

### **Introduction: Defining the Exceptional**

Soviet literature in Stalin's time is often defined by its orthodoxy. Even worse, it is commonly seen, as Katerina Clark notes, as "bad literature."<sup>1</sup> It is this apparent uniformity of opinion on the topic that drew me to it, impressed by the very concept of a literary culture functioning as a total collective unison as demanded by its government. Further, this historical transition from the openness and artistic outburst seen in the Soviet Union in the 1920's, before Stalin, presents a change in the status quo so rapid that it seems like it could not possibly have been total. The idea that the government, as Max Hayward put it, "destroyed the conditions for independent creative activity of any kind," and that the best Soviet writers could do for themselves was, "to be allowed to fall silent"<sup>2</sup> half a decade after a nationwide avant-garde artistic movement, represented a friction between two forces, one political and one artistic, that simply required investigation. Quashing these artistic forces completely seemed like an incredibly tall order. It was also, as I discovered, an impossible one.

It is its presentation as uniform that drew me to study Stalin era literature. However, what became apparent, and is becoming more publicly apparent with the work of people like Clark, is that writers in Stalin's Soviet Union were either not totally functioning within the "master plot" or were, at the very least, finding ways to function creatively within the confines of Socialist Realism, the officially mandated writing style of Stalin's government. Despite its official orthodoxy, a transference of ideas and creativity was, in fact,

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<sup>1</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2000), x.

<sup>2</sup> Max Hayward, "Russian Literature in the Soviet Period," 63.

functioning through literature in the Soviet Union at this time; it was simply the way in which this happened, the modes and methods employed by writers, that changed. Outside of writing, living in the Soviet Union under Stalin was largely about adapting to a society that was directly hostile to the way it had existed only a decade before under the New Economic Policy (NEP).<sup>3</sup> Because of this focus on adaptation, it must also be noted that this paper will focus on the 1930's, detailing how ideas themselves survived a period of rapid official demonization and criminalization.

It has long been noted that within this rigid system, an economic black market became a common component of Soviet life. In many senses, as Sheila Fitzpatrick points out in *Everyday Stalinism*, everyone was involved in this "second economy," and further, "the Stalinist first economy could not have functioned without the second economy."<sup>4</sup> However, this paper contends that, after Stalin came to power in 1928, an intellectual black market, within which writers expressed and transferred ideas that were original, expressive, and often daring, also came into being out of the same necessity. Sometimes this happened within official fiction itself, disguised in some way or another. Just as society could not function economically within the impossible rigidity of Stalinism, it also could not function intellectually entirely within this system. Even further, it was possible that the sheer impossibility of completely following the line of Socialist Realism caused writers to dip into the goods provided by this intellectual black market without wanting, or possibly even meaning, to do so. Truly, art totally controlled by the state proves impossible to produce given this fact. In other ways, ideas were both protected and shared from unofficial

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<sup>3</sup> NEP was a period of economic and social liberalization that occurred in the 1920's under Lenin. In theory, it was meant to provide a period of state capitalism necessary in Communist theory in the evolution towards socialism and eventually communism.

<sup>4</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930's* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 59.

positions, often illegally, and in unique and unorthodox ways. It is in the nature of creativity to express itself, and within the nature of man to create; no institution can regulate that completely, not even Stalin's most regulatory administration.

As Clark notes, "trying to determine whether Socialist Realism is or is not 'bad literature' is not... the most fruitful approach."<sup>5</sup> Much of it may very well have been, "bad literature." However, by studying how the era came to be, both how it was influenced by foreign concepts that were decidedly not Stalinist in nature and how Soviet society itself birthed ideas of similar non-conformity, and how, because of all this, distinctive deviations cropped up in Stalin-era literature, we might be better able to understand this era of literature. Further, we might understand how this literature functioned *beyond* Stalin and his dictatorship, and how art, despite hindrances, all too frequently finds a way to be. As the work of literary outsiders like Daniil Kharms demonstrates, the seeds of creativity and even dissent were strong in Stalin's Russia; though finding them in a sea of what Kharms called "literary trash"<sup>6</sup> might seem daunting, the fact is that this environment only makes it all the more apparent. More importantly, it makes it far more common than one might think.

However, before turning to the Stalin era and the 1930's, the essence of the 1920's must first be discussed, as must the nature and intentions of both the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) and the Writers' Union.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel, Third Edition: History as Ritual*, xi

<sup>6</sup> "The OBERIU Manifesto," in *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd: A Literary Discovery* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 1971), 194.

<sup>7</sup> RAPP was a writers union that existed in various forms throughout the 1920's, but which was not given official power and mandate until 1929. This period marks the beginning of strong government control in the arts and the end of the liberalization of the creative sector that had occurred during the NEP in the 1920's. It would be dissolved in 1932 as the new, official "Writer's Union" was established.

### **Fellow Travelers and Cultural Radicals: The 1920s**

Who are we? And why do we exist? We, the Oberiuty, are honest workers in art. We are poets of a new world view and of a new art. We are not only creators of a poetic language, but also founders of a new feeling for life and its objects. Our will to create is universal. It spans all genres of art and penetrates life, grasping it from all sides.<sup>8</sup>

-The Oberiu Manifesto, 1928

The Oberiu was just one of the many avant-garde groups that flourished in the Soviet Union during the NEP in the 1920s, forming at the very end of a movement that was in many ways one of the most varied and inventive of its time. This was a decade that was as officially distant from the required orthodoxy of the 1930s as possible. James von Geldern considers it a decade of a “rich literary heterodoxy;”<sup>9</sup> indeed, it offered an outburst of artistic ideas and movements. Many of the artists believed themselves to be “cultural radicals” and they “contended that the aesthetic revolution of which they were the avant-garde was a necessary companion or even precondition of the political revolution.”<sup>10</sup> Even Max Hayward, writing in 1968 and himself rather dismissive of the artistic quality of much of the literature produced in the Soviet Union, notes that this period was marked by a “genuineness” and relative freedom when compared to the 1930s and beyond. The 1920s were characterized by officially allowed “fellow-travellers,”

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<sup>8</sup> “The Oberiu Manifesto,” *Russia’s Lost Literature of the Absurd: A Literary Discovery* ed. George Gibian, 19.

<sup>9</sup> James von Geldern, “Proletarian Writers.” *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*. <http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=subject&SubjectID=1929prolet&Year=1929>.

<sup>10</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 43.

artists functioning on behalf of their own whims and expressing themselves in parallel with the revolution of the time rather than underneath that same revolution.<sup>11</sup>

Hayward also admits that some of the attitudes of the 1920s did, despite the efforts of RAPP, follow through into the early 1930s.<sup>12</sup> Even this hard-to-sway critic concedes that Stalin's most vicious institution was incapable of completely replacing self-expression with one-dimensional party-expression. That the avant-garde of the 1920s never completely died, and that the notion of aestheticism and innovation never completely drained away with it, is important in putting the 1930s in perspective. Seismic cultural shifts do not simply happen. Just as in science, where matter never disappears but instead finds itself rearranged and transformed, artistic ideas once developed and expressed within the public sphere never really disappear; rather, they mutate and shift, finding new ways to express themselves. Such is the nature of art, and the case of art in the Soviet Union is no different.

### **RAPP and the Transformation**

As a rule, Senya did not discuss politics in general conversation, except to make an occasional remark. But he did talk to me alone at times, and some of the things he said have remained in my mind. One was a statement that in the recently published second edition of Lenin's Collected Works, passages had been omitted or altered to suit the aims of those presently in power. Another concerned the role of the controlled press in fitting people's minds into a single mold. I listened and said nothing, filing away in my mind what I probably regarded as a quirky opinion.<sup>13</sup>

-Mary Leder

"For the Hegemony of Proletarian Literature! Liquidate Backwardness!"<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Hayward, "Themes and Variations in Soviet Literature," in *Writers in Russia: 1917 - 1978*, 120.

<sup>12</sup> Max Hayward, "Themes and Variations in Soviet Literature," in *Writers in Russia: 1917 - 1978*, 120.

<sup>13</sup> Mary M. Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 57.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in James von Geldern, "Proletarian Writers."

<http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=subject&SubjectID=1929prolet&Year=1929>.

## -RAPP Slogan

Nicholas Luker describes what RAPP sought to assert as, “the hegemony of proletarian literature.” He states that RAPP did this by granting itself “powers that were virtually dictatorial.”<sup>15</sup> RAPP was an organization that purposefully sought to destroy the variety of literary movements functioning in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Further, as James von Geldern asserts, it sought to “root out class-alien culture” and “create new art forms in its place.” These “new forms” included a culture of literature that was uniformly readable by anyone and that focused on the “unvarnished reality”<sup>16</sup> of the worker. RAPP did this by idealizing Soviet beliefs and emphasizing an optimism it deemed natural to a Soviet system that was surely destined for great things. This goal of simplification, combined with the functional power granted to RAPP in 1929, turned the organization into a monster that asserted its hegemony forcefully and swiftly during its brief implementation. During its reign, writers were persecuted and kept from publishing; many careers ended and others went into hibernation.<sup>17</sup> Because of this “campaign of intimidation,”<sup>18</sup> RAPP is frequently credited with killing the avant-garde spirit of the 1920s, ushering in the state control of uniform literature that was wholly accessible to the point of total shallowness, and that focused on ideological content to the point of petrification.

In fact, RAPP was so extreme that the public and official reasoning for its dissolution in 1932 was that literature was “becoming too narrow” and that RAPP and its

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<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Luker, “Introduction” in *An Anthology of the Classics of Socialist Realism* (Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishers, 1988), 15.

<sup>16</sup> James von Geldern, “Proletarian Writers.”

<sup>17</sup> James von Geldern, “Proletarian Writers.”

<sup>18</sup> Max Hayward, “Russian Literature in the Soviet Period, 1917--1975,” in *Writers in Russia: 1917 – 1978*, 63.

sister organizations were, “hampering the serious development of artistic creation.”<sup>19</sup> The pressure to close was in part because, as von Geldern points out, “RAPP had served its purpose, subordinating literary life to political control.”<sup>20</sup> It was also due to pressure from the Soviet literary establishment, which was often made up of victims of RAPP. Maksim Gorky, at the time one of Soviet literature’s “prodigal sons,” wrote to F.V. Gladkov, RAPP author, that he could “never be completely with” the repressive RAPP, or with any organization willing to “convert class psychology into a caste psychology.”<sup>21</sup> In this disdain for the methods of RAPP, Gorky was not alone. Many writers maintained that they could or would not write for RAPP, and its dissolution was, in this way, a cause for celebration. The literary establishment had seemingly survived this wave of terror. However, as the Writers’ Union, which took the place of RAPP and all of its sister unions,<sup>22</sup> matured, the sad fact became apparent that the dissolution of RAPP had in no way freed the writers of the Soviet Union. Clear to these writers was the fact that the cause of the new Writers Union’s was not to liberate Soviet literature, as had been advertised and believed, but simply to regulate it better and more efficiently than RAPP. Whereas RAPP had to coexist with other, less powerful, writers unions, the new Writers’ Union essentially consolidated power into one body. Instead of empowering the writers, it quickly became a more easily manipulated tool of the state, due largely to its singular

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<sup>19</sup> Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), “Decree on the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organizations.” *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, April 23, 1932.

<sup>20</sup> James von Geldern, “Proletarian Writers.”

<http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=subject&SubjectID=1929prolet&Year=1929>

<sup>21</sup> Maksim Gorky, To F.V. Gladkov” in *Maksim Gorky: Selected Letters*, ed. Andrew Barrat, Barry P. Scherr (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 274-275.

<sup>22</sup> To avoid confusion, it should be noted that although RAPP had incredible official powers, it also technically existed alongside other, less powerful unions. This is due to the fact that it was born of the 1920s, wherein many different schools of writing, each with their own ideologies and styles, coexisted. Of these, RAPP simply became the most powerful.

nature. Despite this, the fighting spirit displayed by Gorky, who would even go on to become the Writers' Union's chairman in its early years, remained. Though it might appear as if Gorky "sold out" his ideals for a position of power, he was actually part of a much larger group that sought to liberalize the system from within; really, within the Soviet system, writers like Gorky had no choice but to do so. Even if the Writer's Union was not what they had hoped it would be, those that stayed knew that to simply stop writing and working would only further drive uniformity into Soviet culture so they did what could be done within the circumstances.

Recalling Max Hayward's admission that elements of the avant-garde survived RAPP,<sup>23</sup> it must be noted that the pursuit of homogeneity was never totally achieved. The spirit of functioning within their means, a lesson first taught to Soviet writers during RAPP, continued to exist. Further accounts like American immigrant to the Soviet Union, Mary Leder's recollection of reading Mark Twain, Upton Sinclair, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Kuprin, Dostoevsky or even watching Harry Lloyd comedies in the local movie theater<sup>24</sup> indicates that non-Soviet ideologies were present even in officially sponsored Soviet forums. A very clear attitude can be gleaned from this: despite official policies, certain ideas and literatures were still functioning and in distribution, whether in public movie theaters or close literary circles. Though there was certainly oppression of opposing viewpoints, it was never total, and very often, as with Leder's account, it did not even seek totality in the 1930s. Still, coming out of the openness of the 20s, living within the confines of RAPP's early 1930s rule must have been a harsh adjustment. Even if

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<sup>23</sup> Max Hayward, "Themes and Variations in Soviet Literature, 1917-1967," in *Writers in Russia: 1917 - 1978*, 120.

<sup>24</sup> Mary M. Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 49-50.



exceptional ideas existed, people were being forced to exchange them in new ways particular to a controlled society.

### **The Writers' Union and the 1930's**

The key to the success of Soviet literature is to be sought for in the success of socialist construction. Its growth is an expression of the successes and achievements of our socialist system. Our literature is the youngest of all literatures of all peoples and countries. And at the same time it is the richest in ideas, the most advanced and the most revolutionary literature.

-Andrei Zhdanov, 1934<sup>25</sup>

When the First Congress of Soviet Writers convened in 1934, two years after the dissolution of RAPP, it was marked by an optimism and hope that the dark days of RAPP were now far behind. Maksim Gorky, chair of the Congress, had himself been critical of RAPP and the Soviet Union's handling of literature, and had only just returned from an extended stay abroad in Italy, where he felt he had greater freedom in his writing. James von Geldern also notes that the writers invited to speak at the Congress:

represented the best and most independent writers in Russia, one of many encouraging signs at the congress. After years of consigning literature to the rule of party hacks and no-talent 'worker-writers,' the Soviet state, it seemed, had returned the great tradition of Russian letters to the professionals.<sup>26</sup>

In this light, it is key that in his address to the Congress, Gorky specifically notes that, "The idea, of course, is not to restrict individual creation, but to furnish it with the widest

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<sup>25</sup> Andrei Zhdanov, "Soviet Literature – The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature," *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*. August, 1934.

<sup>26</sup> James von Geldern, "The First Congress of Soviet Writers." <http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=subject&SubjectID=1934writers&Year=1934>

means of continued powerful development.”<sup>27</sup> Truly, the Writers’ Congress was very much meant to be a clearing of the air, not a reincarnation of RAPP. The fact that its reign offered up Socialist Realism and the orthodoxy therein complicates this matter and indicates the complex nature of the Writers’ Union and its interaction with the Soviet literary world.

The goals of Socialist Realism were often very explicitly defined. In his speech to the first Congress, Gorky again laid out very specific goals:

Life, as asserted by socialist realism, is deeds, creativeness, the aim of which is the uninterrupted development of the priceless individual faculties of man, with a view to his victory over the forces of nature, for the sake of his health and longevity, for the supreme joy of living on an earth which, in conformity with the steady growth of his requirements, he wishes to mould throughout into a beautiful dwelling place for mankind, united into a single family...<sup>28</sup>

In summary, the intentional and public goal of the Writers Union was to foster a literature that espoused Soviet ideals of man’s ongoing and assured heroic victory over nature, the inevitability of communist utopia, and to assert its ideological purpose to the real world. This final point is incredibly important. Socialist Realism, in theory, was meant to drive the Soviet population in a tangible way, a way that Stalin, who, as Max Hayward pointed out, was no great fan of intellectualism or even literature for its own sake.<sup>29</sup> In theory, it was a literature meant to please those in power. All of this is important, largely because of the way this goal clashes with that other main sentiment of the Congress – that of a newfound openness and individuality in literature.

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<sup>27</sup> Maksim Gorky, “Soviet Literature (Speech at The First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers,” August, 1934.

<sup>28</sup> Maksim Gorky, “Soviet Literature (Speech at The First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers,” August, 1934.

<sup>29</sup> Max Hayward, “Themes and Variations in Soviet Literature, 1917-1967,” in *Writers in Russia: 1917 – 1978*, 120.

Gorky himself was no fan of writing merely for others, as he expressed in a letter to Stalin in 1934 condemning writers who he felt held no artistic merit. In this letter he called these writers a, “group [that] lacks intellectual vigour and displays extreme ignorance regarding the past and present of literature.”<sup>30</sup> Further, this expresses Gorky’s view that, no matter its revolutionary aspirations, Soviet literature had to participate in a culture and tradition of literature. To Gorky, Socialist Realism could never fully insulate or sterilize itself from outside influences and traditions without totally stripping itself of value. This tension, again, would truly define Socialist Realism as an art form. It was a form of literature that would define itself from working within confines and restraints, and by expressing itself through patterns. That even Maksim Gorky, who had been so against RAPP, was willing to function inside this system underlines the necessity of adaptation and explains why writers had to find new ways to express themselves from within Stalinism. Clearly, Gorky was not a fan of the status quo. However, so entrenched was the Stalinist state that there was no way to change it but from within. Such was the predicament of nearly all creative writers in Stalin’s Soviet Union; those who remained simply saw themselves as continuing the fight on new grounds, not as collaborators as has been misconstrued.

One of the main restrictive tenants of Socialist Realism was an adherence to the “Master Plot.” In the Stalinist USSR, the writer was not, as Katerina Clark states, “the creator of original tales.” Instead, as she points out, the writer functioned as a kind of transcriber of party lore and myth, a job much like that of religious inscribers and painters from the Middle Ages. Though having to adhere to an already told story seems like the

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<sup>30</sup> Maksim Gorky, “To I.V. Stalin” in *Maksim Gorky: Selected Letters*, 351.

most restrictive of all measures that could be leveled against a writer, Clark argues that even within these restrictions, “the author’s creativity is not completely frustrated.”<sup>31</sup>

This is clear when she writes:

The business of writing novels soon became comparable to the procedure followed by medieval icon painters. Just as the icon painter looked to his original to find the correct angle for a particular saint’s hands, the correct colors for a given theme, and so on, so the Soviet novelist could copy the gestures, facial expressions, actions, symbols, etc., used in the various canonical texts.<sup>32</sup>

Through the very act of finding new and better ways to express entrenched ideas and frame the Master Plot, a writer was able to exercise an element of control and autonomy. It is for this reason that some Socialist Realist novels that are better than others and more readable from a Western perspective. It is also, therefore, a large part of the reason why Socialist Realism was not, as other critics have said, always “bad literature” because of its adherence to this framework.

This situation may not have been what writers were hoping for in 1934, but it was the situation that they found themselves in. Still, the element of hope that was so present at the first Congress persisted, and within the confines of official Soviet literature, talented writers still tried to produce the best works they could within the allowance of control they were given. Artists, at heart, are always compelled to express, even in a situation that limits their means of doing so. It was inevitable that many would try to put their stamp on their work and make it their own. Though the writers that Gorky dismissed in his letter to Stalin persisted in their writing, so too did those writers that he invited to speak at the first Congress. These were writers who he defined by their individuality and artistic ingenuity, and who he trusted to behave responsibly within their station. For this

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<sup>31</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 4.

<sup>32</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 160.

reason, it is difficult to dismiss the Writer's Union as comprised entirely of statisticians rather than artists. Soviet literary culture, as with any culture, should never be entirely defined by a majority or controlling group. To dismiss the remainder is to dismiss the exceptional, and this is certainly not an option.

Still, it is in looking beyond Socialist Realism that we can find the most extreme examples of artistic creativity in Stalin's Soviet Union. Those working outside of the system were not always recognized by it and were almost always unknown to the general population, but they still represent an integral part of the general Soviet literary scene, if not the official one. Though they were outsiders, they still very often interacted with those inside the system. In Soviet society, the black markets and the official markets were never entirely separate from each other, and the way in which Soviet outsider artists made themselves known and interacted with the state is demonstrative of this. Specifically, Soviet Absurdism and members of the OBERIU were examples of such artists who never compromised and still managed to exchange ideas with high-level members of the Soviet establishment. In the OBERIU we find a new depth of Soviet literary culture that rarely gains attention and that powerfully demonstrates the potential of the individual artist in Stalinist society.

### **The OBERIU's Literature of the Absurd and the Creative Extreme**

*Once I saw a fight between a fly and a bug. It was so terrible I ran out into the street and ran God knows where.*<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Daniil Kharms, quoted in George Gibian, "Introduction," in *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd: A Literary Discovery*, 3

Daniil Kharms wrote this in 1939, a year after the official announcement that the Great Terror was to be reigned in,<sup>34</sup> but less than two years before his arrest for producing “anti-Soviet” children’s literature in 1941.<sup>35</sup> He died in prison months after his arrest.<sup>36</sup> In his life, Kharms was a boisterous writer of explosively imaginative poetry, prose, and theater throughout the late 1920s and entirety of the 1930s. He frequently lamented his works’ limited exposure to the public eye<sup>37</sup> yet embraced his outsider status, pushing the absurdity of his art and personal character to the extreme. He was an active participant in the Soviet Union’s art scene both before and after RAPP and the establishment of the Writers’ Union. He, together with the rest of the art collective of which he was part, which called itself the Oberiu, a play on the Russian for “The Association for Real Art,”<sup>38</sup> represented one of the last bastions of total creative agency in Stalin’s USSR. Though this group would officially disband in the early 1930s, they would continue to collaborate and function as individual artists directly inspired by the outlandish goals of the Oberiu collective. Again, Stalinist culture made official organization impossible, and again, it simply forced artists to create new modes of communication through non-official channels. The Oberiu never really disappeared; it simply reformed and continued in a new way.

The work of Daniil Kharms and his peers was as far from the restrictions applied by official bodies as possible. As a person, Kharms was at the forefront of this rebellion, known throughout intellectual circles for his outlandish personality and feats. For example,

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<sup>34</sup> Plenum of the CC of the VKP(B), “On the Mistakes of Party Organizations in Excluding Communists from the Party, on the Formal and Bureaucratic Attitude to the Appeals of Persons excluding from the VKP(B) and on Measures for Removing these Shortcomings,” January 19, 1938

<sup>35</sup> European Graduate School. “Daniil Kharms – Biography.” Last modified Oct 11, 2011, <http://www.egs.edu/library/daniil-kharms/biography/>.

<sup>36</sup> George Gibian, “Introduction,” in *Russia’s Lost Literature of the Absurd: A Literary Discovery*, 3.

<sup>37</sup> Daniil Kharms, quoted in George Gibian, “Introduction,” in *Russia’s Lost Literature of the Absurd: A Literary Discovery*, 19.

<sup>38</sup> “The Oberiu Manifesto,” in *Russia’s Lost Literature of the Absurd: A Literary Discovery* Ed. George Gibian, 19.

he was known to act out performance art pieces wherein he would read Gogol's *Nevsky Prospekt* lying down on an armoire, dressed as Sherlock Holmes. Another documented instance involved Kharms walking toward Nevskii Prospekt in his bedroom slippers, an enormous cross hanging on his naked chest, carrying a butterfly net.<sup>39</sup> His contemporary and close friend, Alexander Vvedenskii, once said, "Kharms is art,"<sup>40</sup> and indeed, his very goal in life seemed to be to rattle the ordinary and to weave artistry out of mundane scenes of Soviet public life both through his art and his persona. The Oberiu was not simply meant to be a collective of artists making absurd art, but rather, a collective of absurd artists making art. Performances and artists were public, with the individualistic nature of these artists at the forefront. Through this, the idea of outrageous *people* was just as important as outrageous *art*. In a society that sought, above all, the conformation of its people, this was a bold statement.

Still, the writings of Oberiu members were certainly never secondary to the artists' personas. Kharms' writing, specifically, covered a range of absurdist topics and subjects, all equally fantastic. Some examples include: a cast of a play who cannot stop vomiting; a description of a man who does not physically exist; a crowd who lynches a man simply because the man they originally wanted to lynch escaped; a porcupine who cries, "Cock-a-doodle-doo"; a man who leaves his home one night and never comes back; two men who meet and "that's about all"; a man who eats too many ground peas and dies – followed by a man who "finds out about it and died too" – and by a series of other people dying in no discernable pattern; the eternal torment of a man who only feels tired when his eyes are open; and countless other black humored fables and unhinged acts of expression. His plays

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<sup>39</sup> Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, *Laughter in the Void: An Introduction to the writings of Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedenskii* (Wiener Slawistischer Almanach, 1982), 6.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, *Laughter in the Void*, 8.

were comic and fantastic, deeply dark and very purposefully “realistic.”<sup>41</sup> They were, in all, as far from the prescribed literature of their time as possible. Still, in his parable of the fly and the bug, as well as the summaries of the texts mentioned, one sees the way in which his seemingly unhinged work addressed Soviet culture head on. Indeed, literary historian George Gibian, one of the first and only people to write with a focus on the Oberiu, notes:

Kharms and Vvedensky... were satirizing and parodying the monstrosities and absurdities of a special set of circumstances, of their own age, of Soviet Russia and the First Five-Year Plan and the middle 1930's. Hundreds of thousands of people were being arrested, ostensibly for the purpose of creating a new, classless, perfect society. The Leningrad black humorists produced works full of violence. They picked grotesque examples of characters who failed to react sympathetically to suffering taking place before their eyes. Their works are a comment on the grimness of life in all ages, on the lack of contact and human communication. But in addition to their timeless, universal relevance, the writings make specific comments on the concrete social and political (and hence psychological) conditions prevalent in Soviet Russia at a particular historical moment.<sup>42</sup>

Given the fact that this was one of the first historical studies of the group whose members were, at the time, mostly known for their children's stories, this is a powerful statement and a testament to the sheer audacity and strength of the Oberiu's work. Themes of fear, insane reasoning, and morality, mass panic, death, and the very dirtiest parts of the human person all come into play and make comment on society and people. These themes are inescapable aspects of Kharms' work and are in no way dismissable. In a 2007 essay for the *New York Times*, George Saunders begins by noting that Kharms was just beginning to gain recognition outside of his own moment, a testament to how criminally underexplored Kharms' writing has been even in modern times. Saunders notes that Kharms' work is, at its very core, suspicious of the act of storytelling itself.<sup>43</sup> In this way, Kharms' work is fundamentally, elementally opposed to the act of storytelling and mythmaking that Soviet

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<sup>41</sup> George Gibian, "Introduction," in *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd: A Literary Discovery*.

<sup>42</sup> George Gibian, "Introduction," in *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd: A Literary Discovery*, 28-29.

<sup>43</sup> George Saunders, "Soviet Deadpan", *New York Times*, December 9, 2007, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/09/books/review/Saunders-t.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all&oref=slogin](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/09/books/review/Saunders-t.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all&oref=slogin).



society and Socialist Realism were undertaking. It is, at its deepest core, completely out of place in official Soviet society. Still, as non-conformist and flat out different as it is, Kharms' work gives us a remarkable view into Soviet culture, expressed in a way that was totally unique. And still, it must be that Kharms was not so alone in Soviet society; so dedicated were the group of people who preserved his works, and so high up were some of his closest friends. This alone suggests that Soviet society was very different in reality than it was in officialdom, and that our interpretations of it might very well be skewed by this fact.

Kharms was not alone in his status and goals. He operated as part of the broader Oberiu, whose members and friends held varying levels of influence in Soviet society.<sup>44</sup> Together, they represented a seemingly impossible absurdist left field in Stalin's Soviet Russia, and though most members of the Oberiu never reached mass levels of recognition and only sparingly saw their most serious work published, they reached people and the artistic community through a variety of guerrilla means. George Gibian describes their work as taking a multitude of forms, including, "readings, literary evenings, the circulation of manuscripts among friends, performances of plays, and programs of mixed skits, dramatic scenes, poetry readings, and lectures." Their shows were often spontaneous. Kharms himself was known by an incident in which he climbed on the roof of an official Soviet government building and yelled down to the people below that they should come to a show that night. They operated without a major outlet or publisher, but they still reached people and artists. Truly, as a movement, it was, "ephemeral, changeable, multiform."<sup>45</sup>

Further, it was very much a public movement, one meant to interact and function within the

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<sup>44</sup> Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, *Laughter in the Void: An Introduction to the writings of Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedenskii* (Wiener Slawistischer Almanach, 1982), 10-24.

<sup>45</sup> George Gibian, "Introduction," in *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd: A Literary Discovery*, 8,10.

greater Soviet society. This fact further suggests that Soviet society and the Oberiu were not so far apart or unbridgeable as might be assumed.

Friends of the Oberiu stretched far beyond the group's modest audience. As a child, Kharms' father shared stories with Leo Tolstoy. When embarking on his own artistic career, Kharms worked with the painter Kasimir Malevich, director of the Institute of Artistic Culture. While the Oberiu was at this point fully formed, it was up to other relatively famous figures such as painter Pavel Nikolaevich Filonov, who was largely unknown in the West but extremely influential within the Soviet Union, and imaginative architect Vladimir Tatlin, to come in and out of the group as they did. Theater director Igor Terentev, famous for his outlandish production of Gogol's *Inspector General*, was a member as well.<sup>46</sup> Even beyond this, names of poets and artists crop up in writings on the Oberiu that indicate the reach of the group and the community they were involved in. Radix, an experimental theatre group, ballerina Militsa Popova, professional magician "by the name of Pastukhov", comic poet Kikolai Oleinikov, filmmaker Klementii Mints, composer Dmitri Shostakovich, and children's writer Samuil Marshak can all be included in an incomplete list of the Oberiu's contemporaries, admirers, and members.<sup>47</sup> Clearly, the Oberiu were not alone in Soviet society. In fact, they were remarkably functional within the Soviet artistic community, despite a lack of official publication or recognition. They very purposefully carried on the torch from the 1920s, their absurdisms representing the aesthetic revolution and extremism that had defined the decade.

Even after their forced dissolution in 1930, members of the Oberiu still existed and published work. However, unlike in the late 1920s, their work was mostly published in the

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<sup>46</sup> George Gibian, "Introduction," in *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd: A Literary Discovery*, 12, 24.

<sup>47</sup> Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, *Laughter in the Void: An Introduction to the writings of Daniil Kharms and Alexander Vvedenskii* (Wiener Slawistischer Almanach, 1982), 10-19.

form of children's literature. Still, the spirit remained. The example of the cock-a-doodling porcupine was, in fact, taken from a Kharms children's story. Further, Kharms' close friend and co-leader of the Oberiu movement, Alexander Vvedensky, published roughly sixty children's books between 1928 and 1940. These stories, though sometimes formulaic or propagandistic, are marked by, as Gibian notes, the same humor, absurdity, darkness, and even, at times, a similar pursuit of social critique.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, the Oberiu thrived in this environment; Gibian in fact found that it was one of the only places he ever found mention of the Oberiu at all within official Soviet publications.<sup>49</sup> Of note in regard to this, is the fact that the Oberiu were not alone in this transformation. Russian Literary Historian and critic Max Hayward noted in 1961 that other writers, "sought refuge in translation and writing for children."<sup>50</sup> Though Hayward sees this as the destruction of their craft, the fact remains that these artists found new outlets for their work and - in the case of the Oberiu - did so while pushing their own creative agenda. Further, these stories provided essential incomes and, as is clear in the parable of the fly, written in 1939 and told at the beginning of this section, these writers often used these funds to continue writing non-children's works.

What this instance represents is a necessary transformation in mode, from public plays and adult stories to children's literature, which allowed the Oberiu to express their purposeful absurdity publicly within their societal constraints. In fact, if anything, the popularity of their children's stories exposed a generation of Soviet citizens to a vein of humor and ridiculousness that they would not have found anywhere else. Rather than diminishing their craft, it may very well have been their finest, most subversive hour. They

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<sup>48</sup> George Gibian, "Introduction," in *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd: A Literary Discovery*, 22-23.

<sup>49</sup> George Gibian, "Introduction," in *Russia's Lost Literature of the Absurd: A Literary Discovery*, 26.

<sup>50</sup> Max Hayward, "Dissonant Voices in Soviet Literature," in *Writers in Russia: 1917 - 1978* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1983), 100.

were now not only expressing a kind of dissent in absurdity, but were doing so through official channels and to a mass audience that they might never have reached otherwise. They elevated their craft out of the black market, away from guerilla tactics such as flash productions of their plays and poetry readings, and into officialdom – finding a way to function within institutionalism and yet still well outside of the “Master Plot.” These writers were no “icon painters,” these were clearly original individuals hell-bent on maintaining their individuality. In this way, the Oberiu are one of the most outstanding examples of exceptional and individualist Soviet literature in their time. However, they also represent only one of the ways in which exceptional thought and literature found life in Stalin’s Russia, only one of the many ways in which orthodoxy was defied and ideas were realized.

### **The Dismemberment of the Heroic Male**

There was once a red-haired man who had no eyes and no ears. He also had no hair, so he was called red-haired only in a manner of speaking. He wasn’t able to talk, because he didn’t have a mouth. He had no nose, either. He didn’t even have any arms or legs. He also didn’t have a stomach, and he didn’t have a back, and he didn’t have a spine, and he also didn’t have any other insides. He didn’t have anything. So it’s hard to understand whom we’re talking about. So we’d better not talk about him any more.

-Daniil Kharms, “Blue Notebook No. 10”<sup>51</sup>

Most other writers never reached the same extremes of the Oberiu, and given Kharms’ eventual death, their reasoning doesn’t seem particularly wrong. These other writers worked less flamboyantly, yet still managed to subvert mores and institutions of Stalinism. One of the ways that writers managed to undercut Stalinist ideology was

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<sup>51</sup> Daniil Kharms, “Blue Notebook No. 10,” in *Russia’s Lost Literature of the Absurd: A Literary Discovery* Ed. George Gibian, 53.

through undermining the male figure, which was central to the system and to Stalin's very image. Every time this happened, whether purposefully or because a writer unconsciously dipped into the ideological "black market" and the ideas therein, it represents an important and meaningful deviation from the norm. For this reason, it is important to mark an instance of each of these occurrences, and to study how they subverted the traditional; it is this subversion that is important in understanding Soviet and Stalinist literary culture.

The 1920s had been years of what Beth Holmgren called, "definite, if isolated, achievements for women" and of a general sense of progress in gender issues. However, Stalinism, RAPP, and the Writers' Union swept all of that away, quickly establishing the "twentieth century Russian culture" that would remain "a patriarchal establishment well into the post-Stalin era."<sup>52</sup> This culture, one that emphasized the importance of maleness both as the subject of its literature and as the author, largely cast femininity aside as a tenet of Stalinist culture. The official nature of Stalinist literature as "male" makes picking its male characters apart, as Kharms hyper-overtly does in the story above, so relevant to understanding how subversive acts functioned in Stalin's USSR. In other cases, "the dismemberment" of the Soviet male could be characterized through his characterization. By making male characters that normally occupied "heroic" roles flawed, writers were essentially destroying the "heroic male figure" that was a mainstay of Socialist Realism and that was mandated by Soviet literature.

Further, there is the significance of manhood and associated heroism in Stalin's USSR as a reflection of Stalin's public relationship to the concept of manhood. Stalin very

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<sup>52</sup> Beth Holmgren, "For the Good of the Cause: Russian Women's Autobiography in the Twentieth Century" in *Women Writers in Russian Literature* Ed. Toby W. Clyman, Diana Greene (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1994), 136.

much figured himself as the kind of “big man performing amazing feats” that Katerina Clark describes in her work. This character, very much meant to define the expectations of the male in Soviet society, was both a mentor figure and a heroic individual, using his personal greatness to further the socialist cause. The hero of Socialist Realism, the guiding figure, was now, “not Stalin himself but a sort of Stalin-to-scale, a figure with Stalin’s significance but proportionate to the small world in which the action takes place.”<sup>53</sup>

Strength in masculinity was now a necessary component of the Soviet scripture. This can even be seen in female characters who were often noticeably guided by paternal, male, “Stalin-to-scale” characters and who eventually conformed to the patriarchal ideology. Further, any attack on the Stalin-figure was both an attack on the system and institutions of Stalinism and also on the man himself. By requiring his insinuated presence in every text, Stalin opened himself up for all kinds of subtle yet important acts of demystification.

The specific act that this section will focus on is Pyotr Andreyevich Pavlenko’s starkly propagandistic 1937 novel *In The East*, which was widely published in English as *Red Planes Fly East*. While the study, evaluation, and subversion of the heroic male figure were certainly taking place in other circles, as noted in the Oberiu quote presented in the beginning, it is necessary to study how subversive acts were taking place from within the very core of the Stalinist literary establishment. *In the East* marks an important aspect of Stalinist literary culture: in the self destructive world of The Purges, in which so much of the population became unwitting enemies, literary culture was no exception. Further, the potential subversion of a culture as rigid as Stalinism is not necessarily made toothless by the fact that it came from within the inner circle. *In the East*, in fact, offers a fairly

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<sup>53</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel, Third Edition: History as Ritual*, 4, 132.

powerful deconstruction of the Stalinist establishment and even of Stalin himself. That it was written by one of the most prolific writers of the Stalinist era only proves how completely necessary and unavoidable subversion and critique were in Stalinist culture. Further, that *In the East*, a genuinely epic novel in scope that takes place across continents and casts of characters, would be one of Pavlenko's biggest flops, critically ravaged by reviewers who found flaws in its "composition," should be indicative of how very real many felt its threat was. Though Pavlenko was forgiven and would go on to write a great number of popular and well appraised books, *In the East* represents a moment in which he, like many of his peers, crossed a line with his work by deconstructing a trope of Socialist Realism and turning it in a new direction. Just as the primary economic market would not have been able to function without the secondary, writers in the Soviet Union in the 1930s were incapable of writing a book containing *only* the themes, characters, and relationships required of them by Socialist Realism. Somehow, somewhere, disparate ideas were seeping in. As is the case with *In the East*, it might well be that these ideas offered a rather powerful critique in their subtext.

*In the East* offers this examination in its unorthodox version of the mentor-mentee relationship. Where a strong, viable Stalin stand-in should be, it offers instead a much weaker, thematically incestuous character by the name of "Schlegel." Schlegel not only never changes as he develops the female mentee character, Olga, but also displays what Clark notes are, "elements of sexual attraction."<sup>54</sup> In fact, going beyond Clark's brief look at the work, it should be noted that this attraction is actually one of the main themes of the book, rather than subtext or an underlying element. Further, the tension between Schlegel's

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<sup>54</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel, Third Edition: History as Ritual*, 4, 130.

role as an elder father figure and his sexual attraction to Olga are actually frequently and directly touched upon, presenting a problem that exists well above the subtext of the novel. For example, in his very first meeting with Olga, Schlegel notices her face, which he finds “strangely attractive.” This rumination then segues awkwardly into Schlegel finding out that he is quite familiar with Olga’s mother, so much so that his traveling companion and boyhood friend is even able to recall the details of her birth.<sup>55</sup> His exchange with Schlegel underlines the awkwardness of this relationship. He first discovers Olga’s identity by asking her if she is “little Olga,” a name based on childhood, and then repeats this process of infantilizing her by proclaiming to Schlegel, “It’s Varvara’s daughter! That’s who she is. Look what a neat young lady little Olga has grown into!”<sup>56</sup> In this way, Schlegel, whose relationship with Olga becomes an important facet of the story, is cemented, even at this very early point, to exist as a character caught between two roles: that of the elder father figure and that of the lover. That he is eventually unable to fulfill either of those roles demonstrates how broken and awkward the position that Stalin had created for himself was.

In fact, by the end of the book, Schlegel’s love for Olga is a running theme, including instances of him reminiscing over his feelings towards her. At the point when he and Olga are reunited after years of being apart after Olga’s marriage to another man, she notes that “he had developed a fatherly quality,” that though he still loves her, it is now with “the distant love of an old kinsman.”<sup>57</sup> However, the fact of the matter is that this relationship is never totally resolved by Schlegel’s end. Schlegel himself reminisces about

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<sup>55</sup> Piotr Pavlenko, “Red Planes Fly East” Trans. Stephen Garry (New York: International Publishers 1938), 13-14.

<sup>56</sup> Piotr Pavlenko, “Red Planes Fly East,” 14.

<sup>57</sup> Piotr Pavlenko, “Red Planes Fly East,” 511.



the times in which he was in love with Olga<sup>58</sup> and their time together in the beginning of the novel; it is only Olga who convinces herself that this relationship is now an asexual one. This is a reality in which she can comfortably live, in which their relationship is not incestuous or pushing her beyond her marriage sexually, but a comfortably paternal one. Again, this concept of convincing oneself of a new reality is highly reminiscent of Stalinist culture. *In the East* expresses a recognition of the awkwardness of the Stalin-figure's position, a knowledge that the paradigm must be shifted in order for their relationship to function. That it also denies its male hero any kind of victory, and instead keeps him in the background of the story, also contorts and rebuilds the "heroic male figure" in a way that can certainly be construed as deconstructive of the heroic male myth.

Another important aspect of Olga and Schlegel's relationship is the fact that she undergoes a transformation of consciousness, something that, within Socialist Realism, was usually meant to happen at the influence of the heroic male figure, but instead occurs incredibly far away from Schlegel and very quickly after finally leaving his company. After heading to the taiga for research and then finding out that she will have to stay there for the winter, she experiences a dream which causes her to awake "like a newly born child. Her spirit... filled with audacity," and knowing that "no matter what happened, while she lived she would undertake only the heaviest task and carry it easily. Only thus did she desire to live."<sup>59</sup> In this moment, it is her isolation and searching of the self, not her mentor figure, which causes her to achieve consciousness. So by implication it is, "a book invisibly lying before her consciousness," not her Stalin-to-scale mentor, by which she comes into socialist politics. That is, she never needs a heroic male lead to guide her into socialism.

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<sup>58</sup> Piotr Pavlenko, "Red Planes Fly East," 343.

<sup>59</sup> Piotr Pavlenko, "Red Planes Fly East" Trans. Stephen Garry (New York: International Publishers 1938), 105-106.

This is incredibly important, due to the fact that the strong, heroic male lead was not only one of the main tenets of Socialist Realism, but also of Stalinism itself. Such works as Alexei Tolstoy's *Peter the Great* had presented this figure around the same time in which Stalin was publicly comparing the necessity of his rule to that of the Tsar Peter I.<sup>60</sup> The heroic male figure had, in 1938, long since perforated the realm of literature, existing even in Stalin's own rhetoric. Resurrecting other figures, such as the controversial Ivan the Terrible, who Stalin called a "great and wise ruler,"<sup>61</sup> represents this growth. In the Soviet Union during Stalin's time, heroes were meant to be like these men. They were not supposed to simply be mildly successful men, but heroic men. They were behemoths comparable to Tsars, not men who were indecisive and unsure of themselves. The critique of Sergei Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible* given by Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin's closest compatriot in the literary world, was that, "Ivan the Terrible of Eisenstein came out as a neurotic."<sup>62</sup> Stalin himself had many issues with the film's depiction of Ivan's "spiral into madness"<sup>63</sup> for the same reason: it undermined the heroic and made something dangerous out of what Stalinist rhetoric deemed necessary. Power could not be damning, strength could not be a weakness, and the mentor figure was never meant to fail his duties. It is by making Schlegel's relationship to his mentee figure flawed and conflicted, rather than ideal, that Pavlenko seriously undermines Stalinist culture.

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<sup>60</sup> James von Geldern, "Cult of Personality," *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, <http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=subject&SubjectID=1929prolet&Year=1929>.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph Stalin, "Discussion with Sergei Eisenstein on the film 'Ivan the Terrible,' February 1947," *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, <http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=article&ArticleID=1943ivan1&SubjectID=1943ivan&Year=1943>

<sup>62</sup> Joseph Stalin, "Discussion with Sergei Eisenstein on the film 'Ivan the Terrible,' February 1947," *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, <http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=article&ArticleID=1943ivan1&SubjectID=1943ivan&Year=1943>

<sup>63</sup> James von Geldern, "The Cult of Leadership," *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, <http://www.soviethistory.org/index.php?page=subject&SubjectID=1943ivan&Year=1943>

Though in most ways politically in line with the politics of the day, it is, again, the way in which Pavlenko undermines the Stalinist father figure that potentially makes his work subversive. So, though he was seemingly trying his best to create a book that aligned itself with the politics of the time and functioned as a useful piece of political propaganda for the regime, Pavlenko's failure posed a great number of questions regarding Stalin's relationship to his people. As Clark notes, it was critically ravaged by the Stalinist institution, largely on the basis of its deviation from the structure and expectations of the Socialist Realist norm. This was largely worded in terms of its "composition,"<sup>64</sup> but by implication, its failure in proper "composition" was really a failure to abide by the official structure. Just as a medieval icon painter might have been maligned for not painting his subjects according to tradition, this flaw in composition was really a violation of ideology. In truth, Pavlenko had inadvertently deconstructed Stalinist mythology. In this way, *In The East* subverted the form and etiquette demanded by the regime in a way that was publicly recognized by critics. This makes it artistically subversive, as well as very possibly, if unconsciously, politically subversive.

Both of these out-of-line elements, which could each only exist within the culture of the Stalin-era literary establishment, represent a kind of act of unconscious subversion. While writers like those in the Oberiu insulated transgressive concepts purposefully, other authors projected them without knowing. There is a complexity and variation in this relationship that very definitely functions outside of the simple positivity that was expected. Though the rest of the novel participates as it is expected to, detailing a spectacular and successful Soviet bombing raid of Japan and espousing the morality of

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<sup>64</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel, Third Edition: History as Ritual*, 4, 130.

Sovietism throughout, the subversive element represents a kind of unconscious anxiety that was not supposed to exist within the order and function of the Soviet novel. Further, it represents how easily subversion could take place. By demonstrating the ease with which a novel could turn against its ideological cause, the entirety of Socialist Realism opens itself up for critical examination under this light. Given the shifting political landscape and acceptable norms in Stalinist literary society, it seems reasonable to assert that this phenomenon could happen quite easily and as soon as a work of art or artist fell out of favor. It seems, as *In the East* demonstrates, that the very nature of the novel as an expressive art form caused itself to undermine Socialist Realism's ideological goal of presenting a united, "tendentious"<sup>65</sup> front. In this way, *In the East* situates the heroic male in a new light, demonstrating the way the trope could be hollow and truly insubstantial, concocted out of ideological rhetoric and its desired effect, rather than out of any kind of real literary pursuit.

The concept of personalizing and picking apart the male heroic figure in such a subtle and humanizing way can be seen in later works like Lidiia Chukovskaia's *To the Memory of Childhood*, wherein she personalizes and humanizes her own father, Kornei Chukovskii. Chukovskii was a notable author, literary critic, and defender of dissident writers in his own right. His work was more closely related to the Oberiu's than the Socialist Realists'. Perhaps this is why his work was called "balderdash"<sup>66</sup> by Nadezhda Krupskaya.<sup>67</sup> This notable history aside, Lidiia Chukovskaia's memoir represents a

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<sup>65</sup> Andrei Zhdanov, "Soviet Literature – The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature," August, 1934

<sup>66</sup> Peter Stupples, Review of Russian Poetry for Children by Elena Sokol, *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, 1985, <http://www.jstor.org/pss/40921279>

<sup>67</sup> Lenin's wife, deputy minister of education from 1929-1939

moment at which a prominent dissident<sup>68</sup> would pick up on the cues left by Pavlenko. If anything, the way in which *In the East* set a precedent for later dissidents should lend it some credibility as an act of subversion.

For these reasons, among others, and although many of its effects may have been unintentional, *In the East* represents an incredibly important critique of and moment in Soviet history. By picking him apart, by examining new aspects of his traditional character, *In the East* does to the heroic male figure what Daniil Kharms did to the “red-haired man” in his own, totally outside the establishment story: make him disappear. This, essentially, is the entitled act of the dismemberment of the Stalinist heroic male, and it was something that happened across the literary community, amongst both outsiders and insiders.

### **Foreign Literature and Soviet Ideas**

My understanding of the Western European world consisted only of reading works, translated into Russian, of the very greatest contemporary European writers. And there was still another source of my information on the West. These were personal discussions with those writers who had travelled to the West and returned to Moscow. The last source of my information on the West was the critical reviews of the philosophy and literature of the contemporary West in the Soviet magazine and books. These often cited quotes from esthetic and philosophical streams that were hostile to Communism, and these seditious citations seemed to me to be windows or breaths of air through which spring wind blows.

-Interview with unnamed Soviet  
Citizen and “Stage-Manager”  
displaced by World War II<sup>69</sup>

Given the scope of this paper, which has focused on the smallest and most niche literary societies (and how, in fact, they were neither particularly small nor particularly confined to a niche), as well as the undertakings of a Soviet “Order of Lenin” prize winning

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<sup>68</sup> Sibelan Forrester, “Lidiia Chukovskaia”

<http://www.swarthmore.edu/Humanities/sforres1/alum-readings/2003/chuk.html>

<sup>69</sup> Quoted from Soviet Interviewee in Maurice Friedberg, “Foreign Authors and Soviet Readers” *Russian Review* Vol. 13, No. 4 (Oct., 1954), 268

writer and determined statist Pyotr Pavlenko (whose works proved to be ill defined by their own category as well), it seems vital to address one of the other great literary categories in the Soviet Union: foreign and pre-revolutionary literature. It was a category that permeated popular society and that presents one of the most common ways in which the average literary consumer was able to absorb ideas born outside the Stalinist establishment. Given the very narrow definition of what it was acceptable to write in Stalin's USSR, much of the foreign literature that saw continued publication during his rule fell outside of the ideologically acceptable. As such, many of these texts included prefaces emphasizing either their historical usefulness or the way in which their contents actually foreshadowed Bolshevism or translations better fitting the Stalinist cause.<sup>70</sup> It is in this way, for example, that "Tolstoy, Shakespeare and Molière were revolutionaries and forerunners of the Bolsheviks."<sup>71</sup> However, the fact remains that these authors were published, translated, and were quite often very popular. Further, many Soviet citizens were well aware of the fact that they fell outside of Stalinist ideology, with many seeking out foreign publications for exactly this reason.<sup>72</sup> In this way, these publications represent an influx of very un-Soviet ideas being shared within the Soviet Union – a rather remarkable counterpoint the concept of Stalin's total ideological lockdown.

Even in 1961, when it was much easier to dismiss "Soviet officials and intellectuals" who pointed "with pride to the great volume of translations of foreign authors

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<sup>70</sup> Natalia Vid, "Soviet' Robert Burns – Ideological Adaptation of Burns' Poetry in the Soviet Union" (University of Maribor, Slovenia), [http://www.theroundtable.ro/pages/literary\\_studies/natalia\\_vid\\_soviet\\_robert\\_burns\\_ideological\\_adaptation\\_of\\_burns\\_poetry\\_in\\_the\\_soviet\\_union.htm](http://www.theroundtable.ro/pages/literary_studies/natalia_vid_soviet_robert_burns_ideological_adaptation_of_burns_poetry_in_the_soviet_union.htm)

<sup>71</sup> Quoted from Soviet Interviewee in Maurice Friedberg, "Foreign Authors and Soviet Readers" *Russian Review* Vol. 13, No. 4 (Oct., 1954), 270

<sup>72</sup> Maurice Friedberg, "Foreign Authors and Soviet Readers" *Russian Review* Vol. 13, No. 4 (Oct., 1954), 267

published in the USSR in editions of hundreds of thousands and even millions of copies,” or the way in which officials were likely to, “boast about the large editions of ‘classic’ (i.e., prerevolutionary) Russian writers now published in the USSR,”<sup>73</sup> Western academics were forced to acknowledge the fact that this still represented some kind of non-Stalinist exchange in the Soviet Union. Though these academics often twisted this by focusing on how reading these texts was not socially acceptable, on how the texts themselves were tainted and impure,<sup>74</sup> or focusing on how those texts didn’t actually fit in with Soviet ideology,<sup>75</sup> they weren’t usually able to entirely dismiss the numbers outright. The fact remains that both the sources they cited, as well as outside primary sources<sup>76</sup> and more modern scholarly studies, all verify the popularity and influence of non-Soviet literature within the Soviet Union. Further, by simply looking at the literature published from within the Soviet Union during Stalin’s rule, one can see how frequently Soviet writers interacted with these outside sources and ideologies and how impossible any sort of purely Socialist literary landscape was to maintain. The fact is that the works of O. Henry, Robert Burns, Walt Whitman, Edgar Allen Poe, Robert Louis Stevenson, Anton Chekhov, Jack London, James Joyce, and others could not sit completely in line, or even in the same room as, the works and expectations of Socialist Realism. Further, it is also an important fact that these writers were quite popular, reaching far beyond the academic circles of groups like the Oberiu. While instances like the Oberiu are important, the popularity of foreign authors is also incredibly important in understanding the fact that non-Stalinist ideas and works were incredibly influential with the common population of the Soviet Union. Free thought was

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<sup>73</sup> Melville J. Ruggles, “American Books in Soviet Publishing” *Slavic Review* Vol. 20, No. 3 (Oct., 1961), 419

<sup>74</sup> Quoted from Soviet interviewee in Maurice Friedberg, “Foreign Authors and Soviet Readers,” 267

<sup>75</sup> Melville J. Ruggles, “American Books in Soviet Publishing” *Slavic Review* Vol. 20, No. 3 (Oct., 1961)

<sup>76</sup> Mary M. Leder, *My Life in Stalinist Russia* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001), 49-50

not simply the realm of intellectuals, and though many common Soviet citizens were never able to write their own classic works, they certainly absorbed the works of others.

Understanding this interaction with foreign literature is important because, in a very direct way, it undermines the idea that Soviet literature was, as Andrei Zhdanov put it, a “revolutionary literature,” one that was possible, “nowhere, in no [other] country in the world”<sup>77</sup> but the Soviet Union. It helps us define Soviet literature in a much broader literary context, rather than a confined political one. In this way, it also undermines the Western conception of Stalin era literature as a kind of isolated, “vulgar,” style, well within the control of Stalin and his rather limited personal intellectual library and the general “humdrum empiricism”<sup>78</sup> that resulted from that limited interest in intellectualism. Clearly, much of the literature developed during his rule was well beyond his control, something that can well be evidenced by the prevalent influence of perceivably “bourgeois” and definitely “non-Soviet” literature on the Stalin era literary scene.

Socialist realism itself was not born of any kind of Soviet self-realization. The term “Socialist Realism” was not even presented to the Soviet public until 1932. What Socialist Realism was, then, was a kind of hodge-podge of disparate genres, most notably the Romanticism of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe and the Realism of Russian writers such as Leo Tolstoy. Even then, there were notable disputes among the Soviet literary elite. Katerina Clark notes that most of the writers functioning within the genre were “locked in bitter rivalries in both theory and practice,” with even the publicly presented master and apprentice team of Gorky and Gladkov being, “neither as close nor as enthusiastic about

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<sup>77</sup> Andrei Zhdanov, “Soviet Literature – The Richest in Ideas, the Most Advanced Literature”, August, 1934

<sup>78</sup> Max Hayward, “Russian Literature in the Soviet Period, 1917-1975,” in *Writers in Russia: 1917 – 1978*, 63, 97.



each other's Socialist Realist classics,"<sup>79</sup> as they presented to the public. The reason for this was largely because each writer in the Socialist Realist canon was well aware that he was functioning in a literary tradition that stretched well beyond both the establishment of Socialist Realism in the 1930s and the official canon of precursors recognized by the Soviet government that stretched back thirty years prior.

On the other hand, the Oberiu represent a fairly clear example of "non-Stalinist" literature published in Stalin's time. Of particular note is their contribution to the global literary community, especially as we learn more about them and try to fit them into global literary trends. Alice Stone Nakhimovsky links their work to the European Dadaist movement that cropped up around the 1920s, as well as the European "Theater of the Absurd" that helped usher in the postmodern era in the 1950s. In particular, the way in which they prefigure the 1950s "Theater of the Absurd" is fascinating in that these playwrights were considered revolutionary in their own time and in their own, far freer, societal context. On the Oberiu's connection to this movement, Nakhimovsky writes that:

...both schools reject psychological realism, preferring to portray the human condition through distortions that becomes grotesque. The banality and emptiness of life is presented in both through the deliberate use of banal and empty language.<sup>80</sup>

What the Oberiu presents, then, is not only an element of artistic creativity in Stalin's Soviet Union, but an element of artistic revolution that lived up to and forethought one of the more important Western artistic movements of the post-war years. Importantly, Nakhimovsky continues to state that their setting, Stalin's Soviet Union, was in fact not a hindrance to their artistic development but in fact the very thing that defined it:

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<sup>79</sup> Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel, Third Edition: History as Ritual* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1981), 27-28

<sup>80</sup> Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, *Laughter in the Void: An Introduction to the writings of Daniil Kharmis and Alexander Vvedenskii* (Wiener Slawistischer Almanach, 1982), 3-5

Time is another factor that separates them from the Futurists, for both Kharms and Vvedenskii deal with matters that would have been unthinkable for leftist artists of an earlier, more optimistic decade: Vvedenskii with questions of God, death, and the absurdity of life; Kharms with the horror of the everyday and the question of faith. The grotesque that began to invade the works of both writers was in part a reflection of the external circumstances that were changing rapidly for the worst.

In short, these writers were defined by the hardship of their time. The revolutionary way in which their work evolved was because of the hardships of Stalinism; without it, they might never have turned into the artists they became. In this way, Stalinism was a necessary component for developing an extremely advanced avant-garde collective, and although it was also the force that would destroy Kharms and Vvedenskii, even that grim destination seems a requirement foreshadowed in their art.

What should be clear from this interaction with foreign literature, both in the Soviet population's consumption of foreign writers and the desire to put out art rivaling and besting the works of the West, is that, at least to Soviet readers, the iron curtain was not so definite. While literary life in the Stalinist Soviet Union was never free and never totally open, its people still functioned at a level much higher than they are often given credit for. Soviet citizens not only sought out writers from the West but also created work so audacious that it was definitely worthy of Western attention. No person in the Soviet Union wanted to be cut off, and within whatever means were available to them, most put work into avoiding isolation.

### Conclusion

To say that the literary community of Stalin's Soviet Union was vibrant would certainly be a falsity. However, to identify it as one of "total silence"<sup>81</sup> represents a generalized dismissal and an equally erroneous claim. Publicly, there was certainly a lowering of counter-cultural volume in the 1930s, but the public is not the only forum for speech or for expression. The work of writers such as the OBERIU represents the way in which ideas were simultaneously voiced in closed communities and amongst friends. Many times, these voices were recorded for a later time in which they might be better heard. However, this same group represents the way in which these talents could reach the public: through adaptation. The publication of the OBERIU's children's stories, or, in an undiscussed but also important incidence, Varlam Shalamov's early short stories, represent ways in which "unacceptable" writers made themselves heard in Stalin's time.<sup>82</sup> There were certainly repercussions for these actions, and many writers were sent to prison camps or forced out of publishing, but people are much easier to destroy than ideas, and the preservation of ideas within this setting was certainly one of the more important aspects of Stalin-era literary culture. Even in the most public forums, such as those of Pyotr Pavlenko and *In the East*, many writers found that even if they tried, they were not totally able to avoid challenging norms and preserving elements of expression and subversion. It is the very fact that the Soviet regime was so oppressive and so inflexible that made it so easy to subvert. In the end it seems that literary works had a life all their own, one completely

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<sup>81</sup> Michael Scammell, "Introduction" *Russia's Other Writers*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971)

<sup>82</sup> Another instance of this, deserving more attention than I could give it in this space is the work of writers like Sadriddin Ayni. In his case, he managed to write a great number of works that reaffirmed a decidedly pre-Soviet Central Asian identity in the face of Sovietization and Stalinist culture. Writing primarily in Tajik and Uzbek, much of his work managed to slip past Stalinist censors and into the public sphere, often in the guise of Soviet propaganda.

beyond the realm of the political. Further, even when it was difficult for the common Soviet citizen to attain texts that existed outside the realm of Stalinism, there was a strong and clear effort among them to do so. Whether internally or externally made, the desire for fresh and expressive literature was strong and present in the Soviet Union. Try as he did, Stalin was never able to totally take hold of something as intangible and adaptive as poetry, and it was by this very nature that creative literature survived.

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