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The Soviet Novel

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The Soviet Novel

The Russians have a literary tradition that is at least the equal of the French, English or Germans. They have a history of countless novelists and poets of world renown. One would, however, imagine that this whole tradition came to an end with the Bolshevik revolution after which, Russian society, having thrown off the yoke of exploitation and oppression, failed to produce anything of any great merit, except perhaps Gorky's work, or then Ostrovsky (of whom the Encyclopaedia Britannica writes that his "*passionate sincerity and autobiographical involvement lends a poignant conviction* [to his hero] *that is lacking in most heroes of socialist realism*"). And then again there is Sholokhov, who got a 1941 Stalin Prize for '*The Silent Don*', and was subsequently, in 1965, a winner of the Nobel prize for literature for his "*artistic strength and honesty when depicting a historical epoch in the life of the Russian people.*"

One can imagine how hard it must be for the bourgeoisie to acknowledge any merit at all in anything that depicts the working class as victorious in struggle against the bourgeoisie. The Encyclopaedia Britannica pours scorn on socialist realism in writing as follows:

"*The primary theme of Socialist Realism is the building of socialism and a classless society. In portraying this struggle, the*

writer could admit imperfections but was expected to take a positive and optimistic view of socialist society and to keep in mind its larger historical relevance.

"A requisite of Socialist Realism is the positive hero who perseveres against all odds or handicaps. Socialist Realism thus looks back to Romanticism in that it encourages a certain heightening and idealising of heroes and events to mould the consciousness of the masses. Hundreds of positive heroes – usually engineers, inventors, or scientists – created to this specification were strikingly alike in their lack of lifelike credibility".

Yet in spite of bourgeois critics' snide, unsubstantiated, sneers, it turns out that not a few Soviet works forced their way, socialist realism and all, into the front ranks of world contemporary literature in spite of everything the bourgeoisie could do to prevent it. Just as Soviet art and Soviet music have pressed themselves into the front ranks also, and for the same reason: they are the products of a vibrant new society, which has released an exhilarating tide of energy and enthusiasm. To fail to be caught up in this spirit once you have made contact with it, you would have to have been quite dead for several years – or to be worrying about your pension fund!

Anyway, I had initially intended to spend a leisurely summer re-reading Soviet novels on the beach – to present myself to you having read 20 or 30 relatively recently, to give you a brief rundown of their themes, bring out some enjoyable quotations and generally to be erudite, albeit rather hurriedly so. Comrade Secretary, however, has brought my presentation forward by two months, so I'm afraid the erudition has rather bitten the dust.

Nevertheless I think I can still make a fair first at the overall task which I had in mind when I volunteered to present a session on the Soviet novel, and this was simply to encourage you to

read these masterpieces – as many of them as you can get your hands on. On the one hand you will enjoy them, and on the other hand I think you will learn a great deal which will stand you in good stead in the harsh conditions of political struggle that we wage today. In addition, once you have familiarised yourself with these texts, you will also be able to pick out the ones which are most likely to help your less experienced comrades see their way out of ideological difficulties that do not always respond readily to abstract prescription. For instance, in the course of some Soviet novels it is possible to see positive, as well as negative examples, of criticism and self-criticism in practice, that may be helpful in ourselves utilising these concepts in a way that is helpful to advancing the interests of the working class. Soviet novels give you in effect prolonged and elaborate examples of various principles operating in practice, so that even at second hand, you can gain better understanding of the social phenomena discussed.

To get you into the swing of things, however, I thought I would read you a passage from *Steel and Slag* by Vladimir Popov, a 1948 Stalin Prize winner. His novel concerns the German occupation of the Ukraine in the early part of the Great Patriotic War. The steel plant is evacuated to the far east in advance of the Germans' arrival, but workers left behind are pressed by them into forced labour, under quisling management. As one can imagine, the workers do as little as they can get away with, and in this section have settled down to read a German propaganda newspaper, the *Donetsky Vestnik*, calculating that nobody will try to prevent them doing this.

"'Genuine Personal Liberty,' Sasha read out, and paused to clear his throat.

"The workers exchanged glances.

"'Well, well,' said Dyatalov encouragingly. 'It certainly does sound interesting!'

"'The great German army has brought the Ukrainian people genuine liberation,' Sasha continued loudly. 'At long last, we can be our own masters, and choose our occupations at will. Anyone is free to establish his own workshop, mill or factory. Taxes have been abolished. We may forget them to the end of time. The new order is based on the principle of inviolability of private property. This gives full scope to private initiative. Develop commercial activities more energetically! Tradesmen and manufacturers are entitled to high incomes precisely because they are not rank-and-file philistines, but leaders, activists. We may say more: in present conditions, they are great men, vehicles of culture and civilisation. They carry out a noble mission. We already have a number of private stores; but what is holding up our remaining entrepreneurs? True, there is great difficulty in obtaining merchandise. But it must be procured, from the bottom of the sea if necessary...'

"'That's enough of that!', put in Opanasenko. 'There's no deep-sea divers here. We're 'rank-and-file philistines' every one of us. 'From the bottom of the sea''. He snorted derisively.

"'All right,' said Sasha, laying the paper aside and taking up another. 'Let us try the announcements then. Here's a big one: 'Universal Labour Service for Civilian Population'.

"The announcement was set in very small type, and Sasha had difficulty in making it out in the unlit shop.

"'I command', he read slowly, 'First: all residents of the 'Donetz' Oberfeldkommandatur are liable to labour service, from the age of fourteen. Second: consequently, said residents are obliged to obey any working orders which may be issued by the employment bureau. If so ordered, they are obliged to go to work away from their place of residence. Third: actions violating this order are punishable by fine, imprisonment, confiscation of property, or two or more of these penalties simultaneously.'

"'What do they mean, simultaneously?' demanded the collective farmer, who had seemed half asleep on his pile of bricks. 'You can't take two skins off one ox.'

"Sasha read on:

"'Penalty of death may be imposed. Signed. Oberfeldkommandant von Claire, General of Infantry.'

"Folding up the newspaper, he put it away and produced still another.

"'Svetlana's over fifteen,' said Opanasenko thoughtfully. 'Why, she's still a baby! And here they say – fourteen. Yes, it's nicely put. Page one: personal liberty, and page two – hmph!'

"The others made no comment. Sasha began a new article....

"While Sasha was unfolding a new paper, Lyutov came up and stood waiting, al attention. What were they reading? A leaflet?

"... Sasha began to read the first thing that caught his eye.

"'The municipal board reminds all taxpayers that arrears on former state taxes – ground rent, cattle tax, income tax, and tax for cultural development – must be paid immediately.'

"'What do you mean, spreading lies like that,' demanded Lyutov. Striding up to Sasha, he wrenched the paper from his hands and tore it up. 'Taxes are done away with for good. I read it myself in No. 5'

"'That was No. 5', Sasha retorted, 'and this is No. 10'.

"'There can't be any collecting of old taxes now. I'll make you stop poisoning people's minds, you little son-of-a-bitch.'

"Opanasenko laid a heavy hand on Lyutov's shoulder.

"'You, meister,' he said, 'don't you tear that paper. It's the Germans' paper, put out by the new authorities. I can beat you up for that, and never fear. And you'll have the Gestapo to answer to. We're having a talk here all about the new order, and

you come interfering!'

"'But it's lies,' Lyutov insisted – more quietly, however. Bending, he began to gather up the torn newspaper.

"'What do you mean – lies?' demanded Sasha growing bolder still. 'Here, take another and read for yourself. Only don't tear it this time. Look, this one's about taxes too.'

"He pointed to one of the announcements in small type.

"'Go ahead! Read it out loud!' the workers cried.

"Lyutov read rapidly:

"'Certain institutions and private individuals hold the opinion that taxes need no longer be paid. This opinion is erroneous, and liable to severe punishment. Standartkommandant.'

"The workers guffawed. The crestfallen 'meister' sat down and ran through the announcement again, this time to himself."

This illustrates another invariable feature of Soviet writing – the wit and humour. Like Shakespeare, it's not a laugh a minute: serious themes are the mainstay of the products of socialist realism. But a bit of light relief, a gentle dig at minor backwardness, and not so gentle, mockery (as in the quote above) of people who are inexcusably backward, is typical. Socialist realism definitely allows for parody and caricature the better to illustrate a point.

The Zhurbins

Having made some general points, I would like to familiarise you further with four specific novels to try to give you an idea of how very well worth reading they are. I will start with *The Zhurbins* by Vsevolod Kochetov. This was the first Soviet novel I ever read, and I think everybody will always retain a special affection for the first work that introduced them to this genre, simply because of the terrific impact you are bound to feel if you had no idea beforehand of what to expect.

The Zhurbins has no 'hero', as such. In this novel, as in all other Soviet novels, the 'hero' is the Soviet working people. In *The Zhurbins* the people whose lives are described are working-class people working in the shipbuilding industry. Of course, it is nowadays not so unusual to deal in fiction media with the lives of working people. But what is different about *The Zhurbins* is that these working people live in the unique conditions that they are masters of society. They are not in the slightest bit downtrodden – they're the ruling class. To the extent that there are social hierarchies, this is only for the purpose of organisation and maximisation of resources, not for the purpose of exploitation and oppression.

This is what produces the Soviet man and the Soviet woman whom the Encyclopaedia Britannica considers lack *"lifelike credibility"*. If your view of working-class people has been indelibly informed by (1) acquaintance at most with workers who are exploited and oppressed, but, more importantly, (2) by the bourgeois stereotypes of working-class people, as seen in, say, *East Enders* or *Coronation Street*, as generally rather poor specimens, then a Soviet worker of the 1950s, even if you met

him in the flesh, would seem to you to lack *"lifelike credibility"*.

But let us look at one of the many heroes of *The Zhurbins*, and consider whether such a charge of lack of *"lifelike credibility"* could stick if anybody took the trouble of investigating the facts:

"One evening at about 8 o'clock Ivan Stepanovich put his head into one of the workshops. There he saw Anton, the trade-union organiser of the sector, the chairman of the shop committee, and Gorbunov.

"'But what can I do, comrades? What am I to him?' Anton was asking.

"'Aren't you his brother, man?' argued the chairman of the shop committee.

"'What's the problem?' inquired Ivan Stepanovich.

"The trade-union organiser pointed at a metal framework in the second bay. It was a jig for assembling ship sections. On one of the cross–pieces of the framework sat a welder, his face covered by a protective mask. Pulling an electrode out of his overall pocket, he fitted it into the holder; the arc hissed, showering sparks on all sides; the welder moved on further – a new electrode, again fireworks. He worked fast, dextrously and calmly, and it was impossible to understand why the trade-union officials were so worried.

"'He won't leave the shop after the day shift, Ivan Stepanovich', explained Gorbunov. ;We shall have to report it.'

"'Who is he?'

"'Anton Ilyich's brother, Konstantin Zhurbin.'...

"'Zhurbin!' shouted Ivan Stepanovich. 'Zhurbin! Get down from there, get down at once! What do you think you're doing?'

"'I'll be through in a moment, then I'll come down', replied Kostya, without turning round.

"'Zhurbin!' shouted Ivan Stepanovich. 'Do you realise what you're doing?'

"'What?' Kostya switched off the instrument and raised his face guard.

"'Just this. If the BBC or the Voice of America were to get to know what you're doing they'd go yelling all over the world about forced labour.'

"'They do that in any case, Comrade Director, even if you work only three hours a day. No good going by them! ... Do you expect me to leave this till Monday? Why, that means spoiling my Sunday.'

"'How will it spoil your Sunday?'

"'It would be left hanging over my head. I don't like leaving a job unfinished. And I've just a scrap more to do.'

"... Ivan Stepanovich did not leave it at that. On Monday he summoned Kostya to his office and started telling him off.

"'Let's forget about the BBC, we'll put up with them somehow,' he said. 'The bad thing is that overtime casts a shadow on the whole shipyard. This isn't wartime. It could make people say that we can't work rhythmically, according to the timetable, that we still do things by the old rush method. Understand?'

"'No, I don't', answered Kostya boldly. 'This is no rush method. What did our father always say to us when we were kids? Eat up your food and eat up your work; don't leave things half done.'

"'Did you finish your quota before the hooter went?'

"'Forty per cent over.'

"'That's not half, it's half as much again, Zhurbin.'

"'I didn't want to leave it till Monday.'

"'I'm not asking what you want. There's discipline at this

shipyard and you've got to observe it.'

"'I still don't understand, Ivan Stepanovich. Who do you think I am – a hired labourer? I'm a worker!'

"So the director and the worker did not reach agreement.

"After Kostya left, Ivan Stepanovich recalled the days when he, as a Komsomol leader, had fought against the slackers, the rolling stones and the absentees, when he had called in young lads just like this and tried to prove to them that they must work in a new way, in a socialist way. And often he had failed.

"'You are the owner of the shipyard now,' he would explain.

"'Me, the owner!' the lad would sneer. 'The owner's the director. Our job's to go slogging away and getting paid for it.'...

"Yes, there was much that Kostya did not know. But Ivan Stepanovich had been through it all. He had something with which to compare the new times of his country. And when he compared that lad who had said 'Me, the owner! The owner's the director', with Kostya, he would feel a glow of excitement. He had not just lived a certain number of years, he had entered a new epoch. Yes, that lad and Kostya were representatives of different epochs ...

"It had seemed that a hundred or two hundred years would be needed to nurture the new man, but only 20 years had passed and the new man had grown up. Things had come to a pass when the director of a plant was obliged to cool a worker's ardour!"

The Zhurbins centres round the effect on people's lives of modernisation of a shipyard – the abandonment of riveting and going over to arc welding, plus the introduction of the production line into an area where it had been hitherto unknown. This

process, so necessary to improve productivity (not for the sake of greater profits but for the sake of building up production levels so as to satisfy an ever-increasing amount of workers' needs), is obviously going to change people's lives in a drastic manner. To start with, the craft of the riveter is going to become virtually redundant. How will the workers and their families cope with the disruption that this reorganisation must unavoidably bring to their lives? In true socialist realist tradition, after the initial feelings of reluctance to alter the routine in which they feel at home, the workers are soon taking the changes in their stride and making all the necessary adjustments.

The novel also raises any number of social questions.

One of these is the relationship of theory to practice and the implications of this relationship for decisions a person must make about his or her life. Is one content to be an excellent worker or craftsman, or should one also study scientific theory, and if one should study, then when and under what conditions?

The changing role of women in society is also touched on at some length. One encounters a whole number of different kinds of Soviet woman in the novel, from the housewife who never had an opportunity to go to receive much of an education, go to work, etc., but who has always worked hard helping her family to make their contribution to the new Soviet society, to the young university-trained engineer. Even in the 1950s it becomes clear that Soviet society has not yet managed to remove every barrier in society to women's equality – but Soviet writers of what Encyclopaedia Britannica considers to be simply 'propaganda literature', add their efforts to the common effort to rid society of this kind of backwardness, as indeed every other.

"'You're a good girl, Zinaida Pavlovna,' [says the foreman, but ...] *'the point is this ... I've been at many different shipyards on travelling assignments, I've been working here a good quarter*

of a century, and never in my life have I seen a woman in the stocks, except at the furnaces and as crane drivers ... and may be an assistant here and there, or a caretaker. Is that just a matter of chance? No, it isn't. You need self control and character on our job. And women haven't got much self control nor the right kind of character."

When, however, this same foreman begins to feel a need to acquire more theoretical knowledge in order to be able to keep up with changes at the shipyard, it is to Zinaida Pavlovna that he decides to go for lessons. Ultimately, when a vacancy occurs for a foreman on the stocks he puts her forward. Before long, after seeing her work, and observing her exemplary behaviour in an emergency caused by extreme weather conditions, he finally concedes:

"Now I'm quite certain you'll make a ship builder."

Another of the characters in the novel, Katya, becomes an unmarried mother. In the 1950s in capitalist countries this would have been an unparalleled disaster. It would have given rise to condemnation of the mother's stupidity, if not her downright immorality, or to the nauseating patronage of do-gooders. In *The Zhurbins*, however, though there is some condemnation of the man who left his girlfriend in this state, on the whole the event is no big deal. The child goes to a nursery shortly after birth. The mother goes to work and is well able to provide for her child by herself. Shortly afterwards she starts on a course at the university. Nobody thinks any the less of her simply because she is an unmarried mother.

Another theme relevant to women's liberation is that of breakdown of marriage where the parties turn out to have little in common. While all Soviet novels are disapproving of people who trifle with the affections of others, it is a different matter when parties who have tried hard to make a go of their marriage

actually find that the marriage has become a fetter on their being able to contribute in the way that most inspires them to the building of the new society. Again these are themes which in the capitalist societies of the 1950s were revolutionary in the extreme. Now of course we have fallen into the decadence of the age and have become somewhat hardened to the idea of personal disloyalty and trifling with people's affections. Soviet novels, however, force one to consider whether, under the influence of reactionary classes, we are not engaged in destroying the happiness of a lifetime's comradeship for the sake of an eternal chase after the chimeras of eternal youth and instant gratification. As far as Ostrovsky was concerned, anybody who did that could not be trusted as a communist, never mind as a friend.

Another question raised by the novel is that of the role of the elderly in the new society. Matvei is a war veteran, a former shock worker. As the years go by he ceases to have the steadiness of eye that his trade requires. He starts falling more and more behind in his work as far as both quantity and quality are concerned. He resigns himself to being pensioned off as 'night director', shuffling into his office every evening armed with a good book and a blanket, intent on a good snooze. As emergencies at the yard crop up, however, he finds that his intimate knowledge of the workings of the shipyard and the community is a huge asset for those seeking prompt solutions. Far from being out to grass, Old Matvei finds himself not only in the thick of things, but in a position of considerable authority.

"Since he had become the 'night director' Old Matvei's attitude towards his sons had changed. The subjects of their conversations changed too. Old Matvei drew less frequently on his fund of stories and talked mostly about shipyard affairs. Now ... Old Matvei ... 'moved in high circles' and he, too, would see a thing or two from the top of the hill. He was the first in the family to learn the contents of the Ministry's orders and he was

well-informed about any changes in the production programme. The years seemed to be dropping from him. Only a short time previously, when he was being criticised for his mistakes in marking, a strange feeling had begun to creep over him: for some reason he had started looking up to his sons and even his grandsons as if he had become half as tall as he was before. Now, however, Old Matvei had regained his former magnificent stature. Once again he would boom out in a confident bass, not caring how his words would be taken, unafraid of being laughed at. He straightened his bent back, took his battle and labour medals out of the ancient chest, and pinned them on his coat ..."

The novel, like other Soviet novels, expresses optimism and hope. There are problems in life, certainly, but none is insuperable. This is not 'official propaganda'. It is a fundamental truth in a working-class state. With effective party leadership, i.e., a leadership guided by the most advanced Marxist-Leninist leadership, there is no limit to what the working class can achieve. Mistakes are made, but mistakes are not held against you if you are willing to learn. The working-class state is a land of opportunity for the masses of working people. This is the reality of working-class state power, not some hollow 'party line'.

There are a million controversial issues raised in *The Zhurbins*, but I know that you will all enjoy one of them. There are two anti-heroes in the book. One of them is a thorough bad lot who slinks off one dark night, never to be seen again. The other is a weak man who nevertheless manages to retrieve himself at the last minute and settle down in a post where he can make himself useful. These two 'baddies' have one trait in common, a trait so unusual that it makes other workers suspicious of them straight away. Neither of them drinks!

How the Steel was Tempered

When I read *The Zhurbins* for the first time I was quite sure that no other Soviet novel could be as good, but I was soon to find out that, on the contrary, the genre contained a vast treasurehouse of interesting reading. Nevertheless, when I took up with the much-vaunted *How the Steel was Tempered*, I didn't think it would easily come up to the standard of *The Zhurbins* – that of course was before I read it. *The Zhurbins* is a rattling good read, as well as being educational and informative. *How the Steel Was Tempered* goes that little extra distance that makes it great literature. It shares the other features of Soviet novels – socialist realism, occasional humour, its depiction of the Soviet working class as the masters of society, who are, however, not perfect either as individuals or even en masse, but are nonetheless heroic – both as a whole and as regards a high proportion of the individuals who make up that whole. It is not, by the way, a book that has anything whatever to do with the steel industry. The steel of the title represents the will and determination of the working class to remove every obstacle, however intractable, that stands in the way of their building their new future. In the course of fighting these obstacles, the dross falls away – that is to say that workers overcome backward thinking, and new Soviet men and women are born.

The action takes place mostly in the Ukraine in the aftermath of the Great October Revolution, when the Soviets are still fighting to free the area of German and Polish interventionists and of bourgeois nationalist ambitions to control it. It is a book which does not flinch from describing the horrors of the struggle – and in particular the cruelty with which the proprietor classes treated the proletariat in an effort to hang on to their estates and

privileges in the face of the ever greater Bolshevisation of the masses. The author describes, for instance, the terror, bravely borne, of a young girl in prison who knows that she can expect to face rape and murder at the hands of her captors the following day. He describes a pogrom against helpless, defenceless, unarmed Jewish poor – detailing the tactical considerations of the perpetrators of the pogrom, whose aim in organising it is to distract attention from the defeats they are suffering and attempt to lift the morale of their followers. He describes the venality of local peasants, poor people themselves, who loot the homes of the unfortunate victims. Perhaps Ostrovsky's genius lies in depicting how humanity – which can sink so low – can also rise so high once exploitation and oppression are removed.

Ostrovsky's novel is very much based on his personal experiences as a very young man in the years following the Great October Revolution. His hero, Pavel Korchagin, is of an age with himself and many of the incidents he describes are based on his own involvement in the struggles of the period. For instance, one incident that describes the implacable heroism of ordinary people and which really occurred, and in which Ostrovsky himself also played a leading role, was the laying of a special narrow-gauge railway track into the forest under extremely adverse winter weather conditions. The work was done between October and January and will have taken some 3 months. It was a case of either lay the track or leave the town without fuel supplies for the winter – which would have led to starvation as the ability to replenish food stocks was also dependent on fuel at that time of year. The conditions of work were unimaginably dreadful and, having laboured all day, the workers had to sleep at night on a cold, bare, wet concrete floor in a building without heating, without glass in its windows and which had a badly leaking roof. While originally volunteers were taken on for only two weeks – and many of them could not take even that –

because it was considered that the conditions were too arduous for anybody to stay any longer on the project, in fact many of the volunteers remained on the project throughout for lack of volunteers to take their place.

This episode broke the health of both Korchagin and his creator, Ostrovsky. Their contribution to the work was ended when as a result of coming down with typhus they quite literally were unable to work any longer.

Nevertheless the job was completed. The town was saved.

There are two vivid scenes associated with this episode which perhaps help to show what makes Ostrovsky a great author as opposed to just a very good one. He has Shakespeare's knack of keeping several stories going at the same time, and the love interests of Korchagin and the other young people whose lives he describes do peep out from time to time, although they are never central to the story he is telling.

Pavel early on in the novel, when he is little more than a young urchin of 16, is befriended by a middle class girl of similar age, and they fall in love. Of course, nothing much comes of it because they are rarely able to meet. The girl nevertheless influences Pavel to tidy himself up and try to make something of himself. At this early stage one is thinking – oh dear, still some vestiges here of the bourgeois philanthropic idea that a man can be saved by a good woman, especially one who has been educated and thus able to show the great unwashed the proper way of doing things. Anyway, Pavel goes off to fight the interventionists and the Petlyura bandits. In a short time his class consciousness is heightened, along with his sense of dignity and self-respect as a worker. Nevertheless he still remembers his old girl friend with great fondness and is delighted to be meeting up with her again, even hoping that they might get married. This doesn't work out, as they have considerably grown apart while

he has been away at war. During the course of the building of the narrow-gauge railway, however, the two meet up again. The scene is very beautiful and allegorical. She happens to be travelling in a train which is brought to a stop near where the volunteers are working. The workers on the project are a rough sight, for they have been living for weeks in conditions unfit even for animals. Most, including Pavel, are too poor even to be able to afford proper boots. She steps off the train with her husband, some smooth professional type, and comes face to face with Pavel, whom she is hardly able to recognise. Her reaction? How sad that he has been unable to make something of himself and has simply ended up as a navvy. She is ashamed to acknowledge their previous acquaintance.

Through this minor theme I think Ostrovsky was, without making heavy weather of it in any way, actually encouraging people to shed any illusions they might have in educated people (i.e., people who had received education because they came from privileged backgrounds) as opposed to education. He is pointing out that their class instincts tend to nullify the value of their education. Such people were not worthy of the respect that had traditionally been accorded to them. Their lives and thoughts were full of empty-headed frivolity and philistinism.

In an ordinary novel the little middle-class girl might have been saved by the working-class hero, but *How the Steel Was Tempered* is a great novel. His concern is not for the fulfilment of wishful thinking but of the practical importance of attacking backward thinking habits which could lead the revolution into difficulties.

The second incident I was referring to comes slightly later when the railway line is complete. The town is no longer facing disaster. Pavel is dragged off to a party at some friends' house. Here he finds workers apparently engaged in aping the frivolity

and empty-headedness of the privileged classes of yore. They are playing various kinds of kissing game. He is paired off with a very young teenage girl who is expected to read from a card saucy questions of the *'Blind Date'* variety, which he in turn is supposed to answer. He walks out of the party, overwhelmed with disgust, seething with contempt for the foolishness of the whole thing.

Again, Ostrovsky's light touch does not lay down the law or explain to you why Pavel was so strongly affected by this admittedly silly but harmless enough fun. You are left to work it out for yourself. This is in fact a very common feature in Soviet novels. They do not spell out rights and wrongs. They raise genuine social dilemmas with the arguments on both sides, heightening consciousness of the difficulties and then leaving it to the good senses of their readers to work through these difficulties, now that they are more aware of them, in the course of their own experience.

Throughout the book the reader takes a ride, as it were, in a proletarian mind whose class-consciousness is gradually and inexorably developing and maturing. That person's views on social obligations, on courage and self sacrifice, on various manifestations of backwardness, on the woman question, on personal questions (such as love, friendship and family relations) somehow become one's own, at least for the duration of the ride. Through the eyes of this person you see the history of this critical period of proletarian history evolve. The words of bourgeois cynics try to break through to you as you ride this roller coaster. How can these uneducated workers and peasants possibly be expected to defeat the highly-trained German or Polish armies? How can they possibly win out against Ukrainian nationalism, which is what the Ukrainian people REALLY relate to? How can they complete construction works that are clearly impossible? A good novel – but just propaganda! The facts,

however, prove otherwise. The Germans and Poles were driven out of the Ukraine. The nationalists were defeated. And the people who did it were none other than the downtrodden worker and peasant masses of the Ukraine. This novel helps you to understand in human terms how these victories were possible. They were possible not because there was no backwardness, no cowardice, no wavering, no philistinism – there were plenty of all those things among workers. They were possible because of the leadership of the Bolshevik Party, which organised the advanced workers to lead the less advanced, enabling the massive creative energies of the working class to emerge from the swamp of backwardness. *How the Steel was Tempered* really shows you how this was done.

Just before leaving the subject of *How the Steel was Tempered,* let me give you a short example of the humour that also pervades this great novel:

"'In April of that turbulent 1919, the respectable citizen, dazed and terrified, would open his shutters of a morning and, peering out with sleep-heavy eyes, greet his next-door neighbour with the anxious question:

"'Avtonom Petrovich, do you happen to know who's in power today?'

"And Antonom Petrovich would hitch up his trousers and cast a frightened look around.

"'Can't say, Afanas Kirillovich. Somebody did enter the town during the night. Who it was we'll find out soon enough: if they start robbing the Jews, we'll know they're Petlyura men, and if they're some of the 'comrades', we'll be able to tell at once by the way they talk. I'm keeping an eye open myself so's to know what portrait to hang up. Wouldn't care to get into trouble like Gerasim Leontievich next door. You see, he didn't look out properly and had just gone and hung up a picture of Lenin when

three men rushed in – Petlyura men as it turned out. They took one look at the picture and jumped on him – a good twenty strokes they gave him. 'We'll skin you alive, you Communist sonofabitch,' they shouted. And no matter how hard he tried to explain and how loud he yelled, nothing helped.'"

Incidentally, for Ostrovsky himself as well as for Pavel Korchagin, his creation, the hardships of his youthful penury, the fighting for Soviet Ukraine, the hard labour of the forest rail track, culminated in an irretrievable breakdown in his health. The novel details the struggle of Korchagin to continue to serve the revolution in spite of increasing infirmity. Finally, blind and with his body mostly paralysed, he makes one of his most important contributions to the proletarian revolution in the form of his novel. Ostrovsky died at the age of only 32.

Every Soviet novel sets out to add to the knowledge of its readers, not just their class consciousness and understanding. All set out to provide you with a delicious, enjoyable, nutritious, healthy and balanced meal for the mind, as it were, rather than the cheeseburger of the bourgeois detective novel, say. While one can, after a fashion, satisfy one's hunger with a cheeseburger, and one can enjoy some detective novels, one is not left much the better off for having consumed it. Soviet novels are informative on a wide variety of interesting topics. They are often set among, and often written by, non-Russian Soviet people, and introduce us through their own eyes to people such as the Chukchi of the Soviet Arctic (Timon Syomushkin, *Alitet goes to the hills*), the Nanai of far eastern Siberia (Vasili Azhayev, *Far from Moscow*), the Yakuts of the Soviet North (Antonina Koptayeva, *Ivan Ivanovich),* the Lithuanian peasants (Hans Leberecht, *Light in Koordi*). In addition they deal with the major social concerns of the Soviet people – for instance, *Light in Koordi* deals with collectivisation and *Far From Moscow* with the industrialisation of the far east. While in *Ivan Ivanovich,*

according to the jacket, "*Koptayeva tries to show that the Soviet family must be founded not only on legal equality between man and wife, but on true comradeship and mutual respect. Without that there cannot be real friendship or genuine love.*

"*The conflict which arises between Dr Arzhanov and his wife is the conflict of the new, communist concept of the family, and old-fashioned notions of family life, from which Dr Arzhanov, a progressive member of Soviet society in every other respect, frees himself only when tragedy enters his life.*"

Does that make you feel you want to read it? It does me.

In *Students,* one learns a few things about Russian literature while following the adventures of university students striving to sweep out the bad habits of expectation of privilege and self-seeking that had hitherto been associated – and to some extent still was – with the pursuit of higher learning.

The Soviet Union also produced excellent historical novels. *Genghis Khan,* for instance, is extremely informative about the economics of the Mongol empire. Of course, the bourgeoisie also publishes interesting historical novels – for instance, Colleen McCullough's novels set in ancient Rome – but the Soviet ones are in no way inferior to these, even though the bourgeoisie does not circulate them. Since the writers of Soviet historical novels research not just the lives of the rich and powerful but are also consistently interested in the life of ordinary people and their means of livelihood, Soviet historical novels are also tend to be more consistently informative than their bourgeois counterparts.

Light on Koordi would be a good book to circulate to people who have been fed the bourgeois line of 'forced collectivisation'. It most graphically shows rich, middle and poor peasants' reaction to collectivisation, based firmly on the conditions of life that they have had to endure. It shows that while it was certainly

the business of Party organisers to make sure peasants knew of the possibility of collectivisation, facilitating visits, for instance, to existing collective farms in Russia or elsewhere, for the peasants to pool their resources in collectives had to be their own decision. The novel shows how easy the decision is for the poorest peasants, even though Soviet power brought them land of their own when never previously had they had any, or enough. They can quickly see how much easier life will be when resources are pooled, land is not wasted in supporting dividing boundaries, rational use can be made of machinery, and how the collective can carry people who are temporarily deprived of their ability to work (e.g., through illness) or distribute the effects of any disaster so that nobody is wiped out by bad luck. Middle peasants are a lot less decisive about the whole thing: for them there are advantages and disadvantages, but in many cases they will convince themselves that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages and they had better go along with the collective. For the rich peasants, however, the collective is very bad news. Even though they remain outside it, the collective deprives them of the labour of impoverished peasants which they were formerly able to exploit. Their path to riches is blown away, and they use every bit of their power and influence to try to prevent the path of collectivisation from running smoothly.

One of the nicest touches about *Light in Koordi* is that it presents us with a series of mysteries as to how people will react in the long run. Presented with a number of peasants, all of whom have strong points as well as weaknesses, we follow the process of their evolution as the lure of collectivisation catalyses their social progress. The book opens in the home of a middle peasant, and ends with that same peasant's decision vis-à-vis joining the collective. Throughout the whole book we are shown the various pressures pulling him this way and that, but his denouement, so to speak, is, in fine mystery tradition, left to the

end.

When I undertook to talk about the Soviet novel, it has become clear to me that my eyes were a lot bigger than my stomach. The very richness of the genre means that I could not do it any real justice in just a few weeks of re-reading novels. I would like to suggest that in connection with the Soviet novel there are still many themes that the Stalin Society might like to take up at some future date. One obvious one is an assessment of Gorky. Another might deal with the education and training of Soviet writers. Another might be the historical evolution of socialist realism in fiction, including its roots in pre-Soviet traditions. It would also be good to persuade comrades to make presentations as to various novels so that those of us who do not have time to read them in their entirety can be given a good grounding in what they contain.

I apologise for the deficiencies of this talk, but I do hope that I have inspired comrades to read Soviet novels for themselves. I can assure you that you will not be disappointed.