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STALIN: A FRIEND OF THE WRITERS

Summary: A number of shorter analyses have indicated that Stalin is being rehabilitated, not only as a talented soldier and organizer of the armament industry, but also as a financial politician (cf. Zverev's memoirs). His personal image has also been polished up: the neo-Stalinists have tried to represent him as a tolerant, far-sighted and intelligent politician who listened to the opinions of others. It appeared that Stalin would soon be ready for rehabilitation in other areas, and now it has been stated that Stalin defended writers from the attacks of over-zealous critics. The methods used in this stage of rehabilitation can best be seen in the following, nearly grotesque example.

In No. 11.1969 of Ogonyok, an article appeared dealing with the Russian writer Michail Afanashevich Bulgakov (1891 - 1940). (1) He occupies a special position in the history of Russian literature. Bulgakov, the son of a professor at the clerical academy in Kiev, was originally a medical doctor, but made his debut in literature in 1919. After the coming to power of the Soviets, he lived at first in Kiev, then beginning in 1921 in Moscow, where he wrote several novels and dramas. As his works reflected only the milieu in which he himself lived, i.e., the Russian aristocracy, land owners and White Guards, he was subject at that time to sharp criticism from the revolutionary critics. He was accused of falsifying the history of the civil war and the Revolution, especially in the Ukraine, and of glorifying the White Guards. The NEP people, caught in the morass of the grain speculations, cried at the presentations of his dramas and dreamt of the past. One of Bulgakov's most important novels, The White Guards, was revised into a drama, The Days of the Turbins, and was presented with great success in Moscow and other cities.

(1) Viktor Petelin: "M.A. Bulgakov i 'Dni Turbinych' in Ogonyok No. 11/1969.

The Ogonyok article makes direct reference to this drama. Viktor Petelin, candidate of philological sciences, treats it in his analysis in an interesting and politically contemporary manner. He tries to prove that, while the pseudo-leftist literary revolutionaries carried on a campaign against Bulgakov, Stalin in fact had recognized in his work a "patriotic sentiment" which was in no way opposed to Communism. For this reason, Stalin is said to have held his protecting hand over Bulgakov. Although it has not been "salonfaehig" to quote from Stalin's works in the last few years, Petelin opened Volume 11 of the leader's works in order to prove Stalin's "humane treatment" of Bulgakov: (2)

As far as the play The Days of the Turbins is concerned, it really isn't so bad, for it does more good than harm. Do not forget that the major impression which remains with the viewers of this work is one which is advantageous for the Bolsheviks: "Even if such men as the Turbins are forced to lay down their arms and to adapt themselves to the will of the people, and admit thereby that their cause is lost forever, then that means that the Bolsheviks are undefeatable; one cannot rise up against them, the Bolsheviks." The Days of the Turbins is a demonstration of the all-victorious strength of Bolshevism.

Ogonyok notes that each time that Stalin went to the theater in order to see the play The Days of the Turbins (in the Museum of the Moscow Academic Art Theater -- MChAT -- fifteen such visits were supposedly recorded!) he asked, "How is Bulgakov? What is he up to? A very talented man ..." When Bulgakov's position, according to Ogonyok, became tragic in 1930 because his critics began to make political accusations against him, he wrote a letter to Stalin and asked the latter for his help.

On 28 March 1930 Bulgakov received the following telephone call from Stalin: (3)

- We have received your letter. Read it with pleasure. You will receive a favorable answer to it. But perhaps you should be sent abroad? What, you've had enough of us?

- Recently I have thought a great deal about whether a Russian writer can live outside of his fatherland, and I believe he cannot.

- There you are right. That is also my opinion. Where would you like to work? In the theater?

(2) Stalin, Werke, Bd.11, Dietz-Verlag, Berlin, 1954, p. 294.

(3) Ogonyok, No. 11/1969.

- Yes, I would like that. But I have already asked there, and they turned me away.

- Apply once more. I think they will be agreeable.

This call was decisive for Bulgakov's further fate, according to Ogonyok. He was taken in as Assistant Director in the respective theater (MChAT). Stalin praised his accomplishments many times. His dramas, even the play The Master and Margarita (adapted from the novel of the same title) which last year was a best-seller in Western Europe, were often to be seen on Soviet stages. Bulgakov died in 1940.

There is no doubt that Bulgakov is a Russian writer of high quality. Yet it was not Petelin's aim to indicate Bulgakov's importance for Russian literature and theater. Bulgakov was dragged out of obscurity in order to give the author the opportunity to contribute to the "resurrection" of Stalin. At the same time, Petelin engaged in polemics with foreign literary journals who had claimed, he said, that Bulgakov's creative abilities has been dampened and that he had not been rehabilitated until after Stalin's death.

The facts speak differently. In the cited document from Stalin's work, the portion was omitted in which Stalin took a stance on Bulgakov's play The Flight: (4)

... of, for example, The Flight by Bulgakov, which one should likewise not consider a manifestation of the "left" or "right" danger. The Flight is an attempt to awaken sympathy for certain levels of the Soviet emigrants, if not empathy -- that is, an attempt to justify the cause of the White Guards, or to half justify it. The Flight is, in the form in which it appears, an anti-Soviet manifestation.

Petelin claims that after the "historic telephone call" Bulgakov was able to continue his creative activities without further difficulty. But how can one explain then that, in the reference works which appeared during the Stalinist era, the following characterization of M.A. Bulgakov appeared:

Bulgakov did not understand the new social relationships after the victory of the Soviet power. In a series of tales, Diabolics (1924) and others, he attempted to deny Soviet reality; in the novel White Guards (1924) he tried to idealize the White Guards. Also in the drama which appeared later, The Flight, which was characterized by Stalin as an "anti-Soviet manifestation," he attempted to justify the White Guards. The dramatist Bulgakov became

(4) Stalin, Werke, p. 293.

well-known as his play The Days of the Turbins was presented in the Moscow Art Theater, [a play] which represented the adaptation of his novel White Guards. In the play the tendency towards a certain idealization of the White Guards remained, but under the influence of the facts of reality the writer and especially the theater stressed the theme of the irrevocable defeat of the White Guard movement. (5)

In the same reference work, other works by Bulgakov are referred to as "mistaken" and "hostile."

We see, then, that the attempt to rehabilitate Stalin in the area of literary criticism and literature and to point him up as a protector of persecuted writers is already underway. The fact that tricks are played on historical reality in the process is not paid much attention to by the neo-Stalinists. Lies don't get you far. And it will not be necessary to wait for "imperialist propaganda" to discover this -- in Soviet society itself the forces which protest against such manipulation are present. They have enough reason to protest, considering the present course of the Soviet Party leadership.

For example, The Light by Bulgakov, which one should likewise not consider a manifestation of the "left" or "right" danger. The light is an attempt to awaken sympathy for certain levels of the Soviet emigrants, it is not empathy -- that is an attempt to justify the cause of the White Guards, or to half-justify it. The light is, in the form in which it appears, an anti-Soviet manifestation.

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Bulgakov did not understand the new social relationships after the victory of the Soviet power. In a series of latest diatribes (1924) and others, he attempted to deny Soviet reality; in the novel White Guards (1928) he tried to idealize the White Guard movement, which was characterized by appeared later. The Light, which was characterized by Stalin as an "anti-Soviet manifestation," he attempted to justify the White Guards. The dramatist Bulgakov became

(5) BSE, Vol. 6., Moscow 1951, p. 259.