

RADIO FREE EUROPE *Research*

COMMUNIST AREA

● USSR: Literature
Culture

11 August 1967

MOSCOW'S LONG HOT SUMMER ON THE LITERARY FRONT

The assault by Soviet poet Andrei Voznesensky on the leadership of the Writers' Union is the latest and heaviest barrage fired during a period of intense skirmishing on the literary front in Moscow. His attack, which took the form of a letter to Pravda, unprinted but leaked to Western newspapers, was directed against the conservative elements in the Union's directorate and the cultural apparatchiki in the Central Committee behind them. In question was a particularly clumsy and hypocritical repression of his literary activities, namely his visit to New York which was to have taken place in June. By bringing this case into the open, Voznesensky, a quiet lyricist without his colleague Yevtushenko's flare for publicity but more than the equal of the latter's literary stature, may well have brought to a head the crisis that has simmered within the cultural community since the Writers' Congress in May.

The Writers' Congress: No Cease Fire on the Literary Front

The All-union Congress of Soviet Writers took place in May of this year after many delays. The atmosphere in which the Congress met was certainly tense. Ever since the post-Khrushchev cultural truce, marked by the replacement of Ilychev as ideological secretary and by Rumantsev's middle-of-the-road cultural line, broke down in the furor of the Sinyavsky-Daniel trial early in 1966, the cultural situation had been seriously strained. The lines of battle became more firmly drawn and the nervousness of the combatants more visible. The Sinyavsky-Daniel trial left the liberal elements of the Soviet literary community, which includes most writers of note except Mikhail Sholokov, deeply incensed, apprehensive of a more general crack-down by the regime, but evidently determined to defend and advance the perimeters of their hard-won literary freedoms.

The conservatives, mainly hard-line writers in the Writers' Union and their bureaucratic counterparts in the cultural apparatus of the Central Committee seemed equally determined to exploit what they regarded as the advantages achieved in the Sinyavsky-Daniel case and the relatively illiberal tone they were able to give to the XXIII CPSU Congress. Their principal tactic was to snipe continuously at the chief bastion of literary liberalism, Novy Mir, and its editorial board, not without some limited success apparently.

The top party leadership has evidently been in a quandary. By and large it has appeared to share the ideological and cultural sensitivities of the conservatives. It certainly has shared none of the basic ideals of the liberal camp. But most important of all, it wanted peace and quiet and a general atmosphere of tranquility for the 50th anniversary of October. It wanted no one to mar the event with ill-mannered literary feuding. To achieve this truce on the cultural front was what the regime conceived to be the purpose of the Writers' Congress. An exercise in public amicability, the Congress was not supposed to irritate the sores of cultural politics but produce platitudes about the coming anniversary.

It did the latter to be sure, but it did not produce a cease-fire on the literary front. In general, the outward tone of the Congress was moderate and "centralist," in line with the peace-keeping objectives of the leadership. The assembled writers were treated to a variety of conservative sermons by such regime spokesmen as Yepishev, the chief of political control in the armed forces, and Pavlov, head of the Komsomol, as well as a fire-and brimstone performance by the most colorful standard-bearer of the conservative cause, M. Sholokov, who attacked Svetlana Allilueva for defecting and Ilya Ehrenburg for failing to attend the Congress. He further recalled his notorious address at the XXIII Congress (in the good old days traitors were stood against the wall and shot) by reproaching the Congress for its avoidance of controversy, thereby clearly contravening the official call for moderation.

The Solzhenitsyn Letter

Fairly quiet on the surface, the Congress was boiling underneath. The problem, of course, was that the centralist line which the party leadership wanted to consolidate was viewed with suspicion by the liberals since it had been so flagrantly abused in the past. At the same time, the conservatives saw in the official vacillation a situation to exploit.

The real blow to any cease-fire was struck by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the author of One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, in a form which far transcended the boundaries of cultural infighting but represented a monument to the historic struggle of Russian writers for freedom of expression. In a letter to the Congress, circulated among the delegates and published abroad¹,

1) Le Monde, 31 May 1967.

Solzhenitsyn catalogued a long list of police harrassments of his activity and flayed the Union for its cowardice in failing to defend embattled writers. The letter caused an uproar which the centralist outcome of the Congress, the election of a new leadership for the Union balanced between liberals and orthodox writers, could in no way quell. Solzhenitsyn's brave stand, for which he stated he was prepared to pay any price, became a test of principles and ideals for the literary community outweighing tactical considerations. According to reports, 82 Soviet writers, including Yevtushenko, Tvardovsky, Paustovsky, and Aksyenov, petitioned the board of the Union of Writers to allow open discussion of the letter.²

Summer Skirmishes

The impact of the Solzhenitsyn letter was decisive in the sense that it stirred liberal determination and reinforced the courage of others, such as Voznesensky, to protest similar mistreatment. Solzhenitsyn's case itself does not appear to have been resolved, however. Some reports from Moscow claimed that the regime has promised to return to Solzhenitsyn the works confiscated from him by the police and to publish them.³ Harrison Salisbury subsequently reported that Soviet writers felt the battle against censorship had been won. Other sources claimed the opposite.⁴

In the meantime, the literary battle continued in other sectors, notably around the state of Soviet theater. On 30 June, the Soviet youth newspaper, Komsomolskaya Pravda, carried a strongly worded criticism of "incompetent meddlers who worry more about safeguarding their bureaucratic careers than about the welfare of the theater." The article claimed that bureaucratic meddling by officials of the cultural departments prevented the theater from developing in a healthy atmosphere of dialogue within the artistic community and between it and the public, and tended to make even mediocre dramatists into heroes when their plays were tampered with. One of the authors of the piece was Fyodor Burlatsky, a prominent political commentator of Pravda and a man whose standing and political support have brought him through several journalistic scrapes.

A week later, Komsomolskaya Pravda of 8 July produced an unsigned editorial reasserting all the canons of socialist realism in Soviet theater, repudiating the Burlatsky-Karpinsky article, and accusing itself of having inflicted harm on "party principles

2) Reuter and AFP, 8 June 1967.

3) AP, 21 June 1967.

4) UPI, 22 June 1967

in literature and the arts" by publishing it. Reports circulated that the editor who cleared the article might be fired.⁵ Pravda got into the act on 26 July with an article by theater critic V. Pimenov criticizing the notion that "everything should be without control and planning" and asserting that the theater in our country is not private enterprise; it is state organization, and an integral part of Soviet culture." Pimenov insisted that artists still needed the Party's help to be aware of their responsibilities; "however, this should be done tactfully, carefully, and skillfully."

The Voznesensky Case

Those in charge of helping the artists understand their responsibility were, however, acting with singular lack of tact, care and skill. In the midst of this tense situation, the Voznesensky episode took place. The Soviet poet was due to appear at the Lincoln Center Summer Festival in New York, certainly as the star literary performer. Just before he was to arrive reports emerged that a conservative faction in the Writers' Union, led by Pravda editor Yurii Zhukov and novelist Nikolai Gribachev, was attempting to block the trip. The conservatives were annoyed at Voznesensky's rather apolitical appearance in the U. S. a month before, at his refusal to attack Allilueva, and at his support of the Solzhenitsyn protest. The same report quite credibly alleged that the seemingly orderly proceedings of the Writers' Congress in May were actually scenes of stormy debate, papered over by the censor for public consumption.⁶ The fight over Voznesensky's trip continued to the last minute; as his visa was being processed at the U. S. Embassy, he cabled New York, "I can't come." The directorate of the Writers' Union then circulated the false explanation that the poet was ill.

This denouement was clearly the result of collaboration between conservative elements in the Union and in the Central Committee departments controlling such decisions. As an exercise in clumsy, petty deceitfulness, it has few parallels in recent Soviet literary politics. Voznesensky immediately sent his scorching protest to Pravda, which refused to print it, and circulated it among Soviet writers. His letter accuses the Writers' Union of insulting "elementary human dignity". He states that its disregard of writers "as human beings," its "lying, prevarication, and knocking peoples' heads together is standard practice." "I'm ashamed," he says, "to be a member of the same Union as these people."

Shortly thereafter the poet appeared for a reading at Moscow's Taganka theater, where his fiery performance was an obvious response to his mistreatment. "They've taken out our sense of shame as an appendix is removed," he accused, by "they" clearly meaning the regime and its organs of power. He reserved his harshest words

5) Raymond Anderson, New York Times, 11 July 1967.

6) M. S. Handler, New York Times, 19 June 1967.

for his colleagues, however, whom he taunted with an open call to resistance: "How shamefully we hold our tongues, or at the most we hem and haw... You so-called intelligentsia, caught in the tissue of your lies...."

Voznesensky was called before the board of the Union to retract his accusations and, upon his response with a fiery repetition of the same, was threatened with expulsion.⁷

What Next?

Thus far, there has been no confirmation that Voznesensky was indeed expelled from the Writers' Union, which may mean that some good sense prevailed in the end. The poet's expulsion for his response to such an obviously misplaced and clumsy form of bureaucratic repression would run the serious risk of producing a wave of resignations from the Union. On the other hand, the intense embarrassment which this incident and the apparently unexpected resistance of Voznesensky has certainly produced in the conservative camp may persuade the conservatives to push through the expulsion as a test of strength.

It is the top party leadership, however, which must draw a lesson from the turbulent events of the past several months. Its indecisive quest for a central position in the cultural sphere has badly broken down because, in the Maoist phrase, it "leaned to one side"; it did not restrain the conservatives and the cultural apparatus from engaging in guerrilla warfare against the liberal cause. Because of its essentially conservative sensibilities, the leadership may be sorely tempted to try a crackdown of some sort. But unless it resorts to dangerous extremes, it lacks the instruments to bring the situation under control. Repressive measures would only make matters worse and complicate political tensions within the leadership itself. After all, Fyodor Burlatsky has some very highly placed friends.

The only real solution is, of course, a long-overdue revision of the hallowed principles of partiinost and socialist realism in a direction which will give the writers the freedom which most of them know art requires. There is little to encourage the view that the party leadership sees matters this way. They will probably continue to muddle through until a chain of events forces them to a decision. Voznesensky's letter is another link in that chain.

Fritz Ermarth

7) See New York Times, 11 August 1967, for his letter, the Taganka poem, and details of the case.