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PhD Thesis

*Maxim Gorky and the Politics of Rapprochement: Political
Life in the Pre-Terror Era*

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Introduction

His attitude towards lies and liars was, one might say, solicitous, protective even. I never knew him to unmask anyone or expose a lie – even the feeblest or most brazen attempts at one. He was a genuinely trusting person, but on top of that, he also pretended he was trusting.

This was partly because he would have felt bad about embarrassing the liars, but mostly because he saw it as his duty to respect the artistic impulses, or dreams, or illusions of others, even on those occasions when they manifested themselves in the most pathetic or disgusting of their forms. More than once, I even saw him glad to be deceived. For this reason, it was incredibly easy to deceive him, or even to make him complicit in a deception¹

Vladislav Khodasevich on Maxim Gorky

Since Gorky's death in 1936 perceptions of his public role in the Soviet Union from 1928 onwards have generally depended on personal sympathies. For some Gorky was the spokesperson for the Stalinist regime, a propagandist for state repression and the subjugation of the individual. The great humanist of his early years, the stormy petrel of the revolution who defended the politically vulnerable and raised international funds for famine relief abandoned his principles in exchange for the adulation showered upon him on his return. For others, Gorky was a moderate voice in an immoderate time, using his not-insubstantial public profile to protect the intelligentsia from attack and curb the excesses of Stalin.

¹ Khodasevich, V. F., & Vitali, S. (2019). *Necropolis*. Columbia University Press : New York. p.224

This thesis shall show that Gorky's return to the Soviet Union was born from his genuine faith in the future of the socialist state and his desire to contribute to its success. In launching the journal *Our Achievements* and the projects *History of the Civil War* and *History of Factories and Plants*, Gorky hoped to demonstrate both the achievements of the regime to a domestic and global readership while laying the foundations for a new method of Soviet literature, a documentary, realist portrayal of socialist success *as it shall be*.

I am primarily interested in Gorky's role as both an architect and essential pillar of Stalinism, and how his centrality to Stalinist culture necessitated the construction and protection of the Gorky myth, in spite of his diminished relationship with the regime in the last years of his life. For this reason my thesis focuses on his gradual rapprochement with the Soviet regime from 1925 onwards until the show trials of his former colleagues in 1938. I will however provide a brief outline of Gorky's life and activities prior to 1925 at the beginning of chapter one.

From his first return to the Soviet Union in 1928, Gorky's political activity can be broadly divided into three time periods. The first, from May 1928 until March 1932, encompasses the beginning of Stalin's cultural revolution and Gorky's coronation as the father of Soviet literature. As the regime faced down internal opposition and the threat of foreign intervention it sought to impose and cement its own legitimacy, and Gorky's domestic and international standing bestowed a certain degree of authority upon his public endorsement of Soviet power. During these years every allowance was provided to Gorky as he formed the language and structure of Stalinist culture; he gave voice and rationale to the priorities of the Five-Year Plan in a direct and replicable manner and endorsed and incentivised beginner authors to participate in his state-sponsored projects. The second period, from the disbandment of The Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) in 1932 until the murder of Sergei Kirov

in December 1934, saw the consolidation of Stalin's power, culminating first with the 17th Party Congress (known as the Congress of Victors) and then the first Soviet Writers' Congress, during which the state's position as ultimate arbitrator in cultural policy was firmly established. With Stalin entrenched as the head of state, Gorky underwent a gradual and frustrating transition from literary pioneer to cultural figurehead; although he was still consulted (and often indulged) regarding cultural policy, a clear shift took place with Stalin and his favoured literary functionaries the primary drivers in the formulation of socialist realism and the organisation and political emphasis of the Writers' Congress. Finally, from January 1935 until his death in June 1936, Gorky becomes a peripheral figure in Soviet cultural politics, increasingly isolated from his acquaintances and helpless as the state apparatus slowly turned towards a campaign of terror against its perceived enemies. However his utility to Stalin's cultural and political authority survived even his death, and the interrogation protocols and show trials of Gorky's former friends and colleagues in the years that follow represent an attempt by the state to reshape and reaffirm the author's legacy as an avowed Stalinist and the unquestioned father of Soviet literature.

My thesis takes these time periods as a loose structure, intending to demonstrate that the construction of Stalinism and the formation of a legitimate Soviet culture was a fluid process, evolving from the state's responses to the enormous challenges it faced as Stalin sought to consolidate his power. Viewing power politics through the prism of Marxist-Leninist theory, Stalin sought political and social legitimacy through the continuation of Lenin's legacy. He was instrumental in defining the meaning of Leninism to the broader population through his speeches and writings, and positioned himself publicly as a pupil of Lenin, and thus empowered to fulfil his teacher's vision. Kotkin writes that Stalin's self-styled role as the guardian of Lenin's ideology was inherent to his political ascension, and that his 'mastery and control' of the language and forms of Marxism-Leninism allowed him to define and

dominate the path of the Party². Thus the abandonment of NEP, the collectivisation drive and mass industrialisation movement were understood by Stalin and propagated to the Soviet population as a natural progression of Leninism, leading to emergence of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism as political theory and action. As the preeminent authority of Lenin's legacy and writings, Stalin would become a pedagogic leader using and promoting didactic methods to legitimise the formation of burgeoning Soviet power. As such, Gorky was instrumental in helping the *vozhd* achieve this aim.

Popular understanding of Stalinism is rooted in the concept of the personality cult and weaponization of mass terror against the Soviet population. Certainly both are defining features of Stalin's regime. However key components of Stalinism popularised by the Party that can be said to have evolved from Marxism-Leninism included the sharpening of the class struggle, the positioning of socialism as the antithesis of capitalism (and, by definition, the West) and the celebration of power in the embodiment of one individual, Stalin himself. Furthermore, the concept of the mass social movement was utilised extensively during the formative years of Stalin's reign; The first Five-year Plan, the struggle for full collectivisation and the mass expansion and celebration of the Komsomol all demonstrated the state's desire to broaden and legitimise its appeal.

Maxim Gorky was central to this process. Like the *vozhd*, the author would prove to be an adaptable and pragmatic political player, and while he retained the influence to pursue his own course in literary matters he understood and was amenable to sudden shifts in policy and public discourse. Nobody did more to disseminate and popularise these tenants of Stalinism than Gorky. The language of class warfare, the vilification of enemies of the people, the demonisation of the capitalist West; all of this was legitimised and given its own voice and

² Kotkin, S. (2015). *Stalin: Paradoxes of Power 1878 – 1928*. Penguin Books : London. p. 420

language by the author, who used his considerable domestic and international standing to promote and justify the aims and achievements of the regime. Gorky was also a proponent of mass cultural movements, pioneering communally written texts, organising writers' brigades to construction sites, and most importantly, his *A History of...* compilation, his hugely ambitious attempt to record a written multi-volume anthology of Soviet history by worker-authors in every town and village in the Soviet Union.

Furthermore, Gorky provided Stalin with another through-line connection to Lenin's legacy, which would be emphasised and embraced during the state-wide celebrations of Gorky's 35th jubilee that took place in 1927, the foundation of the 'Gorky' cult that the state would use to promote their cultural ambitions. From 1928 until 1932 Gorky was one of the central architects of Stalinism, behind only Stalin himself. He constructed state mythology, publicised and celebrated the country's achievements, and rebuked the state's detractors at home and abroad. He did this not through naivety, nor to fulfil some Faustian pact in return for fame and wealth, but because he truly believed in the Soviet experiment, and in Stalin as the primary driver of this.

There is no shortage of academic discourse on Gorky's political and cultural role in the years following his return to the Soviet Union in 1928. What this thesis adds is the understanding of the author as a central architect of Stalinism, a primary actor in the legitimisation of Stalin's rule in a period of immense instability and an authoritative voice in the endorsement of Stalinist policy. Gorky would pursue his own cultural ambitions, but they were always concerned with the endorsement and strengthening of the state, and even when cultivating his patronage network of former oppositionists and ostracised writers, a process that would lead to his eventual estrangement from the regime, his motivation was always to utilise their knowledge and ability to further the cause of the state, and ultimately Stalinism. Indeed,

Gorky would become so embedded in the popular understanding of Soviet culture that his legacy and biography would be rewritten after his death to affirm the narrative of the show trials and justify his erraticism in the final years of his life. Other than Stalin nobody was more responsible than Gorky for providing a voice to Stalinist power, a role that the author willingly embraced and felt morally compelled to fulfill.

Chapter Summary

In my opening chapter I discuss the confluence of factors that eventually led Gorky to return to the Soviet Union after an absence of seven years, and the myriad of reasons that have been posited for this; financial troubles, family concerns, fear of irrelevance in his own country, and the increasingly oppressive measures of Mussolini's fascist government. The most persuasive argument for his long-awaited journey home, and certainly the only one that Gorky would state publicly, was his desire to witness and document the burgeoning Soviet state and contribute to its construction. The state had made several overtures to the author following his self-imposed exile in 1921, but it was only as Stalin began to solidify his support within the Party after defeating Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev that Gorky began to take these proposals seriously. By 1927 he was already planning cultural projects he wished to implement, including what would become *Our Achievements* and *Literary Study*. The jubilee arranged in Gorky's honour in 1927, though furiously protested by the author himself, would be the first major project in constructing the myth of Gorky as an icon of Soviet culture, and upon his return the reverence that was thrust upon him throughout his journey legitimised this status. The cult of Gorky had begun.

Yet the Soviet Union that Gorky returned to was undergoing a period of massive political and social upheaval. The Shakhty Trial was already underway as Gorky's train pulled into Moscow, as was the campaign against the intelligentsia and the promotion of self-criticism as

a necessary tactic of Bolshevism. Furthermore, a battle for proletarian hegemony in literature, propagated by the literary group RAPP led to persistent, vicious press campaigns the fellow-travellers, writers from the intelligentsia who hadn't necessarily sided with the Soviet regime but were not actively against it either. Many of Gorky's friends and colleagues would be caught up in both the political and literary conflicts, and suddenly and unwittingly the author found himself having to mediate between the warring factions. Gorky's reaction to the factional dispute within the Party was one of bemusement, and his attempts to reconcile friends and colleagues such as Nikolai Bukharin, Aleksey Rykov and Lev Kamenev with Stalin demonstrate not only the reprisal of his role as 'patron' to those estranged from the centres of power, but also his early and unquestioned acceptance of Stalin as the country's leader.

Chapter two will focus on the author's three visits between 1928 and 1931, as Gorky sought to pursue his own literary agenda with the full support of the regime, while developing his personal relationship with the new members of the political elite. His first major literary projects launched after his first return, the journal *Our Achievements* and his series of *ocherks, Around the Soviet Union*, are demonstrative of the literary form that Gorky intended to pursue and promote, that of literary didacticism and the positive, aggrandising portrayal of Soviet society, not as it was, *but as it should and will be*. The initial negative reception of both works was largely irrelevant; they portrayed Soviet power in precisely the style and language that best served the needs of the state.

The political climate of this period was even more tumultuous than Gorky's first return, as the drive towards full collectivisation and the launch of the first Five Year Plan was met with widespread social and political unrest, to which the state responded with mass arrests and continued show trials. Gorky was unwavering in his support for the regime, using his

considerable platform at home and abroad to justify and sanitise its policies, calling for the execution of those accused of treasonous sabotage. In Bykov's words, Gorky provided 'logic and vocabulary'³ to Stalin's repression, and in formulating and popularising the language of the state he was constructing the foundation of Stalinism itself.

This period also sees the beginning of Stalin and Gorky's written correspondence in 1929, a dialogue that would continue until the author's death. In their early exchanges we see Gorky's attempts, often successful, to shape cultural policy and appointments within the framework of his personal literary philosophy, that is to reach as wide an audience as possible using simple, realist writing to convey the positive achievements of the Soviet state. For his part, Stalin appears to use this early correspondence to both indulge Gorky's minor requests while patiently, and with quiet authority, establishing the boundaries under which Gorky operates. Their conversations are mutually beneficial, but always understood within the political framework of the moment; Gorky doesn't push back on Stalin's occasional rejections, and the *vozhd* generally, though not always, indulges the author with an explanation on his general reasoning. The letters are a fascinating study in power dynamics and demonstrate how the two men came to a gradual understanding on the early construction of a new Soviet culture.

My third chapter centres on Gorky's role in the restructuring of Soviet cultural politics, from the forced disbandment of RAPP in April 1932 to the Soviet Writers' Congress and its aftermath in August 1934. This is also the period where Gorky's estrangement from Stalin begins.

³ Bykov (2008), p.78

The shock decision to forcibly remove RAPP from the cultural sphere appears to have caught Gorky off-guard, and despite claims that the decision was made in order to ‘clear the board’ for the author to shape Soviet literature in his own image as the chairman of the Soviet Writers’ Union, the position was largely symbolic. Although Gorky’s name would be attached to the formation of socialist realism (and indeed the method would be heavily influenced by his work) it was Stalin who was the driving force behind its conception and implementation – Gorky would be the legitimising figurehead.

Though his authority may have been diminished Gorky retained an important role in solidifying the mythology of the Stalinist regime, and his involvement in propagandising the Belomor Canal project, while an unquestioned stain on his biography, served a great purpose in highlighting the achievements of Stalinism and the cultural and political value of the *Obed''inyonnoe Gosydarstvennoe Politicheskoe Upravlenie (OGPU)*⁴. Although Gorky himself did not attend, he organised a group of 120 authors to travel to the construction site of the White Sea-Baltic Canal and document their experience. The resulting publication, *History of the Construction of the Stalin White Sea-Baltic Canal*, promoted several of Gorky’s preferred literary methods, such as accessible, realist language, communal authorship and overwhelming positivity. However it was the celebration of the concept of *perekovka*, the idea that enemies of the state can be ‘re-forged’ through discipline and labour into productive Soviet citizens, that would briefly become one of the defining features of Stalinism.

The 17th Party Congress (also known as the Congress of Victors) in January 1934 solidified Stalin as the unquestioned leader of the Soviet regime, as prominent oppositionists each took the rostrum to publicly renounce their former views and recognise the ultimate authority of

⁴ The State Political Administration, broadly known as the secret police, would undergo several rebrandings during Gorky’s lifetime; the *Cheka* (1917-1922), the GPU (1922-1923), the OGPU (1923 – 1934) and the NKVD (1934 – 1946). In Gorky’s writings he would refer to the individuals working for these organisations as ‘Chekists’.

the Party under Stalin's guidance. Ten years after the death of Lenin socialism was declared to have arrived. Stalin's coronation resolved the question of the legitimacy of his authority, and from this moment Gorky's position was greatly shaken. As the first Soviet Writers' Congress approached the author would lash out at both literary functionaries and Party leaders, frustrated at his inability to coordinate proceedings to fit his agenda. Privately, Stalin and the Politburo grew increasingly frustrated with Gorky's behaviour both prior to and during the congress itself, and from internal communications and personal diary entries it is apparent that this would mark the end of Gorky as an active participant in the shaping of Soviet and Stalinist culture.

The fourth, final chapter begins with the Kirov murder in December 1934, a seminal moment in Soviet history, and will cover the author's gradual decline through the perspective of Romain Rolland's *Moscow Diary* until Gorky's death in June 1936.

Kirov's assassination turned the Soviet Union onto the path of terror, as Stalin sought to implicate former oppositionists and their supporters into an international conspiracy to restore capitalism in the Soviet Union. Gorky's proximity to many of those now held under deep suspicion by the state, such as Kamenev, Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsy, greatly shook his public standing. His attempts at rapprochement, both politically and literary, would have deadly consequences for almost all of the author's immediate circle of friends and colleagues, as Stalin began to view friendship and professional groupings with suspicion; Gorky, the unwitting reconciler, would ultimately fail as the author was unable to navigate the constantly changing political tides. For the first time since 1929 attacks on the author were published in the Soviet press, with Gorky denied the right to reply, and his personal correspondence with Stalin slowed to a crawl. Although ostensibly still a celebrated public figure his public

appearances became increasingly rare, and access to the author fell increasingly under the control of his personal secretary Pyotr Kryuchkov. Gorky would die in June 1936.

The author's story did not end with his death however, as two years later many of his closest friends and colleagues would find themselves accused of his murder; this chapter will conclude by attempting to disentangle the trial protocols, and examine the extent to which the narrative constructed by Stalin during the trials of the accused was an attempt to solidify the myth of Gorky as a true supporter of Stalinism, led astray by nefarious actors who had succeeded in penetrating the author's inner circle.

Methodology

The aim of my research was to attempt to reconcile the competing myths of the 'two Gorkys' commonly portrayed in Soviet literary studies; Gorky as the avowed, unrepentant Stalinist who celebrated the atrocities of the regime as his fame and wealth grew exponentially, and Gorky as the naïve humanist who was exploited by Stalin before being cast aside as his utility to the state waned. My initial reading led me to a third interpretation of Gorky's political biography, that of a skilled diplomat working behind the scenes to reunite alleged oppositionists with the regime and attempt to curb Stalin's perceived excesses, yet as my research developed any evidence of Gorky's 'liberalising' tendencies towards Stalin's policies beyond hearsay or rumour failed to materialise. As such I began to study Gorky as an active and willing participant in the construction of Stalinist culture and attempted to analyse his relationships with his patronage group within this context.

By adopting an interpretative approach to the vast quantity of available material on Gorky I aim to portray as accurately as possible the author's political and literary motivations and ambitions during my selected time period. This has often proven difficult given the wide

disparity in interpretation of the author's actions. The use of diaries and letters as primary sources was particularly challenging. The authors of these sources, the literary intelligentsia in the 1920s and 1930s, were understandably hesitant to fully record their understanding of events. As a direct consequence of the suffocating social environment individual responses vacillate from envy to suspicion to vitriol, representing the experience of the intelligentsia at large at a time of persistent and vocal public recrimination. By the mid-1930s the mere possession of a diary or memoir could provide the possible pretext for arrest, and its contents could ensnare family members, friends or colleagues in broader criminal charges. As a consequence diaries and correspondence of the era tend not to be overly expansive. The frequent appearance of the word *govoryat* (they say) in these texts speaks to the uncertainty and instability of the age, and the persistence and reliance upon of second-hand rumours as a means of contextualising vast social and political upheaval. For this reason I had to be selective of the material presented in this thesis, opting to include rumours or innuendos only if they concurred with similar accounts of the same period; Gorky's fall from political favour, for example, or Kryuchkov's role as gatekeeper to the author during the final years of his life.

Memoirs by Gorky's former friends and colleagues fall into two categories, émigré and Soviet, both of which also prove problematic. Generally speaking the émigré accounts of the author after his death portray Gorky as having been seduced by Stalin into propagandising for the Soviet Union and view the last eight years of his life as a tragedy. Reflections on his life in exile prior to 1928 are inevitably tinged with the pathos of a cultural icon living his last years of autonomy before succumbing to the advances of Stalin's totalitarian regime.

Naturally, Soviet accounts take a different approach, focusing on his pride upon returning home and his immense literary achievements he was able to enact. Accounts published after Stalin's death in 1953 invariably include anecdotes either conveying Gorky's knowledge of

the evils of Stalinism or depictions of his struggle behind the scenes to mitigate the worst excesses of the regime. I have selected some of these accounts for inclusion in this thesis, with the necessary caveats added.

Finally, I was fortunate to have the opportunity to access archival sources in Moscow in 2018 and 2019 (returning to Scotland two days prior to Russia closing its borders during the COVID19 outbreak), and visited The Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI), The Russian State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI), The Maxim Gorky Archive at the Institute of World Literature, and the former KGB archive at the Lubyanka. The unique challenges of working in Russian archives have been well documented elsewhere. For the purposes of my research the Gorky archive was of obvious interest, however their policy of refusing to provide archival documents that have either been published, or are in the process of publication, led to many a frustrating afternoon. Understandably, the files available at the Lubyanka archive were also limited. Of particular curiosity was the personnel file of Gorky's secretary, Pyotr Kryuchkov, which was numbered 21 of 23. The rest of the files, I was told, remain unavailable.

Literature Review

There is a wealth of literature available on Maxim Gorky, though none as valuable as the remarkable output from the Institute of World Literature in the name of A.M. Gorky, from the Russian Academy of Sciences (IMLI RAN). The ongoing publication *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii: Pis'ma v Dvadtsati Chetyrekh Tomax*, a comprehensive resource of the author's complete correspondence, was unquestionably my most consulted resource. Of particular value are the incredibly detailed footnotes that accompany each letter, without which the context of much of Gorky's communication would be inaccessible even to seasoned Gorky scholars. Unfortunately for my research, at the time of writing only 21 of the proposed 24

volumes have been published, and the full correspondence from the crucial years of 1933 and 1934, when the political tide appeared to turn against the author, have yet to be released in their entirety. Other publications emanating from the Gorky Archive help complete some of this picture, including *Gorkii v Zerkale Epokhi: Neizdannaya Perepiska* (2010), *Vremya Gorkovo I Problemii Istorii* (2018) and *Gor'kii I Ego Korrespondenty* (2005), among many others. Each contain complete correspondence with members of the cultural and political elite not presently available in the ongoing 24 volume publication, including Kamenev, Yagoda and Averbakh.

Similarly, *Sobranie Sochinenii v 30 Tomakh: 1949 – 1955*, a 30-volume publication of Gorky's major speeches, articles and fiction, is an excellent chronological reference for the author's literary and journalistic activity, though as a result of the period of its publication it unfortunately omits several of Gorky's more controversial writings; *On Literary Amusements*, *On a Waste of Energy* and all of his writing on the *Belomorkanal* project are perhaps the most prominent omissions, each containing references to victims of Stalinist repression falsely accused of crimes against the state, and at the time of publication yet to be rehabilitated. Two leading Gorky archivists and scholars, Lidia Spiridonova and N.N. Primochkina have also published monographs out with IMLI RAN, and their unquestioned expertise on the subject makes their work invaluable reading for the Gorky scholar. If there is one minor complaint to be made of the official Gorky Archive publications however it is their perhaps understandable caution in portraying the author in anything other than a positive light. Although they don't shy away from discussing Gorky's support of forced labour, his articles calling for the execution of 'enemies of the people' or his ties to Stalin and Yagoda, these actions are generally justified as a necessary performance from the author in order to win the trust of the authorities and thus allow him to pursue his more liberal agenda. While

this may well have been the case on occasion there is also clear evidence that Gorky supported many of the worst excesses of the Stalinist regime.

Within this context, I am interested in Gorky as an architect not only of socialist realism, but also of Stalinism itself. The construction of Stalinist culture is discussed further in Stephen Kotkin's *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation*, as the author chronicles the construction of the industrial city of Magnitogorsk, from a near uninhabited plain below the Ural mountain range to a sprawling settlement housing 250,000 people within three years. A centrepiece of the Soviet offensive towards full industrialisation, Kotkin views Magnitogorsk and its inhabitants as integral to the formulation of Stalinism itself, which he describes as 'not just a political system... (but) a set of values, a social identity, a way of life'⁵. While recognising the authoritarian nature of the Stalinist system, the author nonetheless demonstrates that the formation of Stalinism in Magnitogorsk was reliant on the interaction and intersecting of both the interests and demands of the state, and the needs and desires of its subjects. This 'common ground'⁶, as Kotkin describes it, would become the foundation of Stalinist culture itself.

The practice of 'speaking Bolshevik', in which the residents of Magnitogorsk adopted the vocabulary and language structure of the regime to further their own pursuits, is shown by Kotkin to be a fluid and constantly evolving undertaking, as people adjusted their behaviour according to the regime's adaptable ideology. The one constant, fixed certainty from which this ideology took root – 'socialism is the antidote to capitalism'⁷ – imbued both the state and its citizens with a certain moral authority, which expressed itself in a manifestly different culture from its capitalist, Western alternative. As such, Kotkin states, 'the concept of

⁵ Kotkin, S. (1997). *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation*. California, University of California Press. P.23.

⁶ *Ibid.* p.23

⁷ *Ibid.* p.152

"socialist culture" may have appeared vague and at times self-contradictory, but for contemporaries it formed an important part of their experience.'⁸

Applying this 'vagueness' to the concept of socialist realism, Kotkin argues that the doctrine was enforced from the top down after an identifiable socialist culture (that is, clearly distinct from capitalist culture) failed to develop organically, and when it did, failed to attract a mass audience. Going forward, the regime 'recognised cultural output as "socialist" if it was created in the USSR and if it appeared to demonstrate the present (and especially future) superiority of socialism'⁹.

Kotkin's thesis that Stalinist culture was in part a compromise between the desires of the state and its populace can be equally applied to Gorky's role in the construction of a new Soviet literature; in the pursuit of his own literary ambitions for the country the author understood that in return he was required as propagandistic mouthpiece for the regime. By using his stature and international reputation to propagate Soviet achievements Gorky helped to mould popular understanding of Stalinism, and thus legitimise it.

Magnetic Mountain also provides context for the didactic nature of Gorky's literary pursuits. Kotkin describes the need for the working population of Magnitogorsk to be taught how to behave as Soviet citizens and how to understand the political value of their labour, acquiring 'industrial and political literacy'¹⁰ on the path to building socialism. Applied to the broader cultural context of constructing socialist realism, we can see clear parallels with Gorky's efforts to guide both the intelligentsia and beginner, proletarian authors to a more class-conscious, distinctly socialist form of artistic expression, while staying within the parameters

⁸ Ibid. p.192

⁹ Ibid. p.180

¹⁰ Ibid. p.203

of classical, realist language. Didacticism was an inherent component of the construction of Stalinism, and Gorky helped popularise this on a national scale.

The centrality of didacticism in Stalin's state building is outlined in part two of Kotkin's three-volume biography of the dictator, *Stalin: Waiting for Hitler 1928 - 1941* (2017).

Subscribing to the 'top-down' theory of Stalin's rule, this work appears to contradict one of the central arguments of *Magnetic Mountain*, that the social and political manifestation of Stalinism was born from a tacit compromise between the regime and the Soviet population. Certainly Stalin's outsized influence on all cultural matters cannot be understated. However in crafting Stalinism he was reliant on other actors, Gorky primarily but also the fellow-travellers and beginner authors who were enrolled to develop and document both men's vision for the development of Soviet literature. My thesis will study this interdependence in further detail, in particular through the composition of projects such as *A History of Construction* and *A History of Factories and Plants*.

Examining the reasoning behind the Terror, Kotkin writes that Stalin, 'at heart a pedagogue'¹¹, used the elimination of the Old Bolsheviks and senior officials to 'play the role of teacher to a populous new generation of functionaries'¹², crafting a didactic narrative from the show trials and confessions intended to instruct the next generation of Soviet officialdom in his vision of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy. In fostering an environment of fear Stalin strengthened his political control over the new elite and kept them in a constant state of anticipation for the next wave of avowed enemies to manifest.

The use of terror as instruction can be applied to Gorky in two ways. Most obviously, the author's frequent, outspoken tirades against accused enemies of the people helped to

¹¹ Kotkin, S. (2017). *Stalin, Vol.II: Waiting for Hitler, 1928 – 1941*. Allen Lane, London. p.495

¹² *Ibid.*, p.495

construct a narrative of fear and emphasised the constant need for vigilance. In this he lent an authoritative public voice to Stalin's policy while continuing to occupy his didactic role as the spokesperson for Soviet literature. However we also need to understand this tactic within the context of the author's death and the construction of the show trials that followed. Time and again Gorky would be portrayed as having been misled and confused by the sinister forces within his inner circle, who attempted to turn the author against the Soviet regime. If, as per Kotkin's thesis, the show trials were weaponised by Stalin as a didactic tool, what was the intent behind this portrayal of Gorky?

In contextualising Gorky's attempts at composing a new Soviet culture Yuri Slezkine's *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* proved to be an invaluable source, as the author analyses the Bolshevik revolution, Stalin's reign and his terror through the construction and development of the House of Government on the banks of the Moscow river. The building opened its doors to its new residents in 1931, a decisive year in the cultural battleground between the old intelligentsia and burgeoning proletarian factions, and through the lives of the building's inhabitants, composed of Old Bolsheviks as well as the new generation of Soviet nomenklatura, Slezkine demonstrates how the regime attempted to establish and legitimise its own culture and authority and how this was understood and applied by those closest to the political elite. Although Gorky is rarely featured in Slezkine's narrative several of the author's most famous friends, colleagues and correspondents were residents of the building, most notably Nikolai Bukharin, Alexei Rykov, Mikhail Koltsov and Alexander Arosev, whose fates would be inextricably entwined with shifts in cultural development and the political fallout of the Kirov murder.

Slezkine's central thesis, that the Bolsheviks were not only a millenarian sect but also the very first to see their apocalyptic prophecy apparently realised, places the subsequent events

of early-Soviet history within the context of failed prophecies of other religious sects; the disappointment of the unrealised promise, ongoing delay and the final offer of sacrifice in the form of the great terror. The construction of Soviet culture within a religious framing therefore served to ‘preserve the past, legitimise the present, and align personal experience with sacred time... Everything had to corroborate and constitute the story of fulfilled prophecy’¹³. The failure of the Bolsheviks’ prophecy, that is the failure of worldwide revolution to break out following their seizure of power, led to the prophecy itself being adjusted, with Stalin and Bukharin’s ‘socialism in one country’ adopted instead. From this point onwards, according to Zlezkine, the Soviet authorities, supported by the GPU, faced the monumental task of converting the population to their official doctrine. Identifying three main tasks for the Party following the civil war – ‘suppressing the enemy, converting the heathen, and disciplining the faithful’¹⁴ – the author identifies the last of these as the most important. This would come with Stalin’s socialist offensive. For Slezkine, ‘the goal of the cultural revolution was to fill every nook and cranny with the Bolshevik ideological substance. The most visible part of the campaign was the remaking of the arts and sciences’¹⁵. In this construction of Soviet culture, so inherent to the conversion of the Soviet population to Bolshevik discourse, Gorky would be key. His role was not simply to lend his considerable international reputation to Soviet literature, but to help mould public discourse and shape the language and culture of Stalinism.

Another seminal work on Soviet construction, Cynthia A. Ruder’s *Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal*, studies the infamous White Sea – Baltic Canal construction project that publicly celebrated its use of criminals as forced labour under the supervision of

¹³ Slezkine, Y. (2017). *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution*. Princeton, Princeton University Press. p.192

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.289

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.454

the OGPU. Gorky would become the public champion of this campaign, organising a ‘writers’ brigade’ to visit the construction site and report on the *perekovka* (reforging) of the labourers – the idea that man himself can be reconstructed from an enemy of the state to a model Soviet citizen through his participation in honest, socialist labour. Ruder is primarily interested in the creative process of those involved in the writing of *The White Sea – Baltic Canal: The History of Construction*, the collectively-authored volume by the participants of the writers’ brigade, and well as the role of author as historian. Her understanding of *perekovka*, however, has particular pertinence to my thesis, defining its philosophy as the possibility that ‘through forced labour and ideological conditioning to create ‘new’ people, in this case new Soviet people, who embody the ideology and spirit of their age and who personify the Soviet Union in action and deed’¹⁶. Furthermore, she highlights the implicit theme that *perekovka* is not only about the creation of a new Soviet society, but equally about the destruction of that which preceded it. From this we can appreciate Gorky’s great enthusiasm for the project, not only in his passion for constructing a new socialist culture but in his desire to contrast the achievements of the era with the capitalist corruption of the past. From his articles and correspondence prior to and after the publication of *The History of Construction* we can see that Gorky prioritised the didactic nature of the book over its artistic value. In the values that it espouses we can see clearly the nature of the idealised society and culture that Gorky aspired to popularise.

Didacticism as tactic of cultural construction is explored in depth in *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (2000) by Katerina Clark, which studies the evolution of the socialist realist method through three epochs; pre-1932, the high-Stalinist period and finally from the post-war era until the late 1970s. Proceeding on the basis that socialist realism functioned from

¹⁶ Ruder, C.A., (1998). *Making History for Stalin: The Story of the Belomor Canal*. University Press of Florida, Florida. p. 2

1932 onwards as the ‘official repository of state myths’¹⁷, Clark maintains that its primary purpose, as with all public discourse, was to legitimise the state and entrench its ties to Marxism-Leninism, establishing a through line between the legacy of Lenin and the present of Stalin.

Clark defines the principle feature of a socialist realist novel as the master plot, a series of formulaic stages identifiable in all socialist realist literature that serve as a foundation to document the inevitable historical progress of Marxism-Leninism. This progress is achieved by the resolution of the spontaneity/consciousness dialectic – spontaneity is undisciplined and primitive, the result of historical forces rather than decisive individual action. Consciousness is controlled, focused, and driven by ‘politically aware bodies’¹⁸. The struggle between spontaneity and consciousness is the driving force of history, leading to the final stage in historical progress, communism. The role of literature, in this formulation, is to serve as the ‘generator of official myths, to provide object lessons in the working-out of the spontaneity / consciousness dialectic’¹⁹. Clark’s ‘master plot’ allows the heroes of Soviet literature to complete a journey from relative spontaneity to eventual consciousness.

When the concept of socialist realism was officially adopted in 1932 the state quickly moved to identify Gorky’s *Mother* (1905) as the first socialist realist novel. Clearly political considerations were at play in this formulation – Gorky had just been named as the first head of the Soviet Writers’ Union – but Clark also identifies *Mother* as a foundational text that ‘made possible the single master plot of socialist realism’²⁰. Gorky himself would later disavow the novel, though from both *Mother* and his personal correspondence and public

¹⁷ Clark, K. (2000). *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*. Third edition. Indianapolis, University of Indiana Press. p. xii.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.15

¹⁹ Ibid., p.16

²⁰ Ibid., p.55

pronouncements from 1928 onwards we can clearly place Gorky as an advocate of the consciousness over spontaneity dialectic, and although Stalin (and to a lesser extent Gorky) bore responsibility for formulating socialist realism in 1932, the method evolved from a literary approach promulgated by Gorky since his rapprochement with the Soviet regime in the mid-1920s.

Clark identifies the preferred Soviet literary method as being susceptible to ever-changing political criteria and describes a ‘wave of reaction’²¹ against the ‘little man’ ethos of the First Five Year Plan in 1931, leading to cult of the heroic during the period of High Stalinism from 1932 – 1939. Gorky’s documentation of the ‘heroic’ task of the NKVD in the construction of the Belomor Canal would become one of the defining texts of this age and demonstrate not only his willingness and capacity to promote the achievements of Soviet power to a global audience, but also the extent to which he was able to shape the discourse around this.

While my thesis affirms the centrality of Gorky’s role in shaping the language and form of Soviet culture, *The Soviet Novel* perhaps overstates the weight of the author’s influence in the eventual formation of the Soviet Writers’ Union. Clark’s assertion that RAPP didn’t so much lose their position at the head of Soviet literature, as ‘another player entered the game, the pieces were swept off the board, and a new game was begun’²² identifies the impetus for the top-down restructuring of Soviet literature as Gorky’s return in 1931. However the broader political context of this period shows state-led reconciliation with the intelligentsia across all sectors, and the disbandment of RAPP had as much if not more to do with their virulent, antagonistic campaigns against non-proletarian authors as it did with appeasing Gorky. Furthermore, while Gorky did once again return to the Soviet Union in May 1931 (his first

²¹ Ibid., p.91

²² Ibid., p.33

visit for two years) he would leave for his home in Sorrento in October, and it would only be in 1933 that he would settle in Moscow on a permanent basis.

Throughout this thesis I make reference to the 'cult' of Gorky, a construction of the Party that began in 1927 prior to the author's first return and reached its crescendo in 1932; suddenly streets, theatres and even Gorky's home city of Nizhny Novgorod were honoured with his name. The cult of personality would become a defining characteristic of Stalinism, and in this regard Gorky inadvertently acted as a bridge between the cult of Lenin and the cult of Stalin.

The role of the cult as a cult of the Party rather than the individual is explored by Claude Pannetier and Bernard Pusan in their chapter *Stalinism: Workers Cult and Cult of Leaders*. Describing the internal politicking that took place amongst the Soviet leadership following Lenin's death, they relate Dzerzhinskii's defence of the leader's deification, claiming it was 'not a cult of personality, but a cult, to a certain extent, of Vladimir Ilyich²³'. For Pannetier and Pusan, this demonstrates that the origins of the Stalin cult, which was connected directly to the cult of Lenin, in essence lay in the perpetuation of legitimised authority; this was the cult of the position, not the person, the acknowledgment and celebration of Soviet power. To the same extent, in his exalted position as the 'father' of Soviet literature, the recognition of Gorky as a cultural icon served the purpose of raising Soviet culture to his level, and by logical association, the legitimacy of Stalin's regime with it.

In her chapter *Stalin and the Making of the Leader Cult in the 1930s*, Sarah Davies centres Stalin's understanding of the leader cult within a purely theoretical context, in which the *vozhd* viewed the role of the great leader of history as entirely consistent with Marxist orthodoxy, in that the role of the 'great leader' can only arise through a unique set of social

²³ Pannetier, C. and Pusan, B. (2009). *Stalinism: Workers' Cult and Cult of Leaders, Twentieth Century Communism*, vol.1, no.1, pp.20-29

conditions. Davies uses this context to justify her thesis – that Stalin was largely opposed to his personality cult inasmuch as it glorified him as a person rather than the Bolshevik cause as a whole, and that while he recognised some advantages of the cult he generally viewed it as a negative phenomenon that could be both harmful and exploited²⁴. Despite citing numerous examples of Stalin’s supposed irritation at the rise of his personal cult, Davies’ argument is unconvincing. Certainly it is likely that Stalin sought and found justification in Marxist theory for his emerging personality cult. But his willingness to embrace Lenin’s legacy and Gorky’s stature to further legitimise his own authority demonstrates not only his awareness of the utility of the personality cult, but of its necessity also.

In contrast to Davies, Jan Plamper’s *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (2012) highlights the ‘immodesty/modesty’ duality central to Stalin’s cult; the idea of the simple, hardworking leader who in public is embarrassed and irritated by the unnecessary attention foisted upon him, but privately demands that it continues and accelerates. As we see in Gorky’s correspondence, the author was mortified by the celebrations taking place under his name, but unlike Stalin he had very little control over these events. Despite private accusations of the author’s vanity there is nothing to substantiate the rumour that he secretly enjoyed or even encouraged his lionisation. Plamper identifies the launch of the Stalin cult as December 1929, as the *vozhd’s* 50th birthday approached. As with Gorky in both 1927 and 1932, the anniversary was met with unending press coverage and public celebration, with coverage of global celebrations covered extensively in the pages of *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*²⁵. Plamper notes that Stalin, and subsequently his emerging cult, largely disappeared from the front pages of the Soviet press from 1930 until 1933, presumably to avoid association with

²⁴ Davies, S. (2004). Stalin and the Making of the Leader Cult in the 1930s, in Balasz, A.(Ed.), *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc*. Houndmills : Palgrave Macmillan. pp.30-31

²⁵ Plamper, J. (2012). *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power*. New Haven : Stanford University Press. p.29

the deepening crises across the country. The cult of Gorky, of course, would peak in 1932, maintaining the presence of an avowed Stalinist in the public consciousness in the absence of the *vozhd* himself. Gorky projected Soviet power and moral authority, and as an avowed Stalinist the regime would benefit from his veneration by proxy. Once Stalin's leadership had been legitimised and assured however, *the vozhd* would only very rarely leave the public eye.

The weaponisation of the 'cult' is explored in Benno Ennker's *The Stalin Cult, Bolshevik Rule and Kremlin Interaction in the 1930s* (2004). Ennker views the Stalin cult as occurring simultaneously in two separate spheres; amongst Stalin's closest peers in the Bolshevik leadership circle, and also amongst the broader masses. Leaders such as Kaganovich, Kirov, Voroshilov and others competed amongst themselves to perpetrate the image of Stalin as 'inspirer of all successes during the construction of socialism' from 1933 onwards, initiating a campaign amongst their bases to glorify the unquestioned leader of the Soviet Union as frequently as voluminously as possible²⁶. In participating in this charade, the Politburo members 'intended to portray a direct link between the leader and people'²⁷, and as a result, bolster their position in the eyes of their *vozhd*. Kaganovich in particular is identified as the most active participant in this internal competition, and as this thesis shows, he was instrumental in using his position of favour with Stalin to cast doubt on the actions of Gorky and his cohorts.

Gorky's significant contribution to the development of literature is detailed in Kemp-Welch's *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia, 1928 – 39* (1991), a comprehensive study of the formation of Stalinist literature that expertly details Gorky's marginalisation in literature following the formation of the Writers' Union. The author identifies three stages of literary

²⁶ Ennker, B. (2004). *The Stalin Cult, Bolshevik Rule and Kremlin Interaction in the 1930s*, in Balasz, A.(Ed.), *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships: Stalin and the Eastern Bloc*. Houndmills : Palgrave Macmillan . p.84

²⁷ Ibid, p.85

development under Stalin; the first, 1929 to 1932, saw the rise of RAPP and the struggle to enforce proletarian hegemony during the cultural revolution, followed by the second stage from 1932 to 1934, during which the cultural intelligentsia were welcomed back into the cultural fold, socialist realism was established as a literary doctrine and the formation of the Soviet Writers' Union followed the forced disbandment of RAPP. Finally, from 1935 to 1939, the consolidation of Stalin as a cultural leader and sole arbiter of literary affairs, with Gorky 'pushed aside'²⁸.

For Kemp-Welch, 'the general purpose of Stalinist literary policy was to create a new literature serving the Soviet state'²⁹, and while he places this policy within a top-down, dictatorial framework he nonetheless identifies key secondary actors within this model who worked to implement and manage Stalin's often sudden and impulsive directives, such as diplomats, party delegates and cultural bureaucrats. The author describes Gorky as a 'non-party authority' in literature, whose ties to Lenin and international standing bestowed second-hand legitimacy upon the Soviet regime³⁰. Kemp-Welch briefly summarises Gorky's fall from favour as initially arising from his unwillingness to propagandise for the state, in particular his failure to write Stalin's biography despite a request from the state publishing agency (*Glavlit*).

In Kemp-Welch's account, Gorky's position was that of 'intermediary' between Stalin and the literary intelligentsia³¹. While there is no question that Gorky fulfilled this role (with varying degrees of success) this designation significantly underplays his early attempts to mould socialist literature in his own vision and omits discussion of his writing upon his return to the Soviet Union that clearly, and in line with Kemp-Welch's thesis, intended to serve the

²⁸ Kemp-Welch, A. (1991). *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia, 1928 – 1939*. MacMillan : London. p.240

²⁹ Ibid, p.251

³⁰ Ibid., p.267

³¹ Ibid. p.127

interests of the regime. For example, no mention is made of *Around the Soviet Union*, published at the beginning of 1929, in which Gorky portrayed a sanitised, idealised vision of the developments in the country that had taken place during his protracted absence, and offered up a whitewashed portrayal of the Solovki labour camp to counter Western criticism. Similarly, while there is no doubt that Stalin dictated the terms of Soviet literature from 1932 onwards, Gorky's journal *Our Achievements* was an early precursor to the tenants of socialist realism in its insistence in only portraying the positive in Soviet society, and the author's ongoing editorial work and correspondence with beginner authors from 1928 onwards display his firm conviction that socialist literature should aim to replicate the language of classic Russian realism.

The central role of culture as a validator of Bolshevik authority is explored further in *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents 1917 – 1953* (2007), a collection of archival documents with narrative commentary provided by Katerina Clark and Evgeny Dobrenko. The book is an abridged version of *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsia: Dokumenty TsK RKP(b)-VKP(b), VChK–OGPU–NKVD o kul'turnoi politike, 1917– 1953 gg* (1999), compiled by Andrei Artizov and Oleg Naumov.

Clark and Dobrenko's introduction asserts that 'the greatest trauma for Stalinism was the trauma of its lack of legitimacy'³², and the collection of documents selected from Artizov and Naumov's original sources show definitively the level of control the regime, and Stalin in particular, exercised over Soviet culture in an attempt to establish and control this legitimacy. Any questions relating to culture were debated at the Politburo level, and no serious decisions could be taken without Stalin's approval. As Clark and Dobrenko point out, even as the state

³² Clark, K., and Dobrenko, E. eds. (2009) *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917-1953*. New Haven, Yale University Press. p.xii

faced momentous challenges, such as the threat of foreign invasion, intra-Party struggles and the drive towards collectivisation and industrialisation, Stalin still made time to dictate even the most minor of literary policies. As stated in their introduction, literature took on elevated cultural status ‘because it was felt it would establish the truth of the order to be found in Bolshevik experience. Writing was a means for promulgating the Party’s ultimate authorship of Soviet reality’³³. Yet despite being the ultimate arbitrator in all literary matters Stalin did not create Stalinist culture. Rather, he was a participant in an ever-evolving social environment that would gradually come to dictate the terms of the cultural sphere. As seen elsewhere, Clark and Dobrenko posit that Stalinist culture was a fluid concept susceptible to political and societal changes.

For Clark and Dobrenko, Gorky is a ‘highly-placed supplicant’³⁴ using his proximity to authority and Stalin’s favour to petition on behalf of his patronage circle and settle scores with perceived enemies and rivals – ‘less... some all-powerful figure in the arena of culture than as yet another principal player who, no less than the others, has his lists of people he wants demoted or promoted and lobbies for this’³⁵. There is no question that Gorky was adept at promoting the subtle patronage of close acquaintances, and especially prior to 1933 made the most of his unique position as the figurehead of Soviet literature to position his friends in prominent literary posts. However the authors’ designation of Gorky as a ‘supplicant’ and ‘yet another principal player’ dramatically underplays the influence of his work in shaping the emerging Stalinist culture from 1928 until 1932, a period in which he was able to act with a certain degree of autonomy (and certainly more so than any other public figure) in pursuing

³³ Ibid., p.xii

³⁴ Ibid., p.179

³⁵ Ibid., p.144

his literary ambitions. Gorky was not just ‘another’ principal player’ – along with Stalin he was *the* principal player in defining and composing Soviet literature.

The popular positioning of Gorky as a middleman between the intelligentsia and the regime removes agency from the author in the work he undertook in the initial years of his return. Another frequent allegation against Gorky, that he was merely a mouthpiece for the excesses of Stalinism, also persists. The propagandic nature of Gorky’s work following his return to the Soviet Union is dissected in Dariusz Tolczyk’s *See No Evil: Literary Cover-Ups and Discoveries of the Soviet Camp Experience* (1999). Tolczyk details the state’s attempts to justify and even celebrate its use of forced labour and concentration camps, using Gorky’s *Solovki* and editorship of *The White Sea – Baltic Canal: The History of Construction* as case studies. Identifying Gorky as leading the shift in tone from revolutionary discourse to pedagogic analysis, Tolczyk describes the author as presenting the state’s vision through ‘a literary illustration of a preconceived set of ideological visions’³⁶. By portraying conditions in the Solovki labour camp in the authoritative voice of objective journalism, Gorky removes any suggestion that his *Solovki* ocherk is a creative or even subjective form of writing; everything Gorky claims to have experienced is presented as factual. For Tolczyk, Gorky was keenly aware that he was intended to perceive and describe his return to the Soviet Union through the language dictated by Soviet authority, and successfully displayed his ‘intimate knowledge of this language long before he enters the reality described by it’³⁷.

Gorky’s aspiration towards an ‘objective’ portrayal of Soviet reality is further examined in Elizabeth Astrid Papazian’s *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture* (2009), in which the author describes the use of the documentary method as ‘not

³⁶ Tolczyk, D. (1999). *See No Evil: Literary Cover-Ups and Discoveries of the Soviet Camp Experience*. New Haven : Yale University Press. p.118

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.120

only... a pedagogical tool..., but as a tool for the dissemination and control of information and, eventually, as a tool for the re-writing of history'³⁸. Papazian describes the Gorky of 1928 as struggling with the 'crisis of realism'; how would the realist author adjust his art to align with the policies and ambitions of the burgeoning Soviet state? The documentary method was adopted by Gorky to present his realist depictions of the Soviet present as factually true, exploiting the 'documentary illusion of objectivity in order to convince readers that what they saw projected in the magic mirror was objectively 'real''³⁹. Citing a 1932 letter from Gorky to journalist Vassily Grossman, Papazian identifies the two 'truths' that Gorky established as inherent to the creative struggle; the truth of the past, which must be presented critically, and the truth of the future, to be affirmed.

The perception of Gorky as patron to the intelligentsia was popularised in the post-revolutionary period, as the author strove to protect and subsidise disenfranchised writers and artists from the excesses of the Bolshevik regime. In Sheila Fitzpatrick's *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organisation of Education and Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917 – 1921* (1970), Gorky's social and political position is juxtaposed with his erstwhile Capri School friend and colleague Anatoly Lunacharky; although viewed favourably by the intelligentsia (and occasionally embraced as one of their own), Lunacharsky considered himself primarily as a Bolshevik, whose sole loyalty was to the Party. Gorky meanwhile was vocal in his criticism of the new authorities, despite his friendship with Lenin, and was unmistakably a supporter of the intelligentsia. Following Gorky's departure from the Soviet Union in 1921, Lunacharsky would complain that the author was 'completely

³⁸ Papazian, E.A. (2009). *Manufacturing Truth: The Documentary Moment in Early Soviet Culture*. Northern Illinois University Press : DeKalb. p.16

³⁹ Ibid. pp.137-138

in the camp of the intelligentsia... siding with it in its grumbling, lack of faith and terror at the prospect of the destruction of valuable things under the blows of the Revolution'⁴⁰.

As the head of Narkompros, Lunacharsky's relationship with the old intelligentsia was, in Fitzpatrick's words, one of 'half lover and half commissar'⁴¹, and his perceived leniency towards 'class enemies' during the cultural revolution, when his promotion of state neutrality between competing factions in the arts was in direct contradiction of proletarian hegemony, would ultimately lead to his downfall. His resignation from Narkompros in 1929 came three months before Gorky's second return to the Soviet Union, when the latter would continue to assume the mantle as the 'father' of Soviet literature. Like Lunacharsky before him, Gorky was required to balance the dual roles of literary patron and state figurehead, an unenviable position that would see him derided by his long-term acquaintances in the intelligentsia and, by 1933, viewed with suspicion by the Party leadership.

The relationship between the Bolsheviks and the cultural intelligentsia prior to the cultural revolution is described as 'two competing elites, resentfully interdependent, jealously jockeying for position'⁴² in Sheila Fitzpatrick's *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (1992). Following the regime's decisive campaign against the intelligentsia from 1928, which was essentially a class war against those whose background and loyalty had previously been deemed of secondary importance to their expertise, Fitzpatrick identifies an unspoken 'deal' formed in the early 1930s that established the intelligentsia's 'loyalty and service to the regime in exchange for privilege and social status for themselves'⁴³. Indeed, membership of the Soviet Writers' Union would establish a salary

⁴⁰ Fitzpatrick, S. (1970). *The Commissariat of Enlightenment: Soviet Organisation of Education and the Arts Under Lunacharsky October 1917 – 1921*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. P.130

⁴¹ Ibid., p.129

⁴² Fitzpatrick, S. (1992). *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia*. London, Cornell University Press. p.6

⁴³ Ibid., p.9

and benefits for Soviet authors well above that of the general population, and perks such as the construction of the writers' dacha complex of Peredelkino (which both Gorky and Stalin originally opposed) bestowed a coveted quality of life for those who loyally served Soviet authority.

Fitzpatrick argues that while final authority in cultural politics was held by the Party (specifically Stalin and the Politburo), individuals such as Gorky, Stanislavsky and Pavlov were invested with a certain degree of autonomy within the cultural sphere, and at times the leadership could be deferential to the intelligentsia's expertise, in essence establishing a commonality of influence in the formation of Stalinist culture; 'as party values penetrated culture, the cultural values of the old intelligentsia were penetrating the party'⁴⁴. My study hopes to expand on Fitzpatrick's thesis, establishing for a brief period a collaborative campaign between both Gorky and the regime to forge a uniquely Soviet cultural identity, and the founding basis of Stalinism.

Conversely, popular accounts of this period still attempt to remove agency from Gorky's cultural and political activities post-1928. *The KGB's Literary Archive* (1995) details author Vitaly Shentalinsky's access to the Lubyanka archives following the collapse of the Soviet Union, where he was able to ascertain the fate of several members of the Soviet intelligentsia who had been swept up in Stalin's purges. The documents Shentalinsky was able to obtain on Gorky capture the duality of his public and personal personas, at once the feted head of Soviet literature while also a one-time vocal critic of the Bolshevik regime and its leaders, information previously withheld from his official biography. The second half of Shentalinsky's chapter on Gorky reveals the extent to which the author was monitored by the Soviet secret police following his departure for Europe in 1921. Allusions are made to his son

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.239

Maxim's involvement with the Cheka, and the role of his personal secretary Pyotr Kryuchkov in liaising with Yagoda and the OGPU is thoroughly detailed, both men monitoring Gorky's correspondence and exploiting the author for their own personal advancement. In Robert Conquest's introduction to the book, Gorky is depicted as having been 'bamboozled and bribed by Stalin into giving a spurious humanist glow to his rule'⁴⁵, a common assessment of the author that removes agency from his public pronouncements and blends into Shentalinsky's depiction of Gorky being controlled and manipulated by the shadowy forces of the OGPU/NKVD. My thesis will present a more nuanced interpretation of Gorky's actions upon his return to the Soviet Union and demonstrate that the author acted either through his own volition or in collaboration with the regime in pursuing his literary ambitions.

There is no shortage of memoirs on *Gorky*, most notably by Vladislav Khodasevich, Nina Berberova, Il'ya Shkapa and Romain Rolland. Both Khodasevich and Berberova provide remarkable insight into the author's mindset during his years in exile, though their impressions of Gorky's actions once he returns to the Soviet Union are somewhat tinged by their émigré perspective; much of the information that they discuss originates from the émigré press, and has since been proven to be skewed or simply false. Conversely, Shkapa may have been too close to Gorky to provide an objective analysis; having worked with the author for a number of years his admiration and respect is evident in his text, and even when discussing potentially awkward subjects, such as the inflammatory *If the Enemy Does Not Surrender, He Must be Destroyed* article, Shkapa is happy to accept Gorky's self-justification. Rolland's *Moscow Diary* is unquestionably the finest memoir on Gorky. Visiting the author near the end of his life, Rolland vividly describes Gorky's tragic daily

⁴⁵ Shentalinsky, V. (1995). *The KGB's Literary Archive*. Translated from the Russian, edited and annotated by John Crowfoot. Harvill Press : London. p.viii

existence, surrounded by a constant stream of visitors of whom he has little desire to see. It is the most insightful account of Gorky's final years.

Personal diary entries of Gorky's contemporaries are also particularly illuminating, not only in documenting the author's actions and private thoughts but also revealing a broader cultural perception of his newfound status as the public face of Soviet literature. Mikhail Prishvin and Kornei Chukovsky, for example, were both friendly with Gorky prior to his initial exile in 1921,

The mythic figure of Gorky looms large over the majority of biographical analyses of the author. During the Stalin era he was arguably the second most important public figure in the country, and long after his death he was continuously portrayed as the father of socialist literature. With the advent of *glasnost*' and the gradual opening of the state archives in the late 80s and early 90s, revelations about Gorky's relations with Stalin and Yagoda in particular appeared to sour the image of the author as a great humanitarian, and as a result objective analysis of Gorky's role in the development of Soviet culture became increasingly less common.

The contrasting understandings of Gorky's responsibility for the excesses of Stalinism play out in Russian literary discourse. In his chapter *Bitter Gorky*, Vyacheslav Petukh portrays Gorky as 'neither cunning, nor a villain... but a normal Russian idealist... selflessly devoted to Russian culture'⁴⁶. By this account, Gorky was seduced by the humanitarian potential of the emerging Soviet society and desired to play a role in shaping it. Dmitry Bykov counters this assessment in *Byl' Li, Gor'kii?* (2008), describing Gorky as a 'cold, bile, calculating man, and most importantly, completely incapable of simple and living human feelings'⁴⁷. Bykov's

⁴⁶ Petykj, V. (1991). *Rassuzhdeniya o Pisatelyakh*. Available at <http://modernproblems.org.ru/intellig/199-pieczuh.html?start=8> (Accessed December 12th 2018)

⁴⁷ Bykov, D. (2008). *Byl' Li, Gor'kii?*. Moskva, AST Astrel. p.121

monograph is an excellent analysis of Gorky's activities during his return to the Soviet Union, but it is unmistakably tinged with the author's negative judgment of the author's public actions and pronouncements; Bykov is unable to reconcile the Gorky that protested so passionately against the violence and cruelty of the Bolshevik regime in the post-revolutionary years with the same man who would glorify forced labour and mass executions following his return in 1928. By this account, Gorky was an avowed Stalinist; if he had opposed anything that he witnessed he would have protested publicly. Bykov interprets his silence as an understanding and acceptance of the nature of Stalin's dictatorship, which Gorky understood as a necessary component in the construction of the new Soviet citizen.

In his disdain for Gorky's actions Bykov occasionally makes minor factual errors to support his argument. For example, in discussing Gorky's silence following the arrest of both Kamenev and Zinoviev in 1935, Bykov claims that Gorky would not have felt compelled to comment as he regarded both men as personal opponents. Certainly, the author had an adversarial relationship with Zinoviev in 1921, as both men frequently clashed over Gorky's tireless efforts to petition on behalf of the intelligentsia. However, as we shall see Gorky enjoyed a close friendship with Kamenev dating back to the latter's spell as Soviet ambassador to Italy; they wrote regularly and even holidayed together. Gorky's silence following both Kamenev and Zinoviev's arrest speaks both to the author's diminished political standing at the beginning of 1935 as well as the overwhelming atmosphere of fear and suspicion following Kirov's murder, neither of which particularly fit with Bykov's assessment of Gorky as an unquestioned advocate of Stalin's line.

Likewise, other accounts fall too easily into the portrayal of Gorky as Stalin's willing, though often unwitting pawn, for example Sykhikh's *Zabluzhdenie I Prozrenie Maksima Gor'kogo* (2007). Sykhikh's work begins with a treatise on the contradictions of Gorky's character

before offering a comprehensive literary analysis of the author's final (and uncompleted) novel, *The Life of Klim Samgin*. In his assessment of Gorky's life post-1928, Sykhikh is heavily reliant upon memoirs of the author's former acquaintances. Quoting I.I. Manukhin, Gorky's morality is described as 'conditional... a superstructure that will have to be demolished as soon as they start erect the building of a socialist society'⁴⁸. This moral relativism, in Sykhikh's view, led Gorky to political fanaticism, allowing him to express unconditional support for the political violence of the regime while reconciling this with his own moral authority and aspirations for a utopian socialist society. Each of these biographies on Gorky make for illuminating and entertaining reading, but all too often lack nuance in their understandings of the author's motivations and personal projects. Unfortunately, most Russian biographies also lack referencing, making it extremely challenging for the curious reader to source certain quotes or allegations presented as fact.

There are comparatively few English language accounts of Gorky's life. Toyah Yedlin's *Gorky: A Political Biography* (1999) is perhaps the best source for the author's cultural and political activity, and Yedlin remains objective in her assessment of Gorky's actions, refusing to defend or denounce his actions towards the end of his life. Yedlin attempts to 'separate Gorky from the 'myth' of the man and... to present an honest portrayal of Gorky the political activist, with all his oscillations and inconsistencies'⁴⁹. The biography is an attempt to deconstruct the Gorky 'myth', with Yedlin identifying two 'camps' of Gorky analysis that emerged in Russia following the collapse of the Soviet Union; those who blamed the author for his role as Stalinist propagandist, and those who believed he was misled, or at least shielded from the reality of life in the Soviet Union while he simultaneously attempted to improve the living and working conditions for the literary intelligentsia. Ultimately Yedlin is

⁴⁸ Sykhikh, S.I. (2007) *Zabluzhdenie I Prozrenie Maksima Gor'kogo*. Povolzh'e, Nizhny Novgorod. P.71

⁴⁹ Yedlin, T. (1999). *Maxim Gorky: A Political Biography*. Connecticut, Praeger Publishers. p. xiv

unable to offer an authoritative alternative between these the two competing camps, concluding that while the facts of Gorky's life are larger known, the question of 'why?' will continue to intrigue scholars going forward.

Otherwise, the author is mostly granted cameo appearances in larger analyses of Stalin's life, for example in Kotkin's ongoing three-volume biography of the *vozhd*, and discussion of his role in Soviet society is generally framed within the context of other political figures. In other publications, such as Medvedev's *Let History Judge* (1989) and Tucker's *Stalin In Power*, the outsized influence of Nikolaevsky's *Letter of and Old Bolshevik* is clear, positioning Gorky as the leader of a reconciliatory faction working alongside Kirov and others to try and win the battle for Stalin's soul.

The volume of available literature on both Maxim Gorky and the construction of Soviet culture is vast and multi-faceted. My aim within this thesis is to present an understanding of Gorky not as a victim, or pawn, or tyrant, but as an autonomous, influential actor in the construction of both Soviet literature and Stalinism itself. Gorky used his considerable influence to pursue his cultural vision, and in both his work and his conception of the seismic social and political changes happening around him he helped shape the discourse of early Stalinism. His downfall, brought about through his personal connections to individuals suddenly regarded as enemies, was gradual, and came after the state had spent years carefully crafting the myth of Gorky. It was this myth that lent cultural legitimacy to Stalinism, and the regime would do whatever it took to maintain it, even after the author's death.

Chapter One

Contemplating His Return

There has been much speculation about the reasoning behind Gorky's decision to return to the Soviet Union, albeit on a temporary basis initially, given the comparatively comfortable life he appeared to live in Sorrento. Living with his son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren and surrounded by a constant stream of visitors from both Europe and the Soviet Union, Gorky's daily, regimented work routine was punctuated with excursions, games and the author's reminiscences of his pre-revolutionary contemporaries such as Chekhov and Tolstoy. Gorky had lived in exile in Italy prior to 1914, on the island of Capri, and formed the famous Capri School along with Anatoli Lunacharsky and Alexandr Bodganov, training underground Russian workers in political theory and disseminating social democratic literature and propaganda. Lenin strongly opposed the teachings of the school, and despite staying with Gorky on the island for a fortnight left without a full reconciliation. Although Gorky had been close to the leader their friendship had been strained by the factionalism of party politics following the 1905 revolution.

As the author grew increasingly disillusioned with the repressive measures implemented by the Bolsheviks following the October Revolution their relationship became increasingly fractured. Gorky's public status as patron to the intelligentsia in the post-revolutionary years had led him to clash with the regime on a number of occasions. His 1918 collection of essays, *Untimely Thoughts*, was highly critical of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, decrying the stifling of free speech and the excess of violence used to maintain social order. Gorky's journals were censored and then banned, and the author was criticised in the Bolshevik press by Stalin, Trotsky and Molotov. Clearly the will of the author and the demands of the regime were

incompatible. At Lenin's suggestion, Gorky moved to Europe in 1921 to attend to his ailing health. However this was generally understood as a tacit exile.

Despite their estrangement, the news of Lenin's death in January 1924 was greatly upsetting for Gorky. Writing three days after hearing the news, Gorky would write, 'I was very upset by the death of Lenin, although I expected it, of course. I am writing memories of him. I love this person tightly, and for me he has not died. He was a real, huge person, in his own way - an idealist. He loved his idea, it was his faith. It's a very large loss. I do not know what there is to fill and who will fill this gap'⁵⁰. There would be no shortage of overtures from the Soviet regime in the aftermath of Lenin's death. Replying to Rykov in 1924, Gorky politely declined the invitation while leaving the door open for an eventual return:

And thank you for the invitation to come to Russia, but I'll wait with that. First: I started writing a big story and I want to write a novel. It's easy to work here. And having moved home - no matter where - I will immediately be drawn into various "affairs", literary, cultural, tawdry. Complaints, tears and groans will pour down on me from all corners of the earth, water and air. I'm already fed up with this. I have never liked complaints, and in this direction my taste has not changed. No, I will wait to go home. After all, I am, first of all, a writer, and

I need a certain peace.⁵¹

It was clear however that Gorky was gradually becoming accustomed to the idea of visiting the burgeoning Soviet Union. Already in 1925, Gorky wrote to E. D. Kuskova:

Of course, I have never said to anyone that I would never return to Russia. Why not? My attitude towards the Soviet authorities is clear: I do not see, think, or wish any other

⁵⁰ Gor'kii, M. (2009) *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii: Pis'ma V Dvatsati Chetyrekh Tomakh. Tom. 14.* Nauka : Moskva p.295

⁵¹ Gor'kii, M. (2012) *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii: Pis'ma V Dvatsati Chetyrekh Tomakh. Tom. 15.* Nauka : Moskva p.37

power except Soviet power for the Russian people. I will probably go to Russia in 1926 when
I finish my novel.⁵²

Lidiya Spiridonova of the Gorky Archive places Gorky in the centre of a tug-of-war between two factions in the Politburo as early as 1927, hypothesising that both Stalin and his opponents believed that the author could be the key to deciding the balance of power, as Gorky's stature and influence would have a decisive factor both home and abroad in legitimising the leaders of government⁵³. Spiridonova points to the frequent communication from the likes of Kamenev, Bukharin and Rykov as an attempt to ingratiate themselves with Gorky, in particular a gift from Rykov delivered by Ganetsky during the final negotiations to bring the author home⁵⁴. It is unlikely however that Bukharin and Rykov were thinking along these lines as early as 1927, late as they were to recognise the threat Stalin's manoeuvring posed to them, and even by the time their relationship with Stalin deteriorated into outright hostility by mid-1928 the newly dubbed 'Rightists' viewed the dispute as one of policy rather than power. Furthermore, unlike Stalin each of the men had a personal relationship with Gorky dating back to at least 1921, and there is little evidence that they discussed factional politics. Only one letter in their combined correspondence containing political content prior to 1930 is a paragraph from Kamenev from September 1st 1927, in which he reassures Gorky not to be overly concerned by the reported division between the Left Opposition, of which Kamenev had formally been a member, and Stalin and Bukharin:

As for the Moscow business - do not indulge in melancholy. I look at the case like this: the undertaking that the Old Man (Lenin) started 10 years ago could not develop idyllically. The

⁵² Ibid, p.253

⁵³ Spiridonova, L. (1995) Gorky and Stalin (According to New Materials from A.M. Gorky's Archive). *Russian Review*. 54 (3). p.415

⁵⁴ An Old Bolshevik and friend of Lenin, Ganetsky was arrested and executed in 1937 after being accused of spying for Poland and Germany.

resistance of the “Caspian roach” (Trotsky) was to have an effect not only from the outside, but also from the inside. It cannot but develop in internal contradictions, struggle, etc. If we take the whole thing as a whole, we must be surprised how “okay” and “well” it is going.⁵⁵

Unfortunately Gorky’s initial letter to Kamenev prompting this reply has never been found.

If we are to take Gorky at face value, he was driven by a desire to see the new Russia and return to his homeland after an absence of seven years. In a letter to Bukharin in May 1925 Gorky claimed that the thought of Russian literature, in particular the new, post-revolutionary generation of Soviet writers, was enough to make him want to come home; however work on his new novel (the as-yet untitled *The Life of Klim Samgin*) required him to postpone his journey until the spring. It would be a further three years until his eventual return.

Writing to Khalatov at Gosizdat, Gorky for the first time announced that he was planning to return, outlining his vision for the visit:

I want to write a book about a new Russia. I have already accumulated a lot of interesting material for her. I need to go - invisible - to factories, clubs, villages, pubs, construction sites, Komsomol members, university students, schools in classes, colony for socially dangerous children, rabkor and selkor, look at women delegates, at Muslim women, etc. etc. This is a serious matter. When I think about it, the hair on my head moves with excitement.

Only a few months earlier however Gorky had offered up his desire to witness the new Soviet Union as precisely a reason not to visit, explaining to P.M. Kerzhentsev that his voracious desire to explore and interact (“I am a man greedy for people”⁵⁶) would only inhibit his

⁵⁵ Spiridonova, L. (Ed.) (2010). *Gorkii v Zerkale Epokhi: Neizdannaya Perekopka*. IMLI RAN : Moskva p.545

⁵⁶ Gor’kii, M. (2013) *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii: Pis’ma V Dvatsati Chetyrekh Tomakh. Tom. 16*. Nauka : Moskva. pp.275-276

ongoing work on *Klim Samgin*, and as such leaving Italy was an impossibility. With the publication of the first part of the novel in December 1927 this obstacle was overcome.

As a suspected Bolshevik sympathiser, life for Gorky in Mussolini's Italy was becoming increasingly repressive, with his home subject to sporadic raids by the local militia and his mail monitored and often withheld altogether. The rise of the far-right across Europe depressed Gorky, and further pushed the author to cast his eyes homeward; writing to Romain Rolland in July 1925, in despair at the 'endless drama' and growing xenophobia throughout the continent, Gorky opined, 'Moscow is prophetically right and we need to follow her'⁵⁷.

The author also appears to have had a nagging premonition of being rendered irrelevant by the achievements of a new generation of Soviet authors. No longer as popular in the West as he once was, he viewed with envy the acclaim being directed towards NEP-era literature. Nina Berberova, who along with her partner Vladislav Khodasevich lived with Gorky in Sorrento between 1924 and 1926, depicted his growing anxiety that he was being left behind:

Now it was becoming clear: only there (in Russia) lived people fundamentally like him, only there could he save himself from oblivion as a writer, from loneliness, from problems of money. The fear of losing readers there grew in him. With anxiety he listened to tales about how there authors were writing under the influence of Pilniak, of Mayakovsky. He feared that he would suddenly come to be necessary to no one.⁵⁸

Financial Concerns

⁵⁷ Mikhailov, A.D. (1995) *M. Gor'kii i R. Rollan: Perepiska (1916 – 1936)*. Hasledie : Moskva. pp.128-129

⁵⁸ Berberova, N. N. (2005). *Moura: The Dangerous Life of the Baroness Budberg*. New York Review of Books : New York. p.190.

Spending between 10-12 hours a day working on *Klim Samgin* left Gorky with little time to dedicate towards writing articles and criticism for both the European and Soviet press, cutting off a crucial means of income at a time when his finances were already looking precarious. Certainly, those closest to the author believed that he was driven to return to his homeland as a result of his diminishing wealth. Berberova described a perfect storm of financial instability and calamity that left the author exposed to the advances emanating from the Soviet Union; the death of Alexander Parvus in 1924 and thus the end of his outstanding debt repayments, the dwindling of interest in his fiction across Europe, and the banning of his journal *Beseda* in the Soviet Union⁵⁹ which ultimately led to the publication's demise. Gorky's fluid and expanding retinue that converged upon his villa in Sorrento was largely dependent on his hospitality and generosity, none more so than his son Maxim, daughter-in-law Nadezhda (known affectionately as Timosha within the family's inner circle) and their children. Maxim had developed a reputation as a frivolous and immature young man, gentle, fun-loving and obsessed with fast cars, and Gorky was frequently exhorted by his ex-wife Ekaterina Peshkova to bring their son back to the Soviet Union so that he could begin to build a career for himself and a future for his young family. Both parents also held concerns over Maxim's drinking.

While Gorky himself lived comparatively modestly, much of his income was diverted towards his permanent and visiting houseguests and the elaborate lifestyle to which they had become accustomed, as well as a regular stream of petitioners who benefited from Gorky's inability to refuse financial assistance.⁶⁰ Bruce Lockhart noted a conversation with Moura Budberg in 1930 in which she described Gorky as now poor, a result of having 'given all his

⁵⁹ Berberova (2005) p.194

⁶⁰ Khodasevich, V. F., & Vitali, S. (2019). *Necropolis*. Columbia University Press : New York. pp.210-211

money away'⁶¹. Budberg is also quoted by Khodasevich as laying out the precarious exterior that Gorky and his inner circle had to display to the Bolsheviks in order to preserve their financial security:

We need no less than ten thousand dollars a year; foreign publishers alone can't give us that much, and if Alexei Maximovich should lose his position as the premier writer of the Soviet republic then they won't pay him anything at all. And Alexei Maximovich himself would be unhappy if some incautious act should spoil his autobiography... For the good of Alexei Maximovich and the whole family he has to stay on good terms with the Bolsheviks. In fact, he has to do everything in his power to improve relations. "This," she added significantly, "is essential to us all."⁶²

Much of Gorky's correspondence with his personal secretary Petr Kryuchkov related to his ongoing concerns with money, with Gorky completely reliant on the latter's management of his financial affairs. Kryuchkov had been introduced to the author by Maria Andreeva, Gorky's former partner, in 1922, and would become an indispensable and ubiquitous figure in his life. Writing to Kryuchkov in August 1927, Gorky said "I am very pleased with your intention to send a lot of money in September at once, this will finally calm me down."⁶³

The author's financial woes were known to Soviet authorities. Gorky's Soviet biographer, I.A. Gruzdev, would later tell Vyacheslav Ivanov (son of Gorky's friend and colleague Vsevolod Ivanov) that the author's primary motive for returning was financial, citing 'archival material' that revealed the extent of Gorky's bottomless bank account in the Soviet

⁶¹ Lockhart, R.H.B. (1973). *The Diaries of Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart*. MacMillan : London

⁶² Berberova (2005) p.182

⁶³ Gorkii, M. (2014) *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii: Pis'ma V Dvatsati Chetyrekh Tomakh. Tom. 17*. Nauka : Moskva. p.21

Union⁶⁴. Gorky's friends and former colleagues within the Soviet Union also attempted to support the author financially. Upon learning of Gorky's plight literary editor Alexander Voronsky was able to successfully petition Pravda for an advance of a thousand roubles to be sent to the author for a selection of his works:

Not content with this, I turned to the Central Committee of the party and, in particular, to J.V. Stalin, who passed a resolution that (Gosizdat) sent Gorky, I think, 10,000 rubles, on account of the reprint of his collected works⁶⁵.

Thus even before his first return to the Soviet Union Gorky would find himself unwittingly in Stalin's debt.

Personal ambitions and financial concerns aside, there was a swell of correspondence from within the Soviet Union imploring Russia's most famous contemporary author to return to his native land and both receive the adulation that he deserved and guide a new generation of young Soviet writers. Gorky was also pressured from an unlikely external source, the émigré community who were closely monitoring the author's gradual rapprochement with the Soviet authorities. Speculation was rife within the émigré press that Gorky was desperately trying to avoid returning to his homeland, and this only heightened when he missed the tenth anniversary of the October revolution through illness. An article appeared in *Vozrozhdeniye* just prior to the October celebrations accusing Gorky of feigning illness to avoid having to attend ('Gorky has enviable health. It comes to his aid whenever he needs not to go somewhere'⁶⁶); in fact the author had been seriously ill with inflammation of his right lung,

⁶⁴ Ivanov, V.V. (1993) *Pochemu Stalin Ubil Gor'kogo?*, *Voprosy Literaturny. 1993 – No.1. pp.91 -134*. Accessed online 10/11/2017. <https://voplit.ru/article/pochemu-stalin-ubil-gorkogo/>

⁶⁵ Gor'kii M. (2014) p.342

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 436 - 437

which both he and Max thought may prove fatal⁶⁷. Regardless, Gorky was well aware of the implication that he was manufacturing excuses to avoid returning to Russia.

First Jubilee and The Cult of Gorky

September 1927 saw the beginning of celebrations across the Soviet Union to mark the 35th year of Gorky's literary activity, and on November 17th a Politburo commission was established to prepare for the celebration of the author's forthcoming 60th birthday on March 28th 1928. Included on the commission were Bukharin, Lunacharsky, Khalatov, Skvortsov-Stepanov, Tomsy, Smidovich, Pokrovsky and Ganetsky, and it was to be promoted as an ongoing public event by *Pravda*, *Izvestiia* and Gosizdat⁶⁸. In the years that followed Gorky would frequently be depicted by his contemporaries as vain and hungry for adulation, yet the irritation and embarrassment with which he met the news of the forthcoming celebrations demonstrate the discomfort he undoubtedly felt at his ongoing lionisation in the Soviet press. Gorky was first informed of the Politburo's plans by Khalatov in a letter dated November 18th 1927, and by the end of the month he campaigned passionately for the anniversary to be cancelled, or at the very least postponed until he had produced work he himself deemed worthy of celebrating. Writing to Skvortsov-Stepanov, Gorky pleaded for the committee to halt their plans:

With horror I read the message about the anniversary committee published in *Izvestia*. In the name of all people prematurely and innocently killed by anniversaries, I conjure: do not do this! For this will turn me into the most unfortunate victim of public attention and will decisively and irreparably ruin my trip to the Soviets... let's liquidate this committee,

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.85

⁶⁸ Artizov, A. and Naumov, O. (1999). *Vlast' i Khudozhestvennaya Intellegentsiya: Dokumenty TsK RKP(B) - VKP(B), VChK – OGPU – NKVD o kul'turnoi politike 1917 – 1953*. MFD : Moskva. p.79

announcing that at the request of the accused and in anticipation of his further actions, the case against him has been postponed for ten years.⁶⁹

Further letters to the commission organizers, including Rykov, went largely ignored, and planning pressed ahead in Moscow without Gorky's input. The reason for Gorky's displeasure was twofold; as well as being personally uncomfortable with the level of adulation soon to be foisted upon him, which he felt was unnecessary and undeserved, he was concerned that his heightened level of visibility and celebrity would interfere with his recently announced plans to return to the Soviet Union. Gorky wished to visit as an observer, to experience daily life and converse with ordinary people without the burden of public laudation, and in his letters he discussed travelling in disguise so that people would interact with him naturally and honestly, rather than attempting to 'show themselves as clever'⁷⁰.

To coincide with the celebration Gosizdat also prepared to publish an "Uncollected Works" compilation, again much to Gorky's vexation; 'one should ask: does the author want to see them published? This has not been done. And since I do not know what exactly is supposed to be published, I strongly protest against the publication.'⁷¹ Yet as with the birthday celebrations, Gorky's protests were largely ignored, as was his demand in March that the title of 'Honoured Writer', with which he learned had been bestowed upon him when reading the Italian press, should be revoked. In a letter to Khalatov in early March 1928, Gorky stated not only his embarrassment at the situation but also his fear that his incessant glorification would breed envy and resentment among equally worthy writers in the Soviet Union⁷².

Unfortunately for the author this would prove to be prophetic, as he would soon receive information that Gosizdat had informed young authors that no fiction would be published in

⁶⁹ Gor'kii (2014), pp.99-100

⁷⁰ Ibid. p.100

⁷¹ Ibid. pp.113-114

⁷² Ibid. p.237

1928 due to their entire stock of paper being allocated exclusively to printing both Gorky and Tolstoy's anniversary editions⁷³. In response to a letter from novice author A. Yanin, which stated that 'hundreds of young Russian beginners cry and endure terrible torments' as a result of being unable to secure an income, Gorky stated that he solely blamed the organizers of the anniversary committee for these young writers' predicament⁷⁴.

The deification of Gorky continued unabated. In anticipation of the author's impending return Bukharin used his platform at *Pravda* to pay tribute to his friend and future colleague:

With all his great gifts, (Gorky) can fill an enormous gap. He is awaited, as their very own creative artist, by this Soviet Union of ours, our working class, our Party with whom Gorky was connected over many, many years. This is why we eagerly await his arrival. He is coming to us to do a job, to do a great and good, glorious job of work.⁷⁵

The sudden mass celebration of Gorky's achievements appeared excessive to the author's contemporaries living in Moscow. Mikhail Prishvin complained of the impossibility of having anything published in connection with him due to being 'flattened by Gorky's glory'⁷⁶:

Five years ago Gorky was celebrating the 35th anniversary of his writing activities, and the celebrations went like so: discussions, and nothing else. Now he is 60 years old, and suddenly they have forgotten his recent arguments with the Bolsheviks and decided to ring all the bells.

⁷³ Ibid. p.729

⁷⁴ Ibid. pp.314-315

⁷⁵ Medvedev, R.A. (1980) *Nikolai Bukharin: The Last Years*. New York, W.W. Norton. p.57

⁷⁶ Prishvin, M. M. (1905 – 1954). *Dnevnik (January 10th 1928)*. Available at <https://prozhito.org/person/56> (Accessed 20th November 2017).

Portraits, meetings greetings. The hero of the day, close to, of course, not only Tolstoy or Turgenev, but even Chekov⁷⁷.

The deification of Gorky, essentially amounting to seven months of celebrations in his name, would be excessive for any author, let alone one living in exile after leaving in acrimonious circumstances. Yet the regime, and Stalin in particular, were increasingly anxious to appropriate any measure of cultural authority upon themselves, and in transforming Gorky's jubilee and birthday into a nationwide mass movement they pre-emptively anointed him as the most esteemed of Soviet authors. His return to the Soviet Union, arranged and supported by the Party, would automatically bestow legitimacy on the state in the eyes of a population complicit in the construction of the myth of Gorky.

Chekists

The role of the Cheka/OGPU in the author's return to the Soviet Union has long been questioned. Following Gorky's emigration in October 1921, the OGPU continued compiling reports on him throughout the duration of his exile, taking a dim view of the author's association with anti-Soviet bodies such as the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs). Evidence would suggest that the agency used its substantial resources to surround Gorky with influential voices enticing him to return home, including within his own family. Shentalinsky has Maxim working for Dzerzhinsky and writing to Lenin describing Gorky's shift to the left and disputes with the SRs ('Papa is beginning to reform')⁷⁸, though no date is given. He notes that from the Lubyanka files it is apparent that the OGPU had been monitoring Gorky from at least 1922, with the apparent consent of both Lenin and

⁷⁷ Shits, I.I. (1928 – 1931) *Dnevnik*. Available at <https://prozhito.org/person/80> (Accessed 12th January 2018)

⁷⁸ Shentalinsky, V. (1995). P.227

Dzerzhinsky. Bykov asserts that Maxim was a OGPU agent while staying with his father in Italy.⁷⁹ Khodasevich also alleges that Maxim had worked for the Cheka during the civil war and was invited by Dzerzhinsky to re-join the service in 1925. By his account, Gorky recognised this overture to his son as an attempt to lure the author back to the Soviet Union and ordered Maxim to reject the offer⁸⁰. Khodasevich blames Maxim's ties to the secret police for his own estrangement from Gorky.

The OGPU was monitoring Gorky's mail and collecting documents on his friends and correspondents. The author's visitors in Sorrento were also tracked; an OGPU report uncovered in another writer's file reveals the extent to which the secret police concerned themselves with outside influences on the author:

Great attention should be paid to those whom Gorky has invited to visit him abroad in Sorrento. It is very likely that here also a certain number of enemies have wormed their way in, deceiving an honest and open-hearted old man. I know of one such 'visitor', invited to Italy by Gorky, from the words of P.P. Kryuchkov: Zubakin B.M., an unsuccessful poet and, it seems, historian of religion.⁸¹

The language of this missive is important; the description of Gorky as an 'honest and open-hearted old man' deceived and taken advantage of by enemies of Soviet power would appear repeatedly in the interrogation protocols and trial transcripts of Gorky's former friends and colleagues, accused of the author's murder.

Coincidentally or otherwise, Gorky's first correspondence with Genrikh Yagoda began on 30th March 1928, with Gorky requesting his help in securing the amnesty of childrens' author

⁷⁹ Bykov, D. (2008).p.274

⁸⁰Khodasevich, V.F. (1936). *O Smerti Gor'kogo*. Available at http://dugward.ru/library/hodasevich/hodasevich_o_smerti_gorkogo.html (Accessed 10th June 2020)

⁸¹ Shentalinsky (1995) p.251

Bianki, who has been exiled to Uralsk, and to facilitate the request of Ustimovich, a worker in the literary archives of the Pushkin museum who had written to Gorky regarding his condition, though the original letter has never been found⁸². Bianki would soon be released thanks to Gorky's petitioning⁸³. As will be addressed in a later chapter, questions also remain as to whether the author's secretary Kryuchkov was an OGPU informer; the evidence would appear to suggest that he was at the very least a conduit between Gorky and the Soviet leadership, informing Stalin and Kaganovich of the author's moods and movements. Finally, there is the question of the author's relationship with Moura Budberg, Gorky's unofficial 'third wife' who served the author's occasional translator and agent. She was also widely suspected of being a double agent for British intelligence and the OGPU. Of the eight people listed in Kryuchkov's 1937 interrogation file whom he incriminated as being part of an anti-Soviet plot, only Budburg escaped arrest, and her name was not mentioned at Kryuchkov's trial⁸⁴.

Gorky was conscious of the perception that he was being guided by malignant forces. Writing to his first wife (and mother of Maxim) Ekaterina Peshkova six weeks after Lenin's death, the author attempted to assert his own autonomy:

It is time, I think, to stop talking about my being under someone's influence. People should remember that I am 55 and have a very considerable experience of my own... If I had really been susceptible to influence then long ago I would have submitted to Vladimir Ilych who was superb at influencing others and today I would be dining on diamonds, running around with ballerinas, and riding about town in the best automobiles⁸⁵.

⁸² Gor'kii (2014) p.283

⁸³ Ibid. pp.694-695

⁸⁴ Shentalinksy (1995) p.254

⁸⁵ Gor'kii, M. (2009) *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii: Pis'ma V Dvatsati Chetyrekh Tomakh. Tom. 14*. Nauka : Moskva. p.307

Unbeknownst to Gorky, it would only be a few years before he would find himself at home in the Soviet Union with a lifestyle of incomparable luxury to the rest of the population.

The links with Yagoda and the OGPU at this stage of Gorky's life are important in the broader context of his relationship with the regime and the security services in the years following his return to the Soviet Union. Stalin was able to successfully implement his radical shift to the left in large part due to the support of the OGPU/NKVD, and much of Gorky's work from 1928 onwards was composed in praise of Yagoda's 'Chekists', portrayed as iron-disciplined teachers of the righteous path of socialist construction. Their role is indelibly bound in the preservation of Stalin's rule, and they would carry out the very worst excesses in his name.

The Shakhty Affair

By the time Gorky had decided to return home in October 1927 the Bolsheviks were consumed by internal factional dispute, culminating in the dissolution of the United Opposition at the Fifteenth Party Congress in December and the expulsion of Trotsky, Zinoviev and Kamenev from the party. In January 1928 a schism in the party over the collectivization of agriculture exposed the first frailties in Stalin's political alliance with the Rightists (as they would come to be known), as Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsy cautioned against militarised grain requisition that echoed the civil war tactics of war communism (although both sides agreed on the need for a certain degree of collectivised agriculture). Stalin, as depicted by Khlevniuk, was still uncertain about the direction of the struggle within the Politburo, as even those who could be reasonably described as Stalinists (Molotov, Voroshilov, Ordzhonikidze and Mikoyan) were unlikely at this stage to support an abandonment of collective leadership in favour of sole dictatorship through Stalin. Even in

early 1928 Ordzhonikidze sought to reunify the Politburo, attempting to bridge the divide between the Right and Stalin in a letter to Rykov:

Any more fighting within the party is bound to lead to unbelievably bitter upheavals. That has to be our starting point. I am absolutely convinced that we'll get over this. In terms of grain and other issues, we can argue and decide, but it shouldn't lead to fighting... It seems the relationship between Stalin and Bukharin has really deteriorated, but we need to do everything possible to reconcile them. It can be done.⁸⁶

It wasn't until March 10th 1928 however that these intraparty tensions would escalate into a factional split; The Shakhty Plot uncovered by the secret police allegedly discovered treasonous relations between the bourgeois, non-party specialists working in the Donbass and foreign powers determined to sabotage and overthrow the Soviet regime. The Shakhty show trial, which received enormous press attention in both the Soviet Union and abroad (and was clearly a fix-up from the beginning) would be used by Stalin as means to accuse the nonparty intelligentsia as inherently disloyal to the state, igniting mass denunciations and arrests across all sectors of Soviet society. Reviving the old party ethos of 'self-criticism', Stalin launched a campaign against 'bureaucratism' and 'conservative tendencies' within the state apparatus, exposing and removing any opponents to Stalin's general line and consolidating his influence throughout the Party structure. Speaking at the 8th Congress of the Komsomol in May 1928, Stalin stated, "The chief task now is to start a broad tide of criticism from below against bureaucracy in general, against the shortcomings of our work in particular"⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Khlevniuk, O. V. (2015). *Stalin: New Biography of a Dictator*. Yale University Press : New Haven. pp.106-107

⁸⁷ Stalin, J. (1928) *Speech Delivered at the Eighth Congress of the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League*. Available at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1928/05/16.htm> (Accessed 2nd February 2021)

Stalin described Shakhty as “an attempt at economic intervention”⁸⁸ by the Western imperialist powers, framing the conspiracy within the wider context of international subterfuge at a time when tensions with the capitalist nations were intensifying. A joint plenum of the Central Committee and Central Control Commission in April 1928 voted for a resolution committing the Soviet Union towards the preparation for foreign intervention and possible war on its own soil.

The trial began on May 18th 1928, just eleven days before Gorky’s long-awaited arrival, and lasted forty one days, concluding on July 7th. It was the largest, most spectacular show trial in the country’s short history. Bukharin, Tomsy and Rykov were generally supportive of the campaign against the Shakhty engineers, but in ceding control of the narrative to Stalin and condemning the bourgeois specialists in return for a temporary relaxation of the ongoing grain procurement drive, they were unknowingly contributing to their own defeat in the battle for policy that would rage behind the scenes for the next year and a half.

In a speech from the joint plenum of the Central Committee and the Central Control Commission published in early April 1928, Stalin, without irony, celebrated the end of internal party disputes, and promoted the practice of self-criticism as a necessity for party unity and growth, though avoiding the ‘malicious’ criticism of the former oppositionists. Especially important, in Stalin’s view, was the development of open communication between the masses and the leadership to foster an environment whereby the party elite can be criticised by those below them without fear of reprisal, lest the leaders ‘become arrogant and feel themselves infallible’. Taking subtle aim at those who might wish to downplay the frenzied claims of conspiracy and sabotage by the bourgeois specialists (“Have you noticed that not only the Shakhty affair, but also the procurement crisis by January 1928 came as a

⁸⁸ Kotkin, S. (2015). *Stalin Volume I: Paradoxes of Power, 1878 – 1928*. Penguin Press : London. p.698

"surprise" for many of us?"), Stalin also equated a policy of appeasement towards the bourgeoisie (and by extension opponents of Stalin's line) as a betrayal of socialism, taking aim at 'whole groups of military specialists, generals and officers, sons of the bourgeoisie and landowners... always ready to dig under the very foundations of Soviet power.'⁸⁹

The speech outlined not only the terms of engagement in Stalin's battle with the 'Rightists' over the next year and a half, as Bukharin, Tomsky and Rykov would find themselves subject to an onslaught of abuse within their own departments as well as the Soviet press under the guise of 'Bolshevik criticism', it also foreshadowed the accusations of conspiracy with foreign nations that Bukharin and Rykov would ultimately be charged with. For Gorky, he now found himself returning home in the midst of a bitter factionalist dispute coordinated by Stalin that would publicly demonise those in the Party to whom he was closest. He would spend the next several years attempting to bring the likes of Bukharin, Tomsky and Kamenev back into the cultural fold, a patronage network that would eventually bring distrust and disfavour upon the author.

The Kamenevs

Gorky's friendship with Bukharin in many ways mirrored his relationship with another condemned oppositionist, Lev Kamenev. Unfortunately, as with Bukharin, the Gorky – Kamenev correspondence is fragmented. There are currently 26 letters from Gorky and 37 from Kamenev, but only nine pairs forming a letter-and-answer. From November 1923 until August 1932 there isn't a single letter from Gorky to Kamenev, while during this period Kamenev sends 14, leading the Gorky archivists to conclude that the missing correspondence

⁸⁹ *Pravda* (April 14th 1928). Available at <https://www.eastview.com/resources/gpa/pravda/> Accessed 12th March 2018

was most likely seized from Kamenev's personal archive during his arrest and house-search in 1932 following the exposure of the Ryutin Affair⁹⁰. It is possible that items were also removed from Gorky's archive. Nina Berberova claims that when Gorky lived in Sorrento he had a separate box of letters from correspondents across Europe and the Soviet Union that could have been considered 'counter-revolutionary', including several from Kamenev, referred to obliquely as a 'Soviet plenipotentiary living in Italy'⁹¹. By Berberova's account Gorky was talked out of burning the letters and sent them to London, only for them to eventually be delivered into the hands of the NKVD by Moura Budberg immediately after the author's death. This rumour persists to this day, although the letters have yet to emerge from either the Gorky or Lubyanka archives.

In the period immediately after the October Revolution both Gorky and Kamenev were involved in supporting struggling authors and artists with food and clothing, and both were troubled by the increasingly violent measures of the Cheka (though Gorky more vociferously). Although Gorky's letters from the period are missing we can see from Kamenev's correspondence that they kept in semi-regular contact following the author's exile, as he sought Gorky's input on the publication of Lenin's life works and correspondence. Their friendship developed in 1927 when Kamenev, who had just been expelled from the Politburo, was briefly appointed as a Soviet plenipotentiary to Italy. During this time Kamenev visited Gorky twice in Sorrento⁹², staying in his villa for several 'absolutely wonderful'⁹³ days on each occasion. Kamenev would also arrange for special packages of Russian food to be delivered to Gorky, personally process a travel visa for Kryuchkov and in his letters would always enquire with familiarity about the author's

⁹⁰ Spiridonova, L. (Ed.) (2010) p.530

⁹¹ Berberova, N. (2005).pp.232-235

⁹² Spiridonova (Ed.) (2010). p540

⁹³ Ibid. P.543

extended family⁹⁴. Gorky's correspondence with Glebova-Kamenev, Kamenev's wife, during this period is playful and flirtatious, and the level of humour and familiarity are not echoed in Gorky's other letters of this time outside of family members⁹⁵. Evidently Kamenev and Gorky had become very close.

Kamenev's post in Italy was short-lived, and after his capitulation to Stalin at the 15th Party Congress in December 1927 both he and Zinoviev were sentenced to internal exile in Kaluga, approximately one hundred miles from Moscow. With Gorky's letters from this period absent we have no way of knowing how frequently, or indeed if at all, he initiated written communication with Kamenev, but from the two letters sent from Kaluga we can assume that he kept in contact, and reference is made to a phone call between them. Kamenev's first letter, from April 7th, 1928, has a resigned, self-mocking tone, and describes the local features of his new town of residence where both he and Zinoviev live on the outskirts⁹⁶. He invites Gorky to come and visit him, although at this point the writer was still permanently based in Italy. Kamenev's second letter, from the end of June, is written as Gorky is halfway through his triumphant tour of the Soviet Union, and as Kamenev invites him again to visit Kaluga he gently pokes fun at the adulation bestowed upon the author at his every destination:

We guarantee: 1) the absence of meetings, rallies, greetings, noise, drumming, etc. etc. (Kamenev's son) is screaming, but not very loud. 2) quiet and peaceful conversation in the forest on the banks of the Oka River... Come here even for a day. I think, after our telephone conversation, that you owe me this debt. Let us recall the hard days in St. Petersburg. Hard, but of course, good too. I want to see and talk to you terribly. The ride is seven hours (you can sleep). And here just now it is nice and quiet.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Ibid, pp.541-543

⁹⁵ Gor'kii (2014), pp.33-34

⁹⁶ Ibid, p.551

⁹⁷ Ibid, p.554

This is the last known letter between Kamenev and Gorky until 1932, and was sent only a month before Kamenev would find himself embroiled in yet another Kremlin power struggle, detailed in the next chapter.

Gorky's link to the Kamenevs (and indeed Bukahrin and Rykov) would become important as his relationship with Stalin developed and eventually deteriorated. The *vozhd* retained a deep suspicion of pre-existing and potentially factional relationships, and if he was prepared to overlook Gorky's social 'transgressions' in this matter while working with the author in constructing socialist culture, the aftermath of the Kirov murder left no scope for past networks to be ignored.

Rapprochement with the Regime

Not long after Gorky's decision to return to Russia the author began to pivot in his writing towards open support of the Soviet regime and hostility towards its avowed enemies, while fighting back against claims in the émigré community that life in the Soviet Union was one of deprivation and repression. In his article *On the New and the Old*, published in October 1927, Gorky positioned the Soviet Union as the beacon of hope for world civilization, placing the responsibility on women to educate their children on the evils of a capitalist system determined to manufacture a new war against the working people. Gorky acknowledged certain hardships while simultaneously dismissing them as ultimately irrelevant:

Maybe in the old days cabbage soup was sometimes fatter, but people were not smarter than they are today, when they begin to understand that for a good life it is necessary that everyone be equal and complete masters of it⁹⁸.

⁹⁸ Gor'kii, M (1953) *Sobranie Sochinenii v Tridtsati Tomakh*. Khudozhestvennoi Literatury : Moskva. p.298

His article *Ten Years*, also published in October 1927 in both Pravda and the Manchester Guardian, is both a celebration of the achievements of the October Revolution and a refutation of the Bolsheviks' critics, and revisits and expands upon the themes of *The New and the Old*:

The Russian worker earns for himself not miserable, beggarly food, as it was before - he earns himself the state. He feels that he is gradually becoming the master of his country and the leader of the peasantry on the path to freedom.

Addressing his critics who say he is simply offering up blind praise to the Bolsheviks, Gorky agrees, writing that he has never encountered people 'who love and know how to work as real heroes, people who set themselves the goal of freeing all human forces for creativity, for decorating our land, for organizing forms of life worthy of a person'. The émigré community, embittered by the successes of the regime, have 'not lost the hope of provoking an invasion of foreigners into Russia', and all criticism of the system from out with and wrecking from within the Soviet Union can be attributed to individuals desperately clinging to the fading legacy of capitalism⁹⁹.

If the Gorky in these two articles is defiant and combative then he was somewhat more subdued when discussing his gradual shift from opposition to support for the Bolshevik regime in his personal correspondence. Writing to *Izvestiya* editor (and early supporter of Stalin) Ivan Skvortsov-Stepanov on October 15th, he attempts to justify his earlier position on the revolution by framing it within a wider concern for the working class at large and his doubts (which he points out were shared by many) over Lenin's ability to lead them through the chaos of anarchy and civil war. Gorky assures Skvortsov-Stepanov that his attempts to understand his own trepidation ten years earlier are only to help the author work through a

⁹⁹ Ibid. pp. 285-293

process of self-examination, and are not intended for a wider audience beyond this ‘old comrade’.¹⁰⁰ To the readers of émigré journal *Rul’*, which had published a skeptical response to Gorky’s *Ten Years* article, the author was much more blunt; ‘Why am I now saying something different from what I said in 1917? The answer is: in 1917 I was wrong.’¹⁰¹

Gorky’s flippancy opened the author up to justified accusations of hypocrisy. One correspondent asked why if the author hated the Bolsheviks so much while he lived among them, ‘then why, being abroad, getting acquainted with the life of Soviet Russia through the newspapers, did you suddenly inflame with such ardent love for us?’¹⁰² An article in *Rul’*, *Answer to Gorky*, in December 1927, continued the theme:

You live in fascist Italy and write revolutionary letters to us. Your words sound not only like mockery, but also testify that among the bloody hands flashing in the darkness of our life, yours are also working (...) What evolution did you have to go through so that, indignant at all this 10 years ago, you now praise and greet the creators of such a regime and the guardians of a terrible prison.¹⁰³

That Gorky so readily pronounced the achievements of the Soviet Union while harbouring a certain degree of self-doubt on his *volte-face* is indicative of his plans for the framing of socialist culture. By adopting a tone of relentless positivity, contrasting the success of the Soviet Union with life in the decadent west and echoing the war-scare rhetoric of the regime Gorky laid the foundations of early Stalinism in both the Soviet and western press. That he was willing to do so while still living abroad was remarkable.

Planning Ahead

¹⁰⁰ Gor’kii (2014) pp.58-59

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, p.425

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p.445

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, p.492

Gorky remained well-informed of developments in Soviet literature and publishing, relying on Kryuchkov to forward him as many Soviet journals as was possible. Over time the author developed a written correspondence with Gosizdat chief Artemic Khalatov, and although genial in tone Gorky frequently chided the literary apparatchik for his publishing policy, which the author felt over-looked beginner Russian authors in favour of cheap translations. He also insisted that there should be increased focus on the moral degeneration of the West, contrasted with the achievements of the Soviet Union; Gorky would eventually launch his own journal, *Abroad*, with that very aim in mind¹⁰⁴. In January 1927 the author proposed another work that would come to dominate his early literary activity upon his return. Writing to Konstantin Maltsev, editor of *Rabochnaya Gazeta*, Gorky formulates his idea for what would soon become one of the driving passions of his life in the Soviet Union, *Our Achievements*;

It seems to me that the editorial board of *Rabochaya Gazeta*, which seems to have worked well together, should have published a two-month or monthly edition, *Our Achievements*. The title of the journal accurately answers the question about its program and content. I think that this journal should have the following departments: Achievements of science: in all fields, especially in medicine, chemistry and mechanics; Achievements of technology - also in all areas of it; Workers inventors; Development of construction in the city, in the countryside; Simplification of the state apparatus; Cooperation; Growth of agricultural culture; Achievements of local history - this includes the discoveries of valuable minerals, archaeological finds, etc.; Achievements in the liberation of women, especially Muslim women and women of foreign tribes in general, the speed of her emancipation is absolutely amazing; The growth of the press as an indicator of the growth of interest in life; Facts of personal labor efforts and exploits, the manifestation of personal initiative in creating a new

¹⁰⁴ Gor'kii (2014). pp. 121-124

way of life, etc.; Reviews of poetry and prose outstanding writers-workers; Foreign press about cultural achievements in the Union of Soviets; Etc. ¹⁰⁵

Gorky also drew attention to the work of Anton Makarenko, leading Soviet pedagogue and head of the children's reform school in Bolshevo. The author had maintained written correspondence with Makarenko since 1925 and remained fascinated by educational work with former street-children, the beginnings of his later focus on re-education and *perekovka* demonstrated in his 1928 *Solovki ocherk*, and more famously in his work on the collective publication documenting the White Sea – Baltic Canal project. Writing again to Skvortsov-Stepanov, Gorky implored *Izvestia* to take a closer look at Makarenko's methods:

The enclosed letter from the head of the colony, Makarenko, compels me to ask you this: will you send an intelligent person from *Izvestia* to investigate what exactly is going on in the colony? It has never been written about, and this colony, in terms of its organization and work, deserves the most serious attention'¹⁰⁶

Already prior to his visit Gorky had outlined, whether consciously or otherwise, his first major projects upon his inevitable arrival; *Our Achievements* and *Abroad* would begin to take shape in the summer of 1928, and the author would visit and document the Solovki labour camp the next year. The foundational language dissemination of Stalinism was taking shape.

Literary Battleground

As Gorky's return to the Soviet Union drew closer the author penned a series of articles broadly critical of the ongoing combative literary factionalism that was dominating the cultural sphere. Writing in *Izvestia* on April 21st, Gorky shrugged off his critics in RAPP who

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* pp.175-177
¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* p.255

questioned his authenticity as a proletarian author, and attempted to dismiss such categorisation as irrelevant within the current social and political environment:

Personally, I am not interested in the debates of critics about whether I am a ‘proletarian’ writer or not a ‘proletarian writer... the workers unanimously call me ‘ours’, ‘proletarian’ and ‘comrade’. The voice of the workers for me, of course, is more impressive than the voice of the critics... And the term ‘proletarian’, in my opinion, no longer fully corresponds to the actual position of the working masses of the Soviet Union¹⁰⁷

Developing his theme a few weeks later in the article *On the Exalted and the “Beginners”*, Gorky espoused his belief that beginner authors could only hope to create ‘great’ works if they were willing to look to the past for inspiration, and criticised those who sought to dismiss writers because of their social background. Quoting Lenin, (‘We do not deny inheritance’), Gorky argued that there was much to admire and aspire to emulate in bourgeois culture, and that only once new writers had mastered the techniques of the past could they hope to build a new literature for the masses. To achieve this, the internecine struggle between literary groups had to end; “It is very difficult to write, and even learn to write in continuous fights... The new culture begins with respect for the working person, with respect for work”¹⁰⁸.

However the public debate over the loyalty and trustworthiness of non-party specialists that arose from the Shakhty Affair would inevitably spill over into the literary world, as fellow-traveller authors found themselves publicly accused of the same hysterical allegations of counter-revolutionary agitation as their intelligentsia counterparts in industry. In theory if not practice, the Party was committed to protecting the privileged position of the fellow-travellers

¹⁰⁷ Primochkina, N.N. (1998). *Pisatel' i Vlast'*. Rosspen : Moskva. p.111

¹⁰⁸ Gor'kii (1953), pp.359-365

in literature. A Politburo report (composed primarily by Bukharin), “On Party Policy in the Sphere of Literature”, 18th June 1925, stated the need for eventual proletarian hegemony in literature while recognising that the country’s literary development had not yet reached that stage. As for fellow-travellers, they were to be nurtured until they either sided with the Party or the proletarian authors had developed to the stage where they could inherit the guiding role of literature :

The relationship between different groups of writers in terms of their social-class or social-group content is determined by our general policy. However, it must be borne in mind here that the leadership in the field of literature belongs to the working class as a whole, with all its material and ideological resources. The hegemony of the proletarian writers does not yet exist, and the party must help these writers earn the historical right to this hegemony... In relation to "fellow-travellers" it is necessary to keep in mind: 1) their differentiation; 2) the importance of many of them as qualified "specialists" in literary technique; 3) the presence of hesitation among this layer of writers. The general directive here should be the directive of a tactful and careful attitude towards them, that is, an approach that would provide all the conditions for their transition to the side of communist ideology as quickly as possible.¹⁰⁹

This would be the last Politburo decree issued on literature until the disbandment of RAPP and creation of the Soviet Writers’ Union in 1932.

In theory, the Party maintained its support the fellow-travellers, but the RAPP leadership continued to ratchet up their rhetoric. Calling for a unified proletarian front in literature, Kirshon stated, ‘Our front – the revolutionary front in art – must be strengthened, must be united!’¹¹⁰. Pleas for Central Committee authorities for proletarian hegemony to be pursued

¹⁰⁹ Artizov & Naumov (1999). pp.53-57

¹¹⁰ Kemp-Welch, A. (1991) pp.43-44

in a peaceful manner¹¹¹ fell on deaf ears; the RAPPists anticipated that in the light of the anti-intelligentsia rhetoric emanating from the fallout of the Shakhty Affair, the time to strike was now. Thus the cultural battleground was set for Gorky's arrival.

Beginner Authors

The conciliatory approach that the Politburo report had pledged to the fellow-travellers, the bourgeois literary 'specialists' who Gorky had worked tirelessly to support during his post-revolutionary days in Petrograd, greatly pleased the author, who wrote to Bukharin that the resolution was an "excellent and wise thing"¹¹² that would be of great benefit to young worker and peasants authors seeking to create a new Soviet hero. Gorky warned against the undue use of censorship but was adamant that criticism must be immediate and 'merciless'¹¹³ in order to keep beginner authors on the correct path.

This is consistent with Gorky's dealings with beginner writers in his personal correspondence. Reading the author's letters during the last years of his extended exile, one is struck by the amount of time Gorky dedicates to reading unsolicited fiction and poetry – almost entirely of a poor standard – and the detailed feedback he provides. By Khodasevich's estimate Gorky spent several hours each day methodically reading and replying to each letter and manuscript he was sent¹¹⁴, and by the beginning of 1928 Gorky was receiving between 45 to 60 letters a day, and such a volume of books and newspapers that the Italian post office had simply refused to forward them.

¹¹¹ Ibid. p.47

¹¹² Gor'kii (2012), p.214

¹¹³ Ibid, p.215

¹¹⁴ Khodasevich, V. F., & Vitali, S. (2019) p.202

For the most part Gorky's advice to his correspondents remained consistent; beginner writers must devote time to read the classics of Russian literature and learn how to master language, and Gorky is not sparing in his criticism when he believes it justified. A letter to aspiring poet A.A. Severnom is a good example. Telling the author that his work 'is weak, and should not have been published', he nonetheless implores him to 'read well the old masters: Pushkin, Lermontov, etc. Do not be afraid of them, ideologically they cannot harm you, but technically they will help you a lot.'¹¹⁵ At times, Gorky could be much more blunt, for example his response to V.B. Demidov's manuscript in December 1927;

I read only a few pages of your manuscript, but this is enough to give me the right to tell you: you write very badly, and no one will print your story in this form. The story is written in a wordy, colourless and extremely careless language. Your language is not "literary" at all, it is the language of newspapers. The theme you have chosen is beyond your power. In addition, it has been developed many times. Your admission that you "do not have the willpower to finish, to force yourself," also speaks against you. Literary work, first of all, is work. Try to learn, read, find your language, your thoughts¹¹⁶

Several of Gorky's contemporaries who were aware of the time he dedicated to the task of encouraging and conversing with beginner authors regarded the process as one of folly. Speaking in 1928, shortly after the author's grand return to the Soviet Union, Mikhail Kolstsov remarked, 'Gorky doesn't know what an impact his voice has. He has no business writing reviews. A person who is met at the station by the Politburo in full array and has triumphal arches raised wherever he goes should not point out typos in the writings of second-rate authors¹¹⁷'. Yet the utilisation of beginner authors was to become a cornerstone of Gorky's

¹¹⁵ Gor'kii (2014), p.74

¹¹⁶ Ibid. pp. 118-119

¹¹⁷ Chukovsky, K. (2005). *Diary, 1901 – 1969*. Erlich, V. (Ed.). Heim, M.H. (Trans.). Yale University Press : New Haven. p.233

literary philosophy, and a foundational component of both *A History of Factories and Plants* and *A History of the Civil War*. In line with the broader aims of the cultural revolution, the intent was to raise a generation of beginner, worker writers to expound an agreed history of the revolutionary age and create new, Soviet literature befitting of the achievements of the burgeoning state.

Conclusion

There is likely an element of truth to each of the various reasons proffered for Gorky's decision to return to the Soviet Union. Financial and family considerations certainly played their part, and a fear of being 'forgotten' in his homeland may have allowed his ego to be assuaged by the overtures from Moscow. From his correspondence however we can see that his primary motivation was his desire to witness the 'new Russia', believing as early as 1925 that the Soviet regime was 'prophetically right'. His return was motivated by his conviction that it was morally just, and he returned as a willing and active participant in the building of a new culture. In spite of claims that attempts to 'lure' Gorky home were the result of competing political factions vying for the author's endorsement, it was clearly a sustained non-partisan effort to attract perhaps the most famous living Russian author to return and bolster the regime's standing at a time of domestic and international crisis. The intermittent advances of Rykov, Bukharin, Khalatov, Stalin and others (likely the OGPU also) point to collaborative involvement rather than political point scoring.

Gorky wasn't planning to just witness this new society; he wanted to document it, aggrandise its achievements to a sceptical audience both at home and abroad. To do so he laid the plans for his first major Soviet literary undertaking, *Our Achievements*, which would become a defining influence in the structure and language of Soviet literature going forward. In his pursuit of a new form of literature Gorky envisioned the recruitment of beginner-worker

writers, a process that he would rigorously pursue for each of his major literary projects in the coming years. Although its author's original intention for the journal was to bolster the cause of Soviet power in general, it would prove to be one of the foundational texts of Stalinism as a result of political shifts that were underway even prior to his arrival.

Factional disputes within the Party and the discourse of the Shakhty Affair would profoundly alter the course of the new Soviet state. Gorky's friends and allies such as Kamenev and Bukharin found themselves attacked and ostracised, and association with them or their supporters invited immediate suspicion. The vitriolic rhetoric of the Shakhty trial and the cultural revolution that it inspired would in short time become the language of Stalinism, a language that Gorky would come to echo and master. Indeed, in his articles published prior to his departure from Sorrento, the author was already displaying the anti-West bombast that he would perfect in the years to come.

This period would also see the introduction of the cult of Gorky, with the mass celebrations of his 35th jubilee and then his 60th birthday. The artificial inflation of Gorky's legacy prior to his arrival allowed the state to celebrate his return as a significant coup, lending the Soviet Union the author's considerable cultural legitimacy, which in time it would use as a base for the formulation of Stalinism. Even before he left Italy for his dramatic return, the stage was firmly set for Gorky's entrenchment as a major literary and political actor.

Chapter Two

A Hero's Welcome

Was Gorky a member of the Communist Party? If he was, then only in the very last years of his life. However, I am not sure of that either. "I am near-party," Gorky liked to say. And that was true. He wandered around the party, now to the right of its straight line, then to the left, now behind, now going forward. In politics, as in his personal life, he remained an artist. Mandatory, disciplinary dependence on any doctrine, dogma, was unacceptable to him. He considered ideological subordination an insult to a person.¹¹⁸

Yuri Annenkov

Greetings to you, creators of a new life!¹¹⁹

Following a seven-year absence from the Soviet Union after his estrangement from the Bolsheviks in 1921, Gorky finally returned to a hero's welcome, met at every station of his journey by adoring crowds until he finally disembarked at Belorusskaya station in Moscow. Each step of his return journey had been meticulously documented by the Soviet press, building a crescendo of excitement for his eventual arrival. Ilya Shkapa, a writer, editor and future colleague of Gorky's at *Our Achievements*, described an atmosphere of giddy anticipation, as the 'Stormy Petrel of the Revolution' finally returned home:

¹¹⁸ Annenkov, Y. (1991). *Dnevnik Moikh Vstrech: Tsikl Tragedii. Tom 1.* Khudozhstvennaya Literatura : Moskva. p.50

¹¹⁹ Gor'kii (1953). p.388

From ten o'clock in the evening on May 27th, when Gorky arrived at the Negoreloye station and entered Soviet soil, the whole country followed the movement of the writer's train. Thousands of people greeted him at each station. In Minsk, Smolensk, Mozhaysk, regardless of the time of day, delegations of workers were waiting for him. Welcome speeches were given, Gorky answered them. Those were exciting days... On Monday, May 28th, from the very morning, the house was buzzing like a disturbed beehive: everyone who arrived at the Belorusskaya railway station at ten o'clock wanted to meet Gorky. It was not so easy to get to the arrival point. The huge station square... was filled with thousands of people. Above the columns were streamers, banners fluttered. Portraits of Gorky towered high above your heads. New columns of Muscovites were approaching from the direction of Tverskaya. The weather was breaking. The sun was hiding behind wispy clouds. From time to time a light rain drizzled. But the square was in high spirits.¹²⁰

Leading the thousands of well-wishers greeting Gorky's arrival were Bukharin, Lunacharsky, Voroshilov and Ganetsky, who had been instrumental in finalising the conditions of the author's return after visiting him in Sorrento the previous year. Carried on the shoulders of his illustrious hosts, Gorky was spirited through the crowd. Later that evening, Gorky gave a speech to the Moscow Soviet Plenum at the Bolshoi Theater, where he would also meet Stalin for the first time. Perhaps understandably given the circumstances (at 60 years of age and in poor health, having spent days on end travelling through Europe and the Soviet Union by train), his speech was fragmented, lacked a linear structure, and was relatively short. Frequently evoking Lenin, Gorky expressed his wonderment at the changes that had taken place in Moscow since his last visit, comparing it to the West which he had just left; "I recognized home, but the people are different, young people, well-fed people, there are no

¹²⁰ Shkapa, I. (1964). *Sem' Let s Gor'kim: Vospominania*. Sovietskii Pisatel' : Moskva. p.6

senseless contradictions that I see at every step in the West, with all the rags that are next to luxury.¹²¹” Gorky also used his platform to speak out publicly for the first time against the practice of self-criticism that had arisen from the Shakhty Case, showing clear frustration when the ebullient crowd appeared to laugh off what to the author was one of the most serious problems afflicting the Soviet Union:

It is sometimes bitter to read in the newspapers when you scratch each other too harshly, too fervently and mercilessly. (*Laughter.*) Comrades, don't... Here you find the opportunity to treat me well, why do you treat each other worse? (*Laughter.*) It's not a funny question, it's a natural question.¹²²

The overwhelming adulation that fell upon Gorky from the first moments of his return would be repeated across the country in the months to come, as he travelled through the Soviet Union retracing the journeys he took as a young man in order to witness and describe the changes that had taken place in the country since his departure in 1921. At each stop along the way, from Kharkov to Tblisi, Yerevan to Nizhny Novgorod and numerous other towns and cities, Gorky was met by delegations, awarded honorary positions and named guest of honour at endless public ceremonies. Once his journey was complete he rested for a fortnight on doctor's orders, before embarking for Leningrad, where after just over a week he was forced to return to Moscow once again through illness.¹²³ Clearly the implacable pace of Gorky's tour was wearing on the author. Nadezhda Krupskaya, having witnessed one of Gorky's public speeches, said, “He gives the impression of a seriously ill person: thin and impossible, he speaks, barely audible. Touched to the extreme by everything that is being

¹²¹ Gor'kii (1953), p.368

¹²² Ibid. p.369

¹²³ Gor'kii, M. (2016) *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii: Pis'ma V Dvatsati Chetyrekh Tomakh. Tom. 18.* Nauka : Moskva. p.305

done by us, every now and then he wipes away tears touchingly. I'm afraid that in many ways he will soon be disappointed.¹²⁴”

While resting in Moscow Gorky successfully carried out his plan to experience the city incognito, disguised in makeup, a long beard and an overcoat. In photographs taken by his son Maxim, a keen photographer, he still looks unmistakably like Gorky, but the ruse appears to have worked; together with Maxim and Kryuchkov (also wearing a disguise, presumably for the fun of it) the author was able to visit bars, teahouses and restaurants undetected, observing everyday life and engaging in various conversations with the public¹²⁵. Writing of the experience to Timosha, Maxim's wife, Gorky described with admiration the vibrance of the city and the ongoing construction and renovation projects all around him¹²⁶.

As with so much of Gorky's life post-1928 there exists a disparity of accounts detailing the author's true impressions of his return to his much-changed homeland and the overwhelming reception that he received. To Konstantin Fedin, member of the literary group The Serapion Brothers, Gorky was both detached from the adulation, as if it were happening to another person, and also deeply proud of it; Fedin felt that he had been asked to accompany Gorky for the day only so as to witness the outpouring of adoration that met the author at every stop¹²⁷. Stalin for his part understood this facet of Gorky's personality and played to it directly, remarking to literary functionary Ivan Gronsky, 'He's an ambitious man. We have to bind him to the Party.'¹²⁸ Close friends and colleagues who had remained in the Soviet Union and experienced an altogether different way of life than the one Gorky was so publicly

¹²⁴ Spiridonova, L.A., Primochkina, N.N. and Semawkina M.A. (Eds.) (2014) *Gor'kii: Heizvestnye Stranitsy Istorii (Material I Issledovaniya). Vypusk 12*. ИМЛИ РАН : Moskva. p.59

¹²⁵ Gor'kii (2016) p.327

¹²⁶ Ibid. pp. 8-10

¹²⁷ Bykov (2008) p.285-286

¹²⁸ Clark, K., and Dobrenko, E. eds. (2009) , p.87

celebrating were often perplexed by the lavish aggrandisement the author reserved for Soviet achievements. When pressed for an opinion on whether Gorky truly believed in the gushing praise he was bestowing upon the Bolsheviks, his first wife Ekaterina Peshkova is alleged to have said that “he cannot be dissuaded, he has arrived at a certain point of view, and he appears to be exactly as he writes about it.”¹²⁹

From the same period however there are several accounts of Gorky experiencing the events around him with a certain detached irony, a tacit acknowledgment of his awareness of the Potemkin villages being constructed around him. Mikhail Prishvin, a frequent companion of Gorky’s during the first month of the author’s return, described with contempt the incessant celebrations that accompanied Gorky’s journey:

If you tell Gorky everything, then we must speak, first of all, about his jubilee. I must say that his anniversary was not made by society, not by workers, peasants, writers and admirers, but by the government, just like all Soviet holidays are being made. The government can say today: "Kiss Gorky!" - and everyone will kiss him, tomorrow they will say: "Spit on Gorky!" - and nobody would care.¹³⁰

According to his diary, Prishvin would ask Gorky many “perplexed questions¹³¹” about this exaggerated fanfare, going on to recount Gorky’s famous quip, “I am a cunning person. It is not that I will not use all that they have given me.”¹³² Clearly the author was to some degree aware of the absurdity of the universal outpouring of love that met him around the country. Children’s author Kornei Chukovsky met with Gorky when he visited Leningrad, and described his weariness at the ongoing charade:

¹²⁹ Prishvin, M. (1905 – 1954), Nov 24th 1928

¹³⁰ Ibid. June 1st 1928

¹³¹ Ibid, 20th February 1936

¹³² Ibid. June 3rd 1928

“You get sick and tired of it. Every town, every station seems to have the same words. A peasant woman with a red kerchief and vacant eyes. Horrible! One of them said, ‘Look comrades! It’s Demyan Bedny, the proletarian poet!’”... Seifullina told me he said this to her in Moscow: ‘Everywhere I go they make me an honorary Pioneer. I’m going to see an insane asylum today, and you watch if they don’t make me an honorary lunatic’”¹³³

A note in Chukovsky’s diary also captures a remark highly unusual for Gorky, heard second hand through the author Samuil Marshak; “Our government? A bunch of do-nothings, card players! You don’t catch Briand and Chanteclair playing cards!”¹³⁴ No context is given for this outburst and no further discussion recorded. Perhaps the most revealing quote attributed to Gorky from his early return journeys comes from Pavel Moroz, who accompanied the author through the Caucasus. Following a candid late-night conversation during which Moroz laid bare the realities of everyday Soviet life, Gorky remarked on his daily public receptions :

“Such grandiose meetings can only take place under two conditions: either when the People live in material, political and spiritual contentment, or when the people are in absolute material, political and spiritual poverty and slavery.”¹³⁵

Any ambiguity that Gorky chose to display within his circle of acquaintances is absent from his public proclamations during this period. Regardless of his own personal cynicism it is clear that Gorky was aware of the role he was expected to play upon his return, vociferously trumpeting the achievements of the regime in both the Soviet and Western press and using his considerable reputation to lend credibility to the state and its leadership. In return, the author expected to be allowed to pursue his artistic vision without impediment, and from his very first days in the Soviet Union the full state literary apparatus was put at his disposal; he

¹³³ Chukovsky (2005) p.233

¹³⁴ Ibid. p.234

¹³⁵ Moroz, P. (1954). *Sotsialisticheskii Vestnik*. January, No.1. New York. pp.15-20

would use this to facilitate his personal projects, such as *Our Achievements*, to mold his vision of Soviet literature, as first seen in *Around the Soviet Union*, and as a means to try and reconcile political outcasts with the regime, believing that they could still provide a valuable contribution to the formation of a new Soviet culture. As Stalin consolidated his power and close friends of Gorky such as Bukharin, Rykov and Kamenev were increasingly isolated from positions of authority, the author would gradually insert himself into the role of ‘grand conciliator’ in both literature and politics, in particular during his visit in 1931.

This chapter shall focus on Gorky’s activities from his grand return in May 1928 until October 1931. During this period the author would make three journeys to his homeland, each interrupted by the author’s return to Sorrento on doctors’ orders. As Pravda would announce in October 1928, “the further stay of Alexei Maksimovich, who has become accustomed in recent years to the warm climate of Italy, would be fraught with great danger to his health”¹³⁶, with Gorky’s declining health providing a convenient excuse to the Soviet public for what had been his intended departure regardless. Émigré journal *Rul*, having previously mocked Gorky for using his health as an excuse for not visiting the Soviet Union earlier, sardonically commented, “only such an ardent patriot as Gorky could decide on such a tiring journey, neglecting the danger of the disease.”¹³⁷

In April 1930 Gorky fell seriously ill, largely in part due to the strain that the author had placed on himself during his two whirlwind tours of the Soviet Union in the years prior, and as such his medical team advised against returning that summer (Gorky was also trying to finish his final novel, *The Life of Klim Samgin*). His non-appearance gave rise to further innuendos both in the Soviet Union and abroad, as it was speculated the author had been

¹³⁶ Pravda. 1928. No 239. Oct. 13

¹³⁷ *Rul*, July 1st, cited Baranov, V.I. (1996). *Gor’kii Bez Grima: Taina Smerti*. Agraf : Moskva. p.104

disillusioned with his Soviet experience and either wished to see out his days in Sorrento, or was waiting to see which direction the tumultuous political scene was headed, a theory that the Gorky archive also supports:

It is likely that Gorky, outwardly clearly deciding on whose side he was, internally experienced doubts and hesitations before the final determination of his fate and the fate of relatives and friends.¹³⁸

However the ambiguity that Gorky chose to reveal to his peers during his first return would very rarely be visible in his public pronouncements, and the idea that he was vacillating between political sides is inconsistent with his actions as someone who has clearly sided with Soviet power as a whole, rather than specific factions or individuals. From his interventions in literature and politics, the publication of new journals very specifically tailored to his vision, to his public vilification of “enemies of the people”, the Gorky of 1928 to late-1931 sought to bring positivity, unity and moral direction to the burgeoning state, shaped through his own vision.

¹³⁸ Gor'kii, M. (2018) *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii: Pis'ma V Dvatsati Chetyrekh Tomakh. Tom. 20.* Nauka : Moskva. pp.372-373

Our Achievements

The immediacy of Gorky's pet project, the proposed journal *Our Achievements*, is shown by the haste in which he threw himself into its planning; on June 5th, 1928, just over a week after arriving in the Soviet Union, the first organisational meeting was held at the State Publishing House. Attended by Gosizdat chief Khalatov and Gorky's personal assistant Kryuchkov, who were expected to lead the project, and a selection of academics, scientists and writers, the meeting gave the author a platform to expound his vision for the publication, which was intended to present the achievements of the Soviet people in science, art and labour to a wide public audience¹³⁹. On June 6th, following a conversation with Gorky, Stalin asked Molotov, Rykov, Mikoyan and Petrovsky for their opinion:

Gorky is planning to publish a two-month magazine and then turn it into a monthly one. The goal of the magazine is to reflect our achievements in all areas of work. Gorky is not averse to being the editor of such a magazine. The purpose of such a journal is clear by itself, especially from the point of view of popularizing our successes outside the USSR.¹⁴⁰

Clearly *Our Achievements* had moved beyond the literary sphere and become a matter of state importance. A second editorial meeting was convened the very next day, with leading cultural figures such as Anatoli Lunacharsky, David Ryazanov (soon to be caught up in the Menshevik Trial in 1931), Aleksandr Fadeev, Vyacheslav Ivanov and the editor of *Izvestiya*, Ivan Skvortsov-Stepanov, now involved in the project¹⁴¹.

¹³⁹ Dement'ev, A.G. (1968) *Ocherki Istorii Russkoi Sovetskoi Zhurnalistiki: 1933 - 1945*. Nauka : Moscow. P.128

¹⁴⁰ Yakolev, A.N. (Ed.) (2005). *Bol'shaya Tsenzura: Pisateli i Zhurnalisty v Strane Sovetov 1917 – 1956*. Materik : Moskva. pp.126-127

¹⁴¹ Dement'ev, (1968), p.139

On July 1st, Gorky unveiled his vision to the nation as *Izvestiya* published his article, *On Our Achievements*, in which the author once again targeted the debilitating trend of self-criticism and outlined his vision of the journal as an informative, inspirational source for positivity :

It is also necessary to add to this the deafening blizzard of self-criticism. Of course, self-criticism is necessary, but not to the point of hysteria... Sometimes it seems that "self-criticism" was started not for the sake of the success of our business, not out of a feeling of confidence in its greatness, but out of doubt in the correctness of the very essence of the matter - to the delight of the emigrant gentlemen and other enemies of the Union¹⁴²...

The work of ordinary people from a machine tool, from a plow - people who live in painful conditions, is truly heroic, but the heroes themselves do not understand this. They do not see themselves well and therefore value each other poorly. In our reality, a true hero was born and is growing - he must know this. He will know this if a mirror is placed in front of him; Such a mirror should be a journal that would show an active worker of the revolution and culture his achievements in all fields of science, technology, art, and everyday life...¹⁴³ In a word, the journal should cover all work in the Union of Soviets, all the gains of reason, give a summary of all the positive phenomena of our reality; negative phenomena are noted by the general press with a plenitude, completely exhaustive of them, and even with a certain sensuality.¹⁴⁴

The time and energy to which Gorky devoted to the project was remarkable; the majority of his correspondence through 1928 until the journal's publication in February 1929 is comprised of a constant dialogue between the author and his editors. Gorky also read every

¹⁴² Gor'kii (1953) pp.384-385

¹⁴³ Ibid, p.387

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. p.411

submission to the journal as part of his twelve-hour working day, taking the time to respond to each writer with suggestions, edits or outright rejection. Ilya Shkapa, who joined the *Our Achievements* editorial board after Gorky had returned to Sorrento, spoke in awe of the volume of material processed by the author: “How did he do it? Thousands of pages passed through my hands, read and corrected by Gorky.¹⁴⁵”

From the outset Gorky’s project was met with resistance. Only days after the second editorial meeting, Gorky’s old acquaintance (and occasional adversary) Lunacharsky expressed concern that without a section devoted to poetry or fiction the journal would prove to be dull and inaccessible to the ordinary reader, an opinion strongly refuted by Gorky¹⁴⁶. The journal’s stance against self-criticism and promotion of positivity would also prove to be problematic, openly contradicting political edicts promoted by the Soviet press. Only two days prior to *Our Achievements*’ organising meeting, an article was published in *Izvestia* demanding the application of ‘severe self-criticism’ to all aspects of Soviet society, from the common worker to the Party leadership, “against all enemies, from the kulak and the ‘wrecker’, to elements of corruption in our own ranks. The slogan of self-criticism is... one of the top slogans of today.¹⁴⁷” Given the heightened political atmosphere of accusation and self-recrimination, some of Gorky’s contributors were understandably concerned about the apparent contradiction between the journal’s ethos and the state’s proclamations. At an editorial meeting in Gorky’s absence, Feoktist Berezovsky expressed concern that the

¹⁴⁵ Shkapa (1964). p.317

¹⁴⁶ Gor’kii (2016) p.341

¹⁴⁷ *Izvestia* (3rd June 1928) Available at <https://www.eastview.com/resources/gpa/izvestiia/> (Accessed January to March 2018)

journal's 'jingoistic' approach to Soviet achievements might even be considered a 'deviation'¹⁴⁸.

Internally, both the editorial staff and the journal's contributors increasingly expressed doubts about the viability of *Our Achievements*. Many shared Lunacharsky's concern that without a section for fiction most readers would consider the publication too dull. There was also a general understanding that without Gorky's presence in Moscow the journal lacked the momentum to drive it forward, especially given Khalatov's apparent ambivalence to the project. Gorky maintained a strained relationship with Khalatov, ostensibly the journal's editor-in chief in Gorky's absence but in reality a middle-man between the author and prospective contributors. Gorky had been questioning Khalatov's abilities as the head of Gosizdat for a number of years, never afraid to forward him 'constructive' criticism of the publisher's general direction, and in their correspondence through 1928 Gorky regularly chides the younger man over his health, negativity and his apparent lack of comprehension of the overall project. Writing at the end of August, Gorky again bemoans Khalatov's lack of understanding, and lays bare his didactic ambition for both *Our Achievements* and Soviet publishing as a whole:

My general impression: The plan is not felt, because there is no definite idea of the modern reader. It seems to me that Gosizdat is not only a commercial enterprise throwing out to the market a colorful product for all tastes, but is a state educational institution, whose work should be no less significant and productive than the work of the People's Commissariat for Education¹⁴⁹.

¹⁴⁸ Gor'kii (2016) pp.489-490

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. p.25

The positioning of Kryuchkov as co-editor of the journal demonstrates the lack of trust in Khalatov, and he was to act as Gorky's 'man in Moscow' as the author returned to Sorrento in October 1928. As an intriguing sidenote, Khalatov has also been suspected of being placed in the journal an insider for Stalin, monitoring Gorky's literary activities and contacts and reporting back to the *vozhd*¹⁵⁰. Evidence for this is largely anecdotal (and fiercely disputed by Khalatov's family¹⁵¹), though a letter in Stalin's personal archive reveals that at the very least both men would meet to discuss Gorky's frame of mind. On May 15th 1931, one day after Gorky once again arrived in the Soviet Union, Khalatov wrote to Stalin recommending that based on the conversations the Gosizdat chief held with the author during his trip to Sorrento, the *vozhd* might consider it "expedient" to discuss the matter in person stating that "a number of statements and proposals of (Gorky's) are of certain interest" and should be discussed further. No other details are provided, though Khalatov does go on to discuss the possibility of inviting Romain Rolland to the Soviet Union, on Gorky's initiative. It would be another four years until the French writer would eventually make the long-anticipated journey¹⁵².

Anxious to secure more contributors for *Our Achievements*, Gorky would publish in *Pravda* and *Izvestia* asking for workers to submit reports from their factories for use in the journal, which had the unintended consequence of flooding the editorial offices with poorly written submissions that consumed a substantial part of Gorky's and Khalatov's working day. The author would express his frustration at the quality of submissions in his article *On Beginning Writers*, and his desire to improve the standard of written work by new authors would eventually manifest itself with the launch of another of the author's journals, *Literary Study*:

¹⁵⁰ Baranov (1996) p.90

¹⁵¹ Ibid. p.91

¹⁵² Babichenko, D.L. (Ed.) (1997) *Schaste Literaturny: Gosudarstvo i Pisateli. Dokumenty 1925 – 1938*. Rosspen: Moskva. p.112

Young writers read nothing but newspapers and, deafened by the dry crackle of the language of newspaper articles, they do not at all hear the sound whims of the language of living speech... Their social illiteracy seems even lower than literary. They do not know the history of literature, they read little of the classics, they study reality in the newspapers¹⁵³

The journal also attempted to reach out to the literary and technical intelligentsia for contributions, though responses tended to be lukewarm. After having his article returned for having been deemed ‘too creative’, writer Pavel Maximov replied in frustration:

All literate people know how to write dryly, and I have been doing this for five years, but this kind of work no longer satisfies me, and it will hardly satisfy the reader: the magazine is, after all, a popular one, not an astronomical one (for example). I want to write better, but it looks like I should write worse¹⁵⁴.

The magazine *Rabochaya Gazeta* published their readers’ response to the prospective journal, in which only one in five voiced their approval for Gorky’s project. Another article, under the incendiary title *The Journal Will Be Boring*, was equally as dismissive:

Why does the magazine want to write about only achievements? Is everything going so smoothly with us? Everyone in the factory committee came to the conclusion that the magazine would turn out to be rather boring.¹⁵⁵

“It seems to me”, Gorky responded, “that it is impossible to determine with such confidence the character of, for example, a child who has not yet been born, or the force of a blow that has not yet been inflicted.”¹⁵⁶ However the news coming back from Moscow was far from

¹⁵³ Gor’kii (1953) pp.413-414

¹⁵⁴ Gor’kii (2016), pp.396-397

¹⁵⁵ *Rabochaya Gazeta*. (1928). No. 230. October 3rd. Cited in Gor’kii (2016), p.406

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, pp.57-58

positive. Receiving the minutes from an editorial meeting at the end of November, Gorky read over a fractious and confused debate over the merits of the journal, from style to readership to the selling price, in all a portrait of complete disarray¹⁵⁷. The specter of self-criticism continued to hang over proceedings, with one contributor remarking, “Of the good, there is no need to write, the good writes for itself... Do not shut yourself off from self-criticism”¹⁵⁸ Days later Gorky received a letter from co-editor and contributor Nikolai Koltsov: “Unfortunately, I must inform you that, in my opinion, the magazine's business is progressing very badly.¹⁵⁹” *Our Achievements* would also be afflicted by the ongoing paper crisis, prompting jokes to make the rounds in literary circles:

“Why isn’t (*Our Achievements*) coming out?” I asked ...

“Because of the paper shortage,” he replied.

“Now there’s an achievement.”¹⁶⁰

A Central Committee decree published on December 28th called for books and journals to be published in mass circulation “to ensure the maximum accessibility of a mass book (in form and presentation) for the general reader”¹⁶¹”, essentially supporting Gorky’s vision for a didactic, informative literature intended for a general audience. In an open letter to the editors on December 31st, Gorky wrote in blunt terms (“the material is good, but the processing is extremely bad”¹⁶²) while attempting to rally his dejected colleagues:

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 489-490

¹⁵⁸ Dement’ev (1968) p.129

¹⁵⁹ Gor’kii (2016), p.527

¹⁶⁰ Chukovsky (2005). p.236

¹⁶¹ Artizov & Naumov (1999) pp.88-89

¹⁶² Gor’kii (2016), pp.161 - 163

I repeat: we have set ourselves a very difficult task, but it is an extremely useful task: to create a truly popular magazine that will reflect all current cultural-revolutionary work before the eyes of its workers¹⁶³

Privately, Gorky seethed, blaming ‘eminent writers and inveterate officials’¹⁶⁴ for their lack of interest in the journal. On February 3rd 1929, just two days prior to the launch of the first edition, the author shared his anxiety with Kryuchkov about Khalatov’s competence¹⁶⁵, the next day writing to the latter accusing him of attempting to shift the blame for the journal’s poor quality onto others¹⁶⁶. Yet despite the despondency surrounding the journal’s launch it proved to be a huge success, with the first edition receiving a second print after selling out. Soon the circulation jumped from 20,000 copies to 100,000.¹⁶⁷

Writing to Kryuchkov after the first edition arrived in Sorrento, Gorky was blunt: “To be honest: the impression is dull.¹⁶⁸” The reviews weren’t much more favourable. It took *Pravda* until March 15th to acknowledge the journal, praising its positivity while also castigating its ‘artificial’ premise of highlighting the good while ignoring the bad.¹⁶⁹ *Our Achievements* was also subject to inevitable criticism in the émigré press, but Shkapa recalls Gorky, perhaps cheered by the journal’s surprising success, responding defiantly:

“Of course, our opponents will never give up slander and perversion. This is their daily bread! But it is necessary to take into account the criticism from the side of the enemy! Let us remember our Leninist motto: "It is worth writing down only what is really firmly won."¹⁷⁰

¹⁶³ Ibid. pp.161-163

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. p.189

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. pp.221-222

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. p.283

¹⁶⁷ Papazian, E.A. (2009). p.138

¹⁶⁸ Gor’kii (2016) p.230

¹⁶⁹ *Pravda*, March 15th 1929 (No.61)

¹⁷⁰ Shkapa, I. (1964) p.48

Gorky's experience of compiling *Our Achievements* would be mirrored by two other journals he attempted to launch concurrently, *Literary Study* and *Abroad*, and his later, more ambitious projects *History of the Civil War* and *History of Factories and Plants*. Beset by reluctant contributors, editorial apathy and mismanagement and ambivalence from Soviet leadership, this pattern would be repeated until the author's death, after which the majority of his journals and anthologies ceased publication altogether. However Gorky intended for *Our Achievements* to be much more than simply a platform to celebrate Soviet success; in the first five issues he would publish his series of *ocherks*, *Around the Soviet Union*, which sought to not only educate its readers as to the progress the country continued to make, but to also instruct Soviet authors on how to document it.

Around the Soviet Union

Gorky arrived in the Soviet Union with a vision of transforming contemporary literature, perceiving the role of the author as one of an educator, constructing a narrative history for a country still in its infancy. Gorky adapted his realist method to what Papazian has termed 'Documentary Mode', in which the author portrayed Bolshevik ideology and policy in exactly the manner prescribed by the regime, affirming, promoting and presenting as factual the successes of Soviet society¹⁷¹.

This method would be developed in both the *History of Factories and Plants* and *History of the Civil War* series and reach its apogee in 1933 with the infamous writers' expedition to the White Sea-Baltic Canal. *Around the Soviet Union*, however, was Gorky's first attempt to restructure his authorial voice to promote the achievements of the regime, contrasting his own travels through the pre-revolutionary Russian Empire with his return to a vastly transformed land many years later. The five *ocherks* of the series attempt to portray modern Soviet society

¹⁷¹ Papazian, E.A. (2009) p.127

as a triumph of a new people over their violent, chaotic past, an awakening of consciousness propelled by the progressive actions of the state and achieved by a population acting as a disciplined, collective society as opposed to spontaneous individuals¹⁷². The content of *Around the Soviet Union* serves as Gorky's manifesto for his vision of Soviet literature, a didactic, affirming depiction of collective success accessible to the ordinary Soviet reader. To critics, his new literary method served merely to justify the excesses of the Five-Year Plan and promote re-education through forced labour¹⁷³.

Published over the first five editions of *Our Achievements*, Gorky's narratives depict his two journeys across the Soviet Union in 1928 and 1929, as the author visited construction sites, colonies for homeless children, the Dnieper dam, and finally, the Solovki labour camp. In Baku, Gorky expresses wonderment at the contrast between the chaotic work sites of the author's past and the disciplined, orderly construction of the present. Poverty, Gorky claims, has been eliminated. In Kuryazh, street children who were picked up by the police in rags are molded into Soviet citizens of the future by Anton Makarenko, head of the children's colony and long-term correspondent of Gorky's. At every turn Gorky is witness to the miraculous transformation of the country, achieved by the diligent labour of conscious citizens.

Gorky uses *Around the Soviet Union* to expound on the themes of his new, Soviet literature. Pushing back against the debilitating trend of self-criticism ("How much energy we spend to tell and prove to people how bad they are... imagine that all this energy is spent on explaining to people what they are good for¹⁷⁴"), the author laments the working people's ignorance of their achievements and victories, laying the foundation for the transformation of

¹⁷² Ibid. p.139

¹⁷³ Tolczyk, D. (1999). p.100

¹⁷⁴ Gor'kii, M (1952) *Sobranie Sochinenii v Tridtsati Tomakh: Tom 17*. Khudozhestvennoi Literatury : Moskva. p.131

the Soviet author into a documenter and educator. Throughout the *ocherks* there is a heavy emphasis on the success of the collective, with particular attention paid to the development of groups generally considered to be spontaneous or anarchistic, such as children and prisoners:

I think that the mass of children's letters and observations of children already give me the right to say: a sense of collectivism, based on the consciousness of the success of collective work, is noticeably and rapidly growing in children. Children grow up as collectivists - this is one of the great achievements of our reality, I consider it indisputable and growing deeper into life. The opponents of socialism will probably say: the growth of individuality is difficult, individuality is erased by the influences, pressures of the collective. This old worn-out objection, of course, does not lose its significance for people who are spiritually blind, but it is perfectly clear to the sighted that the collective creates a person of a completely different individual psyche, more active, persistent and deriving the will to act, the will to build life from the will of the collective¹⁷⁵.

The final *ocherk* in the cycle, the now notorious *Solovki*, documents Gorky's journey to the Solovetsky Islands in the White Sea, home to a former monastery converted by the GPU into a correctional labour camp. The trip was organised by Yagoda, who expected Gorky to compose a positive account of the facilities following the publication in the United Kingdom of *An Island Hell: A Soviet Prison in the Far North*. The author, S.A. Malsagov, successfully escaped the islands and fled to Finland, and he described the squalid conditions of confinement and the torture and murder of inmates by the GPU guards¹⁷⁶. The memoir immediately attracted the attention of the émigré community, and in asking Gorky to visit the islands the Soviet regime was hoping for a rebuttal of Malsagov's allegations by an

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. pp.192-193

¹⁷⁶ Malsagov, S.A. (1926) *An Island Hell: A Soviet Prison in the Far North*. Translated by Lyon, F.H. A.M. Phillpot : London. pp.151-176

internationally respected author and recognised 'humanist'. With the publication of Gorky's account in *Our Achievements* at the end of 1929, the regime received all of this and more.

The *ocherk* begins with an oblique reference to Malsagov's memoir, as Gorky mentions the public's familiarity with Solovki due to the success of a 1926 film on the islands, "already out of date - in our current stormy time, even yesterday is repelled far from today."¹⁷⁷ In its place, Gorky presents a model corrective community, the foundation of the state's eventual goal to abolish prisons altogether through the process of rehabilitation and reeducation.

Avoiding the terms 'prison' and prisoners, preferring instead 'Solovets' and 'islander'¹⁷⁸, Gorky portrays the reborn Soviet citizens as a conscientious collective unrecognisable from their unruly past. Needless to say, conditions in the camp are exemplary, and a far cry from Malsagov's account of squalor and abject cruelty; dormitories and working conditions are immaculate, the daily work tasks, although difficult, are restricted to eight hours a day¹⁷⁹. In documenting this success, Gorky juxtaposes it with the cruelty of the Western system of justice, which would discard such people as inveterate criminals unworthy of anything more than the most severe punishment. Only in the Soviet Union, where it is recognised that the criminal mindset is a product of an oppressive class system rather than inherent to the individual, can rehabilitation be successfully implemented, with the Chekists responsible for this transformative task equated to artists.

The question of as to why the author would depict the conditions on Solovki in such glowing, propagandistic terms has been problematic for Gorky scholars since the collapse of the Soviet Union, as they are forced to weigh his account against what is now undeniably known to have been a system as violently oppressive as Malsagov claimed. In 2004, former head of the

¹⁷⁷ Gor'kii (1952) p.201

¹⁷⁸ Papazain (2009) p.146

¹⁷⁹ Gor'kii (1952), pp.209-210

Gorky Archive V.S. Barakhov offered an explanation very similar to Khodasevich's obituary to the author:

Thanks to his 'optimism', the writer fenced himself off from one kind of reality and was creating a different reality, as a 'wondrous fairy-tale', accepted and asserted by him as true actuality.... In the journalism of his Soviet years, Gorky the wonder-maker preferred to inhabit a world of wonders''¹⁸⁰

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's account of Gorky's trip to Solovki in *The Gulag Archipelago* portrays the author as being wilfully ignorant of the conditions in the labour camp, failing to act even when the truth of the situation was laid bare to him. Two incidents recounted by Solzhenitsyn have entered Gorky lore: prisoners holding their newspapers upside down in protest as Gorky inspected the barracks (the author apparently turned them the right way around in silence), and a fourteen year-old boy who dared to defy the GPU guards and told Gorky in vivid detail about the violent mistreatment meted out to the convicts, a conversation so traumatising that the author left the barracks with tears streaming down his face. The boy, Solzhenitsyn says, was shot the next day¹⁸¹.

It would appear that *Solovki's* primary intended audience, the GPU, were dissatisfied with Gorky's final account. Writing to Yagoda in January 1930, Gorky said, "For the essays on Solovki, it seems I have to apologize to you. But you know that all my notes have disappeared, and I had to write from memory."¹⁸² The burned papers also make an appearance

¹⁸⁰ Petrov, P. (2018). *Gorky's Return and the Energetics of Soviet Socialism*. Available at <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11212-018-9299-z> (Accessed 7th September 2020)

¹⁸¹ Solzhenitsyn, A. (2007). *The Gulag Archipelago 1918 -1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation. Volume Two*. Harper Perennial : New York. pp.60-63

¹⁸² Barakhov, V.C., Zaika, S.V., Keldysh, V.A. (1994). *Heizvestnii Gor'kii: Material I Issledovaniya*. Hasledie : Moskva. p.171

in Gorky's correspondence with Stalin¹⁸³, and the episode would later be detailed by Maxim's wife Timosha: "One day... the suitcase with his manuscripts disappeared, and two months later the suitcase was sent back; there were some boots enclosed, but the box where his manuscripts were was all ash, and Yagoda explained that when the rogues (found the box) and when they saw that they were Gorky's manuscripts, they were frightened, and that the manuscripts were burned. And there were many (manuscripts)¹⁸⁴".

Gorky himself would allegedly attempt to justify the *Solovki* article by denying any personal responsibility. An account of the author's second journey through the Soviet Union was published in *Socialist Messenger* in 1954. Written by P. Moroz, a construction specialist assigned to accompany the author in the North Caucasus, the article portrays Gorky as both cynical about the achievements of the Soviet Union which he intended to depict and inquisitive about the realities of everyday life he suspected he was being shielded from. Speaking candidly to the author, Moroz depicts a present in which 80% of the population remain silent through fear, and a future where "everyone will remain silent, except for propagandists and toadies". After listening to his interlocutor's descriptions of violence, oppression, labour camps and the trampling of free speech, Gorky decries the practice of self-criticism and absence of empathy and humanism in modern Soviet society, leading Moroz to cite the Russian proverb, "As is the priest, so is the parish." Gorky would have had little doubt as to whom Moroz was referring¹⁸⁵.

It would be five years until Moroz encountered Gorky once more, visiting the author at his dacha in Crimea in 1934. When pressed as to why he portrayed Solovki so positively in

¹⁸³ RGASPI, f.558, o.11., d.718, l.23-24

¹⁸⁴ Gor'kii, M. (2017) *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii: Pis'ma V Dvatsati Chetyrekh Tomakh. Tom. 19*. Nauka : Moskva. pp.553-554

¹⁸⁵ Moroz (1954) pp.15-20

Around the Soviet Union, Gorky claimed that the published version of his *ocherk* was ‘the complete opposite’ to the article he submitted¹⁸⁶, blaming an errant editor.

It is difficult to accept this account however. Not only did Gorky have final say on the content of *Our Achievements*, the Gorky Archive has verified the original manuscript and typewritten copies, and there is no mention in any of Gorky’s correspondence of his displeasure with the published article. The final *ocherk* is also completely in tone with the rest of the series, and the idea that four articles celebrating the creation of a new man and society would be concluded by a damning account of forced labour is scarcely credible. Furthermore, Gorky would go on to label Western reports of forced labour as “vile slander” in his 1931 article *About a Legend*¹⁸⁷. Moroz describes Gorky at this time as hunched, exhausted and reflecting an inner sadness, cognizant of the violence that the state has inflicted on its people; “We've gone too far. The forces supporting and protecting the response with a bayonet are too great.” If we accept Moroz’s account, then Gorky’s claim of misrepresentation appears to be borne out of personal regret and a desire to avoid accountability for propagandising an institution such as Solovki.

Regardless, both the series *Around the Soviet Union* and *Solovki* within it would provide a template going forward for emerging authors to study and reproduce. The focus on highlighting the positive progression in Soviet society and the willingness to either reframe or ignore anything contentious or damaging would become central to socialist realism, and Gorky’s promotion of this aesthetic would be pioneering in an age of self-criticism and self-recrimination.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. pp.15-20

¹⁸⁷ Gor’kii, M (1953) *Sobranie Sochinenii v Tridtsati Tomakh: Tom 25*. Khudozhestvennoi Literatury : Moskva. p.439

Defender of the Intelligentsia

The ratcheting up of the rhetoric of the cultural revolution continued to have profoundly negative consequences for individuals and institutions deemed to be non-party. The Academy of Sciences was purged, accused of apoliticism, and the staff of both the Academy of Art Sciences and the Moscow Art Theatre were summarily dismissed and replaced by candidates deemed more politically appropriate. Proletarian literary factions, with RAPP at the forefront, launched a series of public attacks on fellow-traveller authors and literary journals, creating an atmosphere of fear and persecution that at times paralysed the publishing industry. Where possible Gorky used his position to shield fellow-traveller authors from public recrimination at the height of RAPP's campaign, though he would prove selective in choosing whom to defend. When Isaac Babel was attacked by Budyonny for his portrayal of the Red Army, Gorky, one of the very few individuals within the country with stature to publicly oppose the civil war veteran, was quick to publicly defend the author:

Dear Comrade Budyonny, I cannot agree with you in the assessment of Babel's *Cavalry* and I strongly protest against your qualifications of this talented writer... This cannot denigrate either Babel or his book. In order to cook soup, the cook does not have to sit in a saucepan.¹⁸⁸

In the same language used against the Shakhty engineers, Boris Pilniak was accused of both treason and 'pre-meditated' wrecking¹⁸⁹. The term 'pilniakovitus' was coined and used to slander authors such as Evgeny Zamyatin and Andrei Platonov for displaying the symptoms of 'extreme aloofness... individualism... haughty aestheticism [and] philistine snivelling'¹⁹⁰. Portrayed by *Literaturnaya Gazeta* as an indefatigable enemy of the state, Pilniak was forced

¹⁸⁸ Gor'kii (2016), p.80

¹⁸⁹ Browning, G. (1985) *Boris Pilniak: Scythian at a Typewriter*. Ardis : Michigan. p.42

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. p. 46

into a series of public recantations of his work and would feel compelled to re-write his controversial novel *Mahogany* as a Soviet production narrative, *The Volga Flows to the Caspian Sea*. In this instance Gorky sought to speak on behalf of the intelligentsia as a whole. In his essay *On a Waste of Energy*, published on September 15th 1929, Gorky asked:

Do we relate carefully enough to these people, do we skillfully appreciate their work and abilities, and not treat their mistakes and actions too harshly? Do we know how to educate (and) lead fellow-travellers? It seems to me that we do not. Boastful statements that ‘we can do without fellow-travellers’ are unconvincing. We have developed a stupid habit of dragging people into the bell tower of glory and after a while throwing them out of there into the dust and dirt.¹⁹¹

Again we find Gorky in the role of conciliator, hoping to bring the proletarian authors in line with the intelligentsia for the benefit of mutual education; the fellow-travellers to learn of the righteousness and certainty of Marxism-Leninism, and the proletarian factions to adopt the language and literary techniques adopted by the intelligentsia. All of Gorky’s major contributions to Soviet culture would proceed with this aim.

The adoption of classic, realist language in the style of the Russian masters was an inherent component of Gorky’s literary vision. In his 1929 article *The Working Class Must Raise Its Own Masters of Culture*, Gorky attacked the narrow-mindedness of literary ideologues who criticised Gosizdat for publishing classic literature by bourgeois authors:

In the classics the reader-worker is carried away not by ideology, but by the plot, the external amusement of the book, the abundance of content, the observations and knowledge in it, its verbal visual skill, that is, everything that the majority of young writers do not yet have

¹⁹¹ *Izvestiia*. 15th September 1929.

because of their lack of acquaintance with the technique of literary work. Fadeev, Sholokhov and similar talents are still very few. But, as we can see, the working class quite correctly appreciates their merits as artists of the word¹⁹²

His emphasis on artistic quality over class purity was hardly in step with the times, and although Stalin didn't publicly censure this philosophy he also didn't endorse it. In time, as the cultural revolution began to wind down in 1931, Gorky's vision would ultimately be adopted by the state, and one of the cornerstones of the emergence of socialist realism, cooperation between the fellow-travellers and the worker-writers, would become established in Stalinist culture.

In spite of his public prominence, his de facto position as the official authority on Soviet literature and his proximity to the upper echelons of power, Gorky was by no means immune to public attack, and his promotion of 'bourgeois' literary methods after years spent in Europe was a source of immense distrust. In 1928 a group of Siberian authors took the opportunity to criticise Gorky for his lack of proletarian credentials, and in July 1929 Gorky was once again targeted by a Siberian journal; in defending the intelligentsia the author was perceived to be undercutting the 'purity' of proletarian literature, and proving himself irrelevant and out of touch¹⁹³. That Gorky could be targeted twice speaks to the intensity of the factional literary struggle and also implies a perceived weakness in the regime itself. Following the 1929 article the Politburo was quick to act, issuing a decree condemning the 'hooligan' attacks on Gorky and summoning the journals representatives to Moscow to explain themselves¹⁹⁴. Gorky's response was more magnanimous, requesting to Stalin that the offenders should be forgiven:

¹⁹² Gor'kij, M. (1953). pp.43-44

¹⁹³ Gor'kij, M. (2017) p.605

¹⁹⁴ Artizov, A., Naumov, O. (1999) pp.123-124

Rul' reports that in Chita some magazine did not praise me and was punished for it. Considering the Central Committee reprimand for Novosibirsk, this is the second case. I am quite sure that there will be a 3rd, 10th, etc. I think this phenomenon is completely natural and inevitable, but I do not think that it is necessary to punish those who write unflattering or hostile things about me...So - do not punish the cursers, Iosif Vissarionovich, I beg you. Those who are incurable – it is not worth thinking about them, but those who are simply ill - will be cured. Our way of life is a talented doctor. ¹⁹⁵

Despite his defence of the intelligentsia, Gorky's return to the Soviet Union was not met with universal approval by his literary peers, many of whom suddenly found themselves dwarfed by the magnitude of the author's public prestige. The perception brewed amongst his former friends and colleagues that Gorky had positioned himself as a literary Caesar, granting competing factions an audience and dictating the terms of discussion – 'today fellow-travellers, tomorrow RAPPists, then the Right... Writers wait in line'. ¹⁹⁶ Others expressed contempt at the wealth bestowed upon the author:

"I've seen the contract stipulating that Gorky is to receive his fees in hard currency, seen it with my own eyes. Every day, holidays included, he gets paid so and so many dollars. Shame on him! Funnelling hard currency out of the country at a time like this! ¹⁹⁷

Famed proletarian author Damian Bedny echoed the sentiment, calling Gorky "scum, a fucking hypocrite"¹⁹⁸ for the gifts lavished upon him by the state despite not contributing

¹⁹⁵ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.718. l.25-27

¹⁹⁶ Polonsky, V.P. (20th July 1931)

¹⁹⁷ Chukovsky, K. (2005). *Diary, 1901 – 1969*. Erlich, V. (Ed.). Heim, M.H. (Trans.). Yale University Press : New Haven. p.260

¹⁹⁸ RGASPI, f. 558. o. 11. d. 189 , June 8th 1930

taxes or union fees. Even supposed allies of Gorky expressed their distaste. Aleksandr Tikhonov described him as a ‘big child, inexperienced and naïve – a political baby’¹⁹⁹, while Mikhail Prishvin wrote that Gorky was now ‘highly placed in the state, which goes far beyond the limits of his literary glory, treated directly as a victor who is not judged’²⁰⁰. Gorky was well aware of the envy he elicited; writing to Kasatkin after returning to Italy in 1928, Gorky acknowledged and expressed regret that he ‘did not satisfy the brotherhood of writers’²⁰¹.

As Gorky grew in political stature his estrangement from the literary intelligentsia would only increase. Becoming increasingly bound up in his didactic vision to document the entire history of the Soviet Union, Gorky would become reliant upon beginner authors and RAPP members to carry out this monumental task. As a result, the divide between the author and peers would only begin to widen as he intensified his pedagogic mission to bolster the Soviet state.

If They Enemy Does Not Surrender, They Will Be Destroyed

As the collectivisation campaign continued to rage in the countryside and the pace of the Five-Year Plan intensified, a series of show trials were staged in 1930 and 1931 that sought to attribute the failures in food supply, poor working conditions and a worsening standard of living to a sinister cabal of saboteurs and oppositionists intent on instigating the collapse of the Soviet Union. The execution of 48 “supply wreckers” alleged to have intentionally caused famine and food shortages in September 1930, followed by the trials of the fictitious Industrial Party and the Peasant’s Labour Party at the end of the year, and finally the

¹⁹⁹ Tikhonov, A. (21st January 1929) *Dnevnik*. Available at <https://prozhito.org/person/174>. (Accessed 24th November 2017)

²⁰⁰ Prishvin, M.M. (May 16th 1931)

²⁰¹ Gorky, M.(2016), p.166

Menshevik Trial in March 1931, all received intensive press coverage both within the Soviet Union and abroad. Each of these trials would be demonstrated in the Soviet press to be inextricably linked, revealing a deadly network of domestic and international conspiracy determined to overthrow the Bolshevik regime, with daily accounts in *Pravda* identifying those responsible for the deteriorating living standards:

The OGPU uncovered a counter-revolutionary sabotage and espionage organisation in supplying the population with the most important foodstuffs (meat, fish, canned food, vegetables), with the aim of creating famine in the country and arousing discontent among the broad masses of the workers and thereby helping to overthrow the dictatorship of the proletariat²⁰².

The first open show trial since Shakhty, the Industrial Party Trial laid bare an international conspiracy to weaken Soviet industry and wave in an invasion from Poland, Romania, Lithuania and Latvia, backed by the British and French looking to drain the Soviet Union of its natural resources and install a capitalist puppet government. The alleged conspirators were members of the technical-intelligentsia with prominent positions in industry, including several acquaintances of Gorky²⁰³.

There is no doubt that Stalin directed the trial. In a letter to Menzhinsky at the beginning of October, the *vozhd* detailed the line of interrogation that the OGPU was expected to take and the conclusion that the trials would reveal²⁰⁴, with State Prosecutor Nikolai Krylenko tasked with staging proceedings in court. Stephen Kotkin describes the transcript of the Industrial Party Trial as “the best extended record to date of the workings of Stalin’s mind²⁰⁵”, as it

²⁰² *Pravda* No. 262, 22nd September.

²⁰³ Prior to being arrested for his part in the conspiracy Petr Osadchy had been approached by Gorky to contribute to *Our Achievements*

²⁰⁴ Lih, L., Naumov, O., & Khlevniuk, O. (Eds). (1995). *Stalin’s Letters to Molotov: 1925-1936*. (C. Fitzpatrick, Trans.). Yale University Press : London. pp.195-196

²⁰⁵ Kotkin, S. (2017). P.61

fused reality with possibility to present a Soviet society overrun with hidden wreckers and foreign agents and encircled by capitalist enemies. Krylenko's opening address expertly amalgamated the *vozhd's* favourite scapegoats and conspiracies:

The Soviet Government and the prosecution at this trial have not hesitated to expose and lay bare to the working class of the Soviet Union the numerous and grave sores festering within our state industry. The evidence has shown that there is hardly a single branch of industry where it can be said with any degree of certainty that an organisation of wreckers has not been active... It means that in programme and in political aims we have a bloc between a party of industrial capitalism and a party representing the kulaks. And there is a correspondingly analogous bloc abroad²⁰⁶

In an ominous portender of conspiracies to come, Krylenko (who himself would be swept up in the purges of 1938) drew a direct link between the treasonous actions of the accused and the oppositionist activities of the Rightists, just as Stalin had predicted as early as August in a letter to Molotov; "I don't doubt that a *direct* connection will be discovered... between these gentlemen and the rightists²⁰⁷". One of the defendants, Aleksandr Fedotov, claimed that the supposed sabotage carried out by the Industrial Party was done so as to lend credibility to the Right's claims that the Stalinist course was leading the country to the brink of disaster²⁰⁸. Stalin himself had levelled similar accusations at Bukharin personally at a private meeting in October, accusing him of inciting acts of terror against the Politburo through his oppositional activities. Bukharin responded furiously, describing Stalin's accusations as 'monstrous,

²⁰⁶ Ramzin, L. K., & Rothstein, A. (1931). *Wreckers on trial: A record of the trial of the Industrial party held in Moscow, Nov.-Dec., 1930*. Modern Books: London. pp. 149-151

²⁰⁷ Lih, L., Naumov, O., & Khlevniuk, O. (Eds). (1995). p.200

²⁰⁸ Ramzin, L. K., & Rothstein, A. (1931).p.59

insane slander, wild and ... foolish.”²⁰⁹ Fedotov’s statement appeared to justify Stalin’s suspicions however.

Gorky’s writing during this period was defiant, as he railed against the enemies of the Soviet Union both outwith and within and sought to justify the increasingly oppressive measures being taken against an intelligentsia accused of the most fantastical crimes. To the émigré community, the truculent character of Gorky’s articles signified the author’s final metamorphosis from an outspoken humanitarian to a mouthpiece of the regime, serving to amplify Stalin’s propaganda to a Western audience. In particular, critics cited the now notorious article *If The Enemy Does Not Surrender, He Must be Destroyed*, published in Pravda on November 15th 1930, ten days prior to the Industrial Party trial. The slogan was so unambiguous in its call to violence against unrepentant opponents of Bolshevism that it retains a toxic infamy to this day, surviving as a lasting example of the brutality of 1930s political discourse. The article inevitably attracted a great deal of negative publicity in the West, with Gorky accused of being “a supporter of violence in public and scientific life”²¹⁰. In his 2008 biography of Gorky (*Byl; Li, Gor’kii*) Dmitry Bykov wrote that “not only did Gorky not object to this regime — he gave it logic and vocabulary, and invented a universal justification.”²¹¹

The article in question, a polemic against the wreckers inside the Soviet Union and the Western capitalist powers that support them, is no more aggressive in tone than Gorky’s other writings of this period, and without the vehemence of the title (which unquestionably reads like an exhortation to violence) it would likely have been long forgotten. Indeed, it is possible that Gorky was not directly responsible for the ignominious title, with minor discrepancies

²⁰⁹ RGASPI f.558, o.11, d.709, l. 65

²¹⁰ Baranov (1996).pp.137-138

²¹¹ Bykov (2008) p.162

between the *Pravda* and *Izvestia* publications hinting at an editorial rather than authorial decision²¹².

Within the context of the article itself, the phrase occurs as Gorky frames the current opposition that the Soviet Union faces as analogous to the conditions of civil war:

Inside the country, the most cunning enemies are organizing food hunger against us, the kulaks terrorize the collectivist peasants with murders, arson, and various mean things - against us everything that has outlived its time allotted by history, and this gives us the right to consider ourselves still in a state of civil war. A natural conclusion follows from this: if the enemy does not surrender, he is destroyed... We live in a continuous war with the entire bourgeoisie of the world. This obliges the working class to actively prepare for self-defense, to defend its historical role, to defend everything that it has already created for itself and to teach the proletarians of all countries during the thirteen years of urban, selfless work of building a new world.²¹³

It is clear that Stalin both guided the content and edited at least some of Gorky's articles of this period. Referring to *To Workers and Peasants*, published on the first day of the Industrial Party trial, Gorky thanked Stalin for providing the relevant material for the article and consented to any changes he saw fit it make (Stalin made two minor amendments²¹⁴). The article itself, like those that followed on the same subject, echoed the language that would appear in the trial transcripts:

These people, technicians, learned lackeys of the capitalists expelled from Russia... confessed to a whole series of heinous crimes against the workers. Using their knowledge and

²¹² Baranov (1996). p.21

²¹³ Gorky, M. (1953) *Tom 25*. pp.228-229

²¹⁴ Gor'kii (2018) p.542

the confidence of the Soviet government, they harmed in every way the cause of the workers building their state as equals²¹⁵

During the late-summer of 1930 Gorky began work on a play, *Somov and Others*, which depicted the wrecking activities of the antagonist Somov and the loyal Bolshevik workers who unravel his plot. Whether the subject of the play was Gorky's inspiration or whether it was proposed to him is difficult to ascertain, but the powers that be certainly did everything in their power to help facilitate the author's work. At Stalin's request, Khalatov forwarded Gorky a selection of Central Control Commission documents prepared by the OGPU on the subject of wreckers²¹⁶, and Yagoda would also furnish the author with interrogation protocols. It is fair to assume that the steady stream of confession transcripts from the Industrial Trial that Stalin readily provided were also used as source material.

There is little doubt that Gorky fully believed the accusations levelled against the alleged conspirators. He closely followed the revelations of sabotage in the Soviet press from his home in Sorrento, appalled and infuriated by the increasingly lurid accounts of anti-Soviet wrecking. Writing to Khalatov at Gosizdat, Gorky expressed his 'fury' at the saboteurs' activities ("I sincerely wish them a vile death") and his gratitude to the devoted service of the GPU²¹⁷. During the Industrial Party trial he claimed to be "in a state of extreme tension", wishing instead that he was present in the courtroom as the trial progressed²¹⁸. To those who doubted the credibility of the charges against the accused Gorky responded with incredulity and vitriol. On September 8th émigré writer and former-politician Ekaterina Kuskova wrote to the author from Prague asking him to intercede on behalf of the arrested scientists, stating that they were being scapegoated for the failures of Soviet policy. "I know well that the

²¹⁵ Gor'kii (1953) *Tom.25*. pp. 230-234

²¹⁶ Gor'kii (2018) p.393

²¹⁷ *Ibid.* p.58. True to form, Gorky can't resist a subtle dig at Khalatov at the end of the letter – "Sometimes it seems to me that they (wreckers) have taken refuge with you in Gosizdat".

²¹⁸ *Ibid.* p.133

situation in Russia has reached the highest point of trouble”²¹⁹, Kuskova wrote, a statement which Gorky would seize upon. In his article *On Clever Men*, published in *Izvestia* on October 16th, the author railed against the so-called émigré ‘expert’ who considered himself the ‘embodiment of world wisdom’ and possessed “an ugly exaggerated opinion about the strength and breadth of his mind.” Gorky, who littered the text with oblique references to Kuskova (“He writes from somewhere, for example, from Prague: "I know very well that the situation in Russia has reached the highest point of trouble”²²⁰), lashed out at those who wrote to him asking to intercede on behalf of the wreckers, accusing them of arrogant, class-based self-interest:

They write: "The noblest Ivan Ivanovich, whom we know, has been arrested ..." From a distance they look into the gateway and crevices of the gates of a new history, which is created by the government, the will of the workers and peasants, they look and know everything. I think that they know only one thing well enough - that the clever people, kindred to them in "spirit," are striving, to the best of their weakness, to restore philistinism, to restore the bourgeois system²²¹²²²

Gorky’s long-term correspondent Romain Rolland was equally unable to move the author. Evoking the Reign of Terror of 1793, “when the Revolution, in a fever, mowed down both its enemies and its most devoted servants”, Rolland tactfully expressed his concerns to Gorky over the incessant uncovering of conspiracies, being sure to state that he was saying this

²¹⁹ Bocharova, I.A., Semashkina, M.A., Spiridonova, L.A. (Eds). *Gor’kii i Ego Korrespondenty: Materialy i Issledovaniya. Bypusk 7*. Moskva : IMLI RAN. pp.124-125

²²¹ Gor’kii (1953) *Tom.25*) pp.203-211

²²² Gorky eventually replied personally to Kuskova in January 1929, defending his stance and claiming during the height of collectivisation that “the peasant eats meat, butter, eggs in quantities he had never dreamed of before.” Gor’kii (2016), p.212

privately out of love and respect for the Soviet Union²²³. Even this cautious rebuke was enough to infuriate Gorky:

I am absolutely amazed that you, too, believe in the possibility of “invented or forced torture” of the confessions of the organizers of the famine. “They must be allowed to repent sincerely,” you write, an artist, a psychologist, a person burdened with the saddest of all knowledge — the knowledge of people. Why is it “impossible”? These vile people repented, hoping that a sincere consciousness of the crime would keep them alive.²²⁴

Rolland backed down: “I voiced my concern. Nothing more... If you, Gorky, guarantee the justice of the arrest, well, I believe you²²⁵.”

As the trial loomed ever closer Gorky maintained regular contact with both Stalin and Yagoda, expressing his anxiety at the situation in the Soviet Union and his relief and pride in the work of the GPU, the “vigilant, faithful guardian of (working class) life and interests²²⁶”. His belief in the guilt of those accused and the righteousness of the consequences never wavered. Any friends or acquaintances swept up in the arrests, such as Osadchy (“What a bastard!²²⁷”) and Sukhanov (“Idiot²²⁸”) were swiftly dismissed. Most intriguingly for Stalin, Gorky also appeared to buy into the subtext that would be presented at the trial that the conspirators were inspired by the oppositionist activities of Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky: “I was completely shocked by the new, so cleverly organized acts of sabotage and the role of right-wing tendencies in these acts.²²⁹”

²²³ Mikhailov, A.D. (Ed.) (1995). p.170

²²⁴ Gor’kii (2018). p.86

²²⁵ Mikhailov, A.D. (Ed.) (1995). p.173

²²⁶ Gor’kii (2018), p.84

²²⁷ Ibid. p.138

²²⁸ Ibid., pp.112-113

²²⁹ Ibid. p.83

Yet for all of Gorky's public and private indignation, and in spite of his repeated articles evoking civil war violence, the author was lobbying Stalin for a policy of leniency. Writing on December 2nd, only six days before sentencing of the Industrial Party Trial was to take place, Gorky recommended clemency for the accused:

Of course, I am in favor of the "supreme measure", but, perhaps, it would be politically more tactful to leave the villains on earth in strict isolation. It is possible that this would have a healing effect on all the specialists and shut the throats of the enemies who are waiting for an opportunity to shout about the atrocities of the Bolsheviks²³⁰.

Whether Gorky's appeal was borne from the author's humanitarianism or his acute consciousness of the Soviet Union's image abroad, he achieved the desired result; those of the accused who received the death sentence subsequently had the order commuted to eight to ten years imprisonment. Privately, Gorky feigned surprise at the verdict, telling acquaintances that the clemency "surprised and excited" him, commending the political wisdom of such a decision²³¹. It is unclear whether it was truly Gorky's intercession that prompted Stalin to show mercy. Writing to the author only days after the sentencing, the *vozhd* outlined his motivations in short bullet points, and followed with a diatribe that reads more like a campaign speech than letter between peers:

We decided to replace the execution by imprisonment for 10 years or less. We would like to emphasize three things with this: a) the main culprits are not Ramzinists, but their masters in Paris are the French invaders with their cover of the Torgprom; b) the Soviet government is not averse to pardoning people who repent and disarm, because it is not guided by a sense of revenge, but by the interests of the Soviet state; c) the Soviet government is not afraid of any

²³⁰ Ibid. p.121

²³¹ Ibid. pp.132-133

enemies abroad, or their agents in the USSR... We are doing pretty well. And in the field of industry, and in the field of agriculture, the success is undeniable. Let them meow there, in Europe, to all of the voices and all of the fossils of the medieval period, about the "collapse" of the USSR. They will not change either our plans or our cause. The USSR will be a first-class country of the largest, most technically equipped industrial and agricultural production.

Socialism is unbeatable. There will be no more "poor" Russia. It's over! There will be a mighty and plentiful advanced Russia.²³²

As with Gorky's articles on the trials of the wreckers and his proposed play *Somov and Others*, Stalin was feeding the author the necessary material to support the policies of the regime, and the conclusion of the Industrial Party trial allowed for a shift in tone from defensive indignation to buoyant victory. A few days after the conclusion of the trial the ironically titled, "*To the Humanitarians*" appeared in *Pravda*, in which Gorky excoriated the hypocritical Western liberals for their failure to protest bourgeois tyranny in their own countries, and celebrated the Soviet Union's unquestionable moral authority:

It is quite natural that the workers' and peasants' government beats its enemies like a louse.

These former masters and former people are supported by the capitalists of Europe, its parasites; support in the hope of satisfying their morbid and insane thirst for profit. The

workers and peasants of the Union of Soviets are successfully building their state in conditions of zoological hatred of the bourgeoisie of the whole world, a class that has already degenerated, has outlived its energy, is incapable of creating culture, acting only by force of inertia.²³³

Gorky would apparently have no regrets with either the title or tone of the *If the Enemy Does Not Surrender*... article. Shkapa relates a conversation with the author in January 1934, as

²³² RGASPI, 558:11:718:98-99

²³³ Gor'kii (1953) *Tom.25*, pp.235-241

Gorky was sorting through letters in which people criticised him for endorsing state violence against ‘enemies of the people’. Citing the recently published volume on the Belomor Canal, Gorky claimed that he had only ever called for the implacable enemy to be destroyed:

Indeed, tell me what to do with the enemy who does not give up? What to do with him? Exhort him? ... Did I call for the extermination of those who laid down their arms?! Serious people seem to be writing and they are talking nonsense!²³⁴

Collectivisation

There can be little doubt as to Gorky’s support of Stalin’s policy of collectivisation. The author’s life-long distrust of the Russian countryside was immortalised in his 1922 article, *On The Russian Peasantry*, in which he depicted the rural population as a superstitious, selfish and inherently sadistic dark mass that posed a grave threat to the revolution, a “semi-wild people” capable of “incredible cruelty”²³⁵. His period in exile only solidified Gorky’s position; writing to Uritsky in December 1928, he criticised the ‘childish optimism’ of writers covering the Sovietisation of the countryside, manipulated by the cunning and distrustful peasant intent on ‘making fools’ of those who seek to build a better life of the peasantry. “Let us crush the conservatism of the countryside”, Gorky concludes, “We will crush it!”²³⁶

While Gorky was likely unaware of the full horrors of grain requisition in the countryside, he was at the very least informed of large-scale ‘excesses’. Forwarding the author a report from the Siberian countryside in September 1928, Zazubrin told of violence, deprivation and widescale abandonment of farms and machinery²³⁷. Gorky would read further accounts of rural violence in the émigré press, yet his primary concern appears to have been on the

²³⁴ Shkapa (1964). p.207

²³⁵ Gor’kii, M. (1922). *O Russkom Krest’yanstv.* Izdatel’stvo I.P. Ladyzhnikova : Berlin. pp.40-41

²³⁶ Gor’kii (2016), pp.155-156

²³⁷ Ibid. pp. 313-314

negative impression this would leave on a Western readership, complaining to Khalatov, “I would like to know who this scoundrel is who is publishing messages from Moscow in *Rul*’, and who is the scoundrel who corresponds to the *Socialist Messenger*... It’s not very fun for me!²³⁸”. The author’s preoccupation with Western perception of the methods of collectivisation continued into 1930, at the very height of Stalin’s campaign against the peasantry, as he justified the reports of violence and mass arrests to Rolland by attributing the conflict to the “anarchist instincts and habits”²³⁹ of the peasants. On January 8th 1930 Gorky wrote to Stalin, dismissing the complaints against the methods of dekulakisation and celebrating the mass upheaval taking place across the Soviet countryside:

I receive a lot of hostile letters, like you, like all of us “old people”. The crazy ideas and attacks of the authors of the letters convince me that after the party so decisively puts the village on the rails of collectivism, the social revolution takes on a truly socialist character. This is an almost geological revolution and it is larger, immeasurably larger and deeper than anything that has been done by the Party. The system of life that has existed for millennia is being destroyed, the system that created an extremely ugly, peculiar man, capable of terrifying with his animal conservatism, his instinct of ownership. There are twenty million of such people. The task of re-educating them in the shortest possible time is the craziest task. And yet, now it is practically being solved. It is only natural that many of the millions fall into a genuine, frenzied madness. They do not even understand the full depth of the upheaval that is taking place, but they instinctively feel it to the bone, feel that the destruction of the deepest foundation of their centuries-old life is beginning.²⁴⁰

²³⁸ Ibid. p.107

²³⁹ Gor’kii (2017) p.207.

²⁴⁰ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.718, l.25

Gorky's rabid fanaticism for collectivisation, his relish at the destruction of traditional rural life, is staggering. It has even been suggested that it was the author himself who proposed the policy, though as Baranov states, this allegation is entirely without evidence²⁴¹. However, his innate distrust of the peasantry, his discomfort at the international criticism of the violence inflicted upon the rural population, and his private celebration at the suffering of millions of people forced into either collective farms or captivity make it impossible to claim that in this regard the author was seeking to moderate Stalin's general line. Two months after Gorky's letter to the *vozhd*, Pravda published Stalin's *Dizzy with Success*, an article described by Service as an act of "gargantuan hypocrisy"²⁴², in which the leader called for an end to the "excesses" in the countryside and laid the blame squarely at the feet of over-zealous Party functionaries who had misunderstood directives from the centre. In Moroz's account, Gorky would later attempt to take credit for this attempted softening of the policy of collectivisation, claiming that he had insisted to Stalin that the peasants should only join the kolkhoz voluntarily rather than under compulsion²⁴³. This is scarcely credible. The reliability of Moroz's narrative aside, none of the available evidence suggests that Gorky was ever anything other than an ardent supporter of collectivisation.

Factional Politics

When Gorky arrived in 1928 it is doubtful that he envisioned his role as one of political intermediary between the two disputing factions in the Central Committee. Prior to his arrival, the impending open conflict between Stalin and the so-called Right Oppositionists over the abandonment of NEP and the breakneck tempo of industrialisation and grain requisition had yet to erupt, with disagreements within the Politburo generally kept behind

²⁴¹ Baranov (1996), p.146

²⁴² Service, R. (2004). *Stalin: A Biography*. Macmillan : London. p. 271

²⁴³ Moroz (1954). pp.15-20

closed doors. The correspondence that we have available from this period between Gorky and his political acquaintances, such as Bukharin, Rykov and Kamenev, contains very little mention of the ongoing intra-party struggles. While it is probable that Gorky was at least somewhat aware of these disputes, through Kryuchkov, Peshkova, and reports in the émigré press, these sources were based on unreliable streams of information leaking from within the country and often provided inconsistent and ultimately untrue versions of events. Prominent émigré journal *Rul'*, for example, posited that upon the author's arrival Gorky might align himself with the "Russian Group", headed by Rykov and Kalinin, who were so appalled by the Shakhty Affair ("which failed scandalously") that they sought to have Stalin removed from power. This attempted recruitment by alleged "Russian Group" was deemed to have ultimately failed however as Gorky had become so enamoured with the lavish receptions celebrated in his honour that he decided to stay neutral²⁴⁴.

More recently, Gorky historian L.A. Spiridonova described a struggle waged between Stalin and those on the Right to gain Gorky's support prior to his first return to the Soviet Union, and notes that Bukharin and Rykov were conscious that the author's international standing could be decisive in the factional battle should he declare his support for them²⁴⁵. It seems likelier however that Gorky's continued relations with those associated with the Right Opposition were born from the author's desire for reconciliation within the party. Gronsky describes Gorky in 1928 as arguing for "the need to end these arguments, to end the factions and live peacefully and work peacefully"²⁴⁶:

Rykov, Kamenev and Bukharin were the closest people to him in the top party leadership.

The disagreements, the split, the incessant struggle in the party and the abuse that his friends

²⁴⁴ Baranov (1996) p.104

²⁴⁵ Spiridonova, L. (1995) Gorky and Stalin (According to New Materials from A.M. Gorky's Archive). *Russian Review*. 54 (3). P.415

²⁴⁶ Ibid. P.415

underwent did not worry Gorky. He dreamed of reconciling the warring sides into a common party for economic and cultural work, which he mentioned more than once in the letters of this time²⁴⁷.

As detailed in Nikolaevsky's *Letter of an Old Bolshevik*, it has also been suggested that Gorky sought to launch an "Intellectual" party working alongside, rather than opposing, the Central Committee, in essence a compromise that would allow Stalin and the Politburo to focus on 'big politics' while Gorky and his retinue developed the cultural growth of the country²⁴⁸. It is probable that this claim arose through Gorky's ambitions for increased cultural autonomy rather than any political ambition, and there is nothing in Gorky's public pronouncements or published personal correspondence to substantiate this rumour.

However if the speculation regarding the launch of an Intellectual Party remains somewhat lacking in evidence, there does appear to have been an attempt by Gorky to launch a bi-partisan 'intellectual' journal during his first visit back to the Soviet Union, alluded to only in diary entries and snippets of correspondence. From the information that we have available, it appears that Gorky discussed the idea openly with several colleagues, only to abandon the project as the schism within the Party widened, making any such undertaking politically toxic. Writing to Gorky on October 10, 1928, just one day before his return to Italy, Tikhonov asked the author, "If you leave, then who will be the head of the magazine - under existing conditions, none of us are able to overcome the obstacles that will inevitably stand in the way of its implementation. *You, of course, know what kind of obstacles these are. You could manage the magazine from Italy in the future, but it is impossible to organise it without you.*" Tikhonov went on to add that while the journal was a worthwhile endeavor, its proposal had

²⁴⁷ Spiridonova, L.A., Primochkina, N.N. & Plotnikova, A.G. (Eds.) (2018). p.154

²⁴⁸ Nikolaevsky, B. I. (1966) *Power and the Soviet Elite: 'The Letter of an Old Bolshevik' and Other Essays*. Zagoria, J.D. (Ed.) Pall Mall Press : London. p.34

generally met a cold response.²⁴⁹ More details are revealed in Mikhail Prishvin's diary: "Tikhonov told the details of Gorky's adventure with the magazine. Apparently, the matter turned out like this: Gorky was negotiating with the Rights (Rykov and others); and while they were talking, these rightists were declared a "right deviation." Gorky fled, and his gamble fell heavily on Bazarov (co-editor)"²⁵⁰. Bazarov would later be caught up in the Menshevik Trial and sentenced to five years imprisonment.

The last documented account of the journal comes from Kryuchkov, writing to Gorky in December 1928; "The magazine about which there was an interview with A.I. Rykov, will not come out - the main group refuses for reasons known to you "²⁵¹. From everything else known about Gorky during his first return this attempted journal was almost certainly another gesture in reconciliation as opposed to political adventurism, but the case serves as perhaps the first example of the author's attempts to utilise the intellectual and creative capacities of his allies within the Party to both further his own cultural ambitions and, by bringing them into his fold, throw a protective umbrella over those he deemed too valuable to be discarded from active work. This would be a recurrent tactic of Gorky's that he would pursue with varying degrees of success until the Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934.

Right Deviation

On May 28th, only one day after Gorky's return to the Soviet Union, Stalin gave a speech to students of the Institute of Red Professors, Bukharin's "intellectual bailiwick"²⁵², in which he

²⁴⁹ Gor'kii (2016) p.430

²⁵⁰ Prishvin Diary, November 15th 1928

²⁵¹ Gor'kii (2016). p.506

²⁵² Cohen, S. (1980). *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888-1938*. Oxford, Oxford University Press. p.285

alluded to a split within the Party and accused his unnamed opponents of indulging in “liberal chatter” and weakening the resolve of the working class and peasantry:

To fail to understand that the relative importance of the kulaks in the countryside is a hundred times greater than that of the small capitalists in urban industry, is to lose one's senses, to break with Leninism, to desert to the side of the enemies of the working class.²⁵³

The struggle between the two factions for the direction of the Party would continue throughout Gorky's first journey home, with occasional concessions from Stalin, such as the repealing of extraordinary measures in grain procurement in July, being countered by the incremental splintering of ‘Right’ strongholds such as the Moscow Communist Party and the Comintern. At *Pravda*, Bukharin's colleagues were ousted and replaced by Stalinists through August and September; Bukharin retained the de-facto title of editor but lost editorial control over published content. Soon after, articles were published warning of a “Right danger” within the Party, though it would be another year before Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky were specifically identified and attacked²⁵⁴. Regardless, the tone of the struggle had shifted from “liberal chatter” to outright counter-revolution. By mid-October only days after Gorky's departure to Sorrento, *Pravda* warned “a victory of the Right deviation in our Party would mean a development of the conditions necessary for the restoration of capitalism in our country.”²⁵⁵

For this to be the backdrop to Gorky's triumphant return home can only have frustrated the author, intent on portraying a unified, flourishing Soviet Union to a cynical Western audience. Spiridovona describes Gorky during this period as being bemused by the bitter political conflict that surrounded him, quoting Gronsky's claim that Gorky viewed his role in

²⁵³ *Pravda*, No.127, June 2nd 1928

²⁵⁴ Cohen (1980) pp. 280-296

²⁵⁵ *Pravda*, No.247, October 23rd, 1928

that moment as one of reconciliation, trying “to end these arguments, to end the factions and live peacefully and work peacefully, especially as there was a wealth of work.”²⁵⁶

Correspondence from this period attests to Gorky’s neutrality in the ongoing struggle and his dismay and discomfort at his friends and colleagues’ inability to unite and work together. In a letter to statesman Nikolai Semashko on the day of his return to Sorrento, Gorky speaks positively of his journey over the previous six months, while allowing hints of his confusion and mild frustration at the environment of political in-fighting:

We are a good country, we have good, talented people, maybe they are so confused because they are very gifted. It's easy to live with them, you have to swear, argue, yes! - and it is not always pleasant, in moments it is hard, but, in the end, after all, it is good, easy, refreshes, invigorates - “rejuvenates”²⁵⁷

Writing in December after three months pondering his experience, Gorky expressed his discomfort with the ongoing political volatility in a letter to author Ivan Kasatkin:

I was very much stunned by the contradictory nature of the impressions, which, at the same time, caused me both delight and anxiety. Delight - of course, not in “meetings” in which there was a lot of artificial and philistine curiosity, but by the work that has been done and is being done, and by those clear changes “for the better”.. There is a lot of joy here. The anxiety is caused by... the fact that we are experiencing a difficult moment and that this is far from clear to everyone. But - I do not like anxiety and “am not a master” of talking, finding that it is much better to fight against the causes of anxiety than to talk about them. For the purpose of this struggle I persuaded comrades to organize *Our Achievements*... When the first

²⁵⁶ Spiridonova, L. (1995). pp. 413-423

²⁵⁷ Gor’kii (2016) pp.62-63

book comes out, please inform me of your impression. I think that it will not be entirely
successful²⁵⁸

In January 1929, only weeks prior to the launch of *Our Achievements*, another political scandal erupted within the Politburo, as details of a covert meeting between Bukharin and Lev Kamenev were detailed in an underground Trotskyist pamphlet circulating through Moscow. Kamenev had only recently been reinstated to the Party in June 1928 and granted permission to return from internal exile in Kaluga to Moscow; almost immediately rumours began to circulate inferring that Bukharin had voted against his former-opponent's pardon. Desperate to refute the allegation Bukharin arranged a clandestine meeting between the two men, which abruptly took a conspiratorial turn. Driven to nervous desperation by the power struggle within the Politburo, Bukharin unloaded his fears for the Party's future onto Kamenev, saying of Stalin, "(he's) an unprincipled intriguer who subordinates everything to the preservation of his power." Incredibly, he would go on to propose a coalition with Zinoviev and Kamenev, the two men along with Trotsky whom he had fought so bitterly to expel from the Party less than a year earlier:

We believe that Stalin's line is destructive for the whole revolution. With it we could disappear. The disagreements between us (the Right) and Stalin are many times more serious than all the disagreements we had with you. Rykov, Tomsy and I unanimously formulate the position as follows: "It would be much better if we now had Zinoviev and Kamenev in the
Politburo instead of Stalin."

Expanding on this theme, Bukharin claimed that there was already an extended coalition ready to demand Stalin's removal from power, likely an expression of political fantasy on Bukharin's part; he claimed that the Right had the support of Kirov, Ulganov and perhaps

²⁵⁸ Ibid. pp. 166-167

most importantly, the OGPU, Yagoda in particular. Ordzhonikidze was also indirectly implicated.

Bukharin swore Kamenev to secrecy, stating that the OGPU was following both men and that their phone lines were tapped. Regardless, Kamenev later made notes of the conversation and mailed them back to Zinoviev in Kaluga, an act, Kotkin speculates, purposely designed to ingratiate Kamenev with Stalin; Kamenev must have known that his mail would be also be monitored by the OGPU. Indeed, the letter was intercepted and Bukharin's 'plot' was exposed.²⁵⁹ It wasn't until the affair was recounted in Trotskyist literature several months later however that the scandal become public.

Bukharin was hauled before the Politburo and Central Control Commission to explain himself, accused of having deviated from simply dissenting against the general line to outright conspiring against the Party. Bukharin gave a good account of himself, refusing to apologise for his actions given the "abnormal conditions"²⁶⁰ of the time and launching a furious attack (co-signed by Rykov and Tomsky) on Stalin's politics and personality, but his fate was essentially sealed. Although, for now, escaping expulsion from the Politburo, a Central Committee Plenum in April 1929 saw Bukharin and Tomsky lose their positions at Pravda and the Comintern, and freed from the constraints of active opposition Stalin began to press ahead with the intensification of industrialisation and collectivisation, officially agreed at the Sixteenth Party Congress in April. A formal purge was also announced to counter the forces of Rightism within the government bureaucracy; over the course of the next year

²⁵⁹ Kotkin (2014). pp.713-716

²⁶⁰ Cohen (1980). p.305

approximately 1.5 million Soviet employees were investigated, with 164,000 removed from their positions.²⁶¹

Bukharin's vision of political moderation was over, as was *Pravda's* policy of only alluding to factional struggle within the Party; in August, Bukharin was identified as "chief leader and inspirer of the right deviationists"²⁶², launching a vicious and prolonged press campaign that essentially finished him as a credible alternative to Stalin. Bukharin would be expelled from the Politburo in November 1929, and along with Rykov and Tomsy recanted his opposition to Stalin's course and pledged unity to the Party. Bukharin's capitulation was complete.

Gorky stayed informed of events throughout the campaign against the Right, and it is possible that he sympathised with elements of Bukharin's opposition; Gorky historian Lidia Spiridonova maintains that Gorky, 'without a doubt', knew of Bukharin's feelings and of his meeting with Kamenev²⁶³. One account goes as far as to insinuate Gorky's overt support for his friends in their struggle with Stalin - in a story passed on to Vyacheslav Ivanov from Anna Akhmatova, Gorky visited Yevgeny Zamyatin shortly before the latter's emigration to Paris in 1931, which Gorky had succeeded in arranging. As the men parted, Gorky is alleged to have told Zamyatin, "Leave, leave, and we will see who wins here – this one (making a gesture depicting Stalin's moustache) or our Ivanovichi (Bukharin and Rykov's patronymics)"²⁶⁴. Whether there is any truth to this anecdote is impossible to verify, but at the very least it indicates an assumption within fellow-traveller literary circles that Gorky supported the Rightists.

²⁶¹ Cultural Revolution as Class War – Sheila Fitzpatrick. In *Cultural Revolution in Russia: 1928 – 1931* ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick p.27

²⁶² Cohen (1980) p.332

²⁶³ Spiridonova, L.A., Primochkina, N.N. & Plotnikova, A.G. (Eds.) (2018). p.154

²⁶⁴ Ivanov (1993)

Gorky's admiration of Bukharin was well known - "devilishly talented," Gorky would say of him, "he literally lights up somehow!"²⁶⁵ – and their correspondence throughout Stalin's campaign against the Right demonstrates the close bond between the men. A clearly despondent Bukharin, who at the time was subject to constant attacks in the press over his 'silence' following the Right Opposition's defeat, reached out to Gorky in May 1930:

I would like to talk to you, my dear, yes but I do not know when it will be. I remember you often, especially when my soul is heavy - ... because you managed not to lose a lot of human traits, for the sake of their development it is worth living and fighting. Well, I seem to be ready to lapse into sentiment.²⁶⁶

Writing in July 1930 from Sorrento, where evidently Gorky was suffering from the effects of the weather and minor earth tremors, the author's warm, gently mocking tone was evidently intended to help comfort his friend:

Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin! You are, indeed, a deviator, for you shy away from co-operation in *Literary Study*, despite the obedient and even humble requests of the editor of the journal M. Gorky ... Dear and cursed deviationist, you defeat an old disabled person, shocked by an earthquake, suffering from the heat and abundance of work - this magazine deserves your support! And you, a heretic, are silent. Shame!²⁶⁷

Joining his fellow oppositionists Rykov and Tomsy in publicly disavowing his previous stance and endorsing Stalin's general line, Bukharin's recantation appeared in *Pravda* on

²⁶⁵ Primochkina, N. (1993) *Donkikhoty Bol'shevizma: Maksim Gor'kii I Nikolai Bukharin*. Cvebodnaya Mysl'. No.4, March 1993. P.67

²⁶⁶ Spiridonova, L.A., Primochkina, N.N. & Plotnikova, A.G. (Eds.) (2018). pp.156-157

²⁶⁷ Ibid. p.156

November 23rd 1930, and marked the beginning of a brief rehabilitation within the party.

Gorky, ever the reconciler, was delighted:

Dear Nikolai Ivanovich, I wanted to drop you a few words. I read your letter in Pravda and was very pleased. It was not yesterday, but the joy that you are again in your fighting place is alive today... I hold you tight, very tight. And Alexey Ivanovich (Rykov). You've both endured a lot of hard things over the years, I know. But forgive my old man "sentimentality",

I have begun to love you both more, with love and respect. Fact.²⁶⁸

Gorky has previously expressed similar sentiments to Rykov. In May of that year Gorky was effusive in his praise of his friend's repentance:

Kryuchkov tells me a lot of things that are very exciting and arouses the desire to visit you right away, look at you, shake your hands. You people are truly dear to me, and - excuse me!

- I love you very much and am surprised at you and - in general. I'd like to see you very
much²⁶⁹

Gorky's proximity to and friendship with Bukharin would initially be tolerated by Stalin, and it would be unfair to accuse Gorky at this stage of naivety in fostering such a relationship; as we will see the author used his access to the *vozhd* to petition on behalf of Bukharin and other disgraced comrades, clearly under the belief that he would be able to influence some sort of political 'truce' for the greater cultural good. In many cases his requests would be indulged, if not initially then over time. However Gorky's ties with those understood to have been one-time oppositionists to the regime would not be forgotten.

I Warmly Shake Your Hand

²⁶⁸ Ibid. p.157

²⁶⁹ Gor'kii (2017) pp.294-295

Written correspondence between Gorky and Stalin was initiated by the *vozhda* on June 11th 1929, a day after the two had met at the All-Union Congress of Atheists in Moscow and presumably agreed to exchange letters. So began a regular, if occasionally uneven, communication that continued until Gorky's death. The content of the first sent letter, a critique of a play Stalin had recently read is fairly innocuous; of more interest is the attached copy of his recent letter to playwright Vladimir Bill-Belotserkovsky, in which he emphasises the impossibility of applying terms such as 'right' and 'left' to literature, only 'Soviet' or 'anti-Soviet', 'revolutionary' or 'anti-revolutionary'. Literature and theatre, in Stalin's view, were distinctly non-Party, and as such not subject to terms describing Party deviations.²⁷⁰ Coming so soon after Gorky's article *A Waste of Energy*, this was perhaps a subtle endorsement of the author's attempts to stop the endless harassment of fellow-traveller authors in the RAPP-controlled literary press.

Gorky's first letter to Stalin, written shortly after the author returned to Sorrento in October 1929, is a candid expression of Gorky's concerns following his second tour of the Soviet Union. In the longest letter that Gorky had composed in a number of years, he outlined both his immediate worries and intended solutions, promoting his ongoing projects of education and reconciliation. Beginning by once again attacking the policy of self-criticism, Gorky worries that the Soviet youth, seeing that their teachers, "one after another, are falling away from the party", are lurching into despair and depression. In fostering an atmosphere of suspicion and denunciation among the Party elite and breeding a culture of pessimism and fear, the Bolsheviks are failing in their duty to rear a new generation of Soviet citizens who can be considered the equals of those who had gone before them. Given the timing, this was an overt reference to the public denunciations of Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky.

²⁷⁰ Artizov & Naumov (1999). pp.100-101

Gorky's solution to this negativity, inevitably, is positive, literary didacticism; "The facts of a negative nature published by our press must be balanced with facts of a positive nature. It is necessary to write about this simply, competently, solidly." Specifically, he proposes the creation of a new journal, *Abroad*, intended by Gorky to negatively contrast life in the decadent, capitalist West with the achievements of the Soviet Union. Also proposed as a matter of urgency is the intended multi-volume *History of the Civil War*, which Gorky frames as vital in the ongoing struggle to educate the peasantry on the heroic struggle of the working class against the common enemy of capitalist power:

This history is incomprehensible to the peasantry, because it is unfamiliar in all its breadth. It is necessary that they know for what reasons the working class began this war, that they know that the workers saved the country from conquest by foreign capital and slavery, so that they know what losses of blood, life, what destruction of the economy, in figures and pictures, were caused in this country.²⁷¹

This echoed the language of his 1928 brochure *Letter to the Rural Correspondents*, replying to letters published in *Krestyanskaya Gazeta*, in which the author appealed to the peasantry to learn their recent history to understand the possibilities of the future²⁷². This knowledge of history was vital to Gorky, who as early as 1922 would claim that much of the innate selfishness and backwardness of the Russian peasantry could be attributed to their lack of collective memory and ignorance of historical heroes²⁷³. The task of literature, in Gorky's view, was to educate, inspire and create new revolutionary heroes.

To assist with these literary projects Gorky proposed the appointment of Karl Radek to *Abroad* and Aleksandr Voronksy to *History of the Civil War*. This endorsement was

²⁷¹ Gor'kii (2017), pp.125 -130

²⁷² Gor'kii (1953) Tom.24. pp.463-464

²⁷³ Gor'kii, M. (1922). pp.14-15

politically fraught, as both men had been vocal critics of the Stalinist line. After much petitioning²⁷⁴, Radek had only recently returned to Moscow after being expelled from the Party and sentenced to internal exile in 1927, while Voronsky had been expelled in 1928 and arrested briefly in January 1929. For both men, Gorky argues, their ‘deviation’ is ultimately irrelevant given the narrow remit of both publications, but this endorsement, so soon after the author expressed his concern at quality teachers being alienated from the Party, is a clear call to reconciliation. For Gorky, an individual’s vacillation from the Party line was less important than the value that person could bring to the Party itself if placed in the correct position.

In the context of Gorky’s vision for the future Soviet Union the letter is incredibly revealing. In the author’s view, all present problems stemmed from self-criticism, negativity and the alienation of honest Bolsheviks whose abilities could greatly benefit the Party. That this is his first letter to Stalin lends the document even more significance, serving as an outline of the author’s expectations of his own role in the years ahead. The statement wasn’t lost on the *vozhd*, who immediately forwarded the letter to Molotov, Kaganovich, Stesky and Smirnov²⁷⁵.

Before receiving a response Gorky would write to Stalin once again on November 29th, buoyed by the news of the Right’s recantation of their opposition and acceptance of the Party line:

Terribly pleased by the return to party life of Bukharin, Alexei Ivanovich (Rykov) and Tomsky. Very glad. Such a celebration at heart. I was worried about this split²⁷⁶

²⁷⁴ RGASPI f.17, O.171, d.17, l.1-2

²⁷⁵ Gor’kii (2017). p.541

²⁷⁶ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.718, l.23

That his friends had been routed and forced to abandon their political position was clearly unimportant to Gorky; again, the author's primary concern was unity within the Party.

Stalin's return letter, written on January 17th 1930, was a classic combination of concession and intransigence. He immediately dismisses Gorky's warnings of the dangers of self-criticism, no doubt by now weary of the author's frequent public pronouncements on the subject, but while insisting on the ongoing necessity of the practice Stalin is sure to stress that Gorky's concerns shall be addressed:

We cannot live without self-criticism. We just can't, Alexei Maksimovich. Without it, stagnation, decay of the apparatus, the growth of bureaucracy, the undermining of the creative initiative of the working class are inevitable... It is possible that our press gives too much prominence to our shortcomings, and sometimes even (involuntarily) advertises them. That is possible and even probable. And, of course, it is bad. You demand, therefore, that our shortcomings should be counterbalanced (I would say: outweighed) by our achievements.

You are, of course, right about that too. We shall most certainly repair this defect, and without delay. You need have no doubt of that. ²⁷⁷.

Going on to acknowledge a certain degree of pessimism in Soviet youth, he nonetheless emphasises that this is a minority opinion in sharp contrast to the strength of the Komsomol. No mention is made of the discarded Party 'teachers', nor indeed is any reference made to the Right's capitulation. Stalin agrees to the launch of the journal *Abroad* (as well as *History of the Civil War*), but on the question of Radek's appointment as editor he is steadfast in his refusal:

We cannot place any of these enterprises under the leadership of Radek or any of his friends. It is not a matter of Radek's good intentions or his conscientiousness. The point is in the logic

²⁷⁷ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.718, l.28

of the factional struggle, which (i.e. the struggle) he and his friends did not completely abandon (some important differences remain that will push them to fight)... It will be more correct if the management of these enterprises is transferred to politically staunch comrades, and Radek and his friends are brought in as employees.²⁷⁸

This was not merely misplaced paranoia on Stalin's part. Mikhail Present, a Kremlin staffer, kept a diary from 1928 until Mayakovsky's suicide in 1930 which documented several of his encounters with high-ranking Bolsheviks and cultural figures (including Gorky) during this period. The diary found its way into Stalin's personal archive during the Kremlin Affair at the beginning of 1935, in which Kremlin staff, including Present, were caught up in the NKVD investigation into Kirov's assassination. Yenukidze, responsible for the administration and management of the Kremlin, was held accountable for this breach of security and sent into exile. His staff's offices were searched and Present's diary was uncovered.

Radek was one of several prominent left-oppositionists who had been expelled from the party for siding with Trotsky in 1927, and while he acknowledged his role in the opposition he appeared to be attempting to make a fresh break from his former colleague while indicating his willingness to work for the regime:

Before Leo's expulsion abroad we in any way possible kept him from taking ill-considered steps. Now he is lost to us, doing one stupidity after another, and the tragedy is that nobody can hold him back. Politics is politics... There are moments when personal friendship fades into the background. Now you can be either white, or green, or red. The Bolshevik can be neither white nor green... If they force me to work somewhere, well, let's work. We are

²⁷⁸ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.718, l.29-30

companionable people: when we fight, we fight a lot, and when we come to an agreement -
we work without any talk²⁷⁹

Radek also claimed to be avoiding Kamenev, Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky as he didn't want to risk letting the party down. Yet following a conversation with Leonid Serebryakov, recently readmitted to the party following his expulsion in 1927, Present reveals that Radek's renunciation of Trotsky may not have been entirely genuine. Serebryakov described a recent encounter with Radek in which the latter appeared to indicate that a group of internally exiled oppositionists remained in communication and conspiracy with Trotsky:

The first thing Radek does is wave a piece of paper covered with writing and say: "I was right. There (Tobolsk) they didn't go without Leo. I mean the Union. When (Polikarp) Mdivani was arrested, he ate the letter from Leo, in which he gave directives on the organization of the second party. Mdivani then restored from memory the contents of the letter and told them to his neighbors in Tobolsk. And now I have in my hands this letter brought to me from Tobolsk. It is wonderful!"²⁸⁰

Gorky's regular advancement of friends and colleagues generally considered politically toxic was to become a common theme throughout his visits to the Soviet Union; a letter in January 1930 to Kamegulov, one of Gorky's long-suffering editors at *Abroad*, reveals that the author also intended to invite Bukharin, Kamenev and Lunacharsky to contribute to the journal, indicating either Gorky's incomprehension of the political climate, or more likely, his belief that his requests would be catered to²⁸¹. To a certain degree he was correct; Radek would eventually be appointed as deputy editor of *Abroad* in December 1930, and Bukharin and

²⁷⁹ RGASPI. f. 558. o. 11. d. 189, 22nd June, 1930

²⁸⁰ RGASPI. f. 558. o. 11. d. 189, July 31st 1930

²⁸¹ Gor'kii (2017) p.174

Kamenev would both later return to active duty under Gorky's direction. According to Ivan Gronsky, who featured prominently in literary politics during the years of Gorky's rapprochement with the regime, Stalin's toleration of the author's promotion of former-oppositionists was pure political calculation:

Some opposition leaders visited Gorky. Bukharin, Kamenev and Rykov, with whom Alexei Maximovich used to be friends, were there especially often, and he did his utmost for them. I happened to witness many kinds of these meetings. Stalin pretended that he agreed with Gorky. He misled not only Gorky, but also many other people, much more experienced in politics than Alexei Maximovich. At Gorky's insistence, Bukharin was appointed head of the department of scientific and technical propaganda at VSNKh USSR, and Kamenev director of the publishing house *Academia*.²⁸²

In future correspondence, the *vozhd* wasn't above promoting his favourites to Gorky either. Discussing Rykov's impending demotion from the Central Committee in December 1930 ("he doesn't keep up... lags behind... gets confused"²⁸³), Stalin endorses Molotov as the ideal candidate to replace him: "(Molotov is) a brave, smart, quite modern leader. His real name is not Molotov, but Scriabin. He is from Vyatka. The Central Committee is completely behind him"²⁸⁴. In March of 1931 Stalin returns to this theme, again endorsing Molotov and asking for Gorky's assessment of one of the chairman's recent speeches²⁸⁵. Gorky, of course, was already in written correspondence with Molotov by this point.

Gorky and Molotov first met in the chaos of the February Revolution, as Molotov briefly appeared at the author's house in search of Shliapnikov²⁸⁶, hoping to coordinate the

²⁸² Primochkina (1993) p.67

²⁸³ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.718, l.98-99

²⁸⁴ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.718, l.98-99

²⁸⁵ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.718, l.104

²⁸⁶ Chuev, F. (1993). *Molotov Remembers: Inside Kremlin Politics*. Edited by Resis, A. Ivan R. Dee, Chicago. p.89

Bolshevik response to events in Petrograd. Prior to the outbreak of the First World War both Gorky and Molotov were frequent contributors to the Bolshevik press, though they diverged politically after the abdication of the Tsar – Gorky had faith in the provisional government and worked with it on various projects, while Molotov, as a left-wing Bolshevik and faithful adherent to Lenin, bitterly opposed any cooperation with the new government. Following Gorky's frequent criticism of the Bolsheviks in the aftermath of the October Revolution and throughout the civil war, Molotov considered Gorky a "former friend" of the party, and didn't support those who stayed in contact with him²⁸⁷. They wouldn't meet again until Gorky's return to the Soviet Union in 1928, when Molotov joined Stalin in the entourage that greeted the author as his train pulled in to Belarusskaya Station.

Gorky's first letter to Molotov, on October 15th 1930²⁸⁸, would define the terms of their relationship, as he appealed for an old friend, Alexander Tikhonov, to be allocated a position in a publishing house. Molotov duly responded, and Tikhonov was given a senior position at *Academia*, a move that prompted outrage in the literary community. Vyacheslav Polonsky, literary critic and editor of *Novy Mir* complained in his diary that Tikhonov had used his political connections to gain a position to which he was wholly unsuited for ("He wrote to Gorky, who wrote a letter to Molotov - as a result of this Tikhonov is now head of the publishing house *Akademia*."²⁸⁹), while Korney Chukovsky noted that Tikhonov only ever appeared in the office to collect his pay cheque⁵⁷.

²⁸⁷ Bocharova, I.A., Semashkina, M.A., Spiridonova, L.A. (2016) *M. Gorkovo i ego Adresatiii. Material I Issledovaniya*. IMLI RAN, Moskva. p.16

²⁸⁸ Ibid. p.28

²⁸⁹ Polonsky, V.P. (5th March 1931) *Dnevnik*. Available at <https://prozhito.org/person/174>. (Accessed 24th November 2017).

Gorky would also make small demands of other members of the Politburo, asking Voroshilov to delay an aspiring writer's military conscription²⁹⁰, for example, or writing to Kaganovich to request a supply of paper²⁹¹, always in short supply throughout the first half of the 1930s. Petitions were sent to Kirov to provide financial support for a Leningrad theatre group.

Lenin and Trotsky

A minor publishing dispute between the author and Gosizdat in 1930 is demonstrative of the evolving relationship between Gorky and Stalin, with both men seemingly happy to placate the other with small concessions; on this occasion however, Gorky would unexpectedly reject the demands being made of him. Writing to Stalin on February 28th, Khalatov warned that Gorky's 1924 eulogy to Lenin, due for publication in volume 22 of the author's completed works, was in need of 'serious revision'. Stalin took almost a month to respond, stating that if Gorky in any way objected to editing the text then Gosizdat was to publish it regardless²⁹². Having secured the *vozhd's* instructions, Khalatov told Gorky, "We are worried about your memories of Lenin", before reminding him of the intended mass audience of the offending article:

Given this circumstance, is it necessary, for example, your testimony about Lenin's attitude to

Trotsky? ("... Let them show me another person who is capable of organizing an almost exemplary army in a year, even winning the respect of military specialists ..."). During the time that has elapsed since you wrote these lines, so many changes have taken place. We would not like to provide material in a mass publication, which secret and overt Trotskyists would use as an opportunity to protect their positions with your name. We, of course, know

²⁹⁰ Gor'kii, M. (2019) *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii: Pis'ma V Dvatsati Chetyrekh Tomakh. Tom. 21.* Nauka : Moskva. p.189

²⁹¹ Ibid. p.313

²⁹² Yakolev (2005). p.183

that very big people have their own "weaknesses". But so little time has passed since the day of Lenin's death; it's not time to write everything about him yet, and especially not in a mass edition²⁹³

Khalatov, who by the tone of his letter was evidently extremely uncomfortable presenting Gorky with this request, goes on to cite various unfortunate quotes attributed to Lenin by the author, and takes particular umbrage at the latter's assertion that, "the love for Lenin among many is only the dark faith of the exhausted and desperate in the miracle worker".

Gorky appeared to acquiesce to the plea, rewriting and forwarding the article complete with the suggested amendments, yet almost two months later Khalatov would receive a letter from the author that would plunge the publication into disarray:

I earnestly ask you to suspend the printing of *Memoirs of Lenin* and send them to me for additions. I will not cross out Ilyich's comment on Trotsky, because after reading Trotsky's autobiography, I see that his attitude towards Ilyich is irreproachable... Everything else that needs to be shortened in the old text does not matter, but Trotsky must remain.²⁹⁴

Pressed on the matter once more, Stalin responded, "the old man should not be disturbed, print it the way Gorky wants²⁹⁵". During a period when any positive public portrayal of Trotsky was an absolute impossibility, let alone in a canonical representation of Lenin intended for mass publication, the allowance that Stalin grants Gorky is remarkable, and indicative of both the author's public stature and the levels to which Stalin was prepared to indulge him.

²⁹³ Ibid. pp. 173-174

²⁹⁴ Gor'kii (2017). p.341

²⁹⁵ RGASPI. f. 4. o. 2, d. 474, l. 29-30. Cited in Bolshaya Tsenzura pp.183-184

In one final, perplexing footnote to the affair, Gorky appears to have eventually relented, as by the time the eulogy finally made its way to print each of Khalatov's suggested edits had been enacted, including Lenin's quote on Trotsky. Had Gorky been simply pushing back against official pressure to test the limits of his authority? As an avid reader of both the Soviet and émigré press he was keenly aware of how incendiary the passage on Trotsky would be if it made its way to print. Gorky was certainly no fan of the exiled founder of the Red Army - Trotsky had written dismissively of the author following the latter's move to Europe in 1921 – and was in no way motivated to defend his reputation. If Gorky was indeed as disillusioned with his Soviet experience as had been suggested, his insistence that the anecdote remain may well have been a case of Gorky asserting his creative independence, yet only months later he was willingly offering up his articles on the Industrial Party trial to Stalin for editing. For Stalin's part, he appears to have judged the enforced censorship of Gorky's article as a potentially risky measure given the author's continued residence in Sorrento, and the directive that Gorky 'should not be disturbed' echoes the sentiment of the Central Committee Decree of the previous year condemning the Siberian literary press; for now, Gorky would be able to proceed with impunity.

As an interesting footnote to the affair, an unlikely encounter between the author and Trotsky almost took place several years later. Gorky's ship briefly moored in Istanbul during his final journey to the Soviet Union in 1933; learning of this, Trotsky's representatives managed to board the boat and attempted to speak directly to the author before being surrounded by 'four or five solidly built fellows' (presumably OGPU guards). Gorky hid below deck, sending out Maxim in his place. Asked to petition on behalf of exiled-Trotskyist Christian Rakovsky, who was rumoured to be in poor health, Maxim promised to pass on their concerns to his

father before the men were bundled off the ship²⁹⁶. Rakovsky would return to public life in 1934, though there is no indication that Gorky influenced this decision. He was arrested in 1937 and a year later convicted for his involvement in the Right-Trotskyist bloc and his alleged role in the plot to murder Gorky. Sentenced to 20 years imprisonment, he was executed in 1941 in the wake of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union.

Gorky's ongoing correspondence with Stalin was largely on a professional basis, a series of appeals and proposals that only very occasionally (and awkwardly) hints at personal relations. The author's first wife, Nadezhda Peshkova, would later say of the relationship, "Gorky studied Stalin, was wary of him, but he was not inclined to love. The way he sometimes admired other people - Chekhov, Lenin - this was not the case with Stalin. Here, one might say, there was more reverence. He was interested in Stalin as a person"²⁹⁷. Yet by 1931 there appears to have been a softening in their relationship; Spiridonova considers Gorky's return that summer to be the period in which the personal bond between Gorky and Stalin formed and strengthened. Gifted a new mansion on Malaya Nikitskaya in Moscow as well as a country dacha, the author was regularly visited by Stalin and other Politburo members for the duration of his six-month stay, and one evening in particular, one week before Gorky once again departed for Sorrento, appears to have forged a bond between the men. After the author recited his short story *A Girl and Death* to the *vozhd* and Voroshilov, Stalin inscribed the book with the perhaps hyperbolic sentiment, "This piece is stronger than Goethe's *Faust*."²⁹⁸ Yevgeny Zamyatin would remember the relationship between the author and the *vozhd* burgeoning during that summer; Gorky was extremely ill for much of his return and spent a large portion of his trip convalescing at his dacha, outside of Moscow:

²⁹⁶ Heijenoort, J. (1978). *With Trotsky in Exile: From Prinkipo to Coyoacan*. Harvard University Press : London. pp.40-41

²⁹⁷ Gor'kii (2017) p.380

²⁹⁸ Spiridonova (1995). pp.416-417

Stalin's own dacha was nearby, and the leader took to visiting his 'neighbour' Gorky more and more often. Closeted over a bottle of wine, the 'neighbours' – one with his invariable pipe, the other with his cigarette – would talk for hours...I think I will not be mistaken if I suggest that the correction of many 'excesses' in government policy and a gradual softening of the dictatorship's rule resulted from these friendly conversations.²⁹⁹

Spiridonova stops short of describing this as a genuine friendship however, stating that Gorky cultivated the relationship with Stalin (and Yagoda) as a means of softening the practices of the state dictatorship, and in no way considered himself a 'friend and ideological accomplice' of the *vozhd*³⁰⁰. Yet from the author's support of collectivisation and his conviction in the guilt of the accused 'enemies of the people' it is difficult to conclude anything other than a general agreement between the two along ideological lines.

A letter from December 1931 in which Gorky rebukes the *vozhd* for carelessness in regard his personal safety is indicative not only of the author's firm belief in a network of terrorists hellbent on assassinating Soviet public figures, but also Gorky's personal regard for the now undisputed leader of the regime:

The monarchists and their terrorist organizations are especially rampant verbally. You are generally being hunted hard, it is necessary to think that now their efforts will increase. And you, dear comrade - as I have heard and seen - do not behave very carefully. For example, you drive at night to Nikitskaya,. I am absolutely sure that you have no right to behave like this. Who will take your place if the scoundrels take your life? Don't be angry, I have the

²⁹⁹ Zamyatin, E. (1936). Published in *Gorky's Tolstoy and Other Reminiscences: Key Writings by and about Maxim Gorky*. Fanger, D. (Ed). (2008). Yale University Press : New Haven. p.271

³⁰⁰ Spiridonova (1995) p.418

right to worry and advise. In general, all the leaders of the party and the country should take a little more care about protecting their lives.³⁰¹

Conclusion

Gorky's re-entry into the literary scene was initially received negatively by all parties; the proletarian factions were dismayed by Gorky's proximity to the cultural intelligentsia and his promotion of literary quality over class credentials, while the intelligentsia were suspicious of Gorky's elevated status and new-found wealth, in spite of the author's various attempts to shield them from public attack. In his pronouncements on the need for unity and his in condemnation of self-criticism as a necessary component of Soviet society, Gorky was out of step with the Party leadership. However in time his insistence on collaboration between the literary intelligentsia and proletarian, beginner authors would become a central tenant of Stalinist culture.

That Gorky set to work on *Our Achievements* only days after arriving in the Soviet Union speaks to the urgency of the project not only to Gorky but Stalin also, who provided the full resources of the state to the author to push through the journal's creation and publication. Both men understood this as an opportunity to construct a new method of Soviet literature, that of the documentary method to present events depicted as factual, lending cultural authenticity to the positive portrayal of the achievements in industry and agriculture. The didactic nature of *Around the Soviet Union* was embodied in both its content and style, instructing its readers how to view the world around them and teaching beginner authors on how to convey it. *Our Achievements* would also become Gorky's first mass literary publication in the Soviet Union, as both he and the state attempted to read as broad an

³⁰¹ RGASPI f.558, o.11, d.718, l.127-129

audience as possible, and in its idealised vision of the Soviet present it would serve as a template to the tenets of socialist realism. In particular, *Solovki* reads as an early precursor to the infamous *History of Construction* and the glorification of Chekists in their attempts to reform criminal elements into Soviet citizens.

As Gorky began to shape Stalinist literature, he also propagated Stalinist vocabulary and rhetoric in his public pronouncements during the show trials of the early 1930s and in his defence of collectivisation. Gorky did not create the vitriolic language targeted against the enemies of the people, but with his considerable domestic and international standing he popularised it and lent it credibility. Both Stalin and Yagoda had considerable input into the final drafts of Gorky's essays; together the three men crafted a language of persecution that would come to determine the composition and justification of the Great Terror, a defining component of Stalinism. In many ways this was a natural progression of Gorky's pre-return, anti-Western tubthumping, though in this instance weaponised against the Soviet Union's own citizenry.

In Gorky's correspondence with Stalin we see the beginnings of the working out of this culture in their mutual agreement of Gorky's forthcoming projects. Their letters begin tentatively, impersonally, and the author's frequent promotion of politically unsound candidates will have hardly endeared him to Stalin. However there is evident indulgence in the *vozhd's* responses, an understanding that Gorky should be catered to when possible and politely humoured when not. This approach is extremely apparent when Gorky appears unwilling to edit his obituary of Lenin to exclude reference to Trotsky. In choosing not to interfere Stalin empowered Gorky's artistic autonomy; that the final publication was submitted with the requested changes made regardless speaks to a common understanding on Gorky's part that his relationship was based on a concept of mutual assistance.

Gorky continued to correspond with his now publicly-disgraced friends, and petitioned frequently for their return to cultural work for the greater good of the Party. If we contrast his letters to Rykov and Bukahrin with those of Stalin and Molotov, for example, there is a friendship and familiarity that is largely absent in Gorky's correspondence with the established leadership, and while clearly tolerated for the most part this would come to have severe consequences for each individual involved. Following the events of 1932 onwards Stalin's distrust of friendship and patronage groups would cast Gorky's choice of correspondents into doubt, not necessarily without reason. We can see from both Bukharin and Kamenev's illicit meeting and the description of Radek's continued underground communication with exiled Trotskyists that ongoing opposition to Stalin's increasing power wasn't simply a paranoid delusion of the *vozhd*. Not only were prominent oppositionists still privately hoping for some measure of regime change, but Gorky was also in direct personal contact with them and advocating for their promotion to prominent cultural appointments. In time, this would be one of several causes precipitating the author's eventual downfall.

Chapter Three

Marginalisation

Naturally, under such circumstances, the Soviet Government could pursue only one policy towards the old technical intelligentsia—the policy of smashing the active wreckers, differentiating the neutrals and enlisting those who were loyal. That was a year or two ago...

Can we say that the situation is exactly the same now? No, we cannot. On the contrary, an entirely new situation has arisen... It would be stupid and unwise to regard practically every expert and engineer of the old school as an undetected criminal and wrecker. We have always regarded and still regard "expert-baiting" as a harmful and disgraceful phenomenon. Hence, the task is to change our attitude towards the engineers and technicians of the old school, to show them greater attention and solicitude, to enlist their cooperation more boldly.³⁰²

Stalin, June 1931

The sudden abandonment of the cultural revolution movement in 1931 allowed the regime to once again invite the intelligentsia to embrace the ethos of the revolutionary movement and assist in the mutual development of the Soviet state. Technical specialists were dispatched to construction sites across the country to impart their expertise onto the new class of cadres who had emerged in the preceding years – the Soviet experiment required collective effort regardless of class background to continue with the overwhelming pace of industrialisation and modernisation. For Gorky, this shift in policy allowed him to welcome several of his formerly disgraced colleagues into the cultural fold as he continued to seek valuable expertise

³⁰² Stalin, J. *Works Vol.13, 1930-1934*. From "New Conditions: New Tasks in Economic Construction". June 13th 1931.

to assist with his pet projects, and friends such as Kamenev and Bukharin would find themselves promoted to positions of relative prominence after a period in the political wilderness. This would represent a major success for Gorky, but although these promotions could not have happened without Stalin's approval they unquestionably rankled other senior members of the Politburo and the emerging literary functionaries. With the advent of socialist realism and the creation of the Soviet Writer's Union this period could perhaps be viewed as the apogee of Gorky's cultural and political success since returning to the Soviet Union. In fact, it would prove to be the beginning of his downfall.

Patron to Oppositionists

The fate of the journal *Academia* is indicative of the manner in which Gorky would pursue the installation of his preferred colleagues to positions of literary importance. Edited by Ilya Ionov, Gorky had the journal in his sights as early as 1930, leveraging his relationship with Molotov to secure a position for his friend Aleksandr Tikhonov within the publication. Gorky was also in frequent communication with Anatoli Vinogradov, a contributor to *Academia* who would send increasingly hysterical missives to his patron complaining of a culture of persecution at the magazine (Vinogradov's tragic life is in itself worthy of a more complete discussion). In December 1931 Gorky expressed concern to both Kryuchkov and Khalatov about the working relationship between Vinogradov and Ionov, with the latter apparently withholding the author's salary due to missed deadlines and general 'neuroses', while Tikhonov would also complain to the author about the direction of the journal under Ionov's guidance. Ionov's perspective of the affair is conveyed in Chukovsky's diary:

Now there is a trial of Ionov in the Central Committee. Ionov does not recognize Gorky's two protégés: Tikhonov and Vinogradov. He regards the former as a slacker, a loafer, the second a scoundrel. Tikhonov is listed as an editor in *Academia*, but he has never even come to the office, he comes only for his salary, and the second (Vinogradov) handed over manuscripts so sloppy to Ionov that Ionov considers them total trash. Gorky (chairman of the editorial board of *Academia*) wrote to Ionov that he did not want to work with him, demanded that

Ionov leave that very minute, and so on.³⁰³

Gorky's letter to Ionov was unconstrained in its criticism of the latter's guidance of the journal, conveying his fury at Ionov's labelling of Gorky's two proteges in Tikhonov and Vinogradov 'white-guardists' in the press and bluntly telling the editor that his tenure of *Academia* was soon to come to an end:

Since I consider you an abnormal man and not able to solely drive the work of *Academia*...I am sending a copy of this letter to the Central Committee of the Party³⁰⁴.

True to his word, Gorky forwarded details of the dispute onto Stalin, describing Ionov as 'not literate enough to manage such a cultural business' and demanding his removal from the journal. Somewhat disingenuously, Gorky claimed to be defending Tikhonov and Vinogradov not out of personal friendship, but 'because they are knowledgeable people'.³⁰⁵ Gorky provided a list of suggested candidates to replace Ionov, with Kamenev's name featured at the top. Stalin's reply on the subject was brief; 'On January 31, I received your

³⁰³ Chukovsky, K.I. (24th February 1932) Available at <https://prozhito.org/person/215> (Accessed on 12th January 2018)

³⁰⁴ Gor'kii (2019). pp.40-42

³⁰⁵ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.718, l.133-140

last letter about *Academia* and Ionov. The latter will have to be removed.³⁰⁶ Soon after, Kamenev was installed in the journal.

As seen in the previous chapter Gorky continued to petition on Bukharin's behalf, desperate to utilise his deeply intelligent, talented friend in the service of the Party. In a letter to Stalin at the beginning of February, the author once again suggests Bukharin as a potential contributor to a proposed new project, a children's book comparing Russia's decadent capitalist past with the advances of the last 15 years of socialism³⁰⁷. The request went nowhere, but Gronskey would attribute Bukharin's appointment as editor of *Izvestia* in January 1934 to Gorky's influence on Stalin³⁰⁸, a move that Cohen describes as 'dramatic evidence of the moderates' progress, it established him as both a symbol of and an illustrious spokesman for their reconciliatory policy.³⁰⁹ The existence of a faction of 'moderates' is questionable, but Bukharin's promotion to a position of such prominence was a hard-fought for, and ultimately short-lived, success for Gorky. Following the Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934 Bukharin would be deemed too politically unreliable for even literary appointments. At a meeting in Gorky's *dacha* with newly-installed Secretary of the Writers' Union Aleksandr Shcherbakov, a discussion on the reorganisation of magazines led Gorky to propose Bukharin as editor of *Novy Mir* as opposed to Stalin's choice, Ivan Gronskey. With customary frankness, Shcherbakov told the author that Bukharin was 'too odious' a figure for the position. Gorky apparently took the news calmly³¹⁰.

³⁰⁶ RGASPI f.558. o.11. f.718. l.149

³⁰⁷ RGASPI f.558, o.11, d719, l.1-9

³⁰⁸ Spiridonova (1995). p.418

³⁰⁹ Cohen (1980) p.355

³¹⁰ Shcherbakov, A.S. (7th September 1934) Available at <https://prozhito.org/person/310> (Accessed 24th March 2021)

In April 1932, after a brief press campaign led, ironically, by Ionov, Khalatov was forced to relinquish his position at Gosizdat. Writing to Gorky, Khalatov stated that he was unsure of his future, and needed two or three months to mentally and physically recuperate from the strain of the previous year. His replacement however would prove more than equal to the task of guiding Gosizdat going forward: Mikhail Tomsky³¹¹.

Gorky had been fond of Khalatov, with the two spending some time together in Sorrento during one of the author's many returns to Italy, but their working relationship had often been strained. Replying to the news of his friend's departure from Gosizdat, Gorky cannot help himself from referencing past issues:

I'm sad, because I love you very much, used to work with you and although, sometimes, your softness to people, not worthy of it, was very annoying, - in the end, we lived well. Of course, it will continue to be so, but outside of the Gosizdat Institution. It requires some very decisive and deep reforms, much of the criticism of it was fair. However, I will not talk about this, the past is not fixable³¹²

There is no indication that Gorky was necessarily responsible for Tomsky's appointment, but it may well have been made to appease him. Writing to Fedin about the news, Gorky said of Tomsky, "(he's) an energetic man, it seems to me that in his hands things will get better."³¹³ In a letter to Rolland a few months later, Gorky celebrated the reintroduction of Tomsky and Kamenev to public roles:

This summer Gosizdat reorganised, Khalatov replaced by Mikhail Tomsky, the former chairman of professional unions, an excellent manager and a very cultured person, and at the

³¹¹ Baranov (1996). pp.139-140

³¹² Gor'kii (2019). p.129

³¹³ Ibid .p.131

head of the *Academia* publishing house, Lev Kamenev, a talented researcher of Russian literature. I think that these two names are familiar to you from the history of the Right opposition, and attracting these people to cultural work is considered as recognition from them of the correctness of the general line of the party.³¹⁴

At a joint plenum of the Central Committee and Central Control Commission in January 1933, Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky once again renounced their former-oppositionist positions and reiterated their support for the Party line. The news delighted Gorky, who told Rolland that the apparent unity within the Party ranks was ‘a serious victory’³¹⁵. Gorky also sent a gushing letter to Rykov to commend both he and Tomsky for their actions.

It is very possible that this letter of mine is inappropriate, no doubt I know that you do not need it, but both of you will understand the mood of my joy, the joy of a person who lives far from you and in not intermittent anxiety for each of you people I sincerely respect, love and appreciate as the best, unprecedented revolutionaries.³¹⁶

Gorky was clearly aware of the potential political problems such a letter may cause, in spite of the apparent truce in the Party, instructing Kryuchkov to deliver the note by hand only; ‘do not show it to anyone, I beg you!’³¹⁷

The End of RAPP

In a completely unforeseen turn of events, a Politburo resolution of April 1932 (its first on literary matters since 1925) formerly announced the abolishment of RAPP, the organisation that had dominated Soviet literature for the proceeding four years, citing as an explicit reason

³¹⁴ Ibid. p.186

³¹⁵ Ibid. pp.297-298

³¹⁶ Ibid. pp.299-300

³¹⁷ Ibid. p.300

RAPP's 'detachment from... significant groups of writers and artists who sympathise with socialist construction'³¹⁸. Having disbanded the Soviet Union's largest literary faction for its antagonistic actions against the fellow-travellers, the Politburo immediately outlined the entry requirements for RAPP's successor, the Union of Soviet Writers, which was to incorporate:

All writers who support the platform of Soviet (who support the politics of Soviet) power and are striving to participate in socialist construction into a single Union of Soviet Writers that includes a Communist faction inside it.³¹⁹

Zamyatin would write after Gorky's death that the author had instigated the act against RAPP, 'like a highly skilled diplomat'³²⁰, but there is nothing to support this. The announcement was a shock to all involved, not least of all Gorky, who only weeks before had been petitioning Stalin to side with Averbakh in the intra-faction feud that had enveloped RAPP in the months prior:

Endless group disputes and squabbles among RAPP, in my opinion, are extremely harmful, especially since it seems to me that they are not based on ideological grounds, but mainly personal motives. That's what I think. Then, it seems to me that replacing the RAPP leadership group, which combines the most literate and cultural of the party writers, with the Serafimovich-Stavsky, Panferov group, will not benefit RAPP's further growth.³²¹

³¹⁸ Artisov, A & Naumov, (1999) p.173

³¹⁹ Ibid., p.173

³²⁰ Gorky, M. (2008). *Gorky's Tolstoy & Other Reminiscences: Key Writings by and about Maxim Gorky*. Fanger, D.

(Ed.) Yale University Press : London. p.271

³²¹ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.719, l.38-41

An account from Slonimsky depicts Gorky's apparent pleasure at the news of RAPP's disbandment, gathering around him numerous guests at his apartment as they attempted to democratise the selection of the new Organising Committee:

The mansion on Malaya Nikitskaya in Moscow was widely known. Alexey Maksimovich Gorky lived and worked here. This mansion in the thirties became the central literary headquarters, the focus of our affairs and destinies. And we first of all rushed here when, by the April resolution of the Central Committee "On the restructuring of literary and artistic organizations," the RAPP was liquidated in 1932. It was necessary to organize a single Writers' Union. Gorky's office was jam-packed with writers, young and old. We were accommodated anywhere and anyway. On the windowsill, near the table at which Alexei Maksimovich was sitting, was the figure of Pavlenko. The composition of the organizing committee was outlined, and Gorky tirelessly wrote down the names that were called out from all sides. He hid his smile in his mustache and his pencil worked tirelessly.³²²

This account doesn't ring true however. Putting aside the problematic timeline (Gorky arrived in the Soviet Union in May of that year, not April), the smile behind the moustache seems unlikely. It was true that Gorky initially had mixed feelings about RAPP under Averbakh's leadership. He had shrugged off their attacks before his arrival in 1928 but had found them increasingly useful in his literary journals as more experienced, skilled authors shied away from contributing to *Our Achievements* and the *History of Factories and Plants* series; not only were Averbakh and his colleagues willing contributors, they had proven themselves to be dedicated and hard-working. However Gorky couldn't abide their incessant attacks on non-proletarian authors, including one of Gorky's own editors, Kamegulov.

³²² Sloniminskii, M. (1987) *Zavtra: Proza, Vospominania*. Sovetskoe Pisatel' : Leningrad. p.497

Resigning from *Literary Study* in January 1931, he claimed to have been hounded out of his position by a covert RAPP operation:

(They) would not spare their own father either. Wishing at all costs to remove me from the magazine, which they did not dare to boorishly attack because of your editorial staff, they led a subtle policy... all these countless Averbakhs and Ermilovs, who cover their critical poverty and their blatant illiteracy with an amazing ability to cynically... spit on the fact that we only yesterday defended them.³²³

Gorky's affinity for the RAPPists appears to have developed during Averbakh's visit to Sorrento at the end of 1931, telling Stalin that Averbakh struck him as a 'very smart, highly talented person.'³²⁴ By Shentalinsky's account, Averbakh returned to the Soviet Union 'happy and proud' that he had convinced Gorky that his vision of RAPP should be the dominant voice in literature³²⁵. Afinogenv and Kirshon would also visit the author soon after, in what appears to have been a coordinated effort by the RAPPists to bring Gorky over to their side in the increasingly vicious feud with Panferov and his allies, who were concurrently petitioning the Central Committee to complain of the Averbakh group as "intolerant, arrogant, unparalleled in its rudeness, lies, intrigues, hypocrisy, inexhaustible in its hatred of those who dare to point out the leadership's mistakes". Stalin was personally forwarded a copy of the complaint by Serafimovich³²⁶.

The Central Committee decision to disband RAPP may well have been born from Stalin's irritation at the stream of complaints from either side, but it also coincided with a shift in

³²³ Gor'kii (2018) pp. 548-549

³²⁴ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.718, l.133-140

³²⁵ Shentalinsky (1995) p.256

³²⁶ Kemp-Welch (1991), p.113

policy of ‘encouragement and concern’ towards the old intelligentsia³²⁷. The abandonment of proletarian hegemony effectively rendered RAPP irrelevant, and in the coming months Stalin would embrace the fellow-traveller authors in his attempt to construct a new Soviet literature. The timing of the announcement was likely intended to coincide with Gorky’s latest return a month later, with Stalin hoping to use the author’s international standing to head-up the Party’s vision for a unified literary front. In reality however, Gorky was both disappointed and embarrassed by the ostracisation of the Averbakh group, who suddenly found themselves accused in Pravda of perverting Lenin’s cultural vision and pursuing a Trotskyist agenda³²⁸. Averbakh himself would be exiled to Ufa until October 1932.

Gorky maintained friendly relations with the RAPPists during their downfall, encouraging Averbakh to remain positive and successfully petitioning for him to remain working on the editorial board for *History of Factories and Plants*. He also maintained contact with Fadeev, who was famously highly strung and suffering greatly through RAPP’s downfall³²⁹. At the opening plenum of the Organising Committee for the Writer’s Congress, which Gorky missed after returning for the final time to Sorrento, the RAPP leadership were subjected to furious attack. After reading a transcript of the events, the author wrote to Averbakh, “You defended yourself well at the plenum, but this is a craft, and in general, you did not succeed as well as the attack.”³³⁰

Gorky’s support for his colleagues was admirable but by 1933 the political tide was turning against him. Panferov, Stetsky, Yudin and Serafimovich were firmly entrenched within the

³²⁷ Clark, K. (1978). *Little Heroes and Big Deeds: Literature Responds to the First Five-Year Plan* (pp.189-206). In *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928 – 1931* Edited by Sheila Fitzpatrick. Indiana University Press, Bloomington and London. P.204

³²⁸ Primochkina (1998) p.129

³²⁹ Gor’kii (2019) p.208

³³⁰ Ibid.,p.231

literary apparatus and were entrusted to carry out Stalin's line in the field of literature.

Writing to Stalin and Kaganovich (who had already demonstrated lingering enmity towards Gorky) Stetsky implored the leadership to act against what he viewed as the continued factionalist activities of the former leader of RAPP:

Averbakh ... continues to be engaged in politicking. Almost all Communist writers (with the exception of Afinogenov, Kirshon, Makaryev) turned away from him. This does not prevent him, clinging to Gorky's authority and hiding behind him, rallying non-partisans around him, which is facilitated by the inactivity of the Organizing Committee.³³¹

Panferov would make a similar complaint in a private letter to Stalin, acknowledging that he cannot attack Gorky publicly, 'but at the same time, I know that Averbakh wants to break my spine with the hands of Gorky³³².'

Panferov's complaint were valid; in February 1934 Gorky published an unprovoked attack on the author in the guise of constructive literary guidance. In an *Open Letter to A.S. Serafimovich*, published in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, February 14th, Gorky took aim at the Party's literary apparatchiks who at the same were being featured positively in the press for their cultural contributions:

I am ready to think that even Panferov will not last from such praise, although he is a person who is in too much of a hurry to achieve fame and rank... from literature. Recently, Reznikov argued that Panferov is also equal to Balzac and the classics. I am confident that this statement of Reznikov was very harmful to Panferov, who needs a more attentive and serious attitude towards him... No, Alexander Serafimovich, we will not rush to proclaim the geniuses of writers who still need to learn literary literacy, very poorly mastered by them... I

³³¹ Artizv & Naumov (1999). p.200

³³² Yakolev (2005). p.312

strongly object to the allegation that young people can learn something from Panferov, a writer who does not know literary language well and generally writes poorly, carelessly.³³³

Gorky's friend Vyacheslav Ivanov was dismayed by the author's ongoing support for Averbakh, having been subject to a RAPP-endorsed press campaign against him in previous years. In a moment of foresight that would have consequences after Gorky's death, Ivanov worries that Gorky 'makes his assistants in the affairs of the former oppositionists, who were removed from their previous posts by Stalin.'³³⁴ Gorky's loyalty to Averbakh and his colleagues, and his public attacks on the Stalinist members of the Organising Committee such as Serafimovich and Panferov, would have serious political consequences as the Soviet Writers' Congress drew nearer. The grand conciliator of Soviet literature had allowed himself to be dragged into factional conflict at a time when Stalin was aggressively manufacturing a unified cultural front, and in siding with Averbakh and his colleagues Gorky further isolated himself from the inner sanctum of state-sponsored cultural construction.

A Fissure in the Relationship?

Slowly, minor cracks would begin to appear in the relationship between Stalin and Gorky. A scheduled anti-war congress in Amsterdam in 1932 raised the question as to who would be sent to represent the Soviet Union. Seeking Stalin's input, Kaganovich suggested that it would be imperative to send a couple of 'big names' recognisable in Europe to mitigate the possibility of 'pacifist rubbish' dominating the event. Gorky's suggestion of Bukharin was inevitably refused, with Kaganovich instead nominating the author to go in his place. Yet after reviewing Gorky's proposed speech, Kaganovich reported back to Stalin with veiled criticism and proposed improvements:

³³³ Gor'kii (1953) *Tom.27.*, pp.147-153

³³⁴ *Ivanov, V.V. (1993)*

(The speech) can be taken as a basis, but it needs additions and changes. It started well, but it needs to be made more purposeful, less vague. It is necessary to provide material that exposes the imperialist machinations of the gradual involvement in war and deceit, and the chauvinistic intoxication of the working masses... It seems to me that it would be necessary to differentiate the pacifists, separating out the bourgeois ones, who defend the cause of peace in words, but in deed remain capitalist, from the pacifists close to the proletariat... Gorky did not succeed in this differentiation. He also has some unfortunate formulations, such as "national wars" and so on³³⁵

Kaganovich received the response he was looking for, with an irritated Stalin replying that 'the phrase 'against national wars' is scandalous and not correct. We stand not against, but for national liberation wars. It must be replaced by the words 'imperialist wars' or 'wars of conquest'. Your comments are correct'³³⁶. As he would in the future, Kaganovich had used his knowledge of Stalin's temperament to manipulate a negative response from the *vozhd*, casting aspersions upon both Gorky and Bukharin. Ultimately, Gorky would be refused a visa for the trip by the Dutch authorities, with the Soviet delegation instead headed by Lunacharsky and Radek, but the negative association of Gorky and Bukharin coupled with the author's miscomprehension of the regime's stance on the nationalist/imperialist dichotomy will have sown doubt over his credentials as a cultural and political spokesperson. Two years later, as the Soviet Writers' Congress approached, Kaganovich would employ identical tactics to further diminish both Gorky and Bukharin's standing in the eyes of the *vozhd*.

³³⁵ Khlevnyuk, O.V, Davis, R.U, Koshleva, L.P., Rees, E.A., Rogovaya, L.A. (Eds.) (2001). pp.291-292

³³⁶ Ibid, p.295

Another, better known episode in 1932 has long been posited as a reason for the gradual erosion of Gorky and Stalin's relationship. As Stalin began to consolidate his position as the head of the Party, the question of an authorised biography soon arose. Who better than Gorky to compose a hagiographic retelling of Stalin's life and career? It was long rumoured that even under extreme duress Gorky was either unable or unwilling to provide the necessary material; indeed, Gorky's failure to complete the project has been previously cited as a factor in Stalin's split with the author³³⁷. The archives reveal a more mundane story. As the correspondence shows, Gorky spent much of 1932 in negotiations with American publisher Ray Long, who wanted Gorky to write the biography for the Western market. Negotiations went so far as to Gorky receiving an advance for the book, but the project collapsed due to the author's dissatisfaction with Long's public promotion of the deal and the money was returned. Stalin and Gorky discussed the matter briefly in their letters, but the subject is never raised again. More tellingly, in a letter to Yemelyan Yaroslavsky in 1933, Stalin wrote, 'I am against the idea of my biography. Maxim Gorky has a plan analogous to yours ... but he and I have given up this affair. I think the time for 'Stalin's biography' has not come yet!!'³³⁸ There is currently little evidence that Gorky was close to completing the biography, and eventually the task was assigned to French author Henri Barbusse and published in 1935³³⁹. He may not have authored Stalin's biography, but Gorky would soon find himself at the centre of another myth-making state venture.

Another Jubilee

September 25th 1932 marked the 40th anniversary of Gorky's literary activity, and set off a wave of festivities glorifying the author's life and works. Having previously protested the

³³⁷ Yedlin, T. (1999). *Maxim Gorky: A Political Biography*. Praeger, London.p.189

³³⁸ Plamper, J. (2012). *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power*. Yale University Press : New Haven. p.122

³³⁹ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.719, l.17-37

1928 celebrations that greeted his 60th birthday, and castigated the editors of *Izvestia* for wasting money organising endless telegrams for his 63rd birthday³⁴⁰, the author likely expected another tiresome cavalcade of greetings and special events to commemorate this latest landmark. Gorky had already been allocated the opulent Ryabushinsky mansion in 1931, a residence that repelled the author³⁴¹ and caused him to fear alienation from his contemporaries for living in such decadent luxury³⁴². Perhaps he believed that this would be the height of ‘gifts’ foisted upon him. Unbeknownst to the author however, a Politburo decree had been issued in March 1931, castigating the editors of *Pravda* and *Izvestia* for failing to properly prepare for the anniversary, risking embarrassment ‘for the hero of the day’³⁴³. Clearly there were bigger plans in place.

As the anniversary drew closer the extent of the celebration that Stalin intended to lavish upon Gorky became clear. Likely under the misguided belief that the author’s ego was such that he required constant public aggrandisement, Stalin unveiled a campaign of wide scale renaming of streets, museums and parks across the Union, all in Gorky’s honour. One of Moscow’s most famous streets, Tverskaya, was renamed after the author, as were the Moscow Art Theatre and the Moscow Park of Culture. Gorky was awarded the Order of Lenin, and the Gorky Literary Institute was founded. A film on his life was proposed, but Gorky refused to participate, concerned that viewers would regard it as “unprecedented self-promotion”. The film was never made.³⁴⁴ Most excruciatingly for Gorky, his hometown of Nizhny Novgorod was allocated his name; writing to a friend a few months later, Gorky said,

³⁴⁰ Gor’kii (2018), pp.261-262

³⁴¹ Rollan, R. (1989) *Moskovskii Dnevnik Romena Rollana*. Vstupitel’naya Stat’ya T. Motylevoi; Perevod M. Arias; Kommentarii N. Pzhevskoi / R. Rollan //Voprosy Literaturny. 1989, No.3. pp.190-246 Available at <https://voplit.ru/article/moskovskij-dnevnik-romena-rollana-vstupitelnaya-statya-t-motylevoi-perevod-m-arias-komentarii-n-rzhevskoi/> (Accessed 2nd March 2021)

³⁴² Gor’kii (2018) p.229

³⁴³ Artizov & Naumov (1999) pp.143-144

³⁴⁴ Gorky (2019) p.164

‘Today I wrote on an envelope for the first time to Nizhny Novgorod - Gorky. This is very embarrassing and unpleasant.³⁴⁵ Visiting Gorky in Sorrento after the author’s return, Ivanova recorder the author’s displeasure in her diary:

He said with indignation in my presence that he saw in these renamings a distortion of history, but, alas, he was powerless to change anything in the practice of renaming, which, from his point of view, was incorrect. He believed that the names of cities, streets, etc. are the face of the history of the people. He said that it is possible and even necessary to assign new names to new places, but it is not necessary to change the old ones, which have grown into the consciousness of generations and reflect the historical fate of the country. As for the Art Theater, Alexei Maksimovich believed that this theater should have justly been named after Chekhov³⁴⁶.

The events provoked ridicule amongst Gorky’s literary acquaintances. Kornei Chukovsky described one of many public meetings to celebrate the occasion, in which the main speaker’s address was so riddled with falsehoods that it was clear ‘his sole motivation was to ‘manipulate the facts in such a way that the official version of the jubilee provided to him by order of his superiors was obtained³⁴⁷’. Mikhail Prishvin mocked the absurdity of the renamings:

I saw with my own eyes on Tverskaya that she was not Tver, but Gorky, and then I heard that Stanislavsky's Artist Theatre had also taken Gorky's name, and Nizhny is now Gorky. All around this they make jokes that, for example, Pushkin's monument is now named Gorky and

³⁴⁵ Ibid. p.330

³⁴⁶ Ivanova, T. (1987) *Moi Sovremeniki: Kakimi Ya Ikh Znala*. Sovetskii Pisatel' : Moskva. pp.92-93

³⁴⁷ Chukovsky, 28th September 1933

each of us, for example, I, Prishvin, find ourselves fastened to the name of Gorky: "I embrace you, my dear M. Prishvin, in the name of Gorky". How did this happen?³⁴⁸

In common with the festivities launched across the Soviet Union in 1927-1928, the jubilee celebrations were not staged with Gorky's considerations in mind. Evidently, his opinion was of no relevance whatsoever. Instead the grandiose renaming of iconic social and cultural landmarks signified Gorky's ascension from literary idol to Stalinist icon, an impeachable representative of the Soviet state and if not necessarily an equal to Stalin, then a close confidant, a senior advisor. Regardless, Gorky's name and image were now indelibly bound to Stalinist culture and Soviet identity; the author as an individual was now superseded by Gorky as an ideal.

A History of Factories and Plants

As seen previously, Gorky's ongoing correspondence with Stalin was used as a platform by the author to advance his literary ambitions. Of foremost interest to Gorky (in common with Stalin) was the pedagogical potential of Soviet literature, as a means to transmit Marxist-Leninist ideology to the wider population while instructing them on the meaning of their shared history and the vision of their future to come. Gorky first mentions education in his letters on December 2nd, 1930, after he is visited in Sorrento by a delegation of Soviet workers:

Speaking with young shock-workers, I found a very serious defect in their political upbringing; this defect was known to me even before. Its essence is that theory, even among

³⁴⁸ Prishvin Diary, 20th October 1932

the party members, hangs in the air – they do not know how to fill it with concrete, factual content. This is not their fault, but the fault of educators³⁴⁹.

Gorky suggests the mobilisation of authors from across the Soviet Union to compose a series of multi-volume texts detailing the country's ideological, social and political history, which would serve the dual purpose of educating Soviet youth and training working-class writers in their craft. The suggested volumes, *The History of the Civil War*, *A History of Factories and Plants* and *A History of the Countryside*, dominate Gorky's dialogue with Stalin from this point on.

The composition of *A History of the Civil War* and *A History of Factories and Plants* was intended to take place concurrently; the former was announced via Central Committee decree on July 30th 1931, the latter a few months later on October 10th. Both works would encompass the central tenants of Gorky's literary philosophy; they would be composed initially by beginner-worker authors, whose texts would then be tidied up and prepared for a mass audience by established writers. The purpose of these projects was to document in complete detail the history of each individual factory in the Soviet Union, each feature of the Civil War, to overcome the backwardness and ignorance of the past and construct a new, socialist culture:

We must tirelessly fight against the remnants of ancient stupidity, against political and any other ignorance, for our culture of socialism. We need to study our reality in its entirety, we need to know in person all our plants and factories, all enterprises, all state construction work.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁹ RGASPI, f.558, 0.11, d.718, l.88-96

³⁵⁰ Gor'kii, M. (1953) Vol.26, p.123

The enormity of this task was not lost on Gorky, but he believed in the necessity of the publications to ‘serve the cause of the development of the working class and the revolutionary self-consciousness of the proletariat, in the cause of deepening the ideology of Marx and Lenin³⁵¹’. This was to be a rewriting of history itself, charting the development of class consciousness in every facet of the Soviet Union within the framework of Marxism-Leninism and the inevitable connection with Stalinism. For Gorky, this was only achievable through the collective, as the strength of this ideology would suppress the concept of individualism – there was now only legitimacy in the mass³⁵².

Writing in August 1931, Gorky envisioned *History of The Civil War* not as a ‘strategy textbook, but the history of the political battle, the history of combat, of the revolutionary growth of the masses, led by the mind and will of its advanced vanguard, organized as the party of Lenin... the main focus of work is not on the "war", but on its meaning, on the class struggle’. *The History of Factories and Plants* would chart the development of the working class from the pre-revolutionary industrial age to the present day, from its creation under bourgeois culture to its development of its own unique socialist culture³⁵³.

The correspondence between Stalin and Kaganovich in the summer of 1931 is revealing of the political machinations behind Gorky’s proposed series. Kaganovich does little to hide his scepticism for the project, and in particular the individuals that Gorky had assembled for his editorial board. As he would also in the build up to the Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934, Kaganovich plays on Stalin’s suspicion of former oppositionists and clandestine meetings to cast aspersions on Gorky’s behaviour, and we can also see a precursor to the narrative of the

³⁵¹ Ibid., p.274

³⁵² Ibid., p.278

³⁵³ Gor’kii, M. (2018) pp.313-315

1938 show trails, that Gorky was misled and taken advantage of by nefarious actors within his social circle:

It seems to me that Bukharin is carrying out something of his own through Gorky. I learned that Gorky made the proposal to publish the *History of Factories and Plants* at the RAPP plenum, and he seemed to be proposing to the RAPP people that the editor of the publication would be Bukharin. By the way, Bukharin also spoke at the plenum. Apparently contact is being established between Gorky and the Rappovites, and Bukharin is somehow joined in this contact... I am firmly convinced that you cannot trust him, he is hostile to our line – the party line.³⁵⁴

It was not just Gorky's team that Kaganovich disapproved of, as he attacked the outline for *History of Factories* as vague, dull and ill-thought out. Gorky's vision, he claimed, was a technical inventory of the plants instead of a historical perspective. Kaganovich's politicking was successful; of the twenty individuals Gorky proposed for his editorial team only ten were approved by Stalin, with notable omissions including Bukharin (who would write to Stalin complaining of his treatment by Kaganovich), Yenukidze and Pyatakov. Their appointed replacements, Stetsky and Mekhlis, were Stalinist functionaries who would clash repeatedly with Gorky in the coming years. Khalatov, a potential informer for Stalin, was also appointed, as, inevitably, was Kaganovich.

Political disagreements aside, Gorky approached the construction of both journals in his usual manner, immersing himself in every facet of their composition and micro-managing even the most minor of administrative editorial tasks, communicating personally with individual factories and taking them to task for the poor quality and slow production of their literary

³⁵⁴ Khlevnyuk, O.V, Davis, R.U, Koshleva, L.P., Rees, E.A., Rogovaya, L.A. (Eds.) (2001). pp.85-86

contributions. Naturally, his other publications suffered for it; Gorky would apologise to the editors of *Our Achievements* for being so overwhelmed with work as to be unable to contribute, and as the quality of *Literary Study* diminished through his absence he would write, “It is extremely sad, but it seems that our magazine will soon turn into a bad joke³⁵⁵”. *Abroad*, meanwhile, was turned over to Mikhail Koltsov. Other familiar problems re-emerged, such as the question of successfully engaging the reader; at an editorial meeting held after Gorky’s return to Sorrento in October 1931, the question was raised about the possibility of including fiction into series to make it more accessible and enjoyable for the broader readership. Gorky was incensed:

It is impossible! You will inevitably risk compromising the main editorial office, and the whole edition of the story... will not give the reader what the "story" should give..

Understand me: It is absolutely impossible to mix the story with fiction!³⁵⁶

Gorky forwarded his concerns to Stalin (‘It is impossible... the whole thing will be spoiled’³⁵⁷), complaining that everything he had understood to be agreed prior to his departure was reversed as soon he left the country, and asked for the *vozhd’s* intervention in the matter. Perhaps emboldened, Gorky proceeded to propose a seven-point plan for a new publication that would convey in ideological terms the entire history of the previous hundred years, encompassing the life of the peasantry under Tsarist rule, the reasons for the outbreak of the First World War, a history of Marxism from the 19th century onwards and a summary of the factional disputes in the Party during the NEP era. The book, provisionally entitled *What is All This For?*, would be released to coincide with the 15th anniversary of the October Revolution, with subsequent editions published annually with additional histories added.

³⁵⁵ Gor’kii, M. (2019) p.105

³⁵⁶ Gor’kii, M. (2018) pp.358-359

³⁵⁷ RGASPI, f.558., o.11, d.718, l. 117-126

Gorky also proposed a companion publication, *How Are Laws Made in the Soviet Union?*, to be published in 1933.

Gorky's letter is astonishing, indicative of his vast ambition for forging a new, socialist culture through the rewriting of history from a Marxist-Leninist perspective. That the project would be an absolute impossibility doesn't appear to have been a consideration; for Gorky it appears that the primary tactic for his literary projects was to talk them into existence, and then deal with the practicalities afterwards. Even Stalin was overwhelmed, replying:

Your proposal for the publication of *What Is All This For?* (something like the history of Russia from the first days of capitalism to the present day) is, of course, correct. But we can hardly manage to organize this business for the 15th anniversary of the October Revolution. We are all terribly busy, and current issues absorb almost all of our working time. This is not just my personal time. This is the opinion of all of our friends.³⁵⁸

Needless to say, *What is All This For?* would never materialise. On the subject of *History of the Civil War*, Stalin's enthusiasm appears to have waned. He expresses his scepticism on the principle of only employing worker-beginner authors at the outset, and although ceding the point to Gorky ('we will not argue with you') argues that this method would fundamentally change the composition from a military history to a civilian narrative³⁵⁹.

The process trundled on. For *History of the Civil War*, Gorky was largely dependent on Yagoda and the OGPU to supply his editorial team with the necessary raw materials to begin work, yet the information was slow to appear. As with *Our Achievements* both projects struggled to attract writers of sufficient calibre to help craft the beginner authors' submissions into a more familiar, literary form, and the authors who volunteered their time were mostly

³⁵⁸ RGASPI f.558. o.11. f.718. l.141-149

³⁵⁹ RGASPI f.558. o.11. f.718. l.141-149

out of favour and thus taking work where they could find it³⁶⁰. Averbakh, who had been appointed secretary of *History of Factories and Plants*, wrote to Gorky in November 1931 to inform him of the impossibility of convening meetings of the supposed contributors because their time was consumed with more important issues. Feedback on the processed submissions was hardly encouraging; texts displayed ‘verbosity, the prevalence of journalistic and newspaper-polemical attitudes to the facts, a ‘lackluster tone and ‘lethargy’³⁶¹. Gorky would bemoan to Yagoda that ‘the *History of the Civil War* moves weakly. The same with *History of Plants*. All this is very disturbing³⁶². *The History of the Civil War* had originally been set for publication by August 1931. By 1933 both Stalin and Gorky were exchanging letters accusing both the contributors and editors of sabotage for the never-ending delays³⁶³³⁶⁴. As we shall see in the following chapter both publications, as well as the additional *A History of the Countryside*, would continue to experience delay upon delay, as the enlisted authors and editors struggled to work within Gorky’s narrow literary parameters.

That Gorky’s proposed publications continued to stall should hardly have been a surprise, given his initial difficulties in composing the much less ambitious *Our Achievements*. His continued absence from Moscow (after leaving for Sorrento in October 1929 he would only return in May 1931) left control of his projects in the hand of editors and writers who were less than enthused by the undertaking, and his highly specific, class-orientated directives proved extremely challenging for beginner authors to formulate. Realistic or otherwise, what is of most interest is the scale of Gorky’s ambition. Not content with simply producing popular, fictionalised accounts on the civil war and drive for industrialisation, Gorky sought to document these defining eras as a narrative history, presenting a factual account of the

³⁶⁰ Clark, K. (2004). pp.267-268

³⁶¹ APRF, f. 45, op. 1, d. 719, ll. 125 - 129

³⁶² Vol.21, p.60

³⁶³ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.719, l.143-144

³⁶⁴ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.719, l.94-100

formative years of the Soviet Union through the lens of Marxism-Leninism. In this he mirrored Stalin's understanding of culture, to instruct the general populace of the lessons of history and demonstrate a progressive continuation of the principles of Lenin in the emerging Stalinist society of the 1930s.

Socialist Realism

By the beginning of 1932 Stalin had persuaded the Party that the Soviet Union was in the process of transitioning from a dictatorship of the proletariat to a classless, socialist society³⁶⁵, and consequently, a new method of literature was required that would be accessible to the entire population. In Hoffman's words, 'once socialism had been achieved, the purpose of Soviet culture was perpetuation and legitimation rather than destruction'³⁶⁶; who better to legitimise the new cultural direction than Gorky?

While Gorky's documentary mode was undoubtedly influential in the formation of socialist realism, it was Stalin and Ivan Gronsky who formed the cultural method that would dominate Soviet literature for over fifty years. At a meeting in Stalin's office in May 1932, Gronsky, part of a Politburo commission on the disbandment of RAPP, was asked for his opinion on the future direction of Soviet literature; "This is a completely new literature", he replied, "new both in its social and in its aesthetic ideals. It is these features, in my opinion, that should reflect the creative method of Soviet literature, which I propose to call proletarian socialist realism, or even better, communist realism." Mulling the suggestion over, Stalin proposed a more succinct terminology:

You have found the correct solution to the question, but you have not formulated it very well.

How do you feel about calling the creative method of Soviet literature and art socialist

³⁶⁵ Garrard, J., and Garrard, C. (1990). *Inside the Soviet Writer's Union*. London, I.B. Tauris and Co., Ltd, p.30

³⁶⁶ Hoffman, D.L. (2004). Was There a "Great Retreat" from Soviet Socialism? Stalinist Culture Reconsidered. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*. 5(4). p.662

realism? The advantage of such a definition is, firstly, brevity (just two words), secondly, comprehensibility and, thirdly, an indication of continuity in the development of literature (the literature of critical realism, which arose at the stage of the bourgeois-democratic social movement... grows at the stage of the proletarian socialist movement into the literature of socialist realism).³⁶⁷

In a classic example of Soviet revisionism it was suddenly decided that the method had in fact been in use for many years, dating back to Gorky's *Mother* in 1905¹⁶. From this moment, Gorky, who was not present at the meeting, was declared the father of socialist realism, pandering to the author's vanity and lending legitimacy to this new cultural movement. Later that week, prominent members of RAPP, including Kirshon and Afinogenov (though not Averbakh, once again exiled from Moscow), were summoned to the Kremlin. In a stormy, seven-hour meeting, they were disavowed of their proposal that RAPP should continue as an independent, proletarian wing of the new Writers' Union, and forced to accept the new literary ideology of socialist realism³⁶⁸.

It would be several months until Stalin unveiled this new direction. Two gatherings of Soviet leaders and writers in Gorky's apartment at Malaya Nikitskaya took place in October 1932, in an attempt by the *vozhd* to decisively break with the literary factionalism of the recent past and dictate the direction of creative production going forward. This wasn't the first attempt at a unifying meeting at Gorky's home; just over two weeks after Gorky's return in May 1931 the author hosted a literary soiree at his home in an attempt to gather together the disputing factions and provide a platform to air and discuss grievances, with the hope of agreeing a general reconciliation and program for Soviet literature going forward. Prominent authors

³⁶⁷ Gronskaia, I. (1989). *K istorii partiinoi politiki v oblasti literatury: (Perepiska I. Gronskaia I A. Ovcharenko)*. *Voprosy Literatury*, 1989, №2. pp. 143-166 Accessed online 3/2/2019. <https://voplit.ru/article/k-istorii-partijnoj-politiki-v-oblasti-literatury-perepiska-i-gronskaia-i-ovcharenko-publikatsiya-a-ovcharenko/>

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

mingled with members of the Party leadership, with guests including Bukharin, Radek, Khalatov, Averbakh and many others – in all over 50 people attended. The evening itself, as detailed in Aleksandr Voronsky's diary, quickly descended into farce, beginning with confused, disjointed speeches and almost ending in a drunken brawl; abuse was shouted at the speakers, threats were bandied about and somebody tried to throw a chair at RAPP-figurehead Vladimir Kirshon. As Gorky surmised after, "It didn't matter. We wanted to firmly unite the responsible Soviet circles with the writers, but instead we got shouts, quarrels, altercations, which often had no direct relation to literature."³⁶⁹ He would also tell Fedin that the meeting was 'messy and sad'³⁷⁰. For these forthcoming gatherings however, the undisputed authority of Stalin would dominate the proceedings.

At the first meeting on October 20th Stalin gave a short speech in which he justified the Central Committee decision to disband RAPP, going so far as to say that the decision should have been taken at least a year earlier, acknowledging that a hostile environment had been allowed to fester in which non-party writers were publicly demonised while RAPPists were hoisted onto pedestals entirely without artistic merit. While the faction undoubtedly had to be liquidated, Stalin said, he stopped short of excluding the former RAPP leadership from the cultural sphere altogether, criticising Fadeev's refusal to work with Averbakh; 'How can a communist refuse to work with another communist when they work in the same organisation? Fadeev's statement in this regard is wrong, it must also be eliminated.'³⁷¹

Placing specific emphasis on the value of drama as the most productive format for reaching a mass audience, Stalin laid out his vision for the development of Soviet literature as a popular, accessible medium to inspire the working population. Evoking Lenin's insistence that a new socialist culture cannot be born without utilising the methods of past, Stalin promoted

³⁶⁹ Primochkina (1998) pp.121-123

³⁷⁰ Gor'kii (2019) pp.275-276

³⁷¹ Yakolev (2005) p.263

Gorky's artistry as the foundation on which Soviet culture was to be built, while coining the name of the literary method that would dominate the arts until Stalin's death and beyond:

In the first period of Gorky's work, there was a great deal of romanticism. But Gorky's romanticism was the romanticism of a new class, rising to a power struggle. Gorky's idealisation of man was the idealisation of a new, future person, idealisation of a new future, a new social structure. The writer needs such romanticism. We need such a romantism that will move us forward. I do not want to oppose this romantism to revolutionary realism.

Revolutionary socialist realism for our era must be the mainstream in literature.³⁷²

The second gathering of writers took place only six days later, and although the meeting wasn't stenographed, literary critic Kornelii Zelinsky recorded a thorough account of the event the next morning. Zelinsky had been invited through the editorial office of *History of Factories and Plants*, an indication that the event had been proposed and organised by Gorky.

As guests slowly filtered in, small cliques gathered together in awkward anticipation of the evening; Zelinsky notes that the former RAPPists, Averbakh in particular, shower Gorky with attention. In return, the author 'meets them almost in love, with a smile, like good friends, winking, knowing all their games and habits'. A 'visibly agitated' Gorky opened the proceedings, opining that on the eve of the 15th anniversary of the revolution, literature was failing to reflect the astonishing achievements in society, and he acknowledged that the previous, unofficial governance of literature conducted by RAPP had proven ineffective:

There was a lot here also from the inability to manage literary affairs. There was rudeness, there were rude methods of education. The group of people most responsible for this - I mean RAPP - admitted their guilt, their mistakes. Now we need to talk in order to somehow create Soviet literature together.

³⁷² Ibid. p.265

Averbakh was next to speak, immediately heckled by Voroshilov who demanded to know why the disposed literary functionary repeatedly referred to himself as a RAPPist in spite of the group's disbandment. Stalin, Zelinsky notes, appeared bored. Despite Gorky's clear intent to move beyond literary factionalism the evening quickly descended into resentful bickering, as the previous targets of RAPP's press campaigns expressed their opposition to the former leadership being included in the Organising Committee for the forthcoming Writers' Congress. Meeting Stalin for the first time, Zelinsky is taken aback by his modest stature, but impressed and awed by his character:

He is very sensitive to objections and is generally attentive to everything that is said around him. It seems he does not listen, but he doesn't forget. No, it turns out, he catches everything in the radio station of his brain, operating on all waves. The answer is ready immediately in this forehead, straight, yes or no. Then you understand that he is always ready for battle.

After tolerating various resolutions and debates Stalin finally took the floor, and in a lengthy speech he laid out his vision for the future of Soviet literature, placing emphasis on the end of RAPP's agenda of literary hegemony for proletarian writers, and dismissing the necessity for dialectical materialism in the creative sphere:

We must reckon with non-partisan writers. They are non-partisan, but they know life and can portray her. Now there will come thousands and tens of thousands of new writers from our young people who trained for a diploma. And this is our joy. The most though, will be non-partisan. We must be able to work with them. That is the task of our future Writers' Union. It should create working conditions for each Soviet writer standing on the platform of Soviet power, sympathizing with communist construction... You do not have to fill the artist's head with theses. The artist should truthfully show life. And if he truthfully shows our lives, he cannot but notice in it, to show in it, socialism. This will be socialist realism.

Given the ever-present atmosphere of persecution that the fellow-traveller authors had operated under in the preceding years, Stalin's words must have sounded like the heralding of a new era of artistic inclusivity; a cautious optimism would spread amongst the convened authors that a new era of artistic liberalism was being ushered in. It appeared that the Party had arrived at the conclusion that quality literature could only be produced by non-Party authors³⁷³.

Warming to his theme, and channelling Gorky's vision of literature as an educational tool, Stalin went on to coin the infamous term 'engineers of human souls' to emphasise the inherent role of culture in shaping Soviet citizens:

Man is processed by life itself. But you help alter his soul. This is an important production - the souls of people. You are engineers of human souls... Your tanks will be worth nothing if the soul in them is rotten. No, the production of souls is more important than the production of tanks. The whole production of the country is linked with your (i.e., writers') production.

Stalin ended his speech, and as had become custom at Gorky's gatherings his guests began indulging in the complimentary alcohol on offer, the room gradually loudening as the authors lost their inhibition and began peppering Stalin with questions and requests. Pressed to tell a personal story about Lenin, Stalin took pleasure in shocking his guests; during Lenin's last days, when the leader knew he was dying, he apparently asked Stalin to poison him. "You are the most cruel person in the party," said Lenin, "you can do it." Stalin, of course, said he didn't dare. When Stalin is asked about the creation of a writers' village (eventually built at Peredelkino, in spite of Gorky's objections), the *vozhd* made a crude joke, seemingly lost on its audience, that the recently exiled Kamenev's *dacha* was currently lying vacant and that they would be welcome to stay there if they wished. One by one the writers took turns to

³⁷³ Fitzpatrick, S. (1976). *Culture and Politics under Stalin: A Reappraisal*. *Slavic Review*. 35 (2).219-220

dedicate toasts to the *vozhd*, until Georgi Nikiforov, well-fueled with vodka and apparently exhausted by the sycophancy, demanded that they stop, shouting that Stalin must be sick and tired of the constant adulation. Laughing it off, Stalin agreed; “Thank you, Nikiforov, you’re right. I’m tired of it already”. Nikiforov would later be caught up in the Great Terror and executed in 1938.³⁷⁴

Although both meetings were hosted by Gorky, Stalin was undoubtedly the driving force behind the new direction for literature, literally dictating the terms on which writers were to proceed in the future and defining the tenets of socialist realism. The language of inclusivity, the fostering of the fellow-travellers and beginner writers and the creative framework of socialist realism were all policies supported and promoted by Gorky. In Gronsky’s account he is sure to mention that Stalin often consulted Gorky on literary policy, often conceding to his demands even if they were not in agreement³⁷⁵. However the agenda of socialist realism had been clearly defined and set by Stalin several months prior, and would continue to be going forward; in making himself the centre piece of both meetings the *vozhd* ensured that authors were made all too aware that it was the Party who guided literary development.

Gorky may not have been responsible for the official pronouncement of socialist realism but he was sure to promote it enthusiastically. In his article *On Socialist Realism*, published in *Literturnaya Gazeta* in 1933, the author outlined his interpretation of a literature that buried the ugliness of the past and portrayed a present and future of glorious socialist achievement:

³⁷⁴ Zelinsky, K. (1991) *Odna vstrecha I.M. Gor’kogo: zapis iz dnevnika publikatsiya a zelinskogo*. *Voprosy Literatury*, May, No.5, 1991. pp. 144-170. Accessed online 12/4/2020. <https://voplit.ru/article/odna-vstrecha-u-m-gorkogo-zapis-iz-dnevnika-publikatsiya-a-zelinskogo/>

³⁷⁵ Gronsky, (1989).

In addition to the need to carefully study the language... the writer must have a good knowledge of the history of the past and knowledge of the social phenomena of modernity, in which he is intended to perform two roles at the same time: the role of midwife and the gravedigger... This high point of view should and will excite a proudful, joyful pathos, which will give our literature a new tone and help her to create new forms, create a new direction necessary for us - socialist realism... which can be created only on the facts of socialist experience .³⁷⁶

The Ryutin Platform

In August 1932, Martemyan Ryutin met with a small group of Party members in a Moscow apartment and formulated a seven-page pamphlet demanding Stalin's removal as General Secretary, as well as a 194 page manifesto entitled *Stalin and the Crisis of the Proletarian Dictatorship* in which the *vozhd* was described as the 'grave-digger of the revolution'³⁷⁷, echoing Trotsky's earlier denunciation of Stalin. The manuscript was circulated among disgruntled Party officials until eventually a whistle-blower reported its existence to the Central Committee. Ryutin was arrested in September and given a ten-year sentence for opposition activity, despite Stalin's call for his execution.

The Ryutin Platform would have grave consequences for one of Gorky's closest colleagues, Lev Kamenev. Having only just settled into his role as acting editor of *Academia*, he found himself hauled before the Central Committee to explain his actions; although he had not participated in the discussions to remove Stalin from power, he was found guilty (along with his former co-opponent Zinoviev) of being aware of the Platform but not reporting it.

³⁷⁶ Gor'kii, M (1953) *Sobranie Sochinenii v Tridtsati Tomakh: Tom 27*. Khudozhestvennoi Literatury : Moskva. pp.5-13

³⁷⁷ Kotkin (2017). p.104. Also Service (2005). p.264

Bukharin was confronted with similar accusations, which he vehemently denied. According to the Gorky Archive the author was greatly distressed over Kamenev's fate, phoning him on September 14th and meeting the next morning to discuss the scandal and its possible repercussions³⁷⁸. Gorky, who was in the Soviet Union at the time, took great interest in Kamenev's case, meeting with party leaders and Stalin himself to discuss it and allegedly receiving a promise from Stalin not only about Kamenev's rehabilitation, but his future literary employment also. Writing to Romain Rolland from Sorrento in November 1932, Gorky said, 'Kamenev was sent to Tobolsk. He will continue to work at the Academy publishing house, where he, it seems to me, is more in place than in politics'.³⁷⁹

A manifesto was also unearthed from an organisation in the Caucasus calling themselves the Organisation of Supporters of the True Leninist Line, who called for a return to the NEP-era politics of 1925 – 1927³⁸⁰. The discovery of both oppositional activities, though the Ryutin Platform in particular, led the regime to consistently refer to the year 1932 as a period when a 'new situation' developed. In Stalin's view, this was evidence that conspiratorial activity was still prevalent amongst the Party rank and file, and that even those who had recanted their past oppositional views such as Kamenev and Zinoviev were capable of resuming hostilities. Yagoda implemented wholesale changes throughout the police force and NKVD as to how criminal investigation was to be performed, moving from mass operations and civil war era insurgency to 'targeted policing, undercover operational work, use of systematically gathered information, and sharp 'incisive' blows against a ubiquitous enemy'³⁸¹. In short, the aim was

³⁷⁸ Kotkin (2017) .p.593

³⁷⁹ Ibid.p.598

³⁸⁰ RGASPI, f.17,o.171, d.137 l.131-134

³⁸¹ Shearer, D.R. (2009). *Policing Stalin's Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924 – 1953*. New Haven, Yale University Press. p.131

to identify and prosecute internal enemies before the damage was done, proactive policing instead of reactive.

In a speech in January 1933, ostensibly to pronounce the results and successes of the first Five Year Plan, Stalin took the occasion to warn against complacency in the ongoing class struggle against internal enemies, invoking once again the threat of capitalist invasion. After the Party survived the intense backlash against collectivisation and delivered bloody, punitive retribution against those who had opposed the regime, a feeling may well have fostered that now the Five-Year Plan was complete, the state would relax its iron grip on the populace. Stalin chose to inform his colleagues that the struggle was only beginning:

Some comrades have interpreted the thesis about the abolition of classes, the creation of a classless society, and the withering away of the state as a justification of laziness and complacency, a justification of the counter-revolutionary theory of the extinction of the class struggle and the weakening of the state power. Needless to say, such people cannot have anything in common with our Party. They are either degenerates or double-dealers, and must be driven out of the Party. The abolition of classes is not achieved by the extinction of the class struggle, but by its intensification. The state will wither away, not as a result of weakening the state power, but as a result of strengthening it to the utmost, which is necessary for finally crushing the remnants of the dying classes and for organising defence against the capitalist encirclement that is far from having been done away with as yet, and will not soon be done away with³⁸²

³⁸² Stalin, J. (1954). *Works, Vol.13*. Foreign Languages Publishing House : Moscow.

A systematic purge of Party members followed, ostensibly to weed out any future opposition from politically unreliable candidates; 18% of the 3.2 million members were expelled, primarily composed of ‘careerists’ who had only joined the Party from 1929 onwards³⁸³.

The intensification of class struggle, even after the Party had appeared to have survived a period of great jeopardy, was a defining element of Stalinism, and the *vozhd*'s co-creator of this culture was eager to lend his voice to the campaign:

When it was discovered that a man... pretended to be a communist and, like a louse, crawled into the Party, I saw and felt disgust... This disgust is an undeniable, excellent sign of the party's political and cultural cleanliness, it is the most true basis of the Party's powerful growth in the depths of the masses and the breadth of the country³⁸⁴.

For all of his pronounced pleasure in the rooting out of enemies, Gorky again found himself in an state of apprehensive suspicion in which conspirators seemed to be lurking in every corner. ‘In my dreams I hear the cries, Ryutin, Ryutin’ he would tell Yagoda³⁸⁵. Gorky would soon be unnerved by more than the oppositionists however; in November Stalin's wife Nadezhda Alliluyeva shot herself through the heart after an argument with her husband. In his letter of condolence Gorky told the *vozhd* that while he knew Stalin to be a man of great courage and strength, and therefore not needing his letter of sympathy, he wished very much to be with him in Moscow. In the same letter, he confirmed that once and for all, he would return to the Soviet Union on a permanent basis in the summer of 1933³⁸⁶. Once finally

³⁸³ Figes, O. *The Consolidation of The Stalinist Dictatorship*. Available online at http://www.orlandofiges.info/section11_TheConsolidationoftheStalinistDictatorship/PartyPurges.php#anchor. Accessed January 20th 2022.

³⁸⁴ Gor'kii, M. (1953) p.77

³⁸⁵ Gor'kii (2019) pp.229-231

³⁸⁶ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.719, l.80-82

settled in the Soviet Union, he would use his artistic platform to glorify the reforging of the same state enemies he had so vociferously vilified.

The Belomor Canal

Gorky's role as an architect of Stalinism would arguably reach its zenith with his organisation of the infamous 'Writers' Brigade' journey to the construction site of the White Sea-Baltic (Belomor) Canal. The project required many of the key structural components of Gorky's literary philosophy and Stalinism itself; the instigation of a mass movement, an intended mass readership, the coordination of both beginner-proletarian writers and fellow-travellers, the celebration of the OGPU, and most infamously, the concept of socialist labour leading to the development of a new Soviet man. The Writers Brigade was one of several literary expeditions organised by the regime during this period; however it would be the first of its kind to promote the concept of collective authorship. The resulting publication, *The White Sea – Baltic Canal: A History of Construction*, would enjoy a brief period of intense publicity and popularity, before political machinations led to its almost immediate disappearance, as OGPU officers who had served as focal characters in the narrative became swept up in the purge of the organisation in the months following Kirov's assassination.

Work on the canal itself had started two years prior to the writers' trip, a flagship project of the first Five Year Plan. An estimated 126,000 people, composed of common and political prisoners, were compelled to work on the construction between 1931 and 1933³⁸⁷, finding themselves not only condemned to forced labour but also featured as a macabre exhibition of the possibilities of re-moulding class aliens. While Belomor would be neither the first nor last Soviet endeavour to utilise prisoners as a free source of labour, it was to remain the only

³⁸⁷ Ruder, C.A., (1998). P.25

event of its kind to not only publicly acknowledge this fact but to celebrate it also. The concept of the *perekovka* (re-moulding) of the individual, first featured in Gorky's *Solovki*, was one of the key ideological components in the construction of Stalinism.

From a cultural perspective, Gorky proceeded with the project with the intention of producing a collective novel documenting the *perekovka* of the prisoners under the watchful eye of the OGPU. The concept of the collective novel was born from pure Stalinist ideology, a celebration of mass collaboration over individualistic authorship. Of the final 36 writers who contributed to the volume only Gorky (in the editorial introduction) and Mikhail Zoshchenko³⁸⁸ would have their names formally attached to a section of writing. The rest of the contributors were listed alphabetically. The first 'group' authorship to emerge from the Soviet Union, the work was praised not so much for its artistic qualities but for the contribution of those writers who so willingly cast aside their role as individual authors to form a cohesive collective advancing the cause of socialism. In this context, the concept of *perekovka* could equally apply to the fellow-traveller writers, learning to remould their bourgeois artistic methods to advance the Soviet cause. In a letter to Stalin after the book's publication, Gorky emphasised the virtues of such collaborative work when it incorporated the fellow-travellers:

The example of collective work on Belomorkanal convinces me that this kind of work acts very well on non-party writers, allowing them to ponder more deeply the meaning of created reality. I don't value the book highly, but I do see a clearly

³⁸⁸ Zoshchenko had been arguably the most famous writer in the Soviet Union during the 1920s, his *skaz*-style short stories incredibly popular for both their humour and accessibility. It is likely that his name was attached to a section of the book so as to boost its broader appeal.

positive meaning of the work done on it in the people [who work]³⁸⁹

Present on the initial journey were authors such as Isaac Babel and Boris Pilniak, both of whom had been publicly castigated in the literary press and were seeking an opportunity to rehabilitate themselves as Soviet authors. Both would lose their lives during Stalin's Terror.

Supervised for the entirety of their visit by the officers of the OGPU (referred to throughout *The History of Construction* as 'chekists'), the authors were presented a highly sanitised vision of the Belomor experience – Solzhenitsyn alleges that they did not even leave their boat for the duration of the visit³⁹⁰. However the harsh reality of the forced-labour project was still transparent enough to cause considerable unease among the writers. Screenwriter Yevgeny Gabrilovich remembered feeling that the site 'had been built on bones' and Tamara Ivanova claimed to have realised even then that they were being presented Potemkin villages³⁹¹. On his individual journey to the canal, Shklovsky was asked by a Chekist how he felt; 'like a silver fox in a fur store'³⁹² was the author's reply.

Aside from its celebration of forced labour, the book would also live on in notoriety for its portrayal of the OGPU, who had been tasked with the construction project. The Chekists of *The History of Construction* are portrayed as demanding though fair, driven but benevolent. When the one protagonist fails to meet his work quota, the Chekist Sapranov attempts to reason with him over tea and biscuits, explaining that the collapse of the capitalist state has made the need for crime entirely redundant. In an earlier chapter, OGPU chief Berman is portrayed as having magnetic charisma ('it seemed to these few men when Berman began to

³⁸⁹ Papazian (2009). p. 164

³⁹⁰ Solzhenitsyn (2007) p. 81

³⁹¹ Ruder (1998), p. 50.

³⁹² Figes, O. (2008). *The whisperers: Private life in Stalin's Russia*. Penguin : London. p.19

speak that he singled them out of the crowd and drew them towards him'³⁹³), and in a later story intended to remind the reader of the industrial wreckers of the Shakhty period, bourgeois engineer Budassy pauses to reflect on his guards:

“Clever fellows,” he thought dreamily of the Chekists; “terribly clever. It’s not easy matter to wind all this ragged rabble around one’s finger! Why, they work like horses.”³⁹⁴

These depictions of the Chekists were not solely written to pay lip service to Genrikh Yagoda and Semyon Firin, the OGPU chiefs who supervised the Brigade’s trip and edited *The History of Construction* (their names even appear in the text as co-authors). The Chekists’ function in the narrative is to serve as mentor figures to the prisoners, much as the guards in Gorky’s *Solovki*, whom the author described as ‘creating civilisation from chaos’³⁹⁵; without the ideological guiding of the Chekists there can be no *perekovka*. During his interrogation by the NKVD in 1937, Averbakh recalled that Gorky would speak of the Chekists with ‘tender rapture, with tears of joy... he felt a warm, somehow simply personal gratitude to those who performed this work’³⁹⁶. *A History of Construction* may have been overseen by the OGPU, but the theme of their formative role in Soviet society was very much Gorky’s own.

It has been suggested that Stalin launched the Belomor Canal project specifically as a means of securing Gorky’s loyalty; in his 1921 article *Untimely Thoughts*, Gorky had denounced the warring nations of the First World War for condemning millions of young men to their death when they could have been constructing a new future, specifically citing Peter the Great’s dream of uniting the White and Baltic seas. Stalin, who had read the article, would doubtless

³⁹³ Ibid., p. 38

³⁹⁴ Ibid. p. 106

³⁹⁵ Papazian (1999) p.145

³⁹⁶ Shentalinsky (1994) p.261

have been aware of the significance of the Belomor project to Gorky ³⁹⁷. Regardless, the entire undertaking remained a seminal moment in Gorky's career, and a foundational cultural text of Stalinism. Writing to Shcherbakov in November 1934, Gorky described the Belomor project as 'the clearest expression of the new, proletarian, socialist humanism':

It is necessary to introduce this humanism into everyday life, into the stubborn environment of philistinism, which must either be re-educated or destroyed. ³⁹⁸

A first print edition of the book was gifted to each attendee of the 17th Party Congress in January 1934, yet by the end of the year the Belomor Canal quickly vanished from Soviet press coverage. As a result of the NKVD's haste for completion and limited budget, the canal's depth had been halved from its original projection, leaving it too shallow to be negotiated by most large ships. Derided by Stalin as being a 'senseless undertaking, of no use to anyone'³⁹⁹, Belomor faded from the public imagination, and after the purge of the NKVD in 1937 claimed the lives of Yagoda and Firin, *The History of Construction* became one of the most censored books in Soviet history⁴⁰⁰.

The delegates who received their copy of *History of Construction* at the 17th Party Congress, dubbed by the Soviet press as The Congress of Victors, would go on to witness the declaration of a new age. This would become the apogee of the Stalin myth, the moment in time when the *vozhd* would become 'fully sacralised' as prominent former-oppositionists took to the stage to not only proclaim full Party unity, but that Stalin 'represented that unity,

³⁹⁷ Basinskii, P. (1991). *Logika Gumanizma (Ob istokakh Tragedii Maksima Gor'kogo)*. Voprosy Literatury. 1991, No.2. pp.129 – 154. Available at <https://voplit.ru/article/logika-gumanizma-ob-istokah-tragedii-maksima-gorkogo/> (Accessed 15th September 2019)

³⁹⁸ Gor'kii, M. (1934). Pis'mo A. C. ЩЕРБАКОВУ. Available at <http://gorkiy-lit.ru/gorkiy/pisma/pismo-1139.htm> (Accessed 24th March 2020)

³⁹⁹ Ruder (1998) p.33

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., p.88

guaranteed its permanence, and stood for its cause and effect'⁴⁰¹. Socialism, it was declared, had arrived. Full communism 'was imminent, but beyond anyone's capacity to schedule'⁴⁰². The date of the Congress was no coincidence, arranged to coincide with the 20th anniversary of Lenin's death. There was no subtlety intended – this was a clear pronouncement that Stalinism was the natural continuation of Marxist-Leninism. Stalin's dictatorship was legitimised.

The Death of Maxim

On May 11th 1934, after contracting pneumonia only days earlier, Maxim Peshkov died suddenly at the age of 36. The tragic loss of his son was a blow from which the author would never entirely recover. Maxim's widow Timosha would describe in her memoirs how the loss 'broke' Gorky, who would spend the evenings pacing his room, unable to read or write. While initially the author was able to discuss his grief with his immediate family he gradually retreated into himself, suffering his loss alone⁴⁰³. Replying to Rolland's letter of condolence sent soon after Maxim's death, Gorky said of his son:

Maxim was healthy and strong and died a difficult death. He was gifted. He had a unique kind of talent.. He was interested in technology and was listened to by specialists and inventors. He had a sense of humour and was an able critic. But he was weak-willed; he squandered his energies and did not succeed in developing any of his talents. He was thirty-six years old.⁴⁰⁴

Gorky's friends noticed an immediate change in the author. Visiting his *dacha* one evening, Ehrenburg was surprised when Gorky excused himself from the table halfway through dinner

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., p.469

⁴⁰² Slezkine (2017)., p.482

⁴⁰³ Yedlin, T. (1999).pp.206-207

⁴⁰⁴ Mikhailov (Ed.) (1995) .pp.284 - 285

and retired to his room. Babel, who was also present and knew Gorky well, said, ‘He’s in a bad way. His son Maxim’s death has got him down. He’s not the same Gorky⁴⁰⁵.’”

The author had expressed concern for Maxim’s health long before his eventual death, writing to Peshkova that he was trying, and struggling, to persuade his son to stop drinking and smoking⁴⁰⁶. Still, Maxim was still a young man and by all accounts was in good physical shape; in the unremitting environment of rumour and intrigue the manner of his death led to all manner of innuendos. It was established that Maxim had passed out on a bench after a drinking binge, sleeping beside a river on a cold evening. As detailed in the following chapter, a narrative developed that it was Kryuchkov who had left Maxim lying, either intentionally or otherwise; it would be alleged that Yagoda had encouraged Gorky’s secretary to drink with Maxim for as long as possible; ‘I will finish the rest’⁴⁰⁷. Maxim’s daughter would refute this account many years later, instead laying the blame for her father’s death solely on Yagoda:

On that day, Dad came from Yagoda, who called him and got him drunk all the time. My mother before then had told him firmly: “If you come again in such a state, then I will divorce you.” Dad got out of the car and headed to the park. He sat down on a bench and fell asleep. The nanny woke him up.⁴⁰⁸

Accounts from this period onwards portray the author as aloof, irritable and weary, and he appeared to age very suddenly. Doubtless his diminishing political stature was in some way responsible for this, and as we shall see the events leading up to the Writers’ Congress

⁴⁰⁵ Ehrenburg, I. (1963) *Memoirs: 1921 – 1941*. Shebunina, T., Kapp, Y. (Trans.) The World Publishing Company : Cleveland. Pp.275-276

⁴⁰⁶ Gor’kii (2019) p.63

⁴⁰⁷ Ts. Arkh. FSB, d.N-13614, t. 43, p.25-29

⁴⁰⁸ Peshkova, M. (2012) *Marfa-Krasavitsa*. Interview with Martha Peshkova in *mk.ru*, 6/9/2012. Accessed on 15th August 2019. <https://www.mk.ru/social/2012/09/06/745528-marfakrasavitsa.html>

brought unprecedented agitation into the author's life, accustomed as he was to being regarded as the arbitrator of Soviet culture. Regardless, to his peers it was apparent that Gorky never recovered from Maxim's death.

First Soviet Writers' Congress

Finally convening on 17th August 1934, the twice-postponed First Soviet Writers' Congress had been keenly anticipated by Soviet authors, who in the wake of Stalin's two pronouncements on socialist realism in Gorky's mansion two years prior hoped to see the ushering in of a new literary era devoid of factional disputes and cultural dogmatism. In his memoirs, Ilya Ehrenburg described his preparations for the congress as 'like a girl for her first dance', the event itself as 'a great and marvelous festival'⁴⁰⁹.

In the Congress' opening address, Andrei Zhdanov emphatically linked Stalinism with the dawn of a new literary method by paying tribute to the banner of 'Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin' for guaranteeing the victory of socialism, and thus the creation of the Writers' Congress and Union. Emphasising the impossibility of such a culture emerging in bourgeois countries, Zhdanov finally provided the attendees with a conclusive definition of socialist realism:

In the first place it means knowing life, so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as 'objective reality', but to depict reality in its revolutionary development. In addition, the truthfulness and historical concreteness of the artistic portrayal should be combined with the ideological remoulding and education of

⁴⁰⁹ Ehrenburg (1963) Pp.270

the toiling people in the spirit of socialism. This method in belles-lettres and literary criticism is what we call the method of socialist realism⁴¹⁰.

In response to questioning Zhdanov refuted the possibility of an apolitical socialist literature; going forward, all cultural output was to convey the class struggle and victorious path of socialism. His outline of socialist realism owed much to Gorky, from its historical necessity to the concept of ideological reformatting. Emphasis was also placed on the need for artistic quality. In his keynote address Gorky returned to a familiar theme, emphasising the role of a collective and unified Writers' Union in educating and shaping the Soviet reader, citing 'the processes of labour' as now being the principal hero in every new book⁴¹¹.

Initially there was an air of exaltation at the Congress, as authors who had to endure several years of RAPP-led attacks on their work were encouraged by both the spirit of reconciliation in Gorky's speech and the prominence of 'moderate' politicians such as Bukharin and Radek in shaping the new literary canon⁴¹². This optimism would dissipate as the Congress wore on, however, replaced instead with an uneasy awareness that the proceedings were nothing more than 'shameless demagoguery'⁴¹³. Against character, Gorky called for self-criticism several times in his speech⁴¹⁴, indicating that at least some of his address had been dictated to him by Party functionaries. Contemporary NKVD informant reports indicate a growing awareness of the didactic, monolithic nature of the Writer's Union under Gorky, with phrases such as 'under the stick', 'stupid fabrications', and 'slap in the face'⁴¹⁵ being used by Babel and other fellow-travellers to describe the Party-line speeches. Pilniak criticised the self-congratulatory

⁴¹⁰ Kemp-Welch, A. (1991) pp.175-176

⁴¹¹ Gorky, M., Radek, K., Bukharin, N., and Zhdanov, A. (1977). *Soviet Writers' Congress 1934: The Debate on Socialist Realism and Modernism in the Soviet Union*. London, Lawrence and Wishart. p.54

⁴¹² Garrard, J. & Garrard, C. (1990) p.41.

⁴¹³ Clark and Dobrenko, (2009) pp. 169-171

⁴¹⁴ Gorky, M. et al (1977). p.69

⁴¹⁵ Artisov, A. & Naumov, O. (1999) pp. 239 - 241

tone of the Congress and complained that ‘conditions for me in the writer’s world are such that I can’t even speak’⁴¹⁶. In his diary Mikhail Prishvin described the congress’ descent from ‘electric’ to ‘unbearable’⁴¹⁷; the event lasted for two weeks, featuring over 200 speeches, reports and declarations, all on the same narrow remit of themes.⁴¹⁸ On Gorky, Prishvin recounted that he was met with great applause on his opening words, followed by gradual boredom; as the speech wore on people began leaving the hall, failing to return. Somebody whispered, ‘maybe he (Gorky) lost his mind a long time ago’⁴¹⁹.

The ensuing tedium of the congress was in stark contrast to the drama that unfolded behind the scenes both prior to and during the event. The Union of Soviet Writers had been drafted into existence on April 23rd, 1932, in the same Politburo resolution that officially declared the elimination of RAPP. Gorky’s name was immediately attached to the union, which would be formally launched at the first Writers’ Congress. The author was elected president of the Orgkomitet of the forthcoming congress in August 1933, replacing Gronskey who was excused on the grounds of ill health. The post appeared to further bolster Gorky’s unshakeable position as the leader of Soviet literature, but the announcement of the change was accompanied by a minor appendage: the creation of a Secretariat, headed by Pavel Yudin, a favourite of Stalin, to manage the day-to-day business of the Orgkomitet. Kemp-Welch describes Yudin’s appointment as a ‘diminution of Gorky’s personal authority’⁴²⁰, further compounded by the placement of several authors not favoured by Gorky to the Secretariat’s committee. This affront to Gorky’s authority eventually boiled over into open conflict, with the author sending a letter to Yudin in the spring of 1934 calling him

⁴¹⁶ Ibid. p. 240

⁴¹⁷ Prishvin Diary, August 17th 1934

⁴¹⁸ Garrard, J., Garrard, C. (1990) p.35

⁴¹⁹ Prishvin Diary, August 17th 1934

⁴²⁰ Kemp-Welch (1991) p.148

‘dishonest’ and ‘a poor communist’: “you have disorganised the communist fraction, driven off non-party writers and generally done great damage to literary affairs”.⁴²¹

As the opening of the congress drew near Gorky was increasingly isolated from the event’s organisation, leading the author to pen an explosive letter to Stalin on August 2nd, just days before the congress was due to begin. Taking aim at Yudin and other Stalin appointees such as Mekhlis and Panferov, Gorky savagely tore into his opponents, dismissing their credentials and accusing them of factionalism, before offering his resignation in a fit of pique :

Yudin and Mekhlis are men of the same stripe. I know nothing of their ideology, but in practice they are leading towards the formation of a group which wants to take command of the Writer’s Union. Possessing the ‘will of power’ and drawing support from the leading organ of the Party, this group is of course quite capable of assuming such command, but in my opinion it does not have the right to that real ideological leadership of literature which is so necessary today. This is because the group lack intellectual vigour and displays extreme ignorance regarding the past and present of literature... They are men of decrepit intellect... My attitude towards Yudin is acquiring an ever-more negative hue. I cannot abide the peasant cunning, the lack of principle, the duplicity, and cowardice of a man who admits his personal impotence, yet attempts to surround himself with people even more insignificant than he is so as to hide in their midst... I also don’t believe in the sincerity of Panferov’s communism; he is another ignorant peasant who is also cunning and painfully ambitious, even though he is a fellow of great will... My dear, sincerely respected and beloved comrade, it is necessary to place the soundest ideological leadership at the head of the Writer’s Union. What is happening at present is the selection of personnel in line with the interests of certain ambitious people, and this signals the inevitability of petty, personal struggles among the

⁴²¹ Ibid, p.149

cliques within the Union... I earnestly request that I be relieved of the chairmanship of the Union due to poor health and my own lit(erary) commitments. I am not a capable chairman; I am even less able to sort my way through the Jesuitical intrigues of group politics.⁴²²

Writing to Stalin on August 12th, Kaganovich informed the *vozhd* that Gorky had followed up this letter with an equally damning article for *Pravda*, which they refused to print. Furthermore, Kaganovich notes, the author appeared to be supporting a RAPP-led campaign against Stalin's hand-picked leadership of the Organising Committee, and was demanding that Averbakh be allowed to speak at the congress⁴²³. Two days later Kaganovich reported that upon review, Gorky's intended keynote speech was ideologically unsuitable, and would have to be re-written, prompting several Politburo members to visit the author and demand a re-write:

We (myself, Molotov, Voroshilov, Zhdanov) went to see him and after a rather lengthy conversation he agreed to make corrections and changes. His mood is apparently not very good. For example: he started talking about children, that the upbringing is bad, inequality, sort of like a division between the poor and the rich, some have bad clothes, others have good clothes, it would be necessary to introduce one uniform and give everyone the same clothes. The point, of course, is not that he spoke about the difficulties in this regard, but with what aftertaste it was said. These conversations reminded me of Comrade Krupskaya. It seems to me that Kamenev plays an important role in shaping these moods of Gorky.⁴²⁴

Once again, Kaganovich used his proximity to the events in Stalin's absence to frame the dispute in a factional context. In associating Gorky's sentiments with both Krupskaya and

⁴²² Artizov & Naumov, pp.219-223

⁴²³ Khlevnyuk, O.V, Davis, R.U, Koshleva, L.P., Rees, E.A., Rogovaya, L.A. (Eds.) (2001). *Stalin i Kaganovich: Perepiska. 1931-1936*. Rosspen : Moskva. p. 431

⁴²⁴ Ibid.. p. 436

Kamenev, Kaganovich was likely intentionally playing on Stalin's contempt and distrust of both, an indication that not only was Gorky out of favour before the Writers' Congress, but that there existed a powerful group within the Politburo that was willing to exploit this to further ostracise the author. Kaganovich goes on to report that Gorky's still as yet unpublished attack on the members of the Organising Committee had now been read by at least 400 people, and proposes that a heavily-edited version be hastily printed as opposed to letting it circulate illegally; Stalin would reluctantly agree, on the condition that Gorky and his associates would be informed that in no way would the Central Committee allow for the reformation of RAPP⁴²⁵. The conclusion to Stalin's letter is a perfect summation of Gorky's authority in the cultural sphere by the end of 1934:

It must be explained to all Communist literary people that the master in literature, as in other matters, is the Central Committee alone, and that they are obliged to submit themselves to it unconditionally.⁴²⁶

Concessions had to be made to secure the author's participation. As preparations for congress intensified, an increasingly disillusioned Gorky demanded at the last minute that both Bukharin and Radek be included as keynote speakers, much to the dismay of the party's literary functionaries and apparently Stalin himself. In his autobiography Ivan Gronskey describes a battle between the Bukharin and Gorky 'wing' against the orthodox party critics who supported Stalin's line:

When preparations were underway for the first congress of writers Gorky put forward Bukharin and Radek as speakers. I was ill, but I received their reports printed in pamphlets. I called Stalin: how could it happen that such reports were prepared for the congress? Stalin

⁴²⁵ Ibid. pp.437-438

⁴²⁶ Kotkin, S (2017) p.178.

replied that they were approved by the Central Committee. I said: how could the Central Committee approve them? Stalin said irritably: “Gorky raped us, he insisted on it”. To Stalin, of course, it was clear that these reports were fundamentally flawed ... After receiving Bukharin's speech I meet him on the stairs in the building of *Izvestia*. I said: “How could you write such a report?” He asked: “Why?” I said: “You are accused of being the ideologue of the restoration of capitalism, and here you, a literary expert, orienteering writers to decadence! You have to renounce the speech!”⁴²⁷

Surprisingly Stalin enjoyed Bukharin’s speech, phoning him the next day to offer his congratulations. Radek’s report was also positively appraised. Gorky however, ‘had shown disloyalty towards the party’ in failing to mention the reasoning behind the disbandment of RAPP during his address. ‘The result’ Stalin said, ‘was a report not about Soviet literature, but about something else.’⁴²⁸ Gorky’s outbursts prior to the congress, his promotion of colleagues not favoured by Stalin and his association with backstage politicking with former RAPPists, greatly diminished the author’s standing amongst Stalin and his inner circle. Shcherbakov’s account of a conversation with Zhdanov a month after the Soviet Writer’s Congress provides a particular damning account of Stalin’s attitude towards Gorky by the end of 1934, as the author was increasingly marginalised from cultural politics:

I went to (Zhdanov’s) *dacha*. He reported on a conversation between the members of the Politburo and Comrade Stalin. The latter identified three shortcomings in the congress: 1) Gorky’s non-Marxist report... 2) Bukharin’s final words of hysteria. 3) The lack of emphasis, especially from Gorky, that the decisive moment in the success of literature was the elimination of RAPP. Gorky manifests "proletkult" atavism. Gorky makes mistakes, the

⁴²⁷ Gronsky, I.(1991) *Iz Proshlovo: Vospominaniya*. Izvestia, Moscow.p.133

⁴²⁸ Khlevnyuk, O.V, Davis, R.U, Koshleva, L.P., Rees, E.A., Rogovaya, L.A. (Eds.) (2001). p. 466

largest of which is the pogrom of communist writers. He does not understand that the fact that fellow-travellers came to the positions of the Soviet government was largely a result of the fact that the communist writers managed to lead them... (Zhdanov) asked about my tactics regarding Gorky. The tactic boils down to the following: “Do not give up in matters of principle, in conductance with the orders of the Central Committee on all questions. To concede the little things, in particular.”⁴²⁹ Shcherbakov, who had been appointed Secretary of the Writers’ Union at the end of August, also quotes Stalin as saying, “Gorky’s desire to become a literary leader, his ‘peasant’ cunning, must also be taken into account”⁴³⁰.

The events preceding the Congress and the response to Gorky’s speech provide clear evidence that by the summer of 1934, the author was no longer at the forefront of the Soviet cultural leadership. Frustrated in his efforts to include his literary retinue in the organisation and presentation of the Congress, Gorky lashed out publicly and privately, clear evidence of his increasing marginalisation. The last-minute scheduling of Bukharin and Radek at the conference demonstrated Stalin’s willingness to ‘concede the little things’ to Gorky; as the public face of Soviet literature the author’s presence at the Congress was crucial both for the international attendees and the fellow-traveller authors who still saw in Gorky the possibility of a pluralistic literary environment. But this was ultimately only a minor concession; after two weeks of the Writers’ Congress there could be little doubt that cultural authority was now entirely bestowed upon Stalin and his literary functionaries.

Conclusion

The end of the cultural revolution movement and the thawing of relations between the regime and the intelligentsia allowed Gorky an opportunity to further petition on behalf of his friends

⁴²⁹ RGASPI. f. 558. f. 11. d. 1494. l. 11-24

⁴³⁰ Yakolev (2005). p.313

and colleagues and bring them under his patronage. In contrast to how Stalin would come to view friendship and patronage networks as inherently suspicious, Gorky's primary motivation for recruiting the likes of Bukharin, Kamenev and Tomsy was for their value to the state and Soviet culture, as he greatly valued their learning and expertise. However his activity in the continued promotion of those formerly deemed oppositionists would be recast following the events of 1932, in particular the Ryutin Affair, and the author's burgeoning relationship with Leopold Averbakh further soured his relationship with Stalin and the regime. The build up to the first Soviet Writers' Congress would see the first signs of open discontent. Still mourning his son Maxim and upset at the ostracisation of his preferred literary collaborators such as Averbakh and Bukharin, Gorky lashed out at the organisers of the congress and even members of the Politburo, making a number of demands that Stalin felt compelled to agree to. Although the author was eventually placated, his years of cultural autonomy were now at an end.

Prior to this, the author's work constructing Stalinist culture had continued unabated. In the spirit of the times, Gorky would reach out to fellow-traveller authors in an attempt to bring them under the fold of new Soviet literature. The Writers' Brigade to the Belomor Canal, featuring both fellow-traveller and beginner authors, would be Gorky's last great success in the formulation of Stalinism, embodying everything both the author and *vozhd* valued in cultural construction; the celebration of the collective over the individual, the depiction of the successes of *perekovka*, the glorification of the OGPU and the positive portrayal of a Soviet construction project. That the canal itself was not fit for purpose, that *History of Production* would soon be banned across the country, was irrelevant: the book was one of the defining texts of Stalinist culture and a major victory for Gorky. As with his articles rallying against enemies of the people in 1931, much of the creative work on the project was overseen by

Yagoda and approved by Stalin, as once again the three men sought to simplify and perfect the language and ideology of the new Soviet age.

The definitive cultural method of the regime, socialist realism, was actively promoted following a series of meetings at Gorky's mansions, where Stalin, ostensibly a guest at these evenings, expanded in great details on the meaning of Soviet culture and the role of the author in the Soviet state. Although Gorky was credited with the creation of socialist realism (the method would indeed feature many of Gorky's preferred literary techniques of portrayal) there would be no doubt in the mind of any of the attendees over the course of the evening that Stalin and the Party were now the ultimate authority in cultural affairs. This was already implicit in the forced dissolution of RAPP, which caught everybody, Gorky included, off guard. However whether or not Gorky was now in control of this new literary method or not, his contribution towards its central tenets went much further beyond the retroactive celebration of *Mother*. The positive hero, the depiction of life not as it is *but as it will be*, the mentorship role of the state and its representatives – all were present in Gorky's *Our Achievements* and would be further explored in his *History of...* series. In attaching Gorky's name to socialist realism, after a series of dramatic, overarching celebrations for the author's jubilee, Stalin purposely legitimised the method by forever associating it with the now-established most senior and celebrated individual in Soviet literature.

The sheer size and ambition of the *History of...* series was, despite its ultimate failure, perhaps the most *Stalinist* of Gorky's cultural projects. This was literature on a mass scale, not just aiming to document the history of every aspect of the pre-and-post revolutionary Soviet Union, but to prescribe the theories of Marxism-Leninism to each event in an attempt to explain and justify to as broad a readership as possible the righteousness of the socialist state. The project was doomed before it began; the impossibility of scale, antipathy from

potential contributors, intra-factional feuding and Gorky's ailing health all combined to ensure that none of the suggested volumes would survive the author's death. However it would remain unmatched in terms of constructing a culture from a state's birth with the sole purpose of justifying and celebrating its current composition.

Chapter Four - End of the Author

He is a very kind and weak person; he goes against his nature, makes a great effort not to condemn the mistakes of his powerful political friends. A fierce struggle is going on in his soul, about which no one knows anything⁴³¹.

Romain Rolland

Ongoing Struggles

Away from the political intrigue of the Writers' Congress, Gorky continued attempting to develop his key projects, *A History of Factories and Plants*, *A History of the Civil War* and *A History of the Countryside*. The process remained frustrating, as the author attempted to rally prominent public figures for contributions. Pressing Tkhachevsky to oversee editorial work on *Civil War*, Gorky warned of the potential 'awkwardness' for the volume should he be unable to participate⁴³². Writing to Radek about the same volume, Gorky adopted the tone of irritated teacher, both reprimanding and cajoling his colleague to finally submit his contribution:

You promised me right after the congress to submit your chapter to *History of the Civil War*.

We are ready all day tomorrow, but I, unfortunately, cannot start editing the volume without

⁴³¹ Rollan, R. (1989) *Moskovskii Dnevnik Romena Rollana*. Vstupitel'naya Stat'ya T. Motylevoi; Pervod M. Arias; Kommentarii N. Pzhevskoi / R. Rollan //Voprosy Literaturny. 1989, No.3. pp.190-246 Available at <https://voplit.ru/article/moskovskij-dnevnik-romena-rollana-vstupitelnaya-statya-t-motylevoj-perevod-m-arias-komentarii-n-rzhevskoj/> (Accessed 2nd March 2021)

⁴³² Bystrova, O.V. (2017). *Izdatel'skii Proekt M. Gor'kogo "Istoriya Grazhdanskoi Voynii"*. Po Materialam Arkhiva A.M. Gor'kogo (IMLI RAN) I RGASPI. IMLI RAN : Moskva. P.387

your chapter. All deadlines, personally scheduled by you, have long passed. 75% of the Congress attendees... were participants in the civil war. Many of them ask with great bewilderment, where is the story? Why isn't it released? Do we have to inform them that the delay can be blamed in you in particular, Comrade Radek? I think, nevertheless that in the coming days your chapter will come to us. I have no doubt that the time delay will be compensated by the content of the chapter.⁴³³

Yagoda too bore the brunt of Gorky's petitioning, also being reminded that the *Civil War* volumes were unable to proceed without the direct input of the NKVD. As a longtime editor of literary journals Gorky was no doubt more than used to having to chase contributors to meet deadlines, but in this instance the delays would be especially aggravating given that the three projects had been designated by the Central Committee as a matter of state importance. The reasons for the ongoing struggle for material have already been expanded on above – poor quality of submissions, a general lack of enthusiasm amongst skilled authors and literary administrators, and the overwhelming (and perhaps unachievable) scale of Gorky's ambition. Increasingly however the author's irritation would be aimed at the new cultural hierarchy, who clearly no longer regarded Gorky's projects as a priority.

Gorky's frustration is evident in his letters, railing against literary bureaucrats and complaining that his proposed volumes aren't progressing. Writing to Stalin in December 1935, the author expressed his dismay that *A History of the Countryside* still hadn't progressed beyond the planning stage, indirectly suggesting that Stalin and Kaganovich were responsible for the hold up by wavering on appointments to the projects board, and not

⁴³³Bystrova, O.V. (2017). *Izdatel'skii Proekt M. Gor'kogo "Istoriya Grazhdanskoi Voynii"*. Po Materialam Arkhiva A.M. Gor'kogo (IMLI RAN) I RGASPI. IMLI RAN : Moskva. P.388

allowing Bukharin to lead the work⁴³⁴. This letter, though still cordial and professional, is the closest display of a personal rift between Stalin and Gorky within their correspondence.

Where possible, Gorky still attempted to involve himself in the construction of popular myths for the state. In 1932, press reports appeared relating the tragic death of Pavlik Morozov, a peasant schoolboy who had reported his father to the Soviet authorities for hoarding grain. Pavlik was subsequently murdered by his family and became a contemporary martyr in state propaganda; songs, plays and even an opera were composed in his name, and he was evoked as an example to Soviet children everywhere to prioritise the state over family. Subsequent investigations have since found the Morozov story to be almost entirely untrue⁴³⁵.

Gorky arrived at the story late, apparently first encountering it in 1933, but was instrumental in the publication of Aleksandr Yakolev's biography of Morozov in 1936. Gorky was so inspired by the legend that he began a fundraising campaign to erect a statue to Morozov in his home village, even squeezing money out of the attendees at the Writers' Congress to go towards its construction⁴³⁶. The entire episode is a microcosm of Gorky's attempts at cultural construction through the utilisation of contemporary myth-building, amplifying the Stalinist ethos of personal sacrifice for the good of the collective and the state. Although its installation was delayed due to Gorky's death, the statue still stands today.

The Kirov Assassination

On December 1st 1934, Leonid Nikolayev made his way to the third floor of the Smolny building and shot First Secretary of Leningrad Sergei Kirov through the back of the head, killing him instantly. The first successful assassination attempt against a Party leader since the civil war, Kirov's death would ignite Stalin's unrelenting campaign against former and

⁴³⁴ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.720, l.81-83

⁴³⁵ Kelly, C. (2005). *Comrade Pavlik: The Rise and Fall of a Soviet Boy Hero*. Granta : London.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid*, p.144

potential oppositionists, leading to the Great Terror of 1936-39, a union-wide purge which saw approximately one million people lose their lives, including hundreds of Gorky's colleagues and inner circle.

Nikolayev had been expelled from the Party in May 1934 for exhibiting 'rude... hysterical' behaviour, and although he had been readmitted on appeal he found himself unemployed and an object of deep suspicion. Written pleas to both Kirov and Stalin went unanswered, and his diaries revealed festering resentment against the Party leadership; he began plotting to murder Kirov as early as October of that year and had been stalking the Leningrad chief for months to learn his movements⁴³⁷.

It was long assumed that Stalin had taken a direct role in Kirov's murder, instructing Yagoda and Ivan Zaporozhets, the head of the NKVD in Leningrad, to covertly arrange the assassination. Nikita Khrushchev would claim in his 1956 'secret speech' that Kirov's death had been carried out by NKVD agents, and the circumstantial evidence combined with the mass state violence perpetrated in the years following 1934 appeared to indicate that Kirov was the first political victim in Stalin's great purge. The *vozhd's* motive has generally been ascribed to political jealousy, with Kirov portrayed as a charismatic, popular and independent reformer intent on pursuing an alternative, liberal political policy, and a serious contender for Stalin's role as General Secretary⁴³⁸. By arranging the assassination Stalin sought to eliminate a serious rival.

In recent years however this theory has been largely disproven. There is no evidence suggesting that Kirov was anything other than a dedicated Stalinist. In Khlevniuk's words, 'the details of Kirov's party career offer scant evidence that he enjoyed an independent

⁴³⁷ Kotkin, (2017) pp.198-204

⁴³⁸ See Tucker (1992), pp.289-290, Medvedev (1989), pp.328-334

political position and much to suggest that he did not.⁴³⁹ From the civil war onwards Kirov had demonstrated a clear willingness to weaponise repression; he was also a fervent supporter of collectivisation. Although it is likely that he desired an end to the inner-party factional conflict he was hardly alone in this sentiment amongst members of the Politburo⁴⁴⁰. The means of Kirov's death is also unlike that of any of Stalin's other perceived rivals, which generally followed a pattern of public disgrace, arrest, trial and execution. Instead, the *vozhd* was said to have been greatly shaken by his friend's death.

Stalin may not have been complicit in Kirov's death but he wasted little time in exploiting the situation presented to him. Having been overruled by the Politburo in 1932 when pushing for the death penalty for Ryutin and his co-conspirators, the *vozhd* sought to use the Kirov murder as a pretext for the arrest and eventual execution of his political opponents. The night of the assassination, Stalin and Yagoda drafted a law implementing the death penalty for those convicted of terrorist acts with no right to appeal⁴⁴¹, and the next day both men and an entourage of Central Committee members arrived in Leningrad to lead the investigation. Nikolaev was personally interrogated by Stalin, Voroshilov and Molotov, described by the latter as 'embittered... short, stocky... angered and affronted by his expulsion from the Party'⁴⁴², and although his motives appeared entirely personal the assassin would be framed as an implacable enemy of the people, a potential foreign agent and embittered supporter of former First Secretary of Leningrad, Grigory Zinoviev; the ensuing investigation revealed parallel terrorist centres in Leningrad and Moscow, exposing a 'Zinovievite' group. On December 16th both Zinoviev and Kamenev were arrested, accused of encouraging a 'moral atmosphere' that incited terrorism and directly led to Kirov's death. The case was personally

⁴³⁹ Khlevniuk (2015). p.127

⁴⁴⁰ Lenoe, M.E. (2010). *The Kirov Murder and Soviet History*. New Haven, Yale University Press. p.77

⁴⁴¹ Ibid., p.205

⁴⁴² Chuev, F. (1993). *Molotov Remembers*. p.220

orchestrated by Stalin, who sifted through 260 interrogation protocols and coordinated the process of investigation with NKVD officials; in 1937, Yezhov would recall that Stalin ordered him to ‘look for murderers among the Zinovievites’.⁴⁴³ As many as 6,500 people were arrested across the country, with hundreds shot⁴⁴⁴. Zinoviev was sentenced to ten years in prison, Kamenev five; both men would be executed in August 1936, two months after Gorky’s death.

Upon hearing of Kirov’s death, Gorky would write to Konstantin Fedin; ‘I am depressed over the murder of Kirov, I feel completely shattered and bad. I very much loved and respected the man.’⁴⁴⁵ Without full access to Gorky’s correspondence during this period it is impossible to say for sure whether the author truly believed the charges against Kamenev, his close friend and colleague. On January 2nd, 1935, Gorky reprised his role as public cheerleader for political and judicial extremism, writing in *Pravda* that ‘the enemy must be exterminated ruthlessly and without pity, paying no attention to the gasps and groans of the professional humanists!’⁴⁴⁶ Two weeks later Gorky would return to the subject:

The bastards killed Sergey Kirov, one of the best leaders of the party, an exemplary worker in reviving the proletariat and the peasantry to a new life, in building a socialist society — They killed a simple, clear, unshakably firm man, killed for being so good - and frightening for his enemies. They killed Kirov - and it turned out that rotten people are hiding in the ranks of the Bolshevik Party, that among the Communists there are possible “revolutionaries” who believe that if a revolution does not end with a Thermidor, then this is a bad revolution⁴⁴⁷.

⁴⁴³ Khlevniuk (2015), p.131

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, p.213

⁴⁴⁵ *Ivanov, V.V. (1993)*

⁴⁴⁶ *Pravda*, 2nd January 1935. Quoted from Shentalinsky, *The KGB Literary Archive*.

⁴⁴⁷ RGALI (Reference missing, RGALI website down)

Whether he included Kamenev in this judgment is unclear, though with a lack of evidence suggesting anything otherwise we have to assume that as with the Shakhty, Industrial Party and Menshevik Party trials, Gorky fully believed in the guilt of the accused.

Only weeks earlier, three days after the assassination of Kirov, Kamenev had sent a lengthy letter to Gorky exclusively relating to cultural affairs, with only a brief sentence at the end mentioning the Leningrad leader; “Last night I stood at Kirov’s coffin. I am bitter. He was a good, strong man and an excellent worker.”⁴⁴⁸

In both Kamenev’s interrogation and confession on 9th January 1935 he was insistent that since his exile to Kaluga in 1932 he had been firmly on the side of the Party and Stalin, and that he neither knew of nor was interested in Zinoviev’s political activity, beyond being aware that he was generally unhappy with the party line. Freely admitting to meetings and conversations that he’d already confessed to years earlier, Kamenev remained adamant that he was now on Stalin’s side, as demonstrated by his work at *Academia*, articles for *Pravda* and his speech at the 17th Congress⁴⁴⁹.

Kamenev’s final letter to Gorky, written on January 17th 1935, was written shortly after he was sentenced to five years imprisonment for his alleged complicity in Kirov’s death - it reads as an admission of guilt, a personal apology and as a final goodbye. If there had been any ambiguity in 1928 over whether Kamenev intended for his letter about Bukharin’s ill-fated conspiracy to be forwarded to Stalin, there can be little doubt that he hoped this last correspondence would reach a larger audience than its supposed recipient:

⁴⁴⁸ Spiridonova (Ed.) (2010). p.574

⁴⁴⁹ RGASPI, f.17, o.171, d.206, l.23-41

But, I want to tell you, Alexei Maksimovich, I wasn't false with you. We didn't talk with you about politics, and when I told you about the feeling of love and respect for Stalin that revived within me, about my readiness to sincerely work with him, that all feelings of resentment and anger burned out in me — I told the truth, said what really was born in me in recent years - after a long struggle - and spoke without any goals and calculations, because my story has developed over the years... I loved you from the bottom of my heart.⁴⁵⁰

Kamenev ends the letter praising the work of the NKVD, alluding to theme of *perekovka* in Gorky's White Sea – Baltic Canal compilation, and asks Gorky to provide 'moral support' to his wife in his absence – she would soon be swept up in the wave of arrests following the uncovering of the Kremlin Affair, and executed in 1937. It would appear that Gorky read Kamenev's missive, as the hand-written copy in the Gorky archives contains the author's characteristic annotations in red pencil, although the letter, which would likely have been received by Kryuchkov first, is not registered in Gorky's correspondence receipt book⁴⁵¹, the author and his secretary apparently fully aware of the potential consequences of corresponding with a convicted terrorist.

Kamenev's arrest would have dire political implications for Gorky, already largely distrusted due to his connections to Bukharin and Averbakh. It was the author, after all, who had successfully petitioned Stalin to allow Kamenev's return to public service as editor of *Academia*. Although Gorky's estrangement from Stalin had growing for at least a year prior to Kirov's murder, their relationship from this point on declined to the point of near non-existence. While their formal written correspondence continued (almost entirely maintained by Gorky with only very occasional replies from Stalin), the *vozhd* stopped visiting the author

⁴⁵⁰ Spiridonova (Ed.) (2010). pp.575-576

⁴⁵¹ Ibid, p.616

at his home and refused to answer his phone calls⁴⁵². If the Kirov murder was the beginning of Stalin's equating of opposition with potential terror, then through his relationships with Kamenev, Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky, Gorky would also be indirectly implicated.

As the fallout of the Kirov murder continued into 1935 the NKVD began investigating Kremlin staffers, some of whom were from class-alien backgrounds and were alleged to have gossiped about the death of Stalin's wife. These minor indiscretions would be spun into accusations of terrorism, purportedly with the aim of assassinating Stalin. 110 people were arrested, with two sentenced to death. The ongoing investigation was charged to Yezhov, who at the June plenum of the Central Committee accused Avel Yenukidze, who was responsible for the administration and security of the Kremlin, of negligence in the management of personnel and 'aiding and abetting terrorists'⁴⁵³. Yenukidze had of course been proposed by Gorky years earlier as a potential editor of *A History of Factories and Plants*.

Yagoda was also implicated, as the NKVD had initially failed to uncover the plot until his subordinate Yezhov had been tasked with the case. Yezhov also used his platform at the plenum to transition the charges against Zinoviev and Kamenev from one of fostering an atmosphere conducive to terrorism to outright organising Kirov's assassination.

The repercussions from the Kremlin Affair are detailed in Shcherbakov's diary, providing an illuminating insight into Stalin's mindset at a time when the campaign to root out internal enemies, real or imagined, was gathering momentum. On March 27th, 1935, Shcherbakov was summoned to his first meeting with Stalin for four months, ostensibly about the organisation of technical colleges and the role of party supervisors. It wasn't long however before Stalin

⁴⁵² Spiridonova, L.A., Primochkina, N.N. & Plotnikova, A.G. (Eds.) (2018). p.159

⁴⁵³ Getty, J. A. & Naumov, O.V. (2010). *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932 – 1939*. Yale University Press : New Haven. pp.80-85

launched into a lengthy speech on his most pressing preoccupation, hidden enemies and the threat of terror. Beginning with a concise summary of the civil war and foreign intervention (“I have never seen such a meeting”, comments Shcherbakov) and referring to 1932 as the most acute year of the ‘reorganisation’ period, Stalin concludes that the present period of prosperity and political stability has resulted in deadly complacency:

And in these conditions, they begin to forget about the remains of the enemy, about the roots, as they said here. And this is wrong. To forget about unfinished enemies, to think that they are not dangerous means to forget Marxism-Leninism, to forget about the existence of a theory of class struggle. The enemy reasons as follows: anyway, I don’t care that the old times are gone, I will mess things up and play dirty tricks. This takes the path of terror: “I will strike at the leaders, I will bring decay into the ranks.” You probably heard about the Kremlin Affair (I mean Yenukidze, who was blind to what was going on and in a certain way promoted two organizations in the Kremlin). Watch how they act cunningly. To get to a member of the Politburo, who can get to their apartment? A cleaning lady, a librarian – they began to create an organization among them. And they can strike easily: there are poisons without color, odorless. They sprinkle a pillow, or a book being read – lay down, went to sleep, breathed in – then a month later, death. In our conditions, recklessness is not a crime, but simply death.⁴⁵⁴

Having spent several years supporting and promoting former oppositionists, employing the likes of Radek, Kamenev and Averbakh for his various personal projects, and petitioning for Bukharin and Tomsky to be promoted to important state organs such as *Izvestia* and Gosizdat respectively, Gorky by Stalin’s definition had surrounded himself with ‘unfinished enemies’,

⁴⁵⁴ RGASPI, f.558, op.11, d.1494, l.22-28

and therefore potentially aided and abetted oppositionist terrorism. The Kirov murder and the Kremlin Affair had greatly shaken Gorky's position.

Writing to Stalin soon after the Kremlin Affair was exposed, Gorky responded in a vitriolic tone that echoed the combative language of his 'crush the enemy' articles of the early-30s:

What is striking is not so much the behaviour of Yenukidze, but the shameful indifference to this behaviour of the partyites. Even the non-party people long ago knew and spoke about how the old man was surrounded by nobles, Menshiviks, and, in general, shitty flies... The closer we get to war, the stronger will be the efforts of these jokers of all suits to try and assassinate you, in order to decapitate the union... This is natural, for the enemies see well: there is no one who could take your place. With your colossal and wise work, you have inculcated in millions of people trust and love to you – that's a fact... Take care of yourself⁴⁵⁵.

The rhetoric of class warfare may still have been present in the letter, but the ingratiating language towards the end of the letter speaks to a sense of desperation in Gorky. Stalin would fail to send a reply.

The Final Years

The last two years of Gorky's life saw the author fall into deep decline both personally and publicly. Increasingly suffering from the ill-effects of his ongoing struggles with bronchitis, the author found it difficult to travel back and forth to Moscow as often as in the past, inadvertently finding himself isolated in his country *dacha*. As detailed in Rolland's *Moscow Diary*, Gorky's affairs were now completely in the hands of his secretary Kryuchkov, who controlled his personal correspondence and dictated who could and could not visit the author.

⁴⁵⁵ RGASPI, 5.558, op.11, d.720, l.78

Old friends of Gorky began to feel increasingly distanced from him, some like Prishvin expressing their bemusement at the situation:

Since then, all winter, I have called Comrade Kruchkov dozens of times with a request to make an appointment with you, which under various pretences he refuses. Finally I send you my new book, Zhen-Shen, and against your custom I don't get a line from you. I personally,

Alexei Maksimovich, do not take offence, because I am an eccentric... but I picture somebody else in my place and it appears very offensive. Imagine you were Prishvin and I was Gorky.⁴⁵⁶

Similar complaints about Kryuchkov persisted; Vyacheslav Ivanov decided to break contact with Gorky as he couldn't stand having to go through his gate-keeper for permission. Kornei Chukovsky recorded his fury in his diary, unable to arrange a short meeting with the author to briefly discuss his new manuscript:

So off I go to see Gorky that is, to Kryuchkov Kryuchkov, son of a bitch, evasive, lying, never wanting to give me access to Gorky... Besides, damn it, I worked with Gorky for three and a half years, I've had a long-standing correspondence with him I have the right to see him once every ten years. "No, I'm sorry. Alexei Maximovich regrets he can't see you now, but he *will* have time... at noon on the 19th." He won't look me in the eye and his breath reeks of vodka⁴⁵⁷

Gorky began 1935 as he had ended the year before, launching personal and political attacks at his perceived literary enemies in his two follow-up articles to *On Literary Amusements*, published within six days of each other at the end of January across *Pravda*, *Izvestia* and

⁴⁵⁶ Prishvin, M. (24th April 1934).

⁴⁵⁷ Chukovksy (2005), p.274

Literaturnaya Gazeta. Gorky returned to his favourite themes, accusing an unnamed group of authors, who, self-satisfied and ‘head over heels in the mud of bourgeois individualism’ did everything necessary to protect their position in literature at the expense of emerging, communist authors.⁴⁵⁸ The tone and target of his attack was familiar, but the response was entirely unexpected; for the first time since the 1929 Politburo decree against the Siberian journals attacking Gorky, *Pravda* published a critical response; Panferov replied with an open letter of his own, defending himself from Gorky’s accusations and questioning his right to criticism. This was nothing, of course, in comparison to the vicious press campaigns of the past, but it was a clear public signal that Gorky was no longer a sacred state institution who was beyond reproach.

Why did this happen? It seems unlikely that *Pravda* would have published Panferov’s response without Stalin’s consent. Yedlin suggests that the reason the articles against Gorky were published was because of the author’s refusal in the wake of the Kirov murder to publish a public condemnation of individual terror, an order apparently conveyed to the author by Stalin using Yagoda as an intermediary. Yedlin quotes Gorky’s reply as, “‘I condemn not only individual, but state terror too.’”⁴⁵⁹ However the letter she cites, from Gorky’s correspondence with Yagoda in the third volume of *Neizvestnyi Gor’kii*, contains no such statement from the author; instead Gorky is transcribing a letter of complaint sent to Rolland in which the correspondent condemns the waves of persecution launched by the Soviet government in the wake of Kirov’s murder. Gorky makes no comment on this. Furthermore, Gorky’s letter to Yagoda is dated July 29th 1935, several months after the articles against Gorky began appearing in *Pravda*. As of the time of writing, this is the first published letter between the two men since November 1934, suggesting a nine-month break

⁴⁵⁸ RGALI – Website down at time of writing

⁴⁵⁹ Yedlin (1999) p.210

in written correspondence. There is no evidence therefore of Gorky's refusal to condemn individual terror.

Worse was to follow. On January 20th 1935 *Pravda* published an article by Zaslavsky outright accusing Gorky of participating in a counter-revolutionary conspiracy, drawing a direct line between the author's known liberalism and his connection to convicted class enemies Zinoviev and Kamenev. Gorky's response was published, but when Zaslavsky was allowed a rebuttal of Gorky's defence *Pravda* refused to carry the author's second reply⁴⁶⁰.

In all likelihood, the publication of Panferov's response and Zaslavsky's accusation was a measure of retribution for Gorky's incessant support of the former RAPP leadership, Averbakh in particular, at the expense of Stalin's preferred personnel in literary affairs. Gorky's conduct in the days preceding the Writers' Congress, during which he had thrown a very public tantrum in a bid to dictate the keynote speakers and contributors, had clearly exhausted Stalin's patience, and with the Congress now firmly in the distance and the legitimacy of Stalin's dictatorship established, Gorky had essentially served his purpose. In the wake of the *vozhd's* growing distrust of friendship and patronage groups, Gorky's position had been firmly shaken by his behaviour of the preceding months and his acquaintances since returning in 1928. The author maintained a written correspondence with Stalin, attended public meetings when his health would allow and still busied himself in the day-to-day tasks of his journals and literary interests – he was in no way banished from public life. However, his days of genuine political influence were over.

The Paris Congress

⁴⁶⁰ Kemp-Welch (1991) p.192

In April 1935 Gorky was nominated by Politburo decree to head the Soviet delegation to Paris for the First International Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture, an international symposium organised by Rolland and Barbusse in which socialist and left-leaning authors were intended to come to common agreement in how best to combat the rise of European fascism⁴⁶¹. Other Soviet representatives included Ilya Ehrenburg (who co-organised the event), Shcherbakov and Vladimir Kirshon. By the time the Congress convened in June however Gorky was no longer listed as an active participant; the author had remained in Moscow ostensibly on the grounds of ill health.

For many years the narrative surrounding Gorky's non-appearance in Paris was one of detainment, with Stalin refusing to issue the author a visa either as punishment for their alleged estrangement or out of fear that once outside of the Soviet Union, Gorky would fail to return⁴⁶². As in 1933, when it was rumoured that Gorky's customary return to Italy had been vetoed by Stalin, the author was cast as a prisoner of a tyrannical regime, tragically denied his freedom of movement⁴⁶³. However, as also in 1933, the decision to stay in the Soviet Union was taken by Gorky alone. Writing to Stalin only a month prior to the trip, Gorky asked to be excused from the trip, pleading overwork:

I pose the question: can you not free me from the trip to Paris? I do not feel like it, I would have to go accompanied by a babysitter and I don't want to lose two weeks for a job that does not seem especially important to me. I have so much serious work to do that every day is expensive. The amount of work - alas, is telling⁴⁶⁴.

⁴⁶¹ Artizov & Naumov (1999) pp.254-255

⁴⁶² *Ivanov, V.V. (1993)*

⁴⁶³ Berberova (2005) p.247. Berberova is cited here but until very recently this has been the reported version of events in multiple accounts.

⁴⁶⁴ RGASPI, f.558, o.11, d.720, l.78

Gorky's 'babysitter' remark is likely a sarcastic reference to the NKVD guards who by 1935 guarded Gorky's home and accompanied him everywhere, ostensibly to protect the author from potential terrorist attempts on his life. Gorky's refusal appears to have taken the authorities by surprise; only days prior he had intimated his reluctance to Shcherbakov, citing general malaise and offering a confused excuse centred on Rolland's impending visit to Moscow:

My heart works lazily and capriciously. I can't imagine going to Paris, and I envy Sholokhov. And then Rolland will come (to the Soviet Union) - he will probably not come to Paris in order to avoid a hostile meeting and a scandal that threatens him from the fascists. The fascists don't bother me, but it would be unpleasant to "part ways" with Rolland. That's the thing.⁴⁶⁵

Shcherbakov forwarded the letter to Stalin, noting with surprise, "I must add from myself that this is the first time I have heard from Gorky about such moods that permeate the letter."⁴⁶⁶

Gorky was behaving erratically, aloofly – however he was clearly acting under his own agency in refusing the assignment to Paris.

The Congress itself was a failure, wrought with in-fighting between the national delegations. Dismayed by Gorky's non-appearance the French organisers demanded that the Russian authorities send Pasternak and Babel in his place; they managed to arrive just two days before the congress began. An on-going feud between Ehrenburg and French surrealist Rene Crevel

⁴⁶⁵ Gor'kii, M (1955) *Sobranie Sochinenii v Tridtsati Tomakh: Tom 30*. Khudozhestvennoi Literatury : Moskva. pp.389-390

⁴⁶⁶ RGASPI, f.88, o.1. d.472, l.1

resulted in the latter's suicide on the eve of the Congress; he left a brief note saying, 'I am fed up with everything'⁴⁶⁷.

Romain Rolland's *Moscow Diary*

The French novelist and dramatist Romain Rolland had maintained a written correspondence with Gorky since 1916, beginning a slow drift from pacifism and Gandhian principles to an overt embracement of socialist ideology. As we have seen, Gorky regularly conveyed his impressions and justifications of Soviet power to Rolland from his return in 1928, and despite the French author's occasional hesitancy and discomfort at reports reaching the West of human rights abuses he was ultimately happy to accept and endorse his interlocutor's rationale. Defending the events surrounding the Shakhty and Menshevik trials, Rolland would write in 1931, "The builders had to dirty their hands; we have no right to act like we are disgusted"⁴⁶⁸.

Gorky had long sought for his friend to visit the Soviet Union; in all their years of close correspondence they had yet to meet, and the international coverage of such an esteemed guest visiting the country would lend further legitimacy to the regime at a time of mounting international tension. Rolland's eventual arrival would mirror that of other prominent Western authors choosing to view the Soviet experiment through their own eyes, with previous visits by George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Andre Gide and others much heralded by *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* as examples of the Western intelligentsia condemning the decadence of capitalism and embracing the future of socialism. These authors' final impressions would differ vastly from Soviet expectations, though Rolland's published account would prove to be nothing short of laudatory of Stalin's regime. However his private memoirs from the same

⁴⁶⁷ Ehrenburg (1964) p.303

⁴⁶⁸ Sobanet, A. (2018). *Generation Stalin: French Writers, the Fatherland and the Cult of Personality*. Indiana: Indiana University Press. p. 115

journey, published for the first time in 1992, would present an entirely contradictory experience, particularly in his encounters with Gorky and the Soviet elite.

Arriving in June 1935, the exuberant scenes that met Rolland in Moscow mirrored those that had greeted Gorky in 1928, as the French author was whisked from one official event to another, overwhelmed with speeches, gatherings and performances in his honour, to the extent that he was almost immediately diagnosed with nervous exhaustion and ordered to rest by Gorky's personal doctor. Rolland's account of his journey, *Moscow Diary*, is one of the most candid and revealing of the era, as the French author spent considerable time with Stalin, Gorky, Bukharin, Yagoda and others, recording his impressions without fear of censorship or repercussion. Rolland had long sympathised with the Soviet regime, and despite often expressing his concerns over reports of political repression and state violence he arrived in Moscow as an avowed supporter of the socialist state.

In a personal interview with Stalin, translated with the aid of Rolland's Russian wife, the writer draws out some astonishing responses from the *vozhd*, in particular when the discussion turns to the wave of arrests made in the immediate aftermath of Kirov's murder. "We went beyond the bounds of legality and morality, perhaps it was even a political mistake", Stalin would admit, "but we succumbed to the power of feelings." Stalin would go on to allude to the Kremlin affair, describing a plot by "young women from noble families" who had infiltrated the ranks of Soviet leadership and attempted to poison them. It is only later that Rolland realises that Stalin is referring to himself as the intended target.

The Gorky that Rolland finally encounters after 20 years of correspondence vacillates between his public persona of staunch supporter of the regime, and that of an exhausted, defeated cynic putting on a perfunctory imitation of himself for the benefit of those who surround him. In the course of one conversation, he condemns Yenukidze for his role in the

Kremlin Affair before lamenting the gradual loss of his closest friends. A tense conversation with Rolland's wife on the injustice of innocent people being condemned for their parents' social position takes place; when she reminds Gorky of his past defence of the former aristocracy, in particular Prince Mirsky, the author shows 'pain and fear' in his eyes, unable to offer a response. The author's housekeepers later tell the Rollands that Gorky undoubtedly sympathises with their point of view, but neither could nor would ever dare to express this.

Gorky's *dacha* is constantly abuzz with guests. The tenderness of his relationship with Bukharin is revealed; the two men shadow box, until the author quickly asks for mercy, and Bukharin kisses Gorky on the head as he leaves. Radek arrives soon after and makes a terrible impression on Rolland, seemingly longing for the outbreak of a world war pitting capitalism against socialism. In his encounters with Kryuchkov Rolland affirms the rumours that circulated amongst Gorky's acquaintances for a number of years, namely that the secretary was in complete control of who could and could not visit the author. He monitored all incoming and outgoing mail, and as a person was 'extremely limited, fanatical and dogmatic'.

Rolland's account of his dinner at Gorky's *dacha* with Stalin, Voroshilov, Kaganovich and Molotov is well known. The guests were presented with a full banquet, of which Rolland would later comment with disgust as to the wastefulness on display in comparison to the poverty he witnessed elsewhere in Russia. Uncharacteristically, Gorky drank repeated glasses of vodka, prompting coughing fits; Stalin joked with his host and Kryuchkov as to whom is really the secretary, and commented on the unruliness of the house⁴⁶⁹.

⁴⁶⁹ Rollan, R. (1989) *Moskovskij Dnevnik Romena Rollana*. Vstupitel'naya Stat'ya T. Motylevoj; Perevod M. Arias; Kommentarii N. Pzhevskoi / R. Rollan //Voprosy Literaturny. 1989, No.3. pp.190-246 Available at <https://voplit.ru/article/moskovskij-dnevnik-romena-rollana-vstupitelnaya-statya-t-motylevoj-perevod-m-arias-komentarii-n-rzhevskoj/> (Accessed 2nd March 2021)

Yagoda, a frequent visitor to Gorky's dacha, is a constant presence in Rolland's diary, as the French author attempted to negotiate Victor Serge's release from NKVD captivity; Serge had been subject to ongoing repression and frequent arrests since 1927 for his vocal disapproval of the direction of the Party under Stalin and had become somewhat of a cause célèbre among European socialists. Yagoda left Rolland perplexed, appearing both polite and compassionate while at the same time proving mendacious on the specifics of the case and evasive when pressed for a resolution. Ekaterina Peshkova, Gorky's first wife, made no attempt to conceal her contempt for the NKVD chief, completely contradicting Yagoda's account of the Serge case and accusing him of hypocrisy in his treatment of political prisoners when contrasted with his glorification of the *perekovka* of the common criminal⁴⁷⁰.

Rolland's final impressions of Gorky, written after the French author has begun his journey home, leave a lasting, tragic image of Gorky in his final days, isolated, lonely and helpless. It is the best account that we have of the author in the last years of his life, recorded in the moment by a friend unhindered by Soviet censorship:

An unhappy old bear, entwined with laurels and showered with honours, indifferent in the depths of his soul to all these blessings that he would give up for the vagabond independence of the old days, on his heart lies a heavy burden of grief, nostalgia and regret; he tries to drown out his old pessimism with the intoxicating enthusiasm and faith of the surrounding masses, who carry him along with them... I love him very much and I feel sorry for him. He

⁴⁷⁰ Rollan, R. (1989) *Moskovskii Dnevnik Romena Rollana*. Vstupitel'naya Stat'ya T. Motylevoi; Perevod M. Arias; Kommentarii N. Pzhevskoi / R. Rollan // *Voprosy Literatury*. 1989, No.4. pp.190-246 Available at <https://voplit.ru/article/moskovskij-dnevnik-romena-rollana-perevod-m-arias-komentarii-n-rzhevskoj-prodolzhenie/> (Accessed 2nd March 2021)

is very lonely, although he is almost never alone! It seems to me that if I were alone with him (and the language barrier collapsed), he would hug me and sob silently for a long time.⁴⁷¹

After Rolland's departure Gorky continued to pursue the case of Victor Serge on behalf of his friend, but given his diminished political stature he was unable to make much headway.

Writing to Yagoda at the end of July 1935, Gorky forwarded an example of the letters of protest being directed towards Rolland, suggesting that the simplest solution would be to give in to the international demands, return Serge's manuscripts and deport him from the Soviet Union:

Maybe you will find it possible to drive Kibalchich (Serge) out of the Union and return his manuscript to him? I, of course, do not advise anything, but it seems to me that... this pitiful pretext for insinuations against the Union on the part of idlers and villains whom, unfortunately, many believe, should be destroyed⁴⁷²

The case dragged on into the next year, with Gorky finding himself in the embarrassing predicament of reporting Serge's imminent freedom to Rolland only to discover from Serge's wife that his case was still unresolved; having been released from NKVD captivity France refused to issue Serge a visa, leading once again to his arrest until another solution was found. Eventually Rolland was able to secure Serge's passage to Belgium; his manuscripts would never be returned⁴⁷³.

⁴⁷¹ Rollan, R. (1989) *Moskovskii Dnevnik Romena Rollana*. Vstupitel'naya Stat'ya T. Motylevoi; Perevod M. Arias; Kommentarii N. Pzhevskoi / R. Rollan // *Voprosy Literatury*. 1989, No.5 pp.190-246 Available at <https://voplit.ru/article/moskovskij-dnevnik-romena-rollana-perevod-m-arias-komentarii-n-rzhevskoj-okonchanie/> (Accessed 2nd March 2021)

⁴⁷² Barakhov, V.C., Zaika, S.V., Keldysh, V.A. (1994) pp.190-192

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.* pp.190-192

Rolland's reflections on his time in the Soviet Union were conflicted; in his published memoir he would praise the strength, pride and vitality of the regime and laud its successes, and publicly he continued to promote the moral supremacy of Stalin's regime. Yet in his unpublished recollections Rolland would mull over the gross disparity in living standards that he had witnessed during his visit, and acknowledged that in all likelihood the perpetrator of the population's greatest suffering was likely the regime itself⁴⁷⁴. Professionally, Rolland would be increasingly frustrated by Stalin's refusal to allow the official publication of their conversations, despite Gorky acting as an intermediary. None of this dulled his public enthusiasm for the *vozhd* however, and he would become one of the most vocal proponents of the 1938 show trials in the West. Damningly, despite Rolland having become quite close to Bukharin during his stay (even petitioning Stalin pre-trial for clemency in the name of their recently deceased mutual friend Gorky), the French author removed any mention of him from his musings on the Soviet Union following his execution, continuing to exalt Stalin and the righteous path of the Soviet people.

End of the Author

In Spring of 1936 Gorky cut short his summer retreat in the Crimea to return to Moscow. Upon arrival at his *dacha* he felt unwell, and his condition deteriorated rapidly. Diagnosed with lobar pneumonia, the doctors prepared the family for the worst. At some point it appears that Kryuchkov informed Stalin of the news, as the *vozhd* soon appeared with Molotov and Voroshilov in tow, barking orders at the medical staff and ordering Kryuchkov and Yagoda from the room. After sharing a brief embrace, Gorky and Stalin parted for the last time; Gorky passed away on 18th June 1936. After his death some notes were found in a book

⁴⁷⁴ Sobanet, A (2018) pp.119-120

beside the author's bed, in which he evidently had been recording final, disjointed thoughts. The last line on the page read, 'End of the novel, end of the hero, end of the author'⁴⁷⁵.

Largely as a result of the 1938 show trials in which Yagoda, Kryuchkov and Gorky's doctors confessed to the author's murder, there remained lingering doubt for many years as to whether or not Gorky met a natural end. However a special medical investigation in the early 90s concluded that the author had indeed died of pneumonia. Four years after Gorky's death Vyacheslav Ivanov would visit the room in which the author died, which had remained untouched since 1936. Underneath a glass on the bedside table was a pile of newspapers from the days preceding Gorky's death, which Ivanov began sifting through. To his amazement, there was not one mention of the author's illness, which had dominated the Soviet press until his eventual passing. It appeared that as with his old comrade Lenin, one-off prints of *Pravda* had been prepared for the author also.⁴⁷⁶

Gorky's Diary

The long-rumoured existence of Gorky's diary, or at the very least hidden correspondence that would implicate the author and his circle of covert opposition to Stalin, remains prevalent in Gorky literature. The rumour appears to have originated from Soviet defector Alexander Orlov's 1953 book, *The Secret History of Stalin's Crimes*, in which it was claimed that after the author's death, NKVD agents had discovered hidden notes criticising the regime, causing Yagoda to exclaim, 'No matter how well you feed a wolf, he always yearns to be back in the forest!'.⁴⁷⁷ Much of Orlov's memoir has since been debunked, but a similar account of events appeared in the émigré press a year later. In *Gorky's Diary*, published in

⁴⁷⁵ Shentalinsky, V. (1993), pp.272-275

⁴⁷⁶ Ivanov, V.V. (1993)

⁴⁷⁷ Shentalinsky (1995). P.276

1954, poet and literary critic Gleb Glinka described a scene in which a group of writers and literary authorities were dispatched to an apartment housing the *History of Factories and Plants* archive to compile the recently-deceased author's collected works, and accidentally stumbled upon Gorky's secret notebook containing 'merciless and completely objective criticism of the Kremlin rulers'. In one particularly memorable extract, Gorky compared Stalin to a household flea, magnified to a thousand times its normal size to make 'the most terrible animal on earth, which no one would be able to match.' By Glinka's account the NKVD were immediately summoned and the diary was swiftly confiscated. Soon after, the majority of Gorky's former journals were shut down, and the persecution of the author's friends, inner circle and medical team began⁴⁷⁸.

No physical documents have been unearthed to verify Orlov and Glinka's claims, and it remains inconclusive as to whether or not Gorky even kept a personal diary. Tamara Ivanova, who visited Gorky in Sorrento with her husband and author Vyacheslav Ivanov, recalled that Gorky 'incessantly instilled in everyone who surrounded him, a commonplace, but often overlooked truth - the benefits of keeping diaries... to be able to control myself, my views and feelings'⁴⁷⁹. Ekaterina Peshkova, many years after Gorky's death, told Kornei Chukovsky that the author 'never kept a diary... but he may have jotted some remarks on loose sheets.'⁴⁸⁰

According to Nina Berberova, who lived with Gorky in Sorrento for nearly three years, the author's entourage took a collective decision to divide up his accumulated correspondence before he returned permanently to Moscow. The first three categories were comparatively innocuous, containing Gorky's dialogues with Soviet authors, émigré contacts and various

⁴⁷⁸ Glinka, G. (1954) *Sotsialisticheskii Vestnik*. January 1954, No.1. pp.15-20

⁴⁷⁹ Ivanova (1987).pp.83-84

⁴⁸⁰ Chukovsky, (2005). p.464

European scholars. The remaining collection of letters, however, were from prominent Soviet politicians and dignitaries (with Rykov, Trotsky and Pyatakov specifically named), and contained ‘seditious’ content calling for the author to publicly oppose Stalin’s rule. Aware of the potentially fatal consequences for the correspondents, and despite Maxim’s plea to burn the entire collection, Gorky took the decision to bundle the letters together and send them to London with Budberg. Gorky’s remaining personal correspondence was divided up and sealed by the OGPU almost a year after the author’s return to the Soviet Union:

In May of 1933, the villa in Sorrento was closed. Gorky’s archive for the period 1921-1933, containing correspondence with Bukharin, Pyatakov and others, often critical of Stalin and the regime, was divided. One part was shipped to Moscow, the other was given to Maria Ignatievna Budburg (Moura).⁵³

Budburg, who is believed to have acted as a double agent for both the OGPU/NKVD and the British Intelligence Services, is alleged to have taken the briefcase to London, before returning it to Gorky days before his death in June 1936.

Boris Nikolaevsky would confirm Berberova’s version, writing in 1966 that Budberg had indeed brought Gorky’s sealed papers into the Soviet Union as the author entered his final days, meeting with Stalin and Voroshilov and handing over the precious suitcase to NKVD officials. As with *Letter of an Old Bolshevik* however, Nikolaevsky’s account appears somewhat divorced from the reality of Gorky’s situation during the last years of his life. “Gorky did in fact see the true horror of Stalin’s terror”, Nikolaevsky wrote, citing contemporary memoirists (likely meaning Rolland); “Not only did he see it but he had decided to fight it, and for that he sought the weapons he would need.”⁴⁸¹

⁴⁸¹ Berberova (2005) pp.251-252

When I personally wrote to the FSB archival director to request access to any files held on Gorky I received a response claiming that everything had long ago been donated to the Gorky Archive. If this is the case then they have yet to be published and remain inaccessible to the public; although the Gorky archivists were extremely helpful during my brief time with them, they insisted that any correspondence between the author and Soviet leadership was now in the public domain, and as such they were unwilling to share the documents currently held within the archive. While the FSB granted me access to Kryuchkov's personal file I only received Volume 21 and was told that the remaining files were unavailable. From this, it appears that there remains a wealth of material available across the former-Soviet archives that may further enlighten future researchers as to the realities of Gorky's final years in the Soviet Union.

Letter of an Old Bolshevik

Boris Nikolaevsky's *Letter of an Old Bolshevik*, originally published at the end of 1936 and beginning of 1937 in the Menshevik émigré journal *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik*, would come to redefine the understanding of Gorky's position under Stalin's government. Based on conversations held between Bukharin and exiled-Menshevik Boris Nikolaevsky during the former's stay in Paris in the spring of 1936, the *Letter* details the growing unease with the direction of the general Party line amongst the Politburo from 1932-34, and describes two competing factions vying for influence over Stalin's 'soul'; a moderate group pushing for reconciliation between the Party and the population, headed by Kirov and Gorky, and hardliners who fought against this, led by Kaganovich and Yezhov. The article claims that not only had Kirov's influence grown to such an extent that by 1934 he could determine his own course independent of the Party line, but that Stalin was unprepared to oppose this course due to Gorky's influence over him, thus explaining the comparatively 'more affable,

more yielding⁴⁴ behaviour of the General Secretary following the 17th Party Congress. Only after Kirov's assassination were Kaganovich and Yezhov able to wrest influence from Gorky, leading once again to mass repression among the populace and a systematic campaign against those who had opposed Stalin in the past, in particular Zinoviev, Kamenev, and ultimately, Bukharin.⁴⁸²

Kirov and Gorky are portrayed as working together in 1933-34 to influence Stalin towards a more moderate line. The two men were certainly close, with Kirov guiding the author through Leningrad during the author's returns in 1928 and 1929. Throughout the 1930s Gorky maintained a semi-regular dialogue with Kirov containing appeals and petitions for the author's acquaintances in Leningrad. In one of the more fanciful theories promoted about the relationship between the two, Ivanov hypothesised that Gorky was conspiring with Kirov against Stalin, using his son Maxim as a conduit between the author and the Leningrad chief⁴⁸³.

Most of the claims of *The Letter* have been subsequently disproven; while it is generally accepted that the conversation took place between Nikolaevsky and Bukharin, the misstatements contained within the text can be attributed to either the author's exaggeration or Bukharin's tendency to over-state and embellish. However the *Letter* accomplished two things in Western discourse on the pre-terror era; firstly, it promoted the concept that up until the end of 1934 there was a genuine and popular alternative to Stalin's rule in Sergei Kirov. Secondly it fed into the idea that Gorky's influence was such that he was able to soften public policy and at least temporarily stave off the worst of Stalin's excesses. Both of these were untrue. Kirov's capacity as an individual actor on the political stage has since been thoroughly debunked, most

⁴⁸² Nikolaevsky (1966). p.44

⁴⁸³ Ivanov, V.V. (1993)

notably in Matthew E. Lenoë's *The Kirov Murder and Soviet History*. On Gorky's behalf, there is no question that he enjoyed tremendous influence in cultural and state affairs from 1928 onwards. However there was no obvious attempt to 'soften' Stalin's general line; as we have seen, Gorky offered nothing but public, unwavering support for Stalin and was central in establishing and perpetrating Stalinism as the logical continuation of Marxism-Leninism. Regardless, the image of Gorky as a moderate influence on Stalin persists to this day. The *Letter of an Old Bolshevik* was the first successful attempt to re-shape Gorky's legacy after the author's death. The second, infinitely more tragic attempt, would take place only a year later.

The Stalinite Gorky

The case of the Anti-Soviet "Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites" was brought before the supreme court of the Soviet Union in March 1938, and over the course of twelve days an audience composed of Soviet and Western journalists heard Nikolai Bukharin, Genrikh Yagoda, Alexei Rykov and eighteen others confess to incredible accusations of espionage, terrorism and murder. All but three of the defendants were shot. It wasn't Stalin's first show trial of Old Bolsheviks but it was arguably the most shocking, the demise of Bukharin in particular having great international resonance, and the guilty verdicts appeared to serve as proof that the Soviet Union was, as Stalin claimed, overrun with internal enemies and foreign agents. When the verdict was read on the evening of March 12th the last defendant to hear his name called was Gorky's former secretary, Petr Petrovich Kryuchkov. Although a comparatively obscure individual in comparison to his considerably more famous 'conspirators', the accusations against him were no less lurid, with Kryuchkov allegedly having murdered both Gorky and his son, Maxim Peshkov, at the behest of Yagoda. In his final plea to Vyshinsky, the state prosecutor, Kryuchkov used his last public statement to affirm Gorky's unswerving

loyalty to Stalin and his 'ruthless' hatred of the *vozhd's* enemies, some of whom stood next to Kryuchkov as he read his statement.

I became the murderer of Gorky, who was so loved by the people and who returned the same great love to the people, its Party, its leader - the mighty Stalin, as Gorky often called Stalin. Yagoda knew about this great love of Gorky's; he also knew how ruthlessly Gorky hated all enemies, and particularly as Gorky expressed it, the self-satisfied animal Trotsky and all of his ilk – the Bukharinites, Zinovievites, Kamenevites and Rykovites.⁴⁸⁴

This wasn't the first occasion during the trial in which a defendant had used his platform to stress Gorky's near fanatical devotion to Stalin; Bukharin claimed to have been informed of an imminent attempt on the writer's life in 1935, describing it as "an action against the 'Stalinite Gorky' as a defender of Socialist construction in general, and of Stalin's Party policy in particular"⁴⁸⁵, while Yagoda explained the necessity of Gorky's elimination before an attempt on Stalin's life could be made, stating, "Gorky was a staunch supporter of Stalin's leadership, and in case the conspiracy was carried into effect, he would undoubtedly raise his voice in protest against us."⁴⁸⁶

Although the majority of the defendants would at some point during the trial express their loyalty to Stalin and the correctness of his course, the almost comical exaggerations of Gorky's devotion to the leader stand out, implying that in a country teeming with implacable enemies of the Soviet Union and Stalin in particular only Gorky stood in the way of a violent, capitalist coup. Furthermore, in painting Gorky as a determined opponent of Bukharin, Rykov and Kamenev, the court presumably expected those reporting on the trial (and those

⁴⁸⁴ Bukharin, N., Rykov, A., Yagoda, G., et al. (1938). *Report of the Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet "Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites"*. The People's Commissariat of Justice of the U.S.S.R. : Moscow p.787

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid. p.581

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid. p574

reading about it) to overlook the author's close ties with each of these enemies of the people, having petitioned Stalin on their behalf in the past and maintained long-standing friendships with Bukharin, Rykov and Yagoda.

Other curiosities arise from the trial transcripts. Yagoda willingly confessed to each of the crimes he was accused of, no matter how ludicrous, yet when asked to confirm his responsibility for Maxim's death he snapped, refusing three times to answer the question publicly⁴⁸⁷. Vyshinsky would later state that Yagoda confessed during an in-camera session that he arranged the murder for personal reasons, presumably because of his rumoured infatuation with Maxim's wife, Timosha. Kryuchkov described the plot in detail, claiming that Yagoda insisted that it was necessary to facilitate the murder because of the debilitating effect it would have on Gorky, "to lessen Gorky's activity, because it is in the way of the 'big chiefs' - Rykov, Bukharin, Kamenev, Zinoviev"⁴⁸⁸. The circumstances of Maxim's death are confirmed by both Kryuchkov and Yagoda: knowing Maxim's weakness for alcohol, Kryuchkov took him for a drinking session by the river and left him asleep outside. When Maxim caught ill Kryuchkov plotted with the doctors to administer the wrong treatment, leading to Maxim's death. Medical sabotage aside, there is just enough plausibility in this account for it to ring true. While living in Sorrento Gorky wrote to Maxim's mother expressing concerns about their son's drinking habits⁴⁸⁹, and Yagoda's emotional outburst at the trial would appear to hint at a level of personal investment in Maxim's fate. Kryuchkov also described his motive for killing Maxim as being financial, as with Gorky's son out of the way he stood to inherit the author's archive and estate, which is indeed what happened.

⁴⁸⁷ Ibid. p.573

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid. p.585

⁴⁸⁹ Barratt, A., and Scherr, B.P. (1997). *Maksim Gorky: Selected Letters*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, p.336

Kornei Chukovsky recorded a meeting with Gorky's wife, Ekaterina Peshkova, in 1962, when she told him that she had been excluded from the author's will:

“When Alexei Mikhailovich lay dying, she (Budberg) gave me a piece of paper in the hand of Kryuchkov but signed by Gorky. ‘Alexei Mikhailovich asked me to have you give this to Stalin or, if that is impossible, to Molotov,’ she said. I didn't even glance at it then; I just slipped it into my dressing gown pocket. But when I did read it what did I find but his last will and testament! And not a word about me. Everything went to Kryuchkov!”⁴⁹⁰

A variation of Kryuchkov's account was reported in 2006. Zosya Petrovna, Kryuchkov's daughter, claimed that she was told by her mother that Pavel Yudin was responsible for Maxim's death, having shared a bottle of brandy with him on the banks of the Moscow River before both men fell asleep. As Petrovna tells it, Yudin awoke first and returned alone to the rest of their group in the dacha, leaving Maxim passed out on the soil. Arriving at the party later, Kryuchkov set off in search for Gorky's son, managed to wake him and dragged him back inside. The next day Maxim was diagnosed with pneumonia, and died shortly afterwards⁴⁹¹. Yudin, as discussed previously, was directly in conflict with Gorky at the time of Maxim's death, and it is possible that the increasing enmity between the two as the Writer's Congress approached was related to Maxim's death.

Another intriguing aspect of the trial is the timeline that Vyshinsky attempts to establish for the commencement of anti-party activity among the defendants. Bukharin, Rykov and Yagoda all agree that they began acting in coalition in 1928, with Yagoda supplying GPU 'data' to the Right Opposition. Although their activities allegedly intensified in 1931,

⁴⁹⁰ Chukovsky (2005), p.464

⁴⁹¹ Yamskoi, N. (2006). *Ubit' Burevestnika: Pri Neviiyasneniikh Obstoyatel'stvakh*. In *Ogonek*, No. 24. 18th June 2006, p.22. Available at <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2297208>. (Accessed 19th October 2018)

Bukharin confessed that in the autumn of 1932 they decided on a course of public terror and political assassinations⁴⁹². This is significant, as the Ryutin Affair was exposed in September of that year, commonly referred to by Stalin as the beginning of the ‘new situation’ within the Soviet Union. In demanding Yagoda’s removal as head of the NKVD in 1936, Stalin wrote that he, “clearly turned out to be not up to the task of unmasking the Trotskyite-Zinovievite bloc. The OGPU was four years late in this process.”⁴⁹³ Thus the attempt to link Bukharin, Rykov and Yagoda to the last known plot to remove Stalin from power, a time when Stalin believed he was surrounded by organised intriguers intent on his downfall.

The grandiose public pronouncements of Gorky’s devotion to Stalin become somewhat suspicious when placed in context with the 1937 campaign against the so-called ‘Averbakh Group’, which was primarily composed of writers formally aligned with RAPP, such as Leopold Averbakh, Vladimir Kirshon and Alexander Afinogenov. Accused of plotting with the Right-Trotskyite Bloc, they were condemned by their fellow members of the Writers’ Union for poisoning Gorky against the party, taking advantage of a vulnerable, trusting old man to promote their own anti-Soviet agenda. In a statement written to Stalin and Kaganovich, Yudin played to his audience and claimed that Averbakh and Kirshon had privately discussed how Kaganovich compared negatively to Gorky, and how Gorky’s erratic behaviour prior to the Writers’ Congress was the result of the negative personalities surrounding him:

The anti-Party activities have also come to light of Averbakh, Kirshon, and others who stood close to Kryuchkov in his attempts to do everything possible to bring Gorky into conflict with

⁴⁹² Bukharin, Yagoda, Rykov et al. (1938), p.571

⁴⁹³ Kotkin, S. (2017). p.344

the Union's Party group; in particular, their powerful efforts to poison Gorky against Communist writers were unleashed before the Writers' Congress.⁴⁹⁴

In a personal memorandum to Stalin, literary administrator Vladimir Stavsky expanded upon this theme:

The group reached an agreement and unleashed wrecking work to bring A.M. Gorky into conflict with the Communists. Relying on the support of Yagoda, who became their own man in A.M. Gorky's home, and having surrounded A.M. Gorky with "their own men", also with the help of P. Kryuchkov, the Averbakh group managed to get some unaffiliated workers to break away from the Communists and to make Gorky, who was receiving one-sided information daily, very unfavourably inclined towards the Party group and the Communist writers. This found its expression in A.M. Gorky's articles entitled "Literary Amusements", whose point was aimed mainly at the Communist writers.⁴⁹⁵

Stavsky goes on to claim that the conspirators' headquarters was based in the editorial office of the White Sea-Baltic Canal (Belomor) book, a pet project of Gorky's that glorified the role of Yagoda's Chekists in reforging prisoners into Soviet citizens. The book had been banned following Yagoda's arrest.

Yudin and Stavsky's pronouncements appear to contradict the image of Gorky as a staunch defender of Stalin's line presented at the 1938 show trial. They acknowledge Gorky's increasing disillusionment with the composition of the Writers' Union and his attacks in the press on Party-endorsed authors, attributing this to the 'wrecking' influence of the Averbakh Group, and by extension, Yagoda and Kryuchkov.

⁴⁹⁴ Clark and Dobrenko (2007). pp.311-312

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid, p.314

Two months prior to the show trial Yagoda and Kryuchkov were brought in for a joint interrogation⁴⁹⁶. The interview is short, most likely an exercise to ensure that both men's testimonies are aligned, but it contains an interesting anomaly. Kryuchkov states that he first met Gorky in 1928, which his interrogators would have known to be demonstrably false; the men became acquainted at least as early as 1922 (and possibly 1918), when Kryuchkov was acting as Gorky's wife's secretary. Most likely this date was fed to Kryuchkov during his initial interrogations as a means to tie him to Yagoda's relationship with Gorky, which began that year upon the author's first journey to the Soviet Union since his departure seven years earlier. 1928 is also the year given by Yagoda at his trial regarding the origin of his conspiratorial activities, and in drawing Kryuchkov into this timeline the intention may have been to portray Gorky as having been under the sinister influence of the anti-Soviet plotters from the very beginning.

Curiously, Yagoda prompts the investigators to ask Kryuchkov for the whereabouts of Gorky's notes on his forthcoming biographies of Stalin and Voroshilov:

I ask you to ask Kryuchkov for an answer, where has he put some of Gorky's documents?

The fact is that Gorky repeatedly told me that he wrote a whole series of notes for compiling biographies of Stalin, Voroshilov and other party leaders, and promised to read them to me...

When Gorky died, these documents were not found in his archive. They are extremely valuable. In view of the fact that Kryuchkov knew about the impending death of Gorky, I have no doubt that he took these documents. Did he transfer them abroad?⁴⁹⁷

⁴⁹⁶ Ts. A FSB, d. H-13614, t.43, p. 25-29. Available online at <http://istmat.info/node/34355>, (Accessed 17th July 2018)

⁴⁹⁷ Ibid.

The investigators reply that they have already spoken with Kryuchkov on this matter, and promptly conclude the interview. Yagoda's outburst is intriguing; Gorky had indeed planned to write a biography for Stalin in 1932, though it ultimately fell through. Given his ostracisation from Stalin's close circle in the last years of his life it seems unlikely that Gorky would have resumed the project. The question of missing files from the author's archive first arose in connection with an alleged briefcase of letters brought to Gorky on his deathbed by Moura Budberg. The NKVD, under the direction of Yagoda, had shown a particular fascination with the archive almost immediately after Gorky's death, having been tipped off by an informant ("Sayanov") that its contents contained letters of 'enormous political value':

These are not only letters unmasking enemies of the people which, evidently, the NKVD has already removed, but correspondence with those who have yet to be exposed.⁴⁹⁸

The interrogations and trial of Kryuchkov and Yagoda were purposely designed to reveal the existence of a series of sinister factions and alliances dating from the late 1920s, which plotted to forcibly remove Stalin from power. We know that Stalin often directed the investigations and trials personally - from the language used in Yagoda's trial speech it is probable that Stalin wrote it himself - and he had remained preoccupied with the Ryutin Affair since 1932 and the OGPU's perceived backwardness in rooting out enemies. With this in mind it is possible to follow the logic of the accused's guilt: from Yagoda's complacency in dealing with terrorist groups to his acquaintance network of Rykov and Bukharin, former oppositionists. In the case of the Averbakh Group, the former RAPPists were accused of heinous state crimes when in all likelihood their guilt didn't extend beyond their association

⁴⁹⁸ Shentalinsky, V. (1995) p.276

with Yagoda and their proximity to Gorky. Addressing the Central Committee Plenum in March 1937, Stalin offered an insight into his views on allegiance networks:

People are sometimes selected based not on a political or business principle but on personal acquaintance, personal allegiance, friendships... What does it mean to drag a whole group of cronies with you?... It means you have acquired a certain independence from local organisations, and, if you will, a certain independence from the Central Committee⁴⁹⁹ .

For Stalin, the mere existence of a friendship group could be taken as independence from, and therefore opposition to, the Central Committee. For Gorky, who had aligned himself with the former RAPP leadership as early as 1932 and persistently promoted former oppositionists to positions of prominence, this had led to his exclusion from the *vozhd's* inner circle. For the RAPPists, this would prove deadly.

The trial of the Averbakh Group and the show trial of 1938 are relevant for two reasons. Firstly, they appear to support the popular theory that Stalin had to wait until Gorky's death before he could move against the former oppositionists, though not in the sense generally forwarded by historians that Gorky's authority was such that he would have fought against any attempt by Stalin to place Bukharin, Rykov, Yagoda and others on trial. As discussed earlier, Gorky was a broken man following Maxim's death in 1934 and saw out the last two years of his life essentially under house arrest. He was in no position to challenge Stalin's rule, and nothing about his private or public pronouncements since returning to the Soviet Union in 1928 would indicate that he would have in any way opposed the arrests and show trials.

⁴⁹⁹ Kotkin (2017) p.390

The trial of the Anti-Soviet Bloc would have been impossible to stage during Gorky's lifetime precisely because of its dependence on friendship and patronage groups. Gorky's closeness to Bukharin, Kamenev, Rykov, and to a lesser extent, Yagoda, would be enough to implicate him in their crimes, especially when we consider that Gorky lived in fascist Italy for a number of years and maintained contact with foreign and émigré authors. While it was comparatively simple to denounce the trial defendants (each had been publicly portrayed as an oppositionist on many occasions), Gorky had been presented as the father of Soviet literature from his first return in 1928, and was second only to Stalin as a recipient of laudatory propaganda. The myth of Gorky was such that his image was enshrined within the concept of Stalinism itself; his name attached to so many prominent cultural institutions that any defamation of Gorky would be a defamation of Soviet culture. Having presented Gorky as a 'staunch Stalinite', it was simpler to double down on this claim and accuse his acquaintances of poisoning the author, both literally and figuratively, rather than assert that Gorky had been enemy in hiding all along.

The second and most important reason that the trials remain relevant is the attempted exposure of networks and factions within the party, in particular relating to the aforementioned *Letter of an Old Bolshevik*. The letter, published one year prior to the Anti-Party Bloc trial, alleged the existence of a moderate faction headed by Gorky, Bukharin and Kirov, which sought to influence Stalin's course during the early 1930s until Kirov's assassination in 1934. Four years later, those closest to Bukharin and Gorky in the first half of the decade found themselves swept up in the Great Purge, accused of anti-party acts dating back to the 1920s which assumed a terroristic character in 1932. Specifically, were the author's friendship and patronage networks, comprised of individuals who had publicly fallen from favour such as Bukharin, Rykov, Yagoda and Averbakh, viewed by Stalin as anti-party?

On the surface, the accusation against Yagoda that he was a Right-Trotskyite terrorist intent on Stalin's murder is as absurd as most of the other charges brought against his co-defendants. A Chekist since 1919, he rapidly rose through the ranks of the OGPU, essentially in charge of the secret police during Menzhisky's protracted struggle with illness. Yagoda personally oversaw the construction projects of both the Belomor and the Moscow-Volga canals, and ruthlessly implemented Stalin's collectivisation policy during the First Five-Year plan. From the outset however, Yagoda was never Stalin's 'man' in the GPU. In 1929, with operatives within the OGPU waging an internal battle for influence, Yagoda had to withstand a denunciation from fellow deputy chairman Meyer Trilisser who chastised him for "retreating from the general line of the party with the right deviation". Yagoda survived and Trilisser was dismissed, replaced by Yefim Yevdokimov, Stalin's hand-picked candidate⁵⁰⁰. Yevdokimov would go on to publicly denounce Yagoda as an associate of Rykov and Bukharin in 1937.

The accusation of Rightist sympathy levelled at Yagoda stemmed from Bukharin's clumsy attempt to entice Kamenev to side with the oppositionists in 1928. Meeting in Kamenev's apartment, Bukharin claimed that the Right had the support of Kirov, Ordzhonikidze and perhaps most importantly, the OGPU, Yagoda in particular⁵⁰¹. As Lenoë notes, Bukharin was prone to political exaggeration, but the accusation was enough for Yagoda to have to explain this link to the party Control Commission, where he admitted regularly meeting with Rykov for a number of years. Bukharin's widow Anna Larina would also claim that Yagoda at the very least sympathised with the Right Opposition initially, accusing him of putting his career before his political convictions.⁵⁰²

⁵⁰⁰ Kotkin (2017) pp.22-23

⁵⁰¹ Lenoë (2010). p.81

⁵⁰² Larina, A. (1994). *This I Cannot Forget*. Pandora, London. p.100

Ivanov places Yagoda in the centre of the action, speculating that his closeness to Rykov and Bukharin and his ties to RAPP (Averbakh was his brother-in-law) put him in indirect opposition to Stalin. Ivanov recalls a conversation with the writer Alexander Fadeev in 1956, only weeks before the latter committed suicide. An upset and inebriated Fadeev spent the day at Ivanov's dacha in Peredelkino, and in an attempt to unburden himself spoke openly about his 'betrayal' of Yagoda. Following the 1932 resolution announcing the disbandment of RAPP, Fadeev had hurriedly written an article renouncing the organisation and apologising for his former views and actions. A furious Yagoda summoned the author to his office and berated him for betraying his comrades in RAPP, and while Fadeev defended himself by pointing to the infallibility of any government decision, he left with a gnawing dread that he had just made a powerful enemy. In the spirit of self-preservation Fadeev wrote a letter recounting his run-in with Yagoda and personally delivered it to the Central Committee⁵⁰³. Following Yagoda's arrest in 1937 he was asked to reread the letter to the Central Committee, although it wasn't mentioned at the trial. In 1939, Fadeev (who was appointed head of the Writers' Union following Gorky's death), was rewarded with a place of honour at the presidium for Stalin's birthday, where he was approached by Molotov and Kaganovich. Fadeev claimed that they told him that he was very highly valued by Stalin, and in reference to the episode with Yagoda in 1932 they let him know that Stalin was forever grateful to Fadeev for taking his side. "when it was not known how the struggle would end"⁵⁰⁴.

If Fadeev's account can be trusted it would again appear to point to the existence of a group or faction, with Yagoda involved, which was in some way opposed to Stalin's policies in 1932. Yagoda himself would implicitly reference factional disputes during his own interrogation. Asked why he had bugged Stalin's phone and listened to his conversations, he

⁵⁰³ Ivanov, I. (1993)

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid.

replies, “I repeat: I knew Voroshilov hated me... Molotov and Kaganovich held me in the same hostile regard⁵⁰⁵”. It is worth noting that these are the same names identified in the *Letter of an Old Bolshevik* as having opposed the ‘moderate’ faction. Kaganovich, as we have seen, was extremely distrustful of Gorky and his inner circle.

For these reasons, the Letter endures to this day. While we can say with relative certainty that Kirov at no point was pursuing his own direction within the Party, or that Gorky was anything other than an ardent supporter of Stalin’s line, the thematic similarities with Nikolaevsky’s account that arose from the Anti-Soviet Bloc trial helped blur the lines between state propaganda and Bukharin and Nikolaevsky’s somewhat skewed perspective of the pre-terror political situation.

Nikolaevsky’s conclusion that Gorky’s death untied the hands of Stalin’s entourage in promoting the execution of Kamenev and Zinoviev is misguided on two fronts; Firstly, by 1936, Gorky - isolated, depressed and receiving private runs of *Pravda* - was in no position to oppose Stalin’s actions, and regardless there is no suggestion that he in any way fought against Kamenev’s initial arrest. Secondly, it would be Stalin himself who decided on the life and fate of his opponents; there was no blood-thirsty entourage that Gorky was somehow impeding.

Conclusion

The assassination of Kirov at the end of 1934 ignited an immediate, repressive operation to uncover those responsible for the murder, and those who fostered an environment where such opposition might be possible. Gorky’s position had already been shaken by the summer of that year but following the arrest of Zinoviev and Kamenev his proximity to Soviet power

⁵⁰⁵ Kotkin (2017). p.393

was severely restricted. All evidence suggests that Gorky likely believed the allegations against Kamenev (as well as Yenukidze following the Kremlin Affair) but he didn't speak out publicly on either case. Attacks on the author began appearing in the Soviet press, and when he was denied the right to reply it was apparent that his proximity in years past to former oppositionists had now cast suspicion on Gorky.

Regardless, Gorky persevered with his *History* projects, a task that became increasingly frustrating as his influence declined. Attempts to cajole and pester contributors into submitting their work fell largely on deaf ears, and without the support of Stalin and the Central Committee the volumes largely floundered. After his death in 1936 they were quietly dropped altogether.

In the last years of his life Gorky found himself increasingly isolated from his friends and colleagues, with access to the author severely restricted by his personal secretary Kryuchkov, who may have been acting under orders from Yagoda and the NKVD. The portrait painted of Gorky by Romain Rolland, a 'sad, old bear' living in isolation and afraid to express his true feelings, is in sharp contrast to the image of Gorky as the 'stormy petrel of the revolution'.

The centrality of Gorky to the show trials of Yagoda, Bukharin, Rykov and Kryuchkov indicate the regime's desire to take control of the author's narrative following his death. Gorky had been established publicly as the symbol of Soviet literature and was second only to Stalin in the public prominence of his cult. Any attempt to disparage the author would only serve to weaken the regime and its cultural authority, so bound up was Gorky's image in Stalinist mythology. Thus, instead of a potential conspirator who created a patronage network of enemies of the people, Gorky was instead presented as a naïve, honourable old man led astray by the likes of Bukharin and Yagoda in an attempt to turn the arch-Stalinite author against Stalin himself. When this failed, they were forced to resort to murder. In framing

Gorky as a victim of the avowed enemies of socialism, the state affirmed the myth of the author as a martyr for the cause of Stalinism.

Conclusion

The Soviet Union that Gorky returned to had a problem of legitimacy; the Party leadership was embroiled in relentless factional struggle and in 1928 lacked a unifying cultural authority to help mould and drive the new state's identity. Gorky's significant renown at home and abroad and his support for the broader goals of socialism lent a powerful voice to the regime, one that could immediately bestow legitimacy upon the actions and goals of the Party. As Stalin emerged victorious from his battles with the Right, the task therefore became to legitimise his authority also, and establish a direct through line from Marxism-Leninism to Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism. Gorky would prove to be a willing, active participant in the construction of Stalinist culture.

That both Stalin and Gorky's cultural goals aligned was significant and allowed the author a certain degree of autonomy as he crafted a vision of Soviet culture based on documentary description, didactic, realist language and the positive depiction of society not as it was, but as it would become. Projects such as *Our Achievements*, *History of Construction* and the *History of...* series projected a positive image of socialist progression with a Marxist-Leninist framework, and despite their varying degrees of success they would provide a textbook model for the eventual formulation of socialist realism.

As the two men were aligned in policy, the more prominently Gorky was portrayed could only serve to bolster Stalin's legitimacy in the eyes of the public, the *vozhd* promoting and bolstering the author's credentials to increase his cultural authority. In the renaming of cities and streets, theatres and galleries, Stalin created a cult of Gorky, inextricable from social and political life. This transcendence of Gorky's personage above not just the average Soviet author but almost the entirety of the Bolshevik leadership was intended to bestow canonical authority upon his writings and cultural activity.

That Gorky created a patronage group composed of former-oppositionists was largely tolerated by the regime, as the end of the cultural revolution fostered an atmosphere of reconciliation with the cultural intelligentsia. After the dissolution of RAPP however Gorky fell into disrepute with Stalin's literary functionaries; the *vozhd*, now firmly established and legitimised as the leader of the Soviet Union, no longer required Gorky's cultural authority. The author's ties to Bukharin, Kamenev and other perceived enemies led to his gradual fall from favour, and he would live out the last years of his life essentially under house arrest. Even still, Gorky would continue on his personal mission to construct a new, Soviet structure, as demonstrated by his continued involvement in the *History of...* series and his central role in the creation and celebration of the Pavlik Morozov myth.

Yet after Gorky's death the regime found the need once again to assert Gorky's legacy, as his long-time acquaintances and colleagues stood trial for his murder. As Bukharin, Rykov, Averbakh and Kryuchkov admitted the most fantastical, lurid details pertaining to the death of the author the regime in turn sought to portray the author as a loyal Stalinist, led astray by enemies of the people. In the promotion of the Gorky myth during the author's lifetime Stalin had inextricably linked Gorky's image to that of his own.

Gorky had ambitions of his own, of course, and was instrumental in driving the concept of mass culture as he strove to create a utilitarian form of literary expression to reach, and most importantly educate, as broad an audience as possible. Gorky had discussed this concept publicly in the years prior to his return to the Soviet Union, and upon his arrival every tool of the state was put at his disposal to achieve the construction of a new Soviet literature.

The adoption of socialist realism in 1932, which was to remain the only legitimate cultural method until after the death of Stalin, was very much shaped in Gorky's image, even if the author himself was by this stage distanced from the decision-making process itself. Stalin

fully understood the importance of culture in state-building and immersed himself in all questions of cultural significance. From the writers' meetings in Gorky's dacha in the summer of 1932 we can see Stalin imposing his personality and authority on literary affairs in an increasingly personalised manner, through his presence alone usurping Gorky's status as the ultimate arbitrator in literary affairs.

The uncovering of the Ryutin Affair in September 1932 had two immediate effects; the strengthening of support for Stalin within the Party as a backlash to the conspiracy, and the clear confirmation that opposition to Stalin's policies still existed within the Party ranks. One of the primary components behind the Great Terror was the assumption that any opposition to Stalin in years prior would logically lead to renewed opposition in the present or near future. The regime would frequently cite the 'new situation' that emerged in 1932⁵⁰⁶ as a crossroads for the Bolsheviks, an understanding that active opposition still existed and that they needed to solidify their grasp on power. From this moment on, Gorky's close tie to former oppositionists, his support for former members of RAPP, his outspokenness against Stalin's literary functionaries, all cast suspicion upon the author. As Stalin's power was consolidated through 1933 and 1934, Gorky's authority began to wane. By 1935 he had lost his relevance as a culture-shaper and became increasingly isolated from the Soviet leadership and his literary contemporaries, but his enduring myth as the father of Soviet literature was now bound up in Stalin and the state's legitimacy. From 1927 onwards no one individual other than Stalin had been so central to the regime's propaganda, to the extent that Gorky's cultural authority became the state's cultural authority and had to be justified and protected at all

⁵⁰⁶ Getty, J.A., and Naumov, O.V. (2010). *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939 Updated and Abridged Version*. New Haven, Yale University Press. p.43

costs. The show trials that followed the author's death thus in part became an exercise in redefining and reasserting Gorky's relationship to Stalin, the final word in the construction of the Gorky myth that would sustain until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

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