

Review Article

New Russian Books In English

Except for "Russian specialists," few readers seems to be aware of the good books now available *in English* from the Foreign Languages Publishing House in Moscow. Almost everyone knows that printed Soviet propaganda is cheap and abundant—from Premier Khrushchev's speeches to little pamphlets on Korea or Hungary. It may, however, come as a surprise to many that treatises in the pure, applied, and social sciences as well as literary works of both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are also available at a very low price (a sturdily bound book costs no more than North American paperbacks).

For the sake of brevity, I must exclude from consideration (1) all scientific books (and they range from hydro-dynamics and archaeology to biographies of major figures since the time of Lomonosov), (2) all works on economics and history (many of which are obtrusively propagandistic, though there are exceptions; for example, N. N. Baransky, *Economic Geography of the USSR*, [1956] or M. Tikhomirov, *The Towns of Ancient Rus*, [1959]), and (3) the bulk of current literature; that is, postwar "best sellers" and Stalin-prize-novels which are, by and large, inferior and ephemeral.

Each of the three books* to be considered here is important because it represents a large group. For example, Pisarev's book is the most recent of a continuing series of uniform volumes by major nineteenth-century Russian critics and social thinkers. The series so far includes Belinsky (1948), Dobrolyubov (1948), Chernyshevsky (1953), and Herzen (1956), and apparently will be continued in a five-volume set of Plekhanov's selected works (1959-). Taken together, these books provide the largest selection of Russian social thought available in English. To be sure, they represent only one side of the story. They are works of the "revolutionary democrats;" and conservative opinion,

**Selected Philosophical, Social and Political Essays*. By Dmitry Pisarev. Tr. R. Dixon and J. Katzer. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1958. Pp. 711. \$2.00.

The Privalov Fortune. By D. Mamin-Sibiriyak. Tr. V. Shneerson. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, [1959]. Pp. 474. \$1.25.

The Forty First. By Boris Lavrenyov. Tr. B. Markevich. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, [1959]. Pp. 190. \$0.75.

which filled many more pages of the "thick journals" during the nineteenth century, is ignored or witnessed indirectly through counter arguments or explanatory foot-notes.

Nonetheless, because the ideas and traditions of these early democrats triumphed in Russia in 1917, though by then the emphasis had changed considerably and Marxism had added a new content, they are distinctly worth study. Indeed, these writers deserve study not merely because Russian history has in a sense confirmed their views, but because their work has great intrinsic merit. Belinsky, for example, remains to this day a major figure partly because of his intensely personal approach to the problems of his day, an approach that permitted him to exhibit his own fascinating personality. Moreover, it will be remembered that, as a kind of Russian Dr. Samuel Johnson, Belinsky's attitudes and tastes remained a force in Russian literature and social thought for more than a generation.

Pisarev is in some ways the least interesting of the group. If his life and reputation are a little more spectacular than his colleagues', his ideas were rather less profound and his presentation more erratic than theirs. We associate his name with the word "nihilist," which his enemies used against him, although he preferred to think of himself as "a thinking realist." He endorsed the famous character in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, Bazarov, who at first provoked the wrath of the radicals. Pisarev, with some reservations, accepted Bazarov and thus provided a prototype for the emulation of young rebels all across Russia. He is important also as a major opponent to Dostoevsky, for he helped disseminate and popularize the notion of "the new people" (that is, the rationalistic materialists) whom Dostoevsky loathed sufficiently to attack in *The Possessed* and repeatedly in his *Diary of a Writer*.

The selection of essays in the present volume is peculiar because some of Pisarev's best known pieces are omitted. It is in "The Realists" and "The Destruction of Aesthetics" that one finds his most memorable proclamations—for example, that Pushkin's poetry was a toy for the indolent, that railroads were preferable to theatres and boots to Shakespeare's tragedies. Of course, it is probably just as well that these essays are omitted, since anyone can find the views they contain in popular surveys of Russian social and philosophical thought (e.g., Zenkovsky's *History of Russian Philosophy* and Masaryk's *Spirit of Russia*).

What the editor, Mr. Dixon, has given us here is a selection of fairly restrained essays in which Pisarev sounds less like an *enfant terrible* than his popular reputation would have us believe he really was. His views on literature are represented by only two essays, on Heine and Chernyshevsky, though of course literary judgments are implied or expressed throughout. The title of the book perhaps indicates that the editor does not consider Pisarev's opinions on literature of the highest value or altogether representative of his thought. The major essays deal with political philosophy and Darwinian science and are valuable because they reveal the climate of opinion among an important segment of the Russian intelligentsia during the 1860's. It is fair to say that the editor has succeeded in presenting Pisarev as a many-sided thinker, and this should do much to rectify

the lopsided notoriety he has suffered from for the past century, especially in the West. Of special interest in the volume are his whimsical allegory on society, called "Bees," and his defense of Chernyshevsky. This defense, entitled "The Thinking Proletariat," presents a distinct challenge at the present time when various forms of Dostoevskian obscurantism and mysticism have been perhaps too generously celebrated and too generally accepted. Pisarev's attempt to fuse the individual's craving for a full life with the individual's responsibility to society retains its validity, despite a certain tendency to oversimplify.

The second book, *The Privalov Fortune* (1883) by Dmitry Mamin-Sibiryak (the second surname was his *nom de plume* as a journalist; it means "the Siberian") is an important addition to the series called "Classics of Russian Literature." This series is, I think, the most important contribution of the Foreign Languages Publishing House. The editors have shown excellent judgment by declining, on the whole, to produce books already popular or widely accessible in English. Thus, they have not published Gogol's *Dead Souls* but have issued instead the forgotten *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka* and *Mirgorod* in beautifully bound and illustrated companion-volumes; not Tolstoy's two greatest novels but instead *Resurrection*; not Dostoevsky's best known books but *Notes From a Dead House*, *The Insulted and Humiliated*, and the little known short novel, *Poor Folk*, Dostoevsky's first. More important, they have made available several works never before translated into English, for example Goncharov's *The Same Old Story* (a harbinger of the more famous *Oblomov*) and Pisemsky's *One Thousand Souls* and *The Simpleton* (containing brilliant pictures of mid-century provincial life). Finally several writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are well represented in collections of stories: Leskov, Garshin, Kotsyubinsky, Bunin, and Kuprin.

Mamin-Sibiryak's novel, hitherto untranslated, was written in the naturalist tradition and seems now to combine the impact of Galsworthy and Frank Norris. I say Norris because the book contains a good deal of that very un-English kind of exuberance that one expects from a Russian novel.

The Privalov Fortune is a family chronicle that tells the story of the scion of a deceased Siberian gold-baron whose estate has been tied up and bled by a tribe of parasites. Young Privalov strives to be a positive contributor to society rather than a superfluous man. He is an idealist who intends to pay his family debt to the exploited workers, but he must at last be satisfied with simply improving the business and industrial structure as he finds it. Of greater interest than his story are those of the minor characters, especially the three women in Privalov's life: his mistress, Tony, who was encouraged to form the liaison by her husband for the sake of business; his wife, Zosya, who weds him (and betrays him later on) because her family needs the money; and his second wife, Nadine, a sane, strong intellectual woman in whom the author has great faith because of her steadfast adherence to principle. A host of lesser creatures crowds the background, providing the whole story with vitality and color. They are neither the quaint grotesques

of Ostrovsky nor the wild titans of Gorky; rather they seem to occupy a very realistic and convincing middle ground. Old Believers, professional match-makers, venal lawyers, unscrupulous social climbers: they make a regular gallery of post-reform social types. Thus, from this book one retains a powerful impression of having looked objectively and calmly at the slow evolution of the Russian bourgeoisie from the early heroic days when they pioneered and expropriated new lands to the period of consolidation when they, like their counterparts in the West, began to engage in predatory mutual exploitation.

The third book, Boris Lavrenyov's *The Forty First*, belongs to the series called "Library of Soviet Literature." This series contains both those books which may be called Soviet "classics" (e.g. Furmanov's *Chapaev* or Fadeev's *The Rout*) and a great number of typical Soviet pot-boilers that have only topical interest and can no more claim attention as serious literature than the mountains of Westerns and Murder Mysteries on North American bookstands. A Soviet pot-boiler, of course, *does* deal with immediate national problems (irrigating deserts, increasing livestock production, improving the quality of industrial output, etc.), hence it cannot be called "escapist entertainment." Indeed, its major defect is that it confuses journalism with literature and treats trivia seriously while the enduring human problems are cheaply resolved in accordance with Communist dogma.

Lavrenyov's book is very nearly a "classic." Two of the three tales in it, all written in the 1920's, are as interesting in style and content as any short works from the first Soviet decade. They have an added interest because, like the stories of Isaac Babel, they were virtually proscribed during the worst periods of Stalin's tyranny. Finally, they are typical examples of a widespread and meritorious tendency during the twenties which has been called "romantic-psychological" and which was practically liquidated after 1930 by the Communist-inspired doctrine of socialist realism.

One would imagine that these stories, together with his play, *Revolt*, and many other works that Lavrenyov produced during the twenties must have returned to haunt him when, after the second world war, he so completely abandoned the claims of art that he could write *The Voice of America*, one of the many anti-American theatre pieces of the Cold War period. Here art is totally submerged beneath propaganda.

But in *The Forty First*, which is, to be sure, propaganda (a parable about devotion to Bolshevik principle), Lavrenyov directs our attention to the artistry of his tale as well as to the moral. The Communist heroine falls in love with a White Army officer after she narrowly misses killing him (her forty-first victim). Shipwrecked and alone on a desolate island in the Aral Sea, they consummate a love based on tenderness and newly discovered sympathy; but at last she kills him when they are about to be rescued by his comrades. The tale is built on the radical contrast between the hard-boiled, almost illiterate girl who tries to write poetry (inimitable except by Eddie Guest) and is striving for freedom through knowledge, and the arrogant, decadent aristocrat who has the grace and charm that she lacks.

The most impressive feature of the story is its humour—at times almost Gogolian

burlesque. Lavrenyov treats the whole narrative of brutality, suffering, and horror with sympathetic but amused detachment. In this way he greatly increases the impact of the calamity, which might otherwise be disregarded as sentimentalized "rough-stuff" in the early Hemingway vein. He does this first by his colourful, almost grotesque, descriptions of people and places. He presents a "crimson commissar" who looked "for all the world like an animated Easter egg." At it turns out, the Red Army had requisitioned quantities of German aniline dye, and Lavrenyov's commissar happened to be issued a pure scarlet uniform.

Then there is the dream-device. While feverish, the hero has an elaborate and astonishing hallucination which begins with a parade of red-tailed soldiers, an all-army band, "but the musicians have no mouths. Perfectly smooth under their noses. The trumpets are thrust into the left nostrils.... And that gives [them] a very special tone...."

Lavrenyov adds a final touch of comedy by his chapter titles: for example, "Stolen from beginning to end from Daniel Defoe, except that Robinson has not long to wait for his Friday"; "Recording the second conversation and explaining the harmful effects of sea bathing at a temperature of 2 degrees above freezing-point"; "In which it is proved that, although the heart defies all laws, one's being, after all, determines one's consciousness."

The two shorter stories in this volume are nearly as well written as the first, though perhaps a little more emphatically didactic. What is clear is that Lavrenyov deserves a distinctive, though minor, place among that constellation of writers in the twenties who produced in less than ten years several of the most remarkable works of Soviet fiction.

The three books I have described here are a meagre sampling of the material available from the Foreign Languages Publishing House. If the translations are sometimes clumsy, mechanical, and partial to British rather than North American idioms, the content provides sufficient compensation.

It is to be hoped, I think, that readers will take advantage of the opportunity thus provided to pierce the Iron Curtain for themselves. A circumspect perusal of several of these volumes would repay the reader not only with entertainment but with surprising insights into the spirit and social structure both of old Russia and the Soviet Union. Because of the traditional, unique intimacy in the relationship between literature and life in Russia, one can learn more about the ideological turmoil there during the nineteenth century by reading Belinsky and Dobrolyubov, and more about the revolution of 1917 by reading Lavrenyov's book or Mikhail Sholokhov's *Quiet Flows the Don* (in a new authorized translation, FLPH, 1959) than he can learn from a dozen standard histories.