

## AMERICAN LITERATURE IN THE SOVIET UNION

By LEONID IGNATIEFF

RUSSIAN interest in American literature did not, of course, begin with the Soviet period. The earlier writers, such as Washington Irving, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Emerson, Poe and others had been as well known to educated Russians as were German, French, and English authors. Later American writers enjoyed even greater popularity.

The Revolution of 1917 and the early years of the Communist government in Russia increased the interest among Russians for literature of all descriptions, including American literature. The government did not, at this time, insist that everything published should be pro-Soviet, and the works of many new American authors appeared in Russia before the Five Year Plan period which began in 1928. This was made possible, not only through the comparative tolerance of the government, but also through the existence of a number of private publishers who competed with one another in bringing out translations of popular current American fiction. This situation must be contrasted with the present one in which publishing is a monopoly of the government.

The arrival of the Five Year Plans brought with it a much sterner attitude, towards literature as towards everything else. Writing, both domestic and foreign, which did not make a definite contribution towards achieving the aims of the government was increasingly banned from the market. Since the 1920's a large number of the more popular American writers have no longer been published in the Soviet Union. Even the growing threat of Germany and then the period of uneasy cooperation during the war never basically changed the situation. Since the war, not only is the number of American works published in the USSR more restricted, but the tone of Soviet criticism towards those works is more hostile than before.<sup>1</sup>

It would not be correct to say, however, that there was little or no American literature being published in the Soviet Union today. In 1951, Soviet journals listed more than a dozen Americans whose works had been published the previous year, or were scheduled soon to appear.<sup>2</sup> Some of these authors

(1) For the pre-war period, see Deming W. Brown, *American Authors in Soviet Russia* (1917-1941), Columbia University Thesis, N. Y. 1947.

(2.) V. Lidin, "Russian Translations of American Authors", *USSR Information Bulletin*, March 23, 1951, p. 2177.

Also—, Russian Translations of American Authors *Soviet Literature* 6 (1951), pp. 184-185.

belong to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; others are contemporary names. The choice of radical writers such as Theodore Dreiser, Howard Fast and Albert Maltz is not surprising, but the appearance of other names is more difficult to explain from the viewpoint of Communist ideology. Mark Twain, Jack London, Fenimore Cooper and O. Henry were in the list principally because they have always been favourites among Soviet readers, especially the younger ones. 10,000,000 copies of the works of Jack London and about 3,000,000 of the writings of Mark Twain circulated in the USSR between the early twenties and 1940, these two authors being consistently the favourite American writers in that country.

Soviet critics have made as much as possible of attacks by Americans upon different aspects of life in the United States. Even in the ranks of the radical writers, however, they have nearly always found a contradictory attitude resulting from vacillation between acceptance of the material benefits of capitalism and criticism of its failures. Among authors who could not even be classed as radicals this vacillation was even greater, but the critics did their best. While Jack London was sometimes critical of Capitalism, he was too inconsistent to be of much help. Mark Twain offered greater promise. Particular attention was paid to the satirical side of his writing and especially to the final period of his life, from 1890 until 1910, when he was an outspoken critic of much that he saw around him. American writers have usually explained the pessimism of Twain's final years as due to personal misfortunes, but Soviet critics claim that it had a great deal to do with his increasing consciousness of the ills of capitalism.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately for them, it was not the later works at all, but *Tom Sawyer*, *The Prince and the Pauper* and *Huckleberry Finn* that interested the Soviet public.

With a man like Theodore Dreiser Soviet criticism was on firmer ground. A number of writers from the group sometimes known as the American "literary renaissance" of the twenties have at different times been published in the Soviet Union, but the only one of them to enjoy lasting favour was Dreiser. Upton Sinclair, Sherwood Anderson, Eugene O'Neill, John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis have all enjoyed their seasons of popularity in the USSR, although in varying degrees. All these writers criticized certain aspects of American manners and morals, revealed certain injustices in the conditions of American life, but

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(3.) R. Samarin, "The True Mark Twain", *Soviet Literature* 6 (1950), p. 179.

they did so because they were artists whose business was to portray life as they found it. Since they refused to accept Communism as the only solution for the ills that they observed, they were accused by Soviet writers of being socially passive. Theodore Dreiser, however, was excepted from this criticism.

Dreiser is unusually acceptable for an American in the Soviet Union, not merely on account of the painstaking thoroughness of the stories in which he flays capitalism in the United States, but also for his consistently leftist record as a writer and, as a man. Soon after the appearance of his most famous novel *An American Tragedy*, the author visited the USSR which made a great impression upon him. Thereafter his opinions seemed to have moved leftward, in the direction of Communism. His work in the thirties consisted principally of essays, sketches and autobiography with a strong bias against the American scene as he saw it. Soviet critics draw particular attention to *Tragic America* (1931) which contained studies made of different sections of the country during the depression and *America is Worth Saving* (1941), the theme of which is that the United States was dominated by a number of rich families from whom she must be saved.

In the last year of his life, Dreiser joined the Communist Party, explaining his step as follows:

Belief in the greatness and dignity of man has been the guiding principle of my life and work. The logic of my life and work leads me therefore to apply for membership in the Communist Party.

The author died too soon to learn from the great post-war flood of escapees from countries behind the Iron Curtain how little their governments really concerned themselves with such trifles as the "dignity of man". Dreiser's conversion has been merely one of the countless indications of primeval American innocence about true conditions in those almost unknown parts of the world.

The fact that Dreiser had taken this step at a time when many other leading American writers seemed to have abandoned their early trends towards radicalism placed him, from a Communist viewpoint, in the first position in American literature. He had been previously castigated by Soviet critics for faults in his writing which were typically American, "petit-bourgeois" traits such as a tendency to excessive individualism. But his posthumous novel, *Bulwark*, has been commended in the USSR as a rare work of positive creation in the midst of the decadence which was considered particularly prevalent in contemporary American literature.

Since the war, the Soviet attitude towards the United States has been one of enmity against its principal rival in the capitalist world. American literature was now examined with greater care than ever and condemned louder than before. In a public lecture delivered in Moscow in 1947, M. Mendleson, one of the principal Soviet critics of American literature, imagined a modern Rip Van Winkle who had been asleep for the past seven years. If, upon awakening, he attempted to learn what had been happening in his country, he would certainly be unable to do so from a study of contemporary writing. Although there had been a large output of books in the United States during the war and since, these writings did not really reflect current life or its problems for:

In the American publishing world several unique and specific kinds of machine-produced literature have long since been admitted to citizenship, such as the detective novel, the horror novel, the mystery novel and the pseudo-historical novel.<sup>4</sup>

This type of unreal literature, Mendleson pointed out, was widely circulated throughout the country by the book-clubs and "other capitalist ventures" that acted as middlemen between reader and publisher. These organizations served to popularize many low grade works since their members obligated themselves to buy books that were chosen by the clubs.

Much attention was given by Mendleson to what he called "the ascendancy of decadence in American literature", a subject that has been a dominant theme with Soviet critics in recent years. This tendency seems to them to proceed from and be accompanied by, a pessimistic attitude towards human beings and progress in general. Its causes, they think, lie in the "hopeless position in which capitalist society finds itself, the blind alley it has entered".<sup>5</sup> Capitalist society, in their opinion, is doomed, and is not far from the throes of death. At this stage, it gives rise to many pathological phenomena, one of which is the decadent stream in literature.

Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*, suggested Mendleson, was evidence that the writer has capitulated to the decadent state of mind. This picture of a group of tramps who, having found themselves a place to live, proceed to do so completely indifferent to the world around them made it clear that Steinbeck was preaching escapism—"withdrawal from life and isolation from

(4.) M. Mendleson, *Soviet Interpretation of Contemporary American Literature*, (Translated by D. B. Brown & R. W. Mathewson), N. Y., 1948.

(5.) L. Yakovlev, "Literature of Decay", *Soviet Literature* 6 (1950), p. 176.

the struggle". From the author of a vigorous protest against American social conditions, *The Grapes of Wrath*, this was regarded as a sign of apostasy.

Another writer who had yielded to decadent influences, the lecturer thought was Richard Wright. He contrasted Wright's earlier work, *Uncle Tom's Children*, describing negroes who refused to succumb to wretched conditions with *The Man in the Underground*. In the later work the hero is a negro who is so overcome with fear that he crawls into an underground sewer to live and die there among garbage and corpses. "Having impressed the reader with a sense of the permanence of the status quo the novel aims to paralyze the ability of exploited Americans, above all of Negroes, to resist",<sup>6</sup> Mendleson comments.

The Soviet critics explain the loss of faith in man that is characteristic of these and other writers as being the inevitable consequence of the "hopeless position" of capitalist society. Another explanation might be offered arising from the fact that Steinbeck, Wright and others are disillusioned radicals. The partiality of many radicals to rosy illusions makes them equally liable to black disappointment. The frequent consequences of this second stage is the conclusion that improvements are impossible because of human weakness. Hence the loss of faith in man. This tendency to go from one extreme to the other is particularly noticeable among former Communists. An example of this is Richard Wright who, with others formerly sharing this creed, has recently explained his faith and then his loss of it in a way that makes one marvel at the innocence of their beliefs.

As a matter of fact, it is not so much pessimism in American literature that requires an explanation as the perpetually optimistic tone of Soviet literature. After a thirty-year period that has included civil war, hunger, hard work which sufficed only to buy the bare essentials of living, eternal fear of arrest—with such a background it would be strange indeed not to find much unhappiness reflected in that literature. But one does not! The Party demands that authors should create positive Soviet heroes, men and women who find happiness in accomplishing the tasks that had been set them, as well as in active support of the party. Such happy warriors are supplied to order by Soviet writers although few of them impress the reader as being very true to life. As for unhappiness, that may be the lot of political

(6.) M. Mendleson, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

malcontents, but these, according to official dogma, are undeserving of understanding or sympathy. Under such conditions, it is not surprising that Soviet critics are able to contrast the optimism that prevails in their own works with the pessimism that is so often found in the writing of any country where writers are free to say what they want.

But even though Americans may be as pessimistic as they wish, they are not nearly so much inclined towards pessimism as the Soviet critics assert with tiresome repetitiousness. If one were to examine the list of best-selling novels in the United States according to the New York Times Book Review, one would find that most of these books deal with the lives and problems of average Americans in a way that could not be regarded as decadent. It is only a minority of the population that read books dealing with maladjustment, or unhappiness, or that reflect a negative attitude towards life. The majority of readers prefer something more cheerful.

Just as they deprecate the "ascendancy of decadence" in contemporary American literature on the one hand, so do Soviet critics approve the existence of what they call a "progressive tendency" on the other. This trend grew out of what might be called the proletarian literature which developed during the days of the depression. The writers of this literature have frequently been Communist Party sympathizers, or even members, and their works present a picture of life in the United States that would fit in with the Soviet interpretation of it. A good example of this progressive type of writing is a collection of short stories by different American authors that was published in Moscow, in 1951, under the title of *This is America*.

According to the preface of *This is America*, the United States is divided into two camps: the imperialist one which desires that this country should attain mastery over the whole world, and the democratic one which is led by the Communist Party. "Contemporary American conditions", the preface concludes, "determine the character of American literature which is also divided into two camps".<sup>7</sup>

This book, which is intended to portray "American realities", is arranged in four sections. The first part presents people in the United States who find themselves persecuted or discriminated against. These include not only negroes or itinerant Mexican labourers, but also white Americans who, for one

(7.) E. Romanova (ed.), *This is America*, Moscow, 1951, p. 4.

reason or another, antagonize interests that are more powerful than themselves. In Dreiser's "Will you Walk into my Parlor", for instance, blackmail is most effectively used against a journalist in order to prevent his investigation of a city political ring. In "Loyal Miss Fereh," by Alan Max, a harmless and conservatively minded civil servant falls victim to a loyalty purge.

The second section of the book concerns itself with American imperialist policy as it reveals itself in the conduct of Americans abroad. An excerpt from a novel by Stefan Heym, *The Crusaders*, deals with the struggle between opposing forces in the American army of occupation in Germany, the supporters of a policy of imperialism and those who are more democratically minded. In "The Green, Green Grass and a Gun" by Carl Offord, the representative of American imperialism is a young sentry somewhere in the Caribbean who blocks the road to a native because the latter cannot produce a pass.

The third part of *This is America* aims to show up the contradictions between rich and poor in the United States. Among the more effective stories here are a couple by Albert Maltz. "Man on the Road" portrays a worker affected by silicosis who had left home so as not to burden his family with a dying man. In "The Happiest Man on Earth" we meet a formerly unemployed man who is happy because he has found a job, even if that job entails handling dangerous explosives.

The final selection of the book differs from the remainder for it passes beyond mere criticism of conditions in the United States to advocate a cure for them: the adoption of Communism. Of the four selections in this part, three are journalistic rather than literary, two of them concerning the trial of American Communist leaders before Judge Medina, three or four years ago. The fourth is an excerpt from the novel *Clarkton*, by Howard Fast, to which further reference will be made. This work deals with the role played by Communists in American industrial life.

An otherwise uninformed Soviet reader would obtain a quite partial view of life in the United States from reading the stories in *This is America*. Such was, of course, the intention of the editors, in spite of their claim that the book presented writers "of the most varied views" writing about "American realities". The editors' policy of tendentious selection has resulted in a uniformly black picture of American life.

Two contemporary American writers who are frequently

and favourably referred to by Soviet critics are Howard Fast and Albert Maltz who are leaders of what the Soviets call the "progressive tendency" in American literature. These authors, as well as several others who have been less in the public eye, have continued the gallery of American Communists that was begun by Theodore Dreiser's *Ermita*, a heroine of his *Gallery of Women* (1929). The Communist heroes are usually presented as the most active and intelligent members of the labour movement and, indeed, of society in general.

Typical presentations of Communist trade union leaders in the United States are found in Maltz's *The Underground Stream* (1940) and Fast's *Clarkton* (1947). The first of these novels was inspired by events that happened during an actual strike among the Detroit autoworkers in 1936. The two opposing forces that appear in the book are the local Communist party organizers and the Black Legion of America, an organization of anti-labour interests of a traditionally Fascist type. One of the Communists is kidnapped by the Legion and killed after he refuses to become an agent of the employers.

*Clarkton*, by Howard Fast, is the story of an imaginary strike just after the Second World War, in a typical New England industrial town. The workers are headed by the non-party president of the trade union and by two Communist organizers. The leading part in the strike is played by some of the 43 Communists who live in Clarkton. The Communists are represented as being truly the vanguard of the working class for it is always they who urge the president of the union to action. It is they, for instance, who are responsible for a clash between workers and police which results in the death of several workers.

Another type of character that frequently appears in the work of the progressive writers is the negro, as representative of people who are discriminated against in the United States. In the two novels just mentioned, we find negroes who have become Communists mainly because they find no colour discrimination within the party. But other negroes in the same novels play the role of informers for the management, or the police. In an earlier novel, *Freedom Road* (1944), Fast magnified the part played by the coloured race in the South in the period following the Civil War when they were able to control the suffrage with the help of Northern troops. According to Fast, the negro leaders were responsible for reforms that were essential, not only to their own race, but to the poor whites as well. He says nothing, of course, of the vicious corruption that characterized



this period of Southern history. This omission is probably one of the reasons why Fast has been accused of falsifying the history of the United States.

In Howard Fast, Albert Maltz and a diminishing number of similarly minded writers, the Soviet Union has at last been able to find American authors who were willing to accept Communism as a solution for the ills that they criticized in American life. The mere fact that they have done so has brought their reputation in the United States perhaps lower than it would otherwise have gone while making it soar in the USSR. The stories and novels of Fast and Maltz are told with skill and sincerity, but their views are so partisan that their interest as imaginative writers has suffered. After all, authors who follow the Communist Party line are obliged to make heroes out of the Communists that they portray and villains out of their opponents. This fairy-story manner of treating fiction naturally introduces a certain element of monotony. The ability of Fast and Maltz, generally speaking, to avoid monotony is a tribute to their skill as writers. A more serious consequence of their partisanship is that they have thereby surrendered the power of objective judgment and criticism that is essential to a true artist.

Both Fast and Maltz have written opinions on what they considered to be the duty of writers. In the words of Maltz:

The leading place in the literature of all periods belongs, as a rule, to those writers who, both in their life and work, have showed warm sympathy and love for people, never cynicism, to the writers who have taken the side of the progressive and frequently radical social movements of their time.<sup>8</sup>

This view of the author as a partisan should be compared with the attitude of Sherwood Anderson who thought that:

It seems to me that the story-teller is one thing; and the thinker, the political economist, the reformer another. The business of the story-teller is with life, in his own time, life as he feels it, smells it, tastes it. Not for him, surely, the making of the revolution.<sup>9</sup>

Upon reading the latter opinion, we can well understand how it was that Anderson, who was once published and praised in the Soviet Union, has lost his former position there on account of his "social passivity" and how most American writers who would choose his view, rather than that of Maltz, are so roundly condemned in that country.

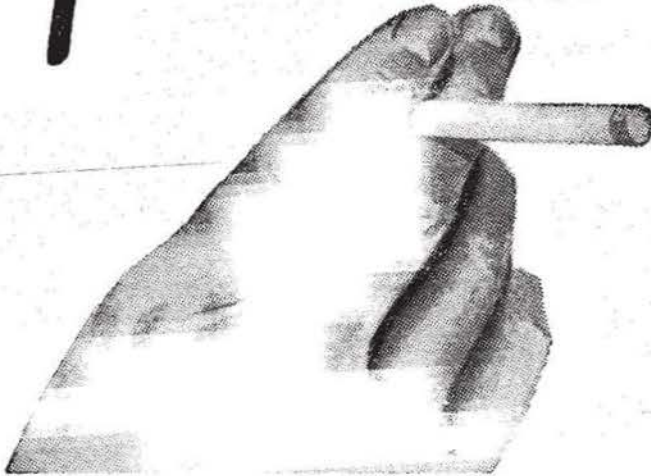
Although many leading writers all over the world have sided with the progressive and radical movements of their time,

(8.) Albert Maltz, *Izbrannoye*, Moscow, 1951, p. 549.

(9.) F. B. Millet, *Contemporary American Authors*, N. Y., 1942, p. 222.

SMOKE

# Player's "MILD"



THE  
MILDEST  
BEST-  
TASTING  
CIGARETTE

PLAIN OR CORK TIP

nowhere has that been more true than in pre-revolutionary Russia. Some critics would even insist that this great concern with social, political and economic conditions was responsible for introducing a certain monotony into Russian literature and for limiting its development. And yet, even in Russia before the Revolution, there were many who dared to ignore the themes recommended by the authoritative voice of "social command", turning their attention to those which lay closer to their hearts, or to the direction of their talents. It is only in recent years that critics have insisted increasingly on Lenin's dictum; "literature must become party literature".

Perhaps Howard Fast, Albert Maltz and writers who think as they do are not fully aware of the tragedy that the application of this dictum has brought, not only to Soviet literature in general, but also to the careers and lives of individual writers. If Soviet views had been more tolerant, then a number of authors would not have been obliged to rewrite their works, or to abandon original writing completely; a number of deaths or disappearances of other artists would not have been necessary. Soviet literature would certainly have felt the benefit.

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