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RUMYANTSEV AGAINST THE DOGMATISTS

The Editor-in-Chief of Pravda, Aleksei Matveyevich Rumyantsev, only contributes a signed article to his paper a few times a year. But when he does the content and results are usually of real political and ideological importance. Rumyantsev has been a full member of the C.C., C.P.S.U., for 13 years now, and before Brezhnev selected him to take over Pravda after the fall of Khrushchev, he had spent six years as the Chief Editor of Problems of Peace and Socialism, the main theoretical magazine of international communism as Moscow sees it.

Thus when Rumyantsev openly criticises Izvestia and raps Selskaya Zhizn¹ over the knuckles, as he did in yesterday's Pravda, he does so with the full authority of the CPSU and the prestige of the First Secretary behind him. The impact of his unusual intervention becomes apparent when he praises Rozhdestvensky, Yevtushenko and Voznesensky, among others, thereby making it clear to every Soviet reader that he is defending the "new wave" of revisionist writers. In the Stalinist thirties, Rozhdestvensky used to be denounced for "ignoring the Revolution", while in the fifties and sixties Yevtushenko and Voznesensky have been the target of numerous criticisms from such literary "experts" as Khrushchev and Leonid Ilyichev.

Only three weeks ago Voznesensky was under fire in Komsomolskaya Pravda (22 August 1965) for his reluctance to write on "significant topics" -- i.e., the alleged crime of Rozhdestvensky in the thirties. On the same day, Pravda itself chided Aleksei Arbuzov,² whose young people are not exactly revolution-minded, and Izvestia chose to attack Novy Mir in an editorial note.

- 1) The daily newspaper concerned with agriculture.
- 2) Author of "My Poor Marat".

Rumyantsev's reply to the criticism of Novy Mir is indirect. Instead of supporting the magazine openly, he speaks highly of Tvardovsky, who is universally known in the USSR as its Chief Editor. But Rumyantsev also lays down a principle which Izvestia, Komsomolskaya Pravda and his own paper seem to have infringed last month and which is the key to yesterday's article:

Any attempt [he writes] to contrast intellectuality with party loyalty [partiinost] and the national character [narodnost] would mean a demagogic, semi-literate offensive against culture, against a scientific outlook, against the mastery of the persuasion of the masses and, willy-nilly, the adoption of administrative methods....

Essentially he is arguing that for newspaper editors to tell writers how to write means a return to neo-Stalinist methods which are out of date. Rumyantsev is by no means against literary criticism, but he makes it clear that it must be conducted in a "comradely" manner, not by the issue of peremptory commands or the application of pejorative labels.

The Attack on "Selskaya Zhizn".

In Rumyantsev's eyes, the agricultural daily Selskaya Zhizn has transgressed against these principles by printing a "destructive" review of a story by Tendryakov which was printed in Novy Mir. Here Tendryakov (who is 42) dealt with the seamier aspects of Soviet rural life. Instead of printing a well-founded, objective critical analysis of the story, the daily:

preferred crudely to snub the writer by alleging that the story is not a model of honest service to the people, nor is it unselfish aid to the party.

Rumyantsev says that Tendryakov was "excommunicated" from socialist realism, suspected of dishonesty and even of hostility toward the collective farmers. But such criticism, he argues, is not characteristic of the Soviet press.

This is news indeed. In 1957 Tendryakov was under heavy fire from the Party for his part in the "feat of silence" (podvig molchaniya). Yet he never repented in public. In 1960 he again aroused the indignation of the ideologists by writing "Three, Seven, Ace", a neo-realist picture of how timber workers in the far North are corrupted by an ex-convict, a gambler and a drunk. Because it showed how immoral human beings can be, it was said to be "a slander on the Soviet people".

Now, only five years later, Tendryakov has done it again, the Pavlovian response of Selskaya Zhizn is the official reaction of five years ago, and the Chief Editor of Pravda, instead of rushing to the assistance of the neo-Zhdanovites, chooses to stand up publicly and be counted for the revisionist writer who fought and won the battles of 1957 and 1960. Times and first secretaries change indeed.

The Attack on "Izvestia"

Politically speaking, the most important section of Rumyantsev's programmatic article is the passage in which he turns from the chastisement of Selskaya Zhizn to the reproof for Izvestia. It is relatively seldom that an open dispute breaks out between Pravda and Izvestia, but there is no doubt as to which is likely to prove the winner. Izvestia, in this case, had made the understandable mistake of criticizing Vasily Aksenov, who is only 33 years old and who can scarcely set pen to paper without provoking storms of neo-Zhdanovite rage.

His "Ticket to the Stars" (in 1961) was an entirely convincing, unembellished, portrait of Soviet teen-agers without partiinost, and with an abundance of coarse slang. His adolescents are as alienated from their parents as any Mod or Rocker in Britain, and he has been repeatedly called a "pessimist" and a "slanderer" by conservative critics.

Last year he published a story in Yunost (12 November 1964) giving a negative but realistic picture of a taxi driver in Yalta. This was eventually denounced in Izvestia (14 August 1965) by a letter purporting to have come from angry taxi drivers in the town who criticised Aksenov for "not setting youth a good example" -- something he had never set out to do.

If Izvestia had left it at that, all might have been well. But it tactlessly added a long neo-Zhdanovite footnote, saying that Aksenov was wrong to concentrate on the adverse portrayal of modern life and thereby to distort the picture of society. It went on to castigate Yashin, Solzhenitsyn, Bitov, Goryshin, Novy Mir and Yunost in the dogmatic style of Khrushchev's 1962-63 period.

Rumyantsev's opinion is that the editors of Izvestia should have argued against the taxi drivers instead of against Aksenov. They should know better than to say that a portrait of a negative hero means the condemnation of an entire profession.

Here Rumyantsev is undertaking an important revision of "socialist realism". For decades the dogmatists have argued that to be socialist realist, a hero must be "positive". But now Rumyantsev declares, with all the weight of Pravda's authority behind him, that negative heroes need not be automatically condemned. He is opening a sluice-gate behind which a torrent of troubled waters are pent up.

Moreover he invokes the shade of Lenin against the unfortunates of Izvestia. "Literature can least of all be subjected to mechanical equality, levelling or to the domination of the majority over the minority" [emphasis supplied]. It must be many years since such a firm defense of an intellectual minority group was seen in Pravda.

However, Rumyantsev is careful to balance his blow for revisionism in the case of Izvestia et al. versus the young writers with reminders of his normal centralist position. He tells us that there are individuals (and clearly they are influential men) who cast doubt on the necessity for any party guidance in artistic questions at all.

These abolitionists are not treated as traitors or wreckers by Rumyantsev. Instead he sees their position as a logical reaction to the "crude administrative methods" of the not so distant past (by which he means the Khrushchev era). But he argues that those methods were a distortion of party guidance, just as Khrushchev used to see in Zhdanovism a distortion of his ideal literary policy.

Genuine party guidance, Rumyantsev says:

defends the freedom of the artist in the choice of theme and subject, style and manner, it directs the artistic process as a whole into the channel of communist construction....

[Emphasis supplied]

Certainly this is a step forward by comparison with the days when Molotov and Ilyichev used to preside over the interpretation of artistic freedom.

Ever since January 9, 1965, Pravda has made it clear that different schools and styles in art are at last able to contend. This was repeated on 21 February in an article signed by Rumyantsev, and has been confirmed in practice by the publication of Voznesensky's modernist poems (one of which, dedicated to Neizvestny,³ has a mathematical formula in the text!) and by an exhibition in Paris of avant-garde paintings by Anatole Zverev.

First by allowing such experimentation and now by defending the use of "negative heroes" in literature, Rumyantsev is significantly expanding the authorized limits of socialist realism. He is cautiously moving towards the positions of the Italian, French and Cuban C.P.'s as regards artistic freedom, but there

3) A modernist sculptor of great brilliance.

is a long road still to travel. By reducing the gap between the positions of the Soviet and Italian C.P.'s he is simultaneously narrowing the great gulf which yawned between the Soviet C.P. and its own intellectuals a mere two or three years ago.

By openly standing up against Izvestia for Novy Mir (which published both Aksenov's and Tendryakov's stories), Rumyantsev demonstrates the strength of Tvardovsky's position and the political weakness of the neo-Zhdanovites today. Since July 1965, when V. I. Stepanov was promoted to become head of the Central Committee's Propaganda and Agitation Section for the Union Republics, the West has not known the identity of the new Chief Editor of Izvestia. It now seems wholly possible that this faceless man may soon be replaced, probably by someone of more liberal views.

On the last occasion when a Rumyantsev article appeared in Pravda (February 1965), Yevtushenko had just written a passionate poem describing a neo-Zhdanovite chairman of a fishing kolkhoz who killed all the young fish in his river by using nets with too fine a mesh. At that time Ilyichev was still in the saddle, as head of the Ideological Commission, and may well have been the model for the chairman. Now Ilyichev has gone (not so permanently as Zhdanov and Khrushchev, but almost as effectively) and it is the editors of Izvestia and Selskaya Zhizn who are trying to kill off the young fish. Rumyantsev has clearly learned the lesson of the Yevtushenko poem,⁴ and he plainly has the backing of a majority in the Presidium. Izvestia promises to achieve the rare distinction of having four editors within twelve months.

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4) Novy Mir, January 1965.

(2) A modernist sculptor of great brilliance.