii Tarsis to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and then to Vasiliï Aksenov, Vladimir Voinovich and Georgii Vladimov, and the 'third wave' of emigration.

One peculiar aspect of the literary process in the Soviet Union was the act of writing letters to the political leadership. Beginning with letters by Mikhail Bulgakov to the Soviet government in 1930, and Evgenii Zamiatin to Stalin in 1931 (both requesting permission to emigrate), through to Solzhenitsyn's address to the Fifth Congress of Soviet Writers in 1967, this substantial epistolary legacy is evidence of the fact of intense struggle and confrontation as part of the literary process in Soviet Russia.

History has shown that the activity of writers prepared the ideological ground for political change in Soviet society and brought nearer the time of *glasnost*', which itself would soon be followed by full freedom of the written word. The purpose of this article is to show the role of Russian writers in opening the closed society of the USSR. We divided that process into cases – Pasternak's case, Brodskii's case, Siniavskii and Daniel''s case, and so on – in order to show that the literary process and the political process are not homogenous. The move from one benchmark to another, from old "scandal" to new ones, from the former "truth" to a new myth. We have arranged our paper according to this plan.

## **The Pasternak Affair**

In his memoirs Anatolii Rybakov writes of Khrushchev:

He is blamed for the hounding of Pasternak and Dudintsev. Yes, he feared that the collapse of the state would be begun by the intelligentsia. He was a man of conviction, but naïve and artless, and he thought that he could convince others that he was right. [...] Often his monologues to writers and artists would end up with him shouting. But hatchet-men do not shout, hatchet-men chop off heads in silence. Stalin would have destroyed these people, Brezhnev would

have exiled them abroad or sent them to a concentration camp. Khrushchev did not send anyone to prison. Yes, at the famous Manege exhibition he stamped his feet, yelled shamefully at artists, including the sculptor Ernst Neizvestnyi, but it is Neizvestnyi's monument that stands on Khrushchev's grave in the Novodevichii cemetery. At a reception in his residence Khrushchev insulted the poetess Margarita Aliger, but then at the Writers' Congress I heard him apologise to her with my own ears. And let us not forget that it was under Khrushchev that Solzhenitsyn, Dombrovskii, the same Dudintsev were all published, and the *Taganka* and *Sovremennik* theatres were opened. On his instruction *Pravda* published Evtushenko's poem 'The Heirs of Stalin'. (195-96)

The 'hounding of Pasternak' testifies to the fear of the authorities towards writers' leaning towards freedom. The publication of *Doctor Zhivago*, the novel that Pasternak knew would decide his fate as a writer, was delayed several times. The editorial board of Konstantin Simonov's *Novyi mir* dragged its heels, and *Znamia* also refused to commit itself. Pasternak himself said that 'all of this is not important, in so far as the most important thing is that the novel itself exists' (qtd. in Emel'ianova 1997: 92). Copies of the manuscript, typed and bound, were ready to be distributed among friends, but because of the delay encountered with its publication in the USSR, Pasternak decided to submit the novel for publication in Italy. This was ensured by passing the manuscript to Sergio D'Angelo, an Italian journalist working in Moscow, who asked for the manuscript on behalf of his friend, the Italian publisher Feltrinelli. Seeing that publication in the USSR was being delayed, Pasternak handed the manuscript to him. The very fact that Pasternak turned to an Italian publisher was a challenge to the closed society. Although *Zhivago's* poems were published in the Soviet Union, the first extracts from the novel itself appeared in the Polish journal *Opinia*. The Feltrinelli publishing-house was pro-Communist and therefore 'friendly', and so the Soviet powers-that-be deemed it expedient to despatch Surkov, one of the secretaries of the Writers' Union, to Italy with the sole aim of returning the manuscript to Russia. He returned home empty-handed.

Georgii Vladimov considers that the real villain in the ‘Pasternak affair’ was Konstantin Simonov, who had taken possession of the novel in 1956 but refused to publish it. According to Vladimov, during the time when the novel lay in a drawer in Simonov’s desk, ‘it could have been published – not all of it, of course, but some fragments – and thereby rendered harmless’ (Posev 1985). On 20<sup>th</sup> August 1957 Pasternak wrote to Dmitrii Polikarpov, head of the Cultural Department of the Central Committee:

The only thing in my life for which I have no cause for repentance is the novel. I wrote what I think, and to this day those thoughts remain the same. It may be a mistake not to have concealed it from others. I assure you I would have hidden it away had it been feebly written. But it proved to have more strength to it than I had dreamed possible -- strength comes from on high, and thus its further fate was out of my hands. I shall not interfere in it. If the truth which is known to me has to be atoned for by suffering, that is nothing new and I am ready to accept any suffering. (qtd. in Pasternak (trans. Duncan) 1991: 229)

The Party leadership devised a plan to publish the novel in a tiny circulation of 3000 copies, distribute them among its embassies abroad, and thus bring the whole affair to a close. Hearing of this, Pasternak authorized Feltrinelli to proceed with publication. On the 15<sup>th</sup> November 1957, the novel appeared in Italian translation, and on the 24<sup>th</sup> August 1958 it appeared in Russian (the authentic final text is that published in *Novyi mir* in 1988). When Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1958, the vilification unleashed against him in the Soviet Union surpassed even that mounted against Evgenii Zamiatin and Boris Pil’niak at the end of the 1920s.

The November 1958 issue of *Novyi mir* printed the editorial board’s considered report of the novel from 1956, together with a preliminary statement signed by Alexander Tvardovskii, Evgenii Gerasimov, Sergei Golubov, Alexander Dement’ev, Boris Zaks, Boris Lavrenev, Valentin Ovechkin and Konstantin Fedin. This statement ran as follows: ‘The award of the Prize is connected with the anti-Soviet scandal around the novel ‘Doctor Zhivago’ and is a purely political act, hostile towards our country and intended to exacerbate the “cold” war’ (*Novyi Mir* 1958).

Students from the Moscow Gor'kii Literary Institute headed for the Union of Writers building on Vorovskii Street with hand-made banners denouncing Pasternak, and the Union's leadership was impelled to dissuade the furious mob from mounting a pogrom. (A pogrom could only be organized by the Union itself!) Despite turning down the Nobel Prize, Pasternak was expelled from the Union at a general meeting of its Moscow branch.

It should be noted that many people were sincere in their feelings against Pasternak, feelings nurtured by an ideology that divided the world into 'us' and 'them', and that tolerated no middle way. Raisa Orlova, later herself to become a dissident, affirms this in her memoirs: 'It seemed to me that this book about our Revolution was written from outside. Everything in it was alien, occasionally offensive. This book was alien to everything we thought, dreamed and argued about in the tumultuous year of 1956' (Orlova 1983: 138).

Pasternak's expulsion from the Writers' Union hastened his death in 1960, and became yet another shameful page in the history of Soviet society. Nevertheless, Pasternak offered an example to all writers: for the sake of one great book everything should be sacrificed, and it matters little where that book will be published. Once more he had proved that for art there are no real borders, especially when they are the borders of a closed society.

## **The Trial of Siniavskii and Daniel'**

One of the landmarks signalling a return to Stalinist ways was the speech by Leonid Brezhnev to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the end of the War on 9th May 1965.

Both Andrei Siniavskii and Iulii Daniel' fought during the War, and Daniel' received serious wounds in 1944. In 1950 he graduated from the Moscow Regional Pedagogical Institute and worked as a schoolteacher, at first in the Kaluga district and then in Moscow. In the mid-1950s he began publishing as a translator of poetry, and in 1956 completed his first work of fiction, the historical novella *Begstvo* ('Flight'). After his arrest the whole printed circulation of this work was

destroyed. Following the War, Siniavskii graduated from the Arts Faculty of Moscow State University, and in 1952 received his doctorate for a thesis on the work of Maxim Gor'kii. His first short story, 'V tsirke' ('In the Circus'), was written in 1955, already containing elements of the grotesque and fantastic that were to recur in his subsequent work. Siniavskii was to later describe himself as an adherent of 'exaggerated prose' – the tradition of Gogol', Dostoevskii and Leskov.

Siniavskii began sending his manuscripts abroad in 1956, and from 1959 (under the pseudonym Abram Terts) they began to be published. These manuscripts found their way to the West through H el ene Zamoiskaia, a Frenchwoman who was looking for a way to secure *Doctor Zhivago's* passage to a Western publisher. In 1962 Daniel's novella *Govorit Moskva* ('Moscow Calling') was first published abroad, to be followed by further works of prose.

Siniavskii and Daniel were arrested in September 1965. There is no writer in Russia to this day who remains unaffected by their trial. Public protests began as early as November of that year, with the dissemination of leaflets containing the following messages: 'It is unlikely that writers' work can constitute a crime against the state; [...] You are invited to a public meeting on 5<sup>th</sup> December at 6 o'clock in the evening on Pushkin Square next to the poet's monument. Invite two more citizens through the text of this appeal' (Nikanorova and Prokhvatilova 1991: 51-2). The author of this text was Alexander Esenin-Volpin, the son of the poet Sergei Esenin.

This was the first public meeting in the Soviet Union since 1927, and the date chosen by the organizers was not fortuitous. 5<sup>th</sup> December was the day celebrated by Soviet citizens as the day the Stalin Constitution was adopted. Banners raised on Pushkin Square proclaiming 'Respect the Constitution!', 'We Demand a Public Trial for Siniavskii and Daniel!' and 'Freedom for Bukovskii and Others Detained for Preparing the Demonstration!' forced the authorities – perhaps for the first time since the adoption of this Constitution – to pay attention to the first voices of public opinion. It is possible that this demonstration ensured that the trial was indeed public.

There have been revisionist attempts recently to deny that the trial was politically motivated, and was rather driven by an attack on the aesthetic

credentials of the writers (Artz 1995). There seems no doubt, though, that the trial was viewed by the authorities as a necessary ideological lesson. In her article ‘Nasledniki Smerdiakova’ (‘The Successors of Smerdiakov’), the public accuser Zoia Kedrina, Professor at the Institute of World Literature, reserved the right of the law enforcement agencies to decide on the judicial nature of the crime, but added: ‘I have read these books attentively, and it is absolutely clear to me that this is the most blatant anti-Soviet propaganda, inspired by hatred of our system’ (Kedrina 1966). It is obvious that the political tone dominates, and the article’s very title tries to equate the two accused with Dostoevskii’s damned villain in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Within the internal emigration there were whole genres, such as satire and the anti-utopia, that were particularly hated by the authorities of the closed society. This is why Kedrina with special vigour fell upon the anti-utopias *Govorit Moskva* by Daniel’ and *Liubimov* by Terts. Daniel’s anti-utopia tells of a group of friends gathering to celebrate the birthday of one of their number, who hear the text of a Supreme Soviet Decree on the radio, announcing a ‘day of permitted murders’, when each person has the right in the course of twenty-four hours to commit murder. The element of allegory and parody is evident, but the Professor of Literature Kedrina fails to see it: ‘I think that readers will agree with me that with such a content the form of narration plays no particular role.’

As far as Siniavskii is concerned, Kedrina glosses over the aesthetic features of his work in order to concentrate on the political charge:

The moral essence of Abram Terts and the anti-soviet ‘ideas’ that he has adopted and which he wishes to disseminate are clothed in the most diverse literary reminiscences and parallels. Ripped out wholesale from the most varied works of literature written by others, turned inside out and hurriedly tacked on to the motley patchwork blanket of anti-sovietism, they characterize the ‘creative face’ of Abram Terts as a person brazenly feeding, parasite-like, off the literary heritage.

Such was the most restrained and academically qualified accusation aimed at the defendants.

The defendants were permitted to make their final address unexpectedly, before they had prepared any statement. Nevertheless, they managed to express their credo with the following explicit propaganda by Siniavskii of a civil society:

Here the law of ‘either-or’ begins to function. Sometimes it operates correctly, other times terribly. Whoever is not with us is against us. In some times – revolution, war, civil war – this logic may be correct, but it is dangerous when applied to calm times, and when applied to literature. So, I am different. I do not count myself an enemy, I am a Soviet person, and my works are not hostile works. In this highly electrified, fantastic atmosphere any ‘different’ person can be considered an enemy. But this is not an objective way of finding the truth. But the main thing is that I don’t know why enemies have to be invented or monsters heaped on us, as artistic images are realised and thought of in literal terms. (Ginzburg 1967: 65)

In his turn Daniel’ said that ‘no articles of the Criminal Code and no accusations of crimes will prevent us – Siniavskii and I – from feeling ourselves as people who love our country and our people’ (Ginzburg 1967: 69).

What is of interest in Siniavskii’s words is his admission that he is a Soviet person. He was indeed a Soviet person when he wrote these works and remained a Soviet person when he bore judicial responsibility for them, but when he sent his works abroad for publication then he behaved not as a Soviet person. That was the act of a citizen of a civil society who is cognisant of his civil rights and who consciously tries to break through the barrier erected around him by the closed society. He declared by this act that he was the only author of his texts and he was the only master of his fate. No Communist Party, no government, no censorship – just the writer, publisher, and readers. The Soviet writer could not ignore all those things; only a member of an open society could. Siniavskii was a Soviet person when he wrote his famous essay ‘What is Socialist Realism?’, published in France in 1959, a heroic yet naïve attempt to delve into his own Soviet subconscious. Today the very fact of this trial seems savage and offensive, and yet the trial was open and the meticulous conduct of the proceedings presupposed that Soviet society had moved on from its Stalinist past.

Yet we must not forget that there were telling features of the closed society, the first and most important of which is the fact of being put on trial for one's ideas and views. Also, the courtroom was enveloped in an atmosphere of tendentiousness and public hysteria; the 'public accuser' was present to demonstrate the alleged depth of public indignation at the 'heinous' crime committed; nobody doubted that the defendants would be found guilty and that the sentences had been decided beforehand. As another indication of the seriousness with which the Soviet state regarded this trial, the judge was none other than Lev Smirnov, the chairman of the USSR Supreme Court and the USSR representative at the Nuremberg trials.

'Writing is a freedom,' declares Siniavskii in his article 'Dissidence as Personal Experience', a statement that can have nothing in common with the role of the writer in a closed society (Siniavskii 1986). Even in his 'legal' writings – that is, those published in *Novyi mir* before his arrest, Siniavskii tried to undermine official literature. In an article of 1964, he wrote that 'Akhmatova had the capability of enclosing one man's destiny in the space of a four-line stanza, with all his psychological complexity and the secrets of his inner life' (Siniavskii 1964). The irony is not lost on the Soviet reader: Siniavskii purposefully juxtaposes the vilified and persecuted Akhmatova with the successful and celebrated socialist realist Mikhail Sholokhov, whose story *Sud'ba cheloveka* ('One Man's Destiny', 1956-7) takes seventy pages to make its point.

Twenty years after the trial, the Israel-based journal *22* published the memoirs of Alexander and Nina Voronel and Mark Azbel', all close friends of Siniavskii and Daniel'. These memoirs contain both interesting historical material and the immediacy of eye-witness accounts, and offer new insights into the trial. In particular, they show just how different the reactions in Russia were at the time. Sections of the liberal intelligentsia were displeased that Siniavskii and Daniel' were not 'sufficiently anti-Soviet', and that they had stolen the limelight from others who were more implacably opposed to the regime. Nina Voronel' recalls:

The Soviet liberal intelligentsia was marching hand in hand on a fine democratic zigzag course to storm the totalitarian system. And it thought that victory was within reach and that soon there would be freedom of speech in

Russia. And then those ‘rats’ Daniel’ and Siniavskii, who didn’t believe in freedom of speech and who took no part in the storming of the system, had tunneled their way through to the West and got published. And now because of them the Soviet authorities could shut down the whole caboodle. (Voronel 1986)

Such thoughts and actions can be seen as characteristic for people of a closed society. Similarly, Igor’ Vinogradov, one of the editorial board of *Novyi mir*, relates that Tvardovskii was afraid that his journal, the only legal forum for oppositionist views, would be closed down, and therefore prohibited all his employees from any involvement in the burgeoning dissident movement (for instance, signing letters of protest or distributing samizdat) (Biul’-Zedginidze 1996: 233).

Among other recently published recollections, the eminent linguistic scholar Rebekka Frumkina recalls the trial as perhaps the most significant event in the 1960s, and goes so far as to say that for many in the intelligentsia the trial in 1966, rather than the invasion of Czechoslovakia two years later, signalled the ‘end of the wonderful epoch’ (Frumkina 1997: 129-30). With the end of one epoch came the beginning of another, for the trial’s real historical significance became linked with the birth of the human rights movement. General Petro Grigorenko traces the beginning of his dissident career, a career that would last another twenty years, to this trial (Grigorenko 1990).

The trial of Siniavskii and Daniel’ was the first of its kind, and set the standard for others to follow. When Iosif Brodskii was tried in 1964 he was still an unknown poet and translator, and the political implications of his trial were nowhere near as significant as that of Siniavskii and Daniel’. For the Soviet authorities, the political fall-out was more negative than positive, for rather than acting as a warning shot to the liberal intelligentsia, the trial struck another blow to the self-protective mechanism of the closed society. On the heels of the Festival of Youth in 1957, the scandal of the ‘Pasternak affair’ the following year, the regular exhibitions of French culture at the end of the 1950s and early 1960s, and the publication in 1962 of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, the attempt to camouflage a political trial as criminal proceedings was doomed to failure.

Moreover, the process of opening up society was beginning, and being initiated from below. If the trial was designed as a warning, it failed. Letters began flooding into newspapers, courts and Party offices (though none were published). Alexander Ginzburg compiled *The White Book of the Siniavskii-Daniel' Trial*, for which he himself was arrested and imprisoned; the scholars Iurii Levin and Iurii Gerchuk wrote of their indignation to *Izvestiia*, as did the writers Vladimir Kornilov and Lidiia Chukovskaia; the Germanist Lev Kopelev wrote to the legal consultation office of Moscow's Pervomaiskii district; and the critic Irina Rodnianskaia sent a letter to the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet. On the eve of the XXIII Party Congress in 1966 the scholars Erik Khanpira, Igor' Mel'chuk, Iurii Apresian, Nikolai Es'kov and L. Bulatova wrote to Leonid Brezhnev personally, calling on him either to reconsider the case, or 'magnanimously pardon' the condemned men. The liberal intelligentsia rallied to the cause by addressing official organizations of varying status and authority, and these letters and appeals demonstrated the awakening of a critical public consciousness.

The regime, though, took its vengeance on those who dared to speak out. Moscow State University lecturer Viktor Duvakin was dismissed simply for being a witness for the defence (Dubrovina ed. 2009).<sup>1</sup> Lidiia Chukovskaia was expelled from the Writers' Union for attacking the conservative die-hard Mikhail Sholokhov, who had spoken against the defendants ('lackeys', 'werewolves') at the Party Congress in threatening terms, stopping barely short of calling for them to be shot according to the 'revolutionary sense of justice' of the 1920s (Velikanova 1989: 501-2). Her letter well conveys the outrage felt by many in the liberal intelligentsia at the brutality of Sholokhov's address:

Your disgraceful speech will not be forgotten by history ... And literature itself will avenge you as it avenges all who part from the difficult duty it imposes on them. It will sentence you to the most severe penalty that exists for an artist – creative sterility. And no amount of honours, money, domestic and international prizes will remove that sentence on your head. (Chukovskaia 1997: 375)

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<sup>1</sup> See more in Dubrovina (2009)

Literature did avenge itself: Sholokhov did not complete any new piece of work until the day he died.

## The Letter as Literary Genre: Pro & Contra

Alongside addresses to writers' congresses, many writers attempted to use formal and informal channels of communication with the country's leaders and literary bureaucrats. Boris Pasternak, Vasilii Grossman and others all wrote to the Party's Central Committee, and in the 1960s, during the thaw, there appeared another address: the Writers' Congress.

Georgii Vladimov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn both sent separate letters to the Fourth Writers' Congress in 1967. Solzhenitsyn sent copies of his letter to all delegates of the Congress, calling for the abolition of all forms of censorship and the restoration of the free word (Medvedev 1975: 236).<sup>2</sup> Following his letter of protest, Vladimov announced his intention of leaving the Writers' Union. Like Osip Mandel'shtam before him, Vladimov spoke of two literatures, of two forms of art that exist simultaneously in the USSR:

One art is free and unconstrained, as it should be, whose popularity and impact are dependent solely on its artistic merits, and the other is officially recognized and well paid, not only oppressed to some degree or other, not only inhibited but occasionally also scarred by the censorship, the first manifestation of which is the 'internal censor', who is probably the most dangerous in that he kills off his own child while it is still in the womb. Which of these two forms of art will be victorious is not difficult to predict. Like it or not, but even now we have to make a choice – which side we opt for, which one will we support and defend? (Vladimov 1983: 60-1)

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<sup>2</sup> 'I propose that the Congress adopt a resolution which would demand and ensure the abolition of all censorship, open or hidden, of all fictional writing, and which would release publishing houses from the obligation to obtain authorization for the publication of every printed page' (Medvedev 1975: 236).

Another example of the epistolary genre is the letter written in 1970 in defence of *Novyi mir*. Signed by over a dozen writers, including Iurii Trifonov, Boris Mozhaev and Veniamin Kaverin, the letter was to be given to Brezhnev's daughter Galina, to be passed on to General Secretary himself. The purpose of the letter was to prevent publication in *Literaturnaia gazeta* of the Writers' Union decision to change the personnel of *Novyi mir*'s editorial board, thereby emasculating Tvardovskii's journal. This letter was not discussed or even referred to, and was published only later, by Anatolii Rybakov in his memoirs (213).

Such communication enabled the intelligentsia to transmit at least some ideas to the powers-that-be, and hopefully influence the literary process. Although there is no evidence that the political hierarchy paid any attention to these views, this form of communication testifies to the emergence, within a closed society, of public opinion opposed to official policy. But the Communist leadership had no time for the views of the creative intelligentsia, and remained guided by its ideological hypotheses and illusions. Writers and artists had to find additional possibilities for contact with the authorities.

Certainly, writers had appealed to the tsars and other leaders of the country throughout its history. But in the 20<sup>th</sup> century these appeals were transformed into a special genre of literary communication. This genre found its own structure, forms, and meaning. Though it was formally addressed to the leaders and chiefs, its real address was to the reading public. The reading public could find its own unspoken wishes, formulated in an artistic way and flavoured with pathos.

By the end of the 1960s it was clear that the thaw was over, liberal tendencies were stamped out, and total conformity with the prevailing ethos was vigorously enforced. Throughout the Soviet Union Solzhenitsyn's books were unavailable for the public to read, they were removed from libraries, and his name did not appear in any articles or studies of the contemporary literary situation. Kornei Chukovskii also had problems publishing his book on the art of translation under the title *Vysokoe iskusstvo* ('The High Art'), which included in its subject-matter examples from the translation into English of *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*.

Solzhenitsyn was further condemned in collective letters signed by writers and published in *Pravda*. These, of course, were not spontaneously written, but

organized by the Writers' Union in order to blacken and isolate the outspoken renegade. One such letter reads thus:

In the current historical moment, when favourable changes are taking place in the political climate of the planet, the behaviour of such people as Sakharov and Solzhenitsyn, who slander our state and social structure, who try to engender mistrust of the peace-loving policies of the Soviet state and who essentially call on the West to continue the policy of the 'cold war', can not arouse any feelings other than profound contempt and condemnation. (*Pravda* 1973)

Such letters were signed by the likes of Chingiz Aitmatov, Sergei Zalygin, Konstantin Fedin, Konstantin Simonov, Mikhail Sholokhov, Iurii Bondarev, Valentin Kataev, Boris Polevoi, Alexander Chakovskii, Pasternak's tormentor Alexei Surkov, Sergei Narovchatov (soon to take over the editorship of *Novyi mir*) and even erstwhile liberals Mikhail Lukonin and Vasil' Bykov, and many others. Not content with signing a collective letter, Kataev even added his own additional contribution to the approval of Solzhenitsyn's exile, recounting his 'profound relief' at hearing that Solzhenitsyn had been sent abroad and deprived of his Soviet citizenship (*Pravda*, 15 February 1974). This is not to say that the literary history of these years can be reduced to a witch-hunt. Simply, the roll-call of these names reflects the balance of forces between the 'conservatives' and the 'liberals' in the writing community, forces that would continue to confront each other until the very end of the Soviet Union itself.

## **Towards an Open Society**

The closed society of the Soviet Union could not be opened by the crowd; this was the initiative of the creative intelligentsia. The objective was simply to explore and broaden the limits of the permissible, but this was above all an artistic objective, not a political one. The last dozen years of the twentieth century saw momentous changes in Russia, not least in literature. In the space of a few years

the bulk of repressed literary works were ‘returned’ to the Russian reader. The publication of works by dead writers became so intense that living writers were often denied publication space (this was true of Iurii Bondarev), and conservatives, such as Petr Proskurin, complained in *Pravda* of a tendency towards what he termed ‘literary necrophilia’. He added: ‘But anyway, do we really need corpses in art, do we need in the literal sense their physical presence?’ (*Pravda* 1987). The increasingly antagonistic situation was not helped by the fusion of several factors: the intellectual demands of the liberals, the spiritual growth of society, and the economic aspirations of literary officialdom.

Perhaps the greatest discovery for a new generation of Russian readers was the publication of the works of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Iosif Brodskii, the two Russian Nobel Prize winners still alive at that time (Brodskii died in 1996, and Solzhenitsyn in 2008). All of these vastly different writers came together in Russia in a few years, creating for the first time a unified literature, and an organic, relatively normal literary process.

In Evgenii Zamiatin’s novel *My* (‘We’), among the mass of collectively-clad members of the Single State is the memorable figure of the State Poet, happy to recite his verses on the occasion of an official execution. The socialist state regarded all poets as state poets, taking no account of the public’s sympathies. Indeed, the public’s sympathies were never subject to any study or investigation (with the exception of statistical polls carried out in public libraries). As in any closed society, the state directed art absolutely, all writers belonged to a branch of the Writers’ Union and had his or her own place within the hierarchy. After the closure of the last private publishing houses in the 1920s, writers had to pass through the net of various editorial discussions, advice and criticism, followed by authorization by the censorship. This was the only possible way to see a work in print. Such were the rules of the game, and they had to be obeyed (or at best circumvented, by whatever means possible).

Of course, the problem of getting a work published is largely a technical one, and is not a problem at all when there is an abundance of printing and copying technology, not to mention modern desktop publishing systems. It would seem the easiest thing in the world to write, typeset, print and copy – but this is only possible

in an open society. The very opposite of all this was the norm of Stalinist society, and even in the Thaw years technology remained the preserve of officialdom. Few people then thought in terms of an ‘open’ or ‘civil’ society.<sup>3</sup>

The publication in November 1962 of Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s novella *Odin den’ Ivana Denisovicha* (‘One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich’) was the greatest single event of the Thaw that lasted from Stalin’s death in 1953 until Khrushchev’s overthrow in 1964. Although the Thaw period lasted a little over ten years (in fact, this decade was characterized not by one thaw, but rather a series of short thaws followed by rather longer freezes: 1953-54, 1956, 1960-62), the seeds that were planted bore much more significant fruit several decades later. However, the period from 1964 until 1982, coinciding with Leonid Brezhnev’s tenure as Communist Party general Secretary and President of the Soviet Union, has become known as the ‘stagnation’, continuing through his successors Iurii Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko until the accession to power in 1985 of Mikhail Gorbachev. During these years writers were once more imprisoned or exiled by the dozen, the censorship apparatus and literary bureaucracy became extremely repressive and reactionary, and it seemed that the country had been thrown back into its dark and dangerous recent past.

Still, dissident intellectuals continued to fight for a breath of freedom, *samizdat* (illegally printed and disseminated) editions grew and found hundreds of eager readers; the Western press was approached to publicize social and political protests; even public demonstrations against official government policies were mounted. Raisa Orlova-Kopeleva has eloquently summed up the hopes of the reform-minded intelligentsia following Stalin’s death, and the dashing of those hopes:

The past – what was termed ‘Stalinism’ – was seen as something ugly and unnatural, simply a temporary digression from the norm. The ‘norm’ was to be restored, with *normal* theatres, *normal* schools, a *normal* literary and publishing life. [...] This period ended with tanks in Prague. At the end of the 1960s literary circles began to feel their space being squeezed, and they

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<sup>3</sup> The main slogan of the Thaw years characterizing the relationship of the state to writers can be summed up in Nikita Khrushchev’s phrase to members of the intelligentsia: ‘When eating mushroom pie keep your tongue behind your teeth’ (‘Ешь пирог с грибами, держи язык за зубами’).

eventually returned to their previous, furtive existence. Still, other attempts did not cease: the *Metropole* almanac at the end of the 1970s, the *Pamiat'* samizdat editions, the journal *Poiski*, and the literary club 'Katalog'. (Orlova-Kopeleva 1994)

Curiously enough, the invasion of Czechoslovakia, with its consequent ending of Soviet political liberalism and the demise of 'socialism with a human face', did not have any *immediate* repercussions on literary life. A more serious event for the literary process was the refusal to publish in 1979 the almanac *Metropole*, as a result of which its young editors Viktor Erofeev and Evgenii Popov were expelled from the Writers' Union (into which, incidentally, they had only recently been accepted).

The Communist Party's Third Programme, adopted at the XXII Party conference in 1961, states: 'The Party will tirelessly care for the blossoming of literature, art, and culture, for the creation of all conditions for the fullest possible development of each individual, for the aesthetic education of all workers and the formation within the people of high artistic tastes and cultural skills' (KPSS 1976). No-one could doubt the Party's commitment to 'the creation of all conditions', nor to 'tirelessly care'. The question was: how long could the urge for liberalization, nurtured during the Thaw period, be suppressed?

The Party decree on literature in 1932, creating the Union of Writers and banning all independent literary activities, fundamentally changed the literary map of Russia. After the XXII Party Congress in 1961, however, in practical terms nothing changed: party decrees were issued, but the literary process moved on according to its own internal laws. The reaction to the liberalization process still had knock-on effects, however, as can be seen by the trials of Iosif Brodskii in 1964 and that of Andrei Siniavskii and Iulii Daniel' in 1966, sure indicators of the regime's refusal to acknowledge any dissent.

We should stress that the reasons for those processes were different. In Brodskii's case, only unlucky coincidence has chosen this name from any others. Nobody knew Brodskii at that time, he never published his original lyrics (only translations), and we agree with Christoph Neidhart that 'a majority of the Soviets seemed to accept the view that a person who was not a member of the Writer's

Union was not a writer, however well he wrote. For Soviet men not to have employment was against the law' (Neidhart 2003).

Unlike Stalin's Terror, the new rulers of Russia had to act out their repression of writers in the public glare, as if to give their sentences the semblance of justice. These trials demonstrated without doubt that the 'liberal' credentials of the Soviet leadership no longer existed, and that force and coercion were again the order of the day. It was in these conditions that the literature of the underground was formed, appearing as *samizdat* and its alter ego *tamizdat* (literature banned in the USSR but published in the West). It was also in these conditions that the human rights movement began, dissidents appeared, and the distance between them and official culture became enormous.

The division of Russian culture into that which was 'official' and that which was 'uncensored' tended to devalue the State system of rewards and prizes, and so the State attempted to influence the literary process through material incentives. If a writer showed loyalty and 'patriotism', he could expect certain material privileges (better housing, foreign travel, access to privileged shops). The whole corrupting patchwork of rewards and privileges was designed to consolidate the cultural hierarchy. All, incidentally, was brilliantly described in Vladimir Voinovich's novella *Shapka* ('The Fur Hat'), published in London in 1988.

This was a hierarchy not only of people and rank, but also of themes and even genres. For instance, the novel was regarded as more important than the short story, and works about the working class were more worthy than those about the intelligentsia or artists. The Soviet epic novel (what Russians themselves term 'the novel-epos', or the 'panoramic novel') could be imbued with Marxist philosophy, trumpet the monopoly of power enjoyed by the Communist Party, show how people thought and acted according to these precepts, and thus divine the future. The Soviet epic novel, therefore, became the repository of myth as official ideology.<sup>4</sup> Within this myth individuality is replaced by communality, the dominant point of view is that of the 'authoritative narrator' (Galina Belaia's term) who represents the ruling ideology, although 'authoritative' in this sense could

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<sup>4</sup> The seminal and still definitive study of the Soviet novel is Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*; another important contribution is Evgenii Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature*.

easily be substituted by ‘authoritarian’. Just as in myth, the hero never dies, for in socialist realist aesthetics physical death is superseded by legendary status in the future. The literature of socialist realism, therefore, contains no unpredictability, no nonconformity, for the narrative must conform to the Marxist laws of history; what Katerina Clark defines as the ‘master plot’ of Marxist-Leninist discourse.

Those writers who did not subscribe to the myth found themselves evicted from the official literary process, and their only possible outlets were then either in samizdat or tamizdat, before being forced into emigration (Vasilii Aksenov, Vladimir Voinovich, Georgii Vladimov, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Fridrikh Gorenshtein, many others). Thus was formed the ‘third wave’ of emigration: the first occurred during and immediately after the Revolution of 1917, the second in the aftermath of the Second World War. The third wave would similarly displace the best Russian writers from their native soil. It began with the now-forgotten Valerii Tarsis (1906-83), who went abroad in 1966. He was the first writer to be declared insane during the thaw, because he had returned his Writers’ Union membership card and his Party card. He can be described as the USSR’s first dissident, and the founder of dissidence among the literary community.

We can say, therefore, that there were three literary processes: the official one, with its prizes and privileges and own rules of discourse; that of the emigration, also with its own discourse but obviously not subject to influence from within Russia; and that of the newly-established *samizdat*.

Major writers forced abroad were cut off from the mass reader, and society in Russia was closed once more. It would be reopened only three General Secretaries later.

The road towards an open society was long and hard, and laid with creative technologies. The letters to the leaders, publications of their works abroad, literary scandals, public trials – all these were not only literary acts. They were remarkable benchmarks in the consciousness of the Soviet intelligentsia. They taught the intelligentsia to understand their civil rights, and without this understanding a closed society cannot be opened. The historical role of Russian literature and writers in this process should not be underestimated.



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## Резюме

В статье оценивается роль писательской активности в «открытии» советского общества после «оттепели». Рассматриваются различные новые формы писательского общественного поведения, которые были невозможны в сталинскую эпоху. Публичное «общественное осуждение» Бориса Пастернака было жестоким и несправедливым, однако впервые осужденный коммунистической партией писатель остался на свободе и продолжал печататься. Суд над Иосифом Бродским и последующая ссылка, а также активная борьба писателей и деятелей культуры за его освобождение стали новым достигнутым уровнем осознания свободы. В кругах интеллигенции особого рода дискуссии сопровождали суд на Синявским и Даниэлем, чья единственная вина заключалась лишь в том, что они воспользовались продуктом своего интеллектуального творчества по своему усмотрению, без разрешения правившего режима. Чем выше была степень достигаемой свободы – тем уже становился горизонт для произвола. Все эти дискуссии сопровождалось обращениями в партийные и государственные организации, более или менее получавшими огласку. Великим вкладом в «открытие» закрытого общества стала деятельность диссидентов, среди которых было много писателей и публицистов. Конечно, огромной потерей для СССР была массовая эмиграция писателей, составивших «третью волну» эмигрантов. Оказавшись на Западе, многие из них привезли с собой рукописи запрещенных книг и фактически открыли параллельный литературный процесс, протекавший в эмигрантских изданиях, но, тем не менее, оказывавшийся известным и изучаемым в Советском Союзе. Все эти формы писательской активности способствовали духовному раскрепощению советского человека и морально готовили его к совершившемуся позже открытию советского общества.

Key words: Literary process, civil society, literary trials, freedom of creative activity, freedom of speech, copyright and publication process

Ключевые слова: Литературный процесс, гражданское общество, литературные суды, свобода творчества, свобода слова, проблема авторских прав и процесс публикации

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