

1955

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### Recommended Citation

Rothberg, Abraham. "Current Events in the Literary Volga." *New Mexico Quarterly* 25, 4 (1955). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol25/iss4/2>

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*Abraham Rothberg*

## CURRENTS IN THE LITERARY VOLGA

**A**FTER A GAP of twenty years since the First All-Union Congress, held in 1934 and chaired by Maxim Gorky, the Second All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers was convened in the Great Kremlin Palace in Moscow on December 15, 1954. Not only were almost all of the prominent Soviet writers present — Mikhail Sholokhov, Konstantin Simonov, Ilya Ehrenburg, Konstantin Fedin, Alexander Fadeyev, to mention only a few — but to give the meeting an international and a “multinational” air there were also Communist “delegates” from the West, from the Soviet national minorities, and from the Satellites as well. There was the French Louis Aragon, the German novelist Anna Seghers, the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, the Brazilian writer Jorge Amado, the English novelist Jack Lindsay, the former Czech, sometime American, and present East German novelist Stefan Heym. Howard Fast wrote to the Congress from the United States (according to Radio Moscow, January 3, 1955) that he regretted, “The frontiers of my Motherland are closed for me. I can communicate my love, my thoughts, but I cannot come myself, even if it is as indispensable for me as bread is indispensable for a starving man.”

The top Party and Government leaders of the Soviet Union — Khrushchev, Bulganin, Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich, Mikoyan, Saburov, Pervukhin, Shvernik, Pospelov, Suslov, and Shatalin — were also there to remind the assembled writers at whose behest they were gathered and whose political purposes would become their assigned “literary” tasks. Lest such powerful presences, and the fact that the opening meeting was held in the Kremlin (it was subsequently transferred to the Hall of Columns in the House of the Union) be taken less as symbolic and more

as formality, the first session of the Congress was opened by Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CCCPSU) Pospelov, who read a Central Committee message to the writers setting the keynotes for the Congress. With unconscious irony, Radio Moscow of December 16 noted that Pospelov's speech was greeted "by a storm of applause [by which] the Congress manifested its boundless devotion to the great CPSU."

What occasioned this thorough critical review of Communist literature, with a Congress which had on its agenda the problems of the novel, dramaturgy, poetry, translation, literary criticism, films, and scenarios? Two things seem to have made the meeting necessary: the difficulties encountered by the Kremlin in getting better writing, and the simultaneous problem of keeping that writing politically acceptable to the Politburo and the Party, as well as related to the purposes of the new policies. Just as Party Congresses have been held throughout the Soviet orbit recently to lay down the political-economic line for the post-Stalin period, so this Writers' Congress was convened to attempt to put an end to the uncertainty and wavering on the Communist cultural front.

With the death of Stalin and the launching of the New Course, there were stirrings in the Soviet artistic world which began in 1953 and reached their peak in 1954, and which seemed to indicate that the "liberalization" of political and economic life might be accompanied by a less stringently regulated art.

The "liberalization" discussion began some six weeks after Stalin's death with an article in *Literaturnaya Gazeta* by poet Olga Berggoltz which criticized the sterility of Soviet poetry. It was followed by articles from Ilya Ehrenburg and V. Pomerantzev, a young critic, and from Shostakovich and Khachaturian in music, calling for more passion and spontaneity in art, less interference in the artist's creative life, and less made-to-order works of art. Ilya Ehrenburg put this point of view most cogently in the October issue of *Znamya*:

In the pre-revolutionary days, a writer's task was not easy; and in Chekhov's letters there is some mention of how the editor of this or that newspaper or magazine would order a story from him. But even the most impertinent editor would draw the line at suggesting to Chekhov the subject of his story. Can one imagine Tolstoy being ordered to write *Anna Karenina* or Gorky being ordered to write *Mother*?

An author is not a piece of machinery. An author writes a book not because he knows how to write, not because he is a member of the Union of Soviet Writers and may be asked why he has published nothing for so long. An author writes a book because he must tell people something of himself, because he is 'sick' with his book, because he has seen people, things and emotions that he cannot help describing.

Although these criticisms were directed at cultural bureaucrats and critics, and not at the Zhdanov decrees of 1946-48, or the Party itself which had imposed them, it seemed as if some "liberalization" was imminent in the sphere of culture. (The so-called Zhdanov decrees were actually elaborations of a postwar literary policy enunciated by the Central Committee of the Communist Party. This policy called for a political literature, filled with Party-mindedness [*partiinnost*] and ideology [*ideiinnost*], and deprecated Western writers and writing as decadent.)

It was then that V. Pomerantsev's article in the December 1953 *Novy Mir*, "About Sincerity in Literature," touched off the Party and regime counterattacks. Although Pomerantsev was still writing within the "Marxist-Leninist" framework, he was for a considerable easing of strictures and a considerable widening of the bounds of permissible creation in literature. There are many phrases — "In the light of the program which has now been unfolded before us for an advance in the country's agriculture," "The atmosphere in editorial offices has begun to clear. Of late they have begun to stop people on tractors . . .," "The 19th Party Congress enlightened these people [the critics], whereupon they promptly turned about face . . ." etc. — which indicate that Pomerantsev was basing his appeal for a New Course in literature on the new economic and political policies. Essentially,

he was asking for a more "realistic" and truthful literature, which took into account "sincerity" and individual artistic creation; in short, he wished to lead Soviet writing to a broadening of themes and a change in the treatment of problems and characters.

The history of art and the ABC of psychology cry out against contrived novels and plays. The degree of sincerity, that is, the directness of things, must be the first requirement. . . . Sincerity distinguishes the author of a book or play from the compiler of a book or play. To contrive, one needs only brains, cleverness and experience. To create, one needs talent — above all, one needs sincerity.

Pomerantsev goes on to equate lack of sincerity with what he calls "slicking up life," and says, "The crudest method [of applying varnish to reality] is to present an imaginary picture of well-being." He wants a more truthful presentation of Soviet reality and the Soviet man, and attacks weak conflict, obvious plot manipulation, stereotyped characters, and a simplified vision of good and evil. Pomerantsev has a long dialogue between a writer of such inferior novels (called "He") and the "new criticism" of the anti-stereotype critic (called "I," or Pomerantsev himself), which is very revealing.

He: "I understand that you permit yourself to call my politically precise formulations empty generalities. Watch out! Talk, but don't talk yourself into a corner."

I: "*Your* formulations? They aren't yours at all. You copy them and consequently haven't assimilated them yourself. You have acquired them, not mastered them. If it were otherwise, the formulations would not be a crib for you, they would be feelings. Feelings, in turn, would give you the means of presenting any thought *through art*. But why talk to you of thought when you have only aims."

. . . . .

He: "Wait, wait, you're going entirely too far. Am I to blame because others have written before I did about the same subjects and the same people? Our Soviet hero is the bearer of ideas common to all of us!"

I: "Your heroes are carried by the ideas, not the other way round. They even dream only logical dreams. Normal confused dreams are

not for them. And how they talk to one another! In harangues from a radio recording. Is human conversation like that? Do speeches pour forth like that, particularly when only two persons are engaged in conversation? Do you remember how your hero gave his daughter a watch 'because my living standard has risen?' That is a phrase straight from the newspaper columns; the man who put it down forgot that in family circles 'living standards' don't 'rise'; a man is 'better off.' Do you remember your mechanic at the Machine Tractor Station and his sweetheart, who dreamed of repairing machines together? Surely, they did not marry for that. Surely they did not keep a repair shop at home. Or your miner who exclaimed: 'Oh, to start using that long blasting charge! If only the weekend were over!' Where did you find a mole like that, burning with the desire to be constantly underground? . . . That is the way people talk only at meetings, or in prosecuting attorneys' speeches when trying a case of theft, not person to person. I could give you an almost endless list of such examples, including some from novels printed in the heavy magazines. . . ."

Pomerantsev was calling for a less political literature, insisting that "political rightness" was not enough to make good books. A good book must come from sincerity of feeling and truthfulness of vision and he sees only foolishness, dishonesty, and empty, flaccid phrases, only obviousness of plot and contrivance of design. He calls for another and different type of writing:

The novel must throw light on the unlit corners of life, but you [authors] travel about to accumulate a vocabulary, episodes and plots. . . . Hence, your stories are thin, and the conflicts you dig up are not conflicts at all . . . but merely . . . duels, 'matters of honor,' with the subsequent reconciliation of flabby opponents. . . . All your moves are obvious. You set the stage in such a way that there can be only one ending. You settle all problems, although you know that in real life they do not disappear, but remain. . . .

In spite of the New Course and, by implication, in spite of any political and economic changes, Pomerantsev says that there are some human problems so complex and stubborn that they will continue to plague mankind and provide material for writers.

We will considerably improve the material conditions of life in two

or three years, but there is no direct line from these conditions into man's soul. If one neighbor after another obtains an apartment, envy may be allayed, but falsehood, for example, will not disappear upon receipt of the rooms. What is 'playing it safe?' At the very least it is all of ten sins. It is egotism, cowardice, blind practicality, ideological lack, and other things, including meanness. Clearly, outliving these sins will require more effort and time than, let us say, eliminating the cattle shortage or the shortage of consumers' goods. To use Chekhov's phrase, these sins, which the Party calls on us to scourge, must be 'conquered by the efforts of a whole generation' — and perhaps more than one generation — of writers. But neither the defects in everyday life nor human failings can be 'elements' of the play or novel. And they cannot be 'balanced' by other 'elements' — prosperity, love of work, goodness, optimism, etc. The work of art must be *organic*, and not composed of good and bad elements.

Like Ehrenburg, Pomerantsev never openly attacks the Zhdanov decrees, or the Party and Government support of the "Socialist realist" line. Instead, he blames the critics, the editors, and the publishers, as if they dealt with works of art independent of Party support, censorship, and control. He even criticizes the Writers' Union — "I have heard that Shakespeare wasn't a member of a union at all, yet did not write badly" — and fellow-writers, and wonders, since "as a rule they are Communists," why they select dull books for publication and put obstacles in the way of publishing good books. At the feet of all of them he places the blame for the triumph of bad and mediocre art.

"Although the Party had repeatedly put these people [the critics] in their place, these people cause the triumph of standardization . . . in books. . . . I could do nothing but hide from these people under a mining combine, a blast furnace, or a tractor [the "He" writer says]. The tractor in my novels was marriage counselor and wedding registry office; it divorced and brought together; it separated, comforted and reconciled. . . .

"How could I not fear him [the critic]? He did not write reviews about me, expressing *opinions*. . . . There were only *sentences* pronounced upon me. Either I was patted on the head or I got it in the neck."

Pomerantsev's attack was a severe one and struck at the very core of the political orientation and Party control of literature. It could not, in the Soviet system, remain unanswered. The counterattack against the "liberalized" line was launched by Vasily Vasilevsky in the January 30, 1954 issue of *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, and was followed by a whole series of attacks led by those of the First Secretary of the Writers' Union, Anatoly Surkov.

The debate continued in a series of pre-Congress discussions and get-togethers, so that when the Writers' Congress was convoked at the end of the year it was obvious that it planned to stop the clamor for more literary elbow room and to reestablish the official policy. The literary discussions had begun to assume the proportions not only of an attack on Soviet theories of art, but implicitly on Soviet life, and the regime from its point of view had no choice but to intervene.

The Congress did not make any new aesthetic or ideological formulations for literature: Not only was the old policy not seriously attacked, but the Pomerantsev-Ehrenburg type of criticism was given a very small amount of attention. The essence of Communist literary policy — still relatively unchanged — has been summed up in two slogans: "Socialist realism" and "national in form and Socialist in content."

Realism was a nineteenth century literary technique of objective rendering of life as it "really" is, emphasizing a "faithful" and "truthful" representation of action, character, and setting. Its language and concreteness made it easy for a newly-educated and newly-literate mass to understand, easy for a new political leadership to control, and furthermore it was capable of being absorbed into a simplified Marxist-materialist world view. However, if this *form* of rendering facts truthfully were applied to the Soviet reality, the results would have been politically disastrous for the regime. Hence, another term — "Socialist" — was added to realism, prescribing the *content*, and making "Socialism" stand for what was politically desirable to Stalinism.

This oil-and-water marriage created enormous problems both



for the writers and the regime. The regime wanted interesting, optimistic, inspiring books which would defend its power, direct the masses to its purposes, and justify its practice. But it also wanted books that people would read and absorb, books which therefore had to have some semblance of truth and relation to reality.

The writers, on the other hand, were caught between the conflicting demands of "Socialist" content and of "realist" form. If they wrote realistically, they were likely to be shot as enemies of the state; if they wrote "Socialistically" they were likely to be accused of "varnishing reality" and of being "divorced from life."

The same logical contradiction was encountered in "national in form and Socialist in content." The "Socialism" in the content meant, of course, the same representation of a political viewpoint consonant with regime policies and purposes, which in this case meant the need to consolidate Stalinist and Great Russian control over an enormous diversity of nations, languages, and cultures. The "national in form" did *not* mean taking account of the creative diversity of human backgrounds and points of view, but merely the use of superficial custom, setting, and language of the particular group involved, Uzbek, Bashkir, or Georgian, while imposing a uniformity of outlook on them. But an Uzbek or Bashkir, for example, could not easily be projected into an essentially Great Russian "Socialist content" mold without an enormous distortion of reality and a corresponding loss of literary force, so that the writer had to choose between actually showing this diversity, and being shot for being a "bourgeois nationalist," or the alternative of a uniform greyness under little more than a cover of linguistic diversity, for which he would be criticized for having "slicked up reality."

AT THE CONGRESS the constant struggle between politics and aesthetics that was apparent throughout the pre-Congress debates was resolved, as it had been in the past, in favor of politics. As Konstantin Simonov summed it up: "The artist of Socialist real-

ism . . . takes the view that there is only one truth in the world — that it is the truth of the people struggling for Socialism — and from this level *all the other, personal truths contradicting it can serve as objects of portrayal but cannot be objects of affirmation.*" (Italics added)

It was precisely in Simonov's distinction between portrayal and affirmation that the Soviet artist had found a compromise solution to the inherent contradictions in "realist" form and "Socialist" content. The Soviet writer had simply delineated the "Socialist" content romantically, giving a rosy picture of Soviet reality and of the so-called positive heroes, and at the same time portrayed realistically those "capitalist remnants" and "negative heroes" which constitute the "counterrevolutionary" elements in Soviet society. That this solution was unstable and unsatisfactory was attested to by the constant stream of criticism of boring and mediocre writing, or as Sholokhov stated it at the Congress:

During the past few years we have pitched our demands on literary standards at an impermissibly low level. We have praised and awarded prizes to books that were only mediocre and allowed others to pass that should never have been published at all in view of their inferior quality.

Certainly a large part of the reason for this failure of literature was the fact that "Socialist realism" insisted on an optimistic literature which not only established the superiority of the Soviet way of life over the capitalist, but made all problems facing man available to solution by action: work, planning, reason, etc. This emphasis on the necessity of optimism by its very nature eliminated the concept of tragedy. The emphasis existed in spite of numerous statements averring that the Soviet writer did not seek to see reality through rose-colored glasses. As Simonov put it, "The aesthetics of Socialist realism does not demand the presentation of a milder portrayal of life where it is rough and even merciless. Yet it demands that beyond exploits a goal should always be in sight; beyond sacrifices, the [cause] for the sake of which they have been made; beyond temporary defeat, the pros-

pect of final victory." In short, the affirmative and optimistic quality of "Socialist realism" lies in its positive political goal. The literature of "Socialist realism" is alien to pessimism because, in Gorky's words, "The very substance of the literature of Socialist realism is an unshakable faith of the masses in the victory of just Socialist relations on earth."

Consequently both the optimism and the Soviet reality are at stake in creating the "positive hero," and therefore Simonov severely criticized Ehrenburg's novelette, *The Thaw*, as having "only approximate knowledge of the people portrayed and a lopsided judgment of them," when Ehrenburg portrayed a large number of "negative" characters. Although Ehrenburg touched problems which literature must not avoid "if it is not to avoid the sharp corners of life," he goes too far for Simonov's tastes.

The positive heroes are, apparently according to the author's plan, people like many others. They are . . . people of whom there are but few, people whose good qualities are a rarity. From many things said by the heroes, one received the involuntary impression that they were compelled to see a great deal of evil in life and very little good; that evil seems to be the rule and all that is good the exception.

It is difficult to imagine that this is just how the author *wished to present our society*. . . . (Italics added)

It was precisely on this same ground that Pomerantsev had been attacked by Surkov in his May 25 article in *Prauda*, where it hurt the regime most: the implication that the Soviet society's values were being called into question, as well as the Party-directed quality of literature. Surkov says:

Pomerantsev's injurious publication is directed, at bottom, against the principles of our literature — against its intimacy with life, against its Communist *ideiinost*, against Lenin's principle of *partiinost* in literature, against the most important canons of Socialist realism. Hiding behind an abstractly understood kind of demand for "sincerity in literature," the author, by the whole tone and feeling of his article, turns the reader's attention to consideration chiefly of the dark, unwelcome sides of our reality.

Although Simonov politely says that this may be contrary to Ehrenburg's intention (Surkov gives Pomerantsev no such quarter), he feels that the contents are a deviation from "Socialist realism," "which on the whole occurs in our literature seldom enough in the form of books, since they are seldom written from alien ideological positions. However, it does find expression, in some way or another, in a number of works."

However, since no Soviet writer may concentrate on the capitalist "remnants and vestiges" without giving a "negative" version of Soviet reality and producing a "negative" hero, nor may he "beautify reality" and "gloss over the contradictions and difficulties" of Soviet life, Simonov falls back on the definition of "Socialist realism" promulgated at the First Congress of Soviet Writers (1934).

Socialist realism is the basic method of Soviet literature and literary criticism and demands of the artist *a true and historically concrete expression of its reality in its revolutionary development. . . .* Thereby *truthfulness and historic concreteness* of artistic expression *must be combined with the task of ideological changing and educating the working people in the spirit of Socialism.* (Italics added)

The Soviet writer, then, must portray both the Soviet reality and his characters in their revolutionary development and changing "ideologically in the spirit of Socialism." Both Soviet reality and characters must be shown as approaching perfection, and the artist must emphasize the *process toward perfection*, rather than the contemporary reality of either character or circumstance. If the writer shows only contemporary Soviet reality, he commits the counterrevolutionary deviation of "objectivism," which confuses possibility and reality (to use Marxist jargon) in Soviet life. The present then is either ignored or romanticized with the veil of the future. Above all, he must never show an absence of forward movement, or difficulties that are insurmountable, or contradictions impossible to resolve within the framework of "Socialist realism," or more important, within the framework of Soviet society.

Simonov applies this type of "process criticism" to Vera Panova's controversial novel, *The Seasons*, particularly panning the novel's characterization:

Panova looks on the human being as a given thing, but we would like to see him from a perspective.

. . . a simplified way of explaining the feeling of dissatisfaction with the portraits of these people will be to say that there are no such people [negative characters]. This, of course, is incorrect. There are contrary people who cause contrary feelings, and no few at that. It would be strange to advise a writer to avoid their portrayal. But our just claims on the Soviet artist lie in the wish to know where the people he portrays are going, whether they are going to change for the better or the worse. It is this which will determine our attitude in the end.

This is not a dogmatic request, but the expression of the active and militant spirit of the time at the foundation of which lies on one hand the *unwavering belief in changing, perfecting and developing people*, and on the other hand, the *firm conviction that stagnation is not in conformity with law*. . . . (Italics added)

If "Socialist realism" then demands from its writers a "true expression of reality" combined with "ideologically changing people in the spirit of Socialism," or what Gorky called the "third reality" — the knowledge of the reality of the future — then either truth or historical circumstance, or both, must be warped or sacrificed. As Simonov phrased it for the Congress, ". . . not every truthfulness and not every historical concreteness can serve this purpose [of ideologically changing people in the spirit of Socialism]."

SINCE SOVIET ARTISTS could not combine a true expression of Soviet reality with ideological conformity, the non-conflict theory arose. Artists tended to "improve reality," "vencer life," and "embellish circumstances in literature." The errors, shortcomings, and negative phenomena of Soviet life were overlooked. The best in heroes (the positive characters), the best in industry (the most modern and efficient factories), the best in agriculture

(the most advanced *soukhozi* and *kolkhozi*) were portrayed *not as examples to be emulated, but as having been everywhere achieved.*

Since literature is a political instrument for the achievement of regime purposes in the USSR, this tendency only partly fulfilled regime intentions. It did not fulfill those Kremlin plans which aimed at higher productivity, larger yields, greater and better quality production at less expense of men and materials. As Simonov pointed out at the Congress, the Party writers and critics (not to speak of the mass of people) were aware ". . . that the general image of life was distorted by such embellishment, the images of the best people of the countryside suffered in their credibility, because they achieved successes in literature with less difficulties than the real difficulties they would have had to encounter and overcome to succeed in real life."

This tendency to represent much of what was desired by the regime as already having been achieved by the regime obviously grew out of the writers' fear to criticize freely since they might be dropped from their jobs or government stipends, never published, jailed, or even shot as counterrevolutionaries. It ran counter to what Zhdanov had called, at the First Congress of Soviet Writers, "revolutionary romanticism" which "stands with both feet on a strong materialist foundation . . . [and] must enter literary creation as an integral component because the whole life of our Party, the whole life and struggle of the working class, consists of the unity between the most severe, the most rational practical work, with the greatest heroism and grandiose vistas."

The most important element of that Zhdanov quotation talks of equating "rational practical work" with "heroism and grandiose vistas," a simple and vulgarized Marxist logic. If a society is determined by its economic base, man is determined by his relations to that base. Since work is his most important relationship to that base, then the labor process is quintessential in representing man. The Soviet state wished to direct its people to work for goals it had set, and literature could be of great help in molding

and motivating the people, which is probably why Stalin called writers "engineers of the soul." Books then had an area of conflict and struggle — "the majestic process of the transformation of the country," — and a character who took part in that struggle — Gorky's "the man of the Party," the Communist leader of the masses, or the "positive hero."

This economic emphasis has led to the rash of "positive heroes" and settings chosen from farm and factory and accounts for the stress on labor, energy, resourcefulness, and initiative as qualities for such heroes. Simonov stated it clearly at the Congress:

*It is possible to ride into literature, even on a tractor, on a bulldozer, on a locomotive and on a combine. There is only one question to be asked here: what kind of people are sitting at the wheel? The theme of labor exploits is a human theme, it is a history of people, character, human relations. The matter is to show man's relation to work, to stress in literature the lofty thought that our relations to man are determined mainly, and above all, by the relations of the man himself to work.*

Simonov insists that no amount of integrity in personal relations, no attractiveness of personality, no fidelity in love, can make up for a character's (or a human being's) improper attitude toward work, and therefore "he [that character or person] has no right to expect any sympathy from us. . . . His attitude towards work is a question of his ideology, of his loyalty — not in words but in facts — to the ideals of Communism." Since no "positive hero" can have a negative work attitude, and since there are some objective work difficulties, Simonov believes that ". . . the main subject for exposure and castigation in literature should be everything which opposes our concept of creative labor."

Not that Simonov contends that the hero should be shown *only* in his "primary" economic role. However much time and strength heroes devote to their work, this would give a lopsided picture for "labor is the center of their lives, but not all of their lives." Characters must endure all the joys and vicissitudes of life as well so that their public behavior (work) will be motivated by

some private behavior (personal life), and also so that a more rounded representation of character will emerge that readers, at least in part, can hope to identify with.

But introducing personal life may not go too far, as First Secretary of the Writers' Union Surkov told the Congress: "Failure will inevitably overwhelm the writer who succumbs to the allure of petty soul-molding, thus isolating the main characters from what is the main factor in their lives — from public important tasks."

Nor does work for the new "Soviet man" have the boredom or difficulty of the worker under capitalism. If, as Jack Lindsay, the English Communist writer at the Congress, stated, ". . . work is plainly seen as the central way in which men grapple with nature and transform her," then "work ceases to be a boring thing imposed on the worker, but becomes an imaginative activity in which the worker is aware of the larger relations of his individual contribution."

The same danger was present in glossing of reality applied to characterizing the "positive hero." For there was not only the danger of creating an idealized "positive hero" but also of creating an individualist "positive hero," who would then be running counter to the collectivist emphasis of Soviet theory, if not of Soviet practice. It was on this count that Simonov at the Congress criticized Panferov's *Bruski* severely for transforming his hero into a man "who succeeds in everything in one fell swoop. There are no rational motivations, nor logical limits to the continuous uplifting of this man, and therefore the reader begins to lose his belief in him." According to Simonov, Panferov promotes his "positive heroes" to supermen, stressing their exceptional qualities as individuals rather than recognizing that their strength comes from the masses and from "Socialist building."

The Kremlin cultural commissars were asking for a middle course between an undifferentiated and stereotyped hero and an idealized and "superman" individualized hero, just as they were asking writers not to limit themselves either to the description



of production relations between people, or to concentrate solely on personal relations.

The same difficulties had arisen with regard to conflict. Since conflict, dissatisfaction, disappointment, and refusal to accept reality and the status quo (Soviet or otherwise) are essential for and inherent in good literature, Soviet writers had difficulty in producing believable work. How could they create conflicts in a country where perfection had been achieved (or close to it) under the benevolent Stalin, and where finding conflict or lack of perfection might result in dire punishment?

The "non-conflict" theory stated that clash of forces and ideas had disappeared from Soviet life. But the necessity, both political and literary, for a literature that showed more real difficulties, complexities, contradictions and conflicts, was apparent so that the "non-conflict" theory was dropped from the regime canon in 1952. Literarily, more conflict was called for in order to be better able to create believable images of a "positive hero" and "a positive Soviet reality." Politically, this was necessary to spur the masses to more and harder work, to greater involvement with and cooperation in fulfilling State economic plans.

Many Soviet writers, caught in these hairsplitting controversies and unable to solve them, turned to history for safe material. But even here the Party blocked them — at least in part — by insisting that they find in the past answers and implications for the most pressing contemporary problems. Both the remote and recent past had to have a bearing on the immediate present and future, or the work might be proscribed. The situation was an impossible one for the writers: they could not retreat from reality; they could not accept reality as it was; and they could not embellish reality. They could not "select only the petty or bad," or "photograph facts" and "copy observed details," or "embroider and fictitiously perfect life," for all of these techniques were considered serious deviations: nihilism and objectivism, naturalism or critical realism, and idealism.

Moreover, Pospelov's reading of the Central Committee's

opening message to the Congress had warned them that such "deviation" would not be countenanced: ". . . some men of letters who were not in close contact with life looked for artificial conflicts and wrote worthless works. They permitted themselves a distorted and sometimes even slanderous representation of Soviet society, defaming Soviet people without any grounds." And he went on to assure them that there was no new cultural line, nor would there be: "Socialist realism" remained official Kremlin policy.

The Union [of Soviet Writers] must wage a determined struggle against deviations from the principles of Socialist realism, against all attempts to lead our literature away from the life of the Soviet people, from the urgent problems of the policy of the Communist Party and the Soviet state. The Union must fight against the relapses of nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and other manifestations of bourgeois ideology, and against the attempts to lead literature into the boglands of trivial daily life, lack of ideas, and decadence.

The Congress ended on December 26, again in the Great Kremlin Palace, with the assembled writers sending a message of greetings and obeisance to the Central Committee of the CPSU, stating their goal simply:

Soviet literature has been called upon to reveal, in a highly artistic form, the beauty and grandeur of the ideas of Communism, to fight effectively against the remnants of capitalism in the consciousness of the people, to incarnate in the images of its heroes all the variety of their toiling activity, public and personal life, to present the contradictions and conflicts of life.

Soviet literature not only reflects what is new *but also helps to make this new victorious*. Soviet artistic literature has been called upon to educate, with all the revolutionary ardor, the patriotic feelings of the Soviet people; to strengthen friendship among peoples; to contribute to the further consolidation of the powerful camp of peace, democracy, and Socialism; to assert the ideas of proletarian internationalism and fraternal solidarity. (Italics added)

The writers went on to say that they recognized that they had done less for the people than they can and *must* do, that they had

not yet sufficiently carried out their "lofty calling," and that they accepted the fact that the Second All-Union Congress had been a time of strictest criticism and self-criticism to help them do so. Furthermore, they were "fully determined to wage a constant struggle against all deviations from Socialist realism."

Chiefly, then, the eleven days of the Congress, the more than a thousand pages of stenographic minutes, and the four thousand writers in attendance, did not pioneer new positions or pronounce new major theoretical or ideological changes. The Congress, instead, devoted itself to consolidating the accepted "Socialist realist" position. The continuing line was, "We have accomplished much, but . . ." there are still further deviations from the line, shortcomings in production, improper quality, and additional obstacles to overcome.

THIS ATTITUDE and phraseology were the continuation of a vulgarized materialist tradition which looks on books as commodities to be produced, as a factory produces motor cars or tractors. It was apparent not only in the Congress vocabulary but in the stress on quantity: the number of books published, the number of titles written, the number of books exported, the number of titles translated, and the number of languages into which they were translated.

The tendency to treat books as "product" was evident also in the way the Communists were discontent with the past situation and how they called for "improved quality" as they would call for better-made shoes from a production line. (It is an interesting sidelight that there is a marked lack of criticism and self-criticism in the USSR of the actual production of Soviet books, since the poor paper, the mediocre or worse typesetting, layout, illustrations, and the appalling bindings and coverings more than merit such criticism.)

Some minor protests calling for less bureaucracy and more leeway for writers were made. Fadeyev said, ". . . it is necessary to insure elbow room for personal initiative, for individual

trends, for more room for thought and fantasy, for fullness of content." Dramatist Aleksander Korneichuk also remarked that, "No one can give a playwright any recipes as to how life should be studied, and point out paths to the secret places of the human heart." Or as novelist Fedin commented, "Art cannot be created by recipes. . . . An artist must discover his work of art through his own talents and work."

Under the miasma of "Socialist realism" there was a bit of post-Stalin fresh air. Soviet writing may now be able to criticize a bit more freely some of the specific shortcomings in Soviet life and perhaps a little more depiction of "personal life" will also be countenanced. But qualitatively the atmosphere had not changed much from the past. No serious effort to break out of the "Socialist realist" framework had been made, and certainly no denigration of "Soviet reality" heard. The Congress had come a long way from the criticisms of Pomerantsev, Ehrenburg, and Shostakovich. Surkov's, "Literature is a sharp weapon of social-political influence . . . closely linked with politics [and] subordinated to the latter," was obviously to continue to be the cultural line both in theory and in practice.

Nonetheless, the need to enliven art while mobilizing it for the new political policies made for a slightly different emphasis on the "Socialist realist" tradition; that is, the possibility of individual and divergent rivulets working themselves out in the broad stream of "Socialist realism," a diversity within a uniformity, all in a vast "Socialist literary competition." Simonov formulated this viewpoint at the Congress:

While noting all the damage of the attempts to regard our literature as having one style only, one must add that the very life of literature has invariably upset, and will continue to upset, all similar attempts. In literature every great personality creates his own style. . . . We have every reason to consider as correct and natural the existence in our literary life, within the common and single river bed of the method of Socialist realism, the varieties of the creative trends which develop on the grounds of a healthy and creative competition.

But in spite of this talk of developing the entire scale of individual talent and style within the framework of "Socialist realism," ideology remains more important than art, so that in spite of constant demands for "richness" and "diversity," Soviet writers cannot produce such a literature within the straitjacket of ideological "correctness."

It is not only that Communist leadership is concerned with present audience dissatisfaction with books — although it is very much interested in having the Soviet peoples read the kind of books which defend its interests — but more that it feels that "a great cause demands a great word," and that the absence of a great literature is a direct and inevitably pejorative criticism of its cause. One extremely interesting sidelight on this attitude was contained in a December 2, 1954, article in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, contending that most of the tributaries of the "literary Volga" were drying up. The article made an invidious and meaningful comparison of the First and Second All-Union Writers' Congresses, pointing out that in 1934 three-quarters of the authors were under forty, while in 1954 three-quarters are over forty. No more damning criticism of the Stalinist bureaucratization and tyranny in writing and literature need be made.

TALENTS ARE NOT LACKING in the USSR. The country that produced Chekhov, Tolstoi, Gogol, and Dostoievsky, also produced writers of great talent after the Revolution: Pasternak, Esenin, Mayakovsky, Sholokhov, Zamiatin, and many others, some of whom were present at the Congress. But the tyranny and dictatorship in art and life have reduced the "literary Volga" of Russian letters to a brackish trickle. Not only are few new writings and writers of merit being produced, but the older writers are now producing inferior work, or no work at all, out of the cultural commissars' demands that they be the "people's tribunes." Under Communist control, the Soviet writers have had to give up their literary birthright, or sell it for a mess of pottage, and in so doing they have also sold their work and its value for a pot of message.