

Munich, 26 October 1961 (Research and Evaluation - r.r.g.)

As at the 20th Party Congress, Mikhail Sholokhov has again made what will almost certainly prove to be the most amusing speech (Moscow Radio, October 25, 1961) of the whole torrent of words now pouring out of the Kremlin. The author of "Quiet Flows the Don" is at present appreciably less angry than he was five years ago, when his withering attack on Alexei Surkov, who was then the party hack at the head of the Union of Writers of the USSR, contributed ~~considerably~~ greatly to the beginning of a campaign against Surkov with such effect that eventually the liberalization movement succeeded in obtaining the latter's replacement, three long years later, by a non-party writer, K. Fedin.

Despite the conspicuous decrease in Sholokhov's spleen, many of the literary problems touched on in his speech appear to be as far from solution as they were five years ago.

Then his plea was for good, readable, books rather than the mere multiplication of titles. Now he is clamouring for better plays, even if it means fewer of them. In his praise for E.A. Furtseva, the Minister for Culture, he makes it clear that he considers her a more desirable type of official than her predecessors, but as the latter include both Molotov and Shepilov, now of the anti-party group, this is not surprising. Nevertheless he humorously mocked her for playing a numbers game with Soviet drama in her boast that more than 70% (780 out of 1114) plays staged in Soviet theatres this year are concerned with contemporary themes - i.e., with propaganda in the great majority of cases.

Sholokhov exposed this kind of production statistic by asking piously:

"God grant that out of these 780, ~~twenty~~ ~~that twenty~~ or thirty may remain!"

But even of these twenty or thirty, he went on to say, fewer still will be remembered or will even cause the audience to think. No Western critic of the Soviet theatre could have stressed more convincingly the dangers of Khrushchev's approach to the arts, which seems to amount to producing propaganda for propaganda's sake. As Sholokhov put it: _____

"Figures and percentages are crafty things, Comrade Furtseva. Before you know where you are they will deceive you. Better leave them to the Central Statistical Board. They will be more comfortable there than in art!"

The second unsolved problem is the one which Sholokhov himself raised with great effect at the 20th Party Congress¹ - the tendency of the writers to congregate in the big cities, among all the other representatives of the "new class". In 1956 there were 1200 writers living in Moscow out of 3773 in the Union of Writers of the USSR. Today, according to Furtseva,² there are 4,000 writers resident in the capitals of the union republics, with 1700 in Moscow and Leningrad alone, out of a total of 5200 throughout the Soviet Union. It would seem that five years of impassioned appeals for authors to move out into the rural provinces, "closer to life" in the current jargon, have had virtually no effect at all. Moreover Sholokhov himself now seems to realize that this battle is one neither he nor the Minister can win:

"Some of those to whom Comrade Furtseva has appealed may go for a week to the country for a breath of fresh air, to breathe the oxygen. Then they will be bored, hankering after a warm bathroom and other benefits of city life...And in a moment they will reappear in Moscow!"

The last major contradiction raised by Sholokhov is the most interesting, because it is the most novel. This was his attempt to poke fun at the younger generation of writers, the "fashionable" boudoir poets" as he called them, who are at present deservedly much more popular with Soviet intellectual youth than the Sholokhofs, Fedins, and Leonovs themselves. There is little doubt that Sholokhov's witticisms were aimed mainly at Yevtushenko, whose new poem on anti-Stalinism, "Babi-yar", has caused such a furor. But the significant and hopeful fact here is not so much the clash of the generations alone as that "boudoir" poetry, which means nonconformist and personal poems dealing with the emotions and private lives, the very antithesis of propaganda, has achieved its present degree of popularity despite all the efforts of the neo-Zhdanovites and of the old school to stamp it out.

¹For the text of his speech then see Background Information, 3 May 1958, p. 1

²Pravda, 22 October 1961.