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TERKIN'S LAST BATTLE?

Appendix:

The Literary Purge in Retrospect
(Survey, October 1963, by: Max Hayward)

In the past week Terkin, Tvardovsky's wounded soldier who visited the Stalinist other world and found it full of horror seems to have begun his last and greatest battle. But whereas Terkin first became famous fighting as a simple private in the Red Army, now he is the centre of a major political campaign of real significance to the future of Soviet literature.

Tvardovsky's latest poem, "Terkin in the Other World", is widely known throughout the USSR not only for its undoubted literary merits but also because Alexander Tvardovsky, the editor in chief of Novy Mir, is one of the leaders of the revisionist movement in Soviet art. His stature is almost as great as that of Ehrenburg, much greater than Yevtushenko's, and his influence is more far-ranging than in either of these cases because of his skillful use of the forum provided by his magazine, which is the liveliest literary publication in the USSR. The poem itself describes Terkin's arrival in a gloomy world of the dead, with its endless officialdom and censors, all presided over by Stalin. This other world has a writer's union, holds endless meetings filled with hypocrisy and resembles, Tvardovsky says, an ambulance rushing to help the victims crushed beneath its own wheels.

Its political impact stems not only from the wholesale condemnation of Stalinism and the neo-Stalinist survivals of to-day, but also from the fact that Khrushchev personally approved it before publication and Khrushchev's son-in-law, Adzhubei, printed it in the government newspaper Izvestia. At the time Adzhubei commented that "Terkin.....was certain to produce arguments and objections". In this he was absolutely right.

After six weeks of stunned silence, the neo-Zhdanovites in the USSR have begun their counter-attack on Terkin with the publication of a vitriolic article in Oktyabr, Kochetov's own dogmatic magazine, by D. Starikov. The author is the same individual who initiated the campaign in 1961 against Yevtushenko's "Babi Yar".

Starikov's position is that "Terkin in the Other World" is of no literary interest and is politically completely erroneous (no doubt Mao would agree with him). But Starikov differs from Mao in that he, Starikov, contrasts Tvardovsky's sarcastic description of the negative aspects of Soviet reality with the aims of the CPSU Program², a document Mao abhors. Hence Starikov makes it clear that he has understood the real target of Tvardovsky's

¹ Izvestia, 18th August 1963, Novy Mir No. 8, 1963

² Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 4 October 1963

poem, i.e. the neo-Stalinists of the USSR to-day.

Starikov laments the fact that Tvardovsky criticizes the atmosphere of suspicion of every new idea which was prevalent under Stalin, and writes:

"But in our times too erroneous and mistaken ideas unfortunately appear. The mills of the enemy still exist and are still at work. And we still have people among us who provide grist for these mills".

Starikov also complains that Tvardovsky's poem mocks "the Regime" and the idea of "discipline", without condemning idle chatter, inefficiency and slackness. Like Mao, he argues that not everything about the Stalin era should be condemned. Tvardovsky, he writes, has tried to combine everything bad about Russia in order to be able to mock it all simultaneously. The poet has strayed far from the right road, etc, etc ad nauseam.

Apart from the use of Starikov and Kochetov's magazine to spearhead the ultra-conservative attack on Terkin, there is another important facet to this episode. Among certain analysts of the Soviet literary scene, it has lately become fashionable to ascribe the initial opposition to such Khrushchevian initiatives as the publication of "One Day in the life of Ivan Denisovich" to Kozlov. It has even been argued by this school of thought that Serebryakova's outburst on December 17th, 1962, at the meeting between the Party leaders and artists when she cried out:

"Many comrades are now shouting about the right to experiment, to innovate, to more liberty, for more contact with the West, teaching us moral lessons. Yet what were they doing under Stalin?"

could only have been carried out with the connivance of Kozlov³.

Yet Starikov's attack on Terkin is at least as direct a criticism of Khrushchev's policies, not merely his unquestioned Stalinist past but more importantly his present line, as anything said by Serebryakova. And Kozlov probably ceased to be an effective political force in the USSR at about the time of his second illness five months ago. Thus the likelihood is that neither Serebryakova nor Starikov are instigated by Kozlov - they are motivated by their own neo-Zhdanovite convictions and by the mechanical thinking of the years of Pavlovian reactions under Stalin. Their outbursts are largely a reflection of the profound division within the CPSU between the fundamentalists and the revisionists, each with their own newspapers, their own figureheads and their own - quite separate - platforms.

As was to be expected, Izvestia has swiftly reacted to Starikov's sweeping condemnation of "Terkin" and therefore of Izvestia's judgement. In an article on 6 October by A. Sergeyev, Starikov and Oktyabr are told roundly that they lack objectivity. Batting on the sticky wicket of "objective criticism", Sergeyev has had to be careful. To give balance to his barbs, he starts by portraying himself as a centralist - i.e. he finds Abramov's

³ see lecture by Professor Peter Benno at International Symposium on Soviet Literature in the Sixties, 5 September 1963, at Bad Wies.

"Round and About" a gross distortion of kolkhoz life and he regrets that Novy Mir was so damning about Kochetov's novel, "The Obkom Secretary". But after this introduction Sergeyev devotes half his space to the errors of Starikov.

The majority of Izvestia's readers, to judge by those who have written to the editors about Terkin, warmly approve of him. One letter reads:

"It takes not only talent, but also courage to criticize, or rather to scourge the still living and sometimes even powerful adherents of the cult....."

(emphasis supplied)

Evidently the author of this letter at least got Tvardovsky's message.

Sergeyev finds "Terkin" a perky, gay, optimistic satire, whereas Starikov, he says, portrays it as a gloomy, reeking concoction by some alien literary tourist. Starikov is accused of writing with

"enviable arrogance, a pompous pseudo-scientific attitude, behind which lies the frank vulgarization, the logical tight-rope walking of a man who does not wish to analyse the essence of either the poet's motives or his work".

Then Sergeyev goes on to charge Starikov with distortion, with a lack of elementary aesthetic taste, and with stupidity.

Next Sergeyev accuses his opponent of using the methods of the (Stalinist) past which, it appears, are now out of date in the enlightened Khrushchevian age. Readers of Izvestia may be a little bewildered at this, because between November 1962 and May 1963, the paper's columns were filled with lengthy attacks on Ehrenburg, Yevtushenko, Nekrasov, Neizvestny et al, using precisely the techniques of Starikov.

But in recent months times have changed. Now Starikov is said to be only capable of confusing and disorienting his readers, and we are optimistically told by Sergeyev that the "critical truncheon has for ever been withdrawn from use in our literary milieu"! He should try telling this to Yevtushenko.

Nevertheless, the absurdities apart, Sergeyev's article demonstrates that Adzhubei and Khrushchev intend that Terkin should stick to his guns. If this is Terkin's last battle, the weight of metal behind him suggests that Terkin will win the day in the end. It is now Starikov's and Oktyabr's turn to visit "the other world". And as Tvardovsky has described it, they at least, unlike Terkin, will feel at home there.