



FEATURES OF MODERN RUSSIAN MASS LITERATURE

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ABSTRACT: - Well into the 20th century, Russian literature was an important forum for societal self-understanding. This function, however, was lost during the First World War. Revolution and civil war completed the transformation of the literary establishment, although another brief flowering followed in the 1920s. The chronological pattern of Russian literature at the beginning of the 20th century is mostly oriented towards the diverse movements, groups, and schools. Although some structures persisted in part into the years after 1917, they did not prove resistant to the political, social, economic, and cultural upheavals triggered by the war. Analogously, the authors changed not only their view of the world, but also their subjects and means of expression. For this reason, the war as an historical context of literary creation (with the decisive years of 1904/05, 1913/14 to 1917/18, and 1921/22) moves to the centre, including its interrelationship with the global revolutionary undercurrent of the time.

KEYWORDS: When the First World War broke out, merely four years had passed since Lev Tolstoj (1828-1910) died and with him the Russian literature of the 19th century had been laid to rest.

INTRODUCTION

With his main work, the novel War and Peace about the Patriotic War of 1812, the Sevastopol Tales about the time of the Crimean War (1853-1856) as well as numerous journalistic articles and pamphlets, he had set a standard in Russia for the artistic discussion of the war. Any public debate regarding the influence of war on the individual, the family

and society had to refer to Tolstoj. Radical pacifists who rejected any form of military service invoked his influence. Tolstoj had questioned the spiritual authority of the Orthodox Church, which, according to his conviction, did not preach pacifism but declared war service a patriotic duty and even blessed weapons. Yet, the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) already produced images of the destructiveness of modern war that went

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beyond anything previously known. This memory was still fresh when Russia was surprised by the “German War” in 1914.

By contrast, the literary establishment of the Tsarist empire was well prepared to take on the challenge of the modern war to the arts. In the course of expanding the industry, the advance of new technologies in agriculture, and the growing social pressure to adapt, the scope of activities for publishers and authors had expanded considerably. The illiteracy rate had dropped rapidly, especially in the cities. Knowledge and expertise became parameters of progress, and state institutions found it increasingly difficult to meet the growing demand and regulate the countless independent educational initiatives. Formerly almost unrestrained regulatory institutions such as censorship could hardly keep up with the flood of publications on perpetually changing fields of knowledge. In 1904/05, the preliminary censorship was abolished, but an important part of its powers was transferred to the criminal courts. “Serious” literature was still cultivated in salons and circles and distributed in the large (“thick”) journals. At the same time, “light” genres such as the adventure novel, the detective story, or the secular graphic narrative (Lubok) conquered growing shares of the market for books, pamphlets, magazines, and newspapers.[1] Increasingly, a sophisticated popular culture and a differentiated, opinionated news system with high circulations aimed at the “mass reader.” Railways and telegraphs shortened the distribution channels and enlarged the resonance space for a “public” that wanted to be kept up to date. Domestic politics and international relations, economics and science, religion and culture were being reported on and discussed more controversially than ever before.

Initially, established writers also benefited from this boom in the printed word.

Nevertheless, the growing competition from popular genres, but above all from the emerging humanities and social sciences, endangered the exclusive claim of the established literary figures to interpretative sovereignty in questions of everyday life and world view. Compared to the preceding decades, the impact of “serious” literature gradually diminished. The large form and the individual author became relative. In this respect, it was not the First World War that fundamentally changed the literary world. Rather, it accelerated what the previous explosion of the literary culture had already triggered. Regardless of the increasingly strict military censorship, the aesthetic and thematic spectrum of prose and poetry continued to expand and paved the way for self-taught writers to enter the literary world. These were welcomed as rising stars “from among the people,” who thereby gained their own voice and emancipated themselves from intellectual paternalism. Whilst the “Silver Age” seemed to continue beyond 1914, a fundamental cultural change was taking place, which in turn the revolutions of 1917 took up and tried to steer “in a democratic direction.” Even before the war, literary critics had observed a tendency that was then massively intensifying: the focus of literary creation shifted noticeably in favour of journalism under the new exceptional circumstances of the state of emergency.

“War Literature” ↑

There is no established term in Russian for the literature of the First World War. This may be surprising for several reasons. On the one hand, military subjects, officers as modern heroes, and extended campaigns as peripeties of history have been an integral part of Russian literature since the 18th century. From the victory odes of Gavril R. Derzhavin (1743-1816), to Mikhail IU. Lermontov’s (1814-1841) poeticisation of the decades-long Caucasian

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War and Tolstoj's epic depiction of the war against Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) as a test of an entire society, to Vsevolod M. Garshin's (1855-1888) harrowing tales from the Russo-Turkish War of 1877 and Leonid N. Andreev's (1871-1919) and Vikentij V. Veresaev's (1867-1945) perception of the Russo-Japanese War of 1905 as a prelude to coming catastrophes, the war was always present amongst the educated elites, yet also increasingly to the mass reader, even in times of peace. On the other hand, in almost all national literature of the countries involved in the First World War, a branch of literary studies emerged that collected the literary heritage, categorised it according to genres, themes or social contexts, and ultimately examined it.[2]

The reason for the absence of Russia in this series is the result of a historical-political drama. For the Bolsheviks, it was considered a foregone conclusion that the revolutionary events of 1917 and the subsequent civil war were sufficient to remove the three devastating years of the World War from historical memory. Not until the rediscovery of the "Great War," which began before the commemorative year of 2014, was the "loss" of the political and social epochal break before the revolution called to mind.[3] Meanwhile, the methods employed to conceal the gap between 1913, the threshold year of this cultural break,[4] and 1918, had already been developed during the war. It was a matter, as one military censor characterised the informational practice of the general staff, of "systematically denying" facts, texts, and memories or "interpreting them extremely arbitrarily." [5] In Soviet Russia, the ideological conflict was openly played out. Instead of the Great War, the "Red October" was established as the epochal turning point. Military virtues, heroisation, and patriotic sentiments passed to the victors in the civil war, which was

described as a revolutionary "decisive battle." From then on, all the resources of history and literature were devoted to this reconstruction and repetition.[6] "War literature," as it developed in the countries of the former Entente and the Central Powers, was thus deprived of the opportunity to develop in the Soviet Union.

The literary response to the experience of the World War and its consequences was preserved, as it were, in the state left behind by contemporaries. That this legacy represents more than a disorganised archive is attributable to the writers, literary critics, and publicists who, immediately after the war began, began to discuss the characteristics of a literature that faced an unrequited challenge. Under the impression of the mass deaths at the very beginning of the conflict, the question was raised as to the role of each individual author, how the events could be appropriately captured linguistically and formally and, last but not least, what "duty" (dolg) and what "responsibility" (otvetstvennost') the intellectuals should assume as citizens of the state.[7] Over were the days when battles seemed to be conducted according to fixed rules and the duel, a relic of the declining aristocratic culture, epitomised by the possibility of duels at the front, which could be fought face to face.

Any attempt to explore the Russian literature of the First World War must be directly linked to this heritage, which has been preserved but not newly appropriated for the respective generation through transmission.[8] This literary resource has a scope and quality that calls for theoretical exploration and conceptual order. Following the genre of "war art" (batal'nyj zhanr, batal'naia zhivopis'), it has recently been suggested to speak of "artistic" or "literary war literature" (khudozhestvennaia or literaturnaia

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batalistika). The fluid transitions to authors of “the second and third tier,” but above all to trivial literature and kitsch, are not always clearly discernible. This is especially true when – due to a lack of current theoretical development – interpretive patterns of Soviet provenance are resorted to.[9] In these, educational, didactic, ideological, and moral evaluations of the work and author are often given more weight than aesthetic or scientific criteria.[10] Notwithstanding this, approaches that examine the interrelationship between historiography and fiction and take up suggestions from international research are productive. This also applies to parts of recent military historiography.[11]

The revision of literary creation of the years 1914 to 1917/18 had thus begun. Its aim was to recognise the war as the dominant creative impulse. In addition, a wealth of forgotten works and unknown biographical evidence was being made accessible.[12] Both the renowned authors of these years and those familiar only to contemporaries were much more directly involved in the events of the war than Soviet literary scholarship would have us believe.[13] Large sections of international research follow this distorted portrayal in part up to the present day.[14] One of the few exceptions, Ben Hellman’s thorough study of symbolism in the war years, did not appear until after the collapse of the Soviet Union.[15] Since then, international historiography has shifted the epochal break from 1917 back to 1914.[16] It was the war that shook world views, disrupted social relations, and ultimately led to revolutions. Accordingly, the war dictated themes and motifs also in literature. In the disintegrating political order, authors sought orientation; social barriers fell; women seized new rights; peasants and workers made their way into literature.[17]

The extent to which the widespread network of publishers, journals and distribution

channels, libraries, associations, and private and public meeting places were affected by the restrictions imposed by the conversion to wartime economy can be reliably reconstructed in broad outlines.[18] Individual studies substantiate this knowledge.[19] Yet numerous questions remain unanswered. How did literary trends change and which emerged anew? What influence did cultural authorities have on the literary establishment? For a long time, there was more conjecture than fact about military censorship. In many respects, however, it seems to have been weaker than in England or France, for example.[20] One sweeping accusation concerned the quality of literary works. Contemporary critics lamented that there were mainly nationalistic devotional writings, mediocrity, and rubbish.[21] There is no doubt that the tabloid press, with its sensational reporting, achieved even greater attention than before 1914. At the same time, however, it offered authors a modest livelihood in difficult times. Reviews were not infrequently characterised by the heated atmosphere. In order to learn more about the social discourses, it is necessary to find out more about the actual tastes of the public.[22] In itself, the place of publication said nothing about the significance of the stories, essays, and articles. On the one hand, the development of the war polarised the literary scene. On the other hand, the organisational and personnel shifts in journalism were not always transparent and therefore increased mutual distrust. Harsh criticism was widespread. Nevertheless, many intellectuals were united by the desire to preserve serious literature. It becomes apparent that the image of the public sphere of the Tsarist empire during the war is now viewed in a thoroughly differentiated way.[23] The cultural life of the war years as a whole now appears wholly diverse and contradictory.[24]

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The aforementioned stereotypes of Soviet literary studies had a twofold disparaging effect. On the one hand, trends or groups such as Akmeism and Symbolism were widely suspected of aestheticising and idealising the war. On the other hand, Vladimir Lenin's (1870-1924) dogmatic theorem of "imperialist war" served to politically discredit writers who perceived the events rather as a complex anthropological state of emergency. Terms such as "on the eve of the revolution" (instead of "before the war") or "after the revolution" (instead of "after the war" or "after the empire") linguistically fixed the change of perspective. It was not individual experience, emotional involvement, or moral evaluation that was to characterise the "man at war," but political conviction. Accordingly, authors were judged according to criteria that dominated the political discourse of the radical parties: they were distinguished as "militarists" or "pacifists," as "defenders of the fatherland" (oborontsy) or "defeatists" (porazhentsy), "nationalists," "chauvinists," or "internationalists." The degree of deviation from the party line determined whether these were merely temporary or fundamental "errors" (zabluzhdeniia) that – with Lenin's help – could be "overcome" or alternatively abandoned thanks to insight into post-revolutionary realities.[25] Individual creative profiles, however, show how diverse and at times contradictory authors responded to the impending catastrophe.

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