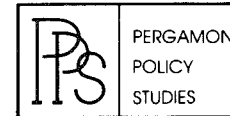


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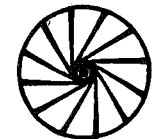
ON THE SOVIET UNION
AND EASTERN EUROPE

Ethnic Russia in the USSR

The Dilemma of Dominance

Edited by
Edward Allworth

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the dying Russian village and of "the type of person created by it...our mothers and fathers, grandfathers and grandmothers" whose "moral forces...did not allow Russia to perish in the years of its hardest trials":

Yes, they are semiliterate and much too credulous, at times politically ignorant, but what treasures of the soul, what spiritual light! Endless self-sacrifice, the sharpened Russian conscience, love of work, of the land, of all that lives - there is no way to count it all...In short, it is impossible to plough the Russian field anew without ploughing up human souls, without mobilizing all the spiritual resources of the people [narod], of the nation [natsiia].(1)

The evident Russian ethnocentricity of Abramov's pronouncements is a common, implicit and sometimes explicit feature of many rural prose works. The ruralists turn to the past, trying to capture the values of a way of life now rapidly becoming extinct. Their explorations into the past appear to be a search for self-identity outside the conventional values actively advocated in Soviet society. The efforts of these writers are inextricably tied to an awareness of, and a desire to define, their own Russian ethnic roots.

The ruralist prose writers' search for Russian roots has unleashed a storm of debate in the Soviet press, and this debate has become even more crucial since the Soviet government's announcement in 1974 of an extensive project to transform Russia's non-black earth region (nechernozem'e), the setting for the majority of rural prose works. The ruralists are now being enjoined with increasing frequency to turn their attention from the past to the future, to abandon their self-imposed historical, documentary function. They are being encouraged to embrace the official vision of the future countryside, consolidated into agricultural centers on a par with urban areas in material goods and services, educational and job opportunities, and cultural offerings.

Because of the project in the non-black earth region, the ruralists stand at a crucial point in the development of their vision of Russian self-image. On the one hand, most of these writers are themselves from peasant backgrounds and grew to maturity in villages of the non-black earth region impoverished by war, collectivization, and inefficient management. Their literary works contain eloquent pleas for economic rehabilitation of the Russian village and material improvement of life in the countryside. From this point of view, the ruralists can feel only sympathy for the economic goals of the project of the non-black earth region. On the other hand, the project threatens to destroy those vestiges of the past left in the

9 The Search for Russian Identity in Contemporary Soviet Russian Literature

Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy

Joseph V. Stalin's death in 1953 set in motion the process of liberating Soviet literature from the strictures of "socialist realism." During that period, the more liberal forces in Soviet literature raised profound questions about the quality of life in Soviet society. Many writers, especially during the early 1960s, were content merely to pose the problem, portraying rootless and alienated individuals unable to find happiness and fulfillment in a society shaped by communist ideology. Another group of writers, however, has attempted to fill the spiritual vacuum which has become increasingly evident in Soviet society during the past 25 years by positing an alternative source of values. These writers, the ruralists or rural prose writers [derevenshchiki], began to emerge shortly after Stalin's death and have come to be a dominant force in Soviet Russian literature during this decade. They have turned from the urban, industrial environment - favored under socialist realism and by many of the writers of the late 1950s and early 1960s - to the countryside in search of enduring values rooted in the Russian historical and cultural experience.

Although the ruralists are hardly a homogeneous group, they are united by their common concern with life in the Russian countryside and by their persistent efforts to assert the need for historical continuity despite the upheavals of revolution, collectivization, and war which have shaken the Russian countryside during the 60 years of Soviet rule. Their organic vision of history - especially the history of the Russian people - demands that the life of the future be built on the best that may be salvaged of the rapidly disappearing Russian past. During the Sixth Congress of Soviet Writers in June 1976, Fedor Abramov, one of the leading exponents of rural prose, eloquently defended its basic tenets. Condemning the indiscriminate belief in progress, Abramov pleaded the cause of

central Russian countryside and, along with them, the remnants of the historical bases of Russian ethnic self-identification. The project represents the great leveling force of Soviet modernization, the goal of which is the destruction of the traditional division between city and country. The situation appears even more poignant in the light of Russia's peculiar stance as the leading union republic in a multiethnic state, the existence of which is based on communist "internationalism." As the forces of modernization and "internationalism" increasingly pressure the rural prose writers to abandon their idealization of the Russian past and of the Russian peasant, these writers and their sympathizers will be forced either to turn from their quest for ethnic self-identification or to retrench into a more militantly chauvinistic stance. The hypothesis that this paper will address is that this aspect of the trend toward growing Russian ethnocentricity represents a threat to the authorities' ability to control the Soviet ethnic question in the future.(2)

In their self-imposed role as chroniclers of the dying Russian village and guardians of the Russian cultural heritage, the ruralists have shown a marked preference for nonfictional narrative forms, and, in general, there is a thin line dividing fiction from nonfiction in rural prose. There is a strong documentary, often journalistic, element in their writings, and it is no accident that one of their favorite genres is the semi-journalistic sketch [ocherk] and that many of their works are clearly autobiographical. These efforts to authenticate the realism of their works reflect the concern of the ruralists with preserving the texture of life in the disappearing Russian countryside in its minutest detail. Even in patently fictional works, these writers often painstakingly reproduce the customs, traditions, and the language of the village, all of which are recognized as essential components in the formation of Russian character. This attention to detail - and especially to details deriving from the ethnic cultural heritage - sharply distinguishes rural prose works from traditional "socialist realism." The "positive hero" of "socialist realism" was drawn in broad, generalizing strokes. Raised to superhuman proportions by his devotion to the communist ideal, he was as devoid of particularized characteristics as a propaganda poster and was thus robbed of all traces of ethnic origin. In reducing their characters to life-size, the ruralists have also given them back their ethnic identity.

There is another side to the works of the ruralists which coexists with and complements the documentary realism of their works. A Russian critic wrote about the ruralists in the mid-1960s: "One of the new tendencies is the striving of writers to capture traits of national character in images."(3) Aside from their concern with recording anthropological data, the ruralists also work in images. Their vision of Russian

character is created largely of the stuff of literature, drawing heavily on myth and potent archetypal symbolism. In fact, it may be argued that with the disappearance of the tangible manifestations of the Russian cultural heritage, myth takes on an ever greater role in the definition of Russian character.

Of all the symbols which the ruralists use to create their highly mythical vision of what it means to be Russian, the central one is unquestionably the land: the land in its archetypal role as the source of life, the land as a manifestation of natural beauty, and, above all, the land as the "little motherland" ("malaia rodina").

The "little motherland," in concrete terms, is the writer's native village and the natural landscape which surrounds it. Since by far the majority of the ruralists come from the north central non-black earth region of Russia, their "little motherlands" are the small villages in the historical core of Russia. In a more abstract sense, the "little motherland" is the symbolic focus for the Russian ethnocentricity of the ruralists; it is their tie to the past and to the eternal continuity of life, and, ultimately, it is a synecdochic image for all Russia. One Russian critic, trying to define the concept of the "little motherland," recently suggested that it provides these writers with a necessary grasp on life, that in writing about the "little motherland" they are reaffirming "their ties with the fundamental life of the people":

Is it as if they want to make sure that they have not been torn away from the continent, that they have not lost their way, that they have not gotten lost in the boundless sea of life?

Or is it perhaps better to equate this feeling of the fundamental principle to the feeling of a supporting center, of a magnetic pole, the attraction of which is life-saving? Isn't this what the lines of Nikolay Rubtsov are about: 'And around the unconquerable love for the villages, the pines, the berries of Rus' my life invisibly rotates like the earth around its axis.'(4)

The critic then continues: "Today the feeling for the little motherland, for its locality, for its ties with the life of the people is especially sharp, because the lively sensation of Home, of Motherland helps every day to oppose the cosmopolitan pressure of fashion, the magnetism of the consumer ideal."(5)

The native villages of these writers, to which they continually return to explore and record, and, above all, to reaffirm their generic and ethnic roots, are their own personal havens of safety from the leveling forces of "cosmopolitan unification" and "standardization of personality." The ruralists'

fear of standardization is the link between their hostility to modernization and to "internationalism"; both threaten to destroy the differences among people which have traditionally served as bases for self definition. In this context, the "little motherland," with its ties to the family and remembrances of childhood and its associations with the continuity of the Russian cultural heritage, becomes a powerful image in the understanding of personal identity.

In some rural prose works the return to the "little motherland" takes on the emotional coloring of what may almost be termed a religious pilgrimage. In one such story, the main character returns to his native village after 40 years of wandering throughout the Soviet Union. By chance, he comes across a distant relative, and he manages to visit the house where he grew up, where his senses call up the texture of the country life of the not so far distant past. At the end of the story, he goes to the local cemetery to look for the grave of his grandfather. He does not find it, and this leads him to meditations on Russia:

Why only after forty years did I remember my motherland? Where was I earlier? I even lost track of the graves of my ancestors!...And for the first time in this bitter hour I took the time to think about the motherland, about Russia: and do I understand Russia as I should understand her, and do I understand her in general?...In deep thought I came out on the bank of the Obnora. Quietly and unbrokenly she carried her waters into the blue distance....And thoughtfully I imagined how long she will run along the ravine among fields and meadows until merging with the River Kostroma and together with her rushing farther...entering as a large river into the mighty Volga, in order to add to her strength, in order that she should not grow weak, the great river of Russia.(6)

The efforts of the ruralists to delineate the Russian self-image have precipitated a lively debate among Soviet critics. This debate centers around the problem of the role of ethnicity in the multiethnic literature of the Soviet Union. The old Stalinist formula "socialist in content and national in form" has been largely discredited, but the assumption remains in Soviet criticism that any work of Soviet literature must be partly socialist and partly ethnic, or, as one Soviet commentator put it: "It's bad if national narrow-mindedness is in the nature of a writer, but it's just as bad if he has no national aspect."(7) The critic's task is further complicated by the need to make judgments about life as well as literature. The ruralists' search for spiritual values in the Russian ethnic

heritage raises the question of the interaction of what is socialist and what is ethnic in the formation of character. Thus, one critic, in speaking of the ethnicity [*narodnost'*] of contemporary, Soviet multiethnic literature, pointed out the need "to show the effect of socialist principles on national character, which is in constant movement and growth, not losing, however, during all of these changes, its national [ethnic] definition and originality."(8) In dealing with the ruralists' preoccupation with the past, critics have once again stressed the need to find a "golden mean":

Criticism must see two extremes, two dangers: the danger of negativism in relation to the past of the fatherland, and, on the other hand, the danger of a supra-social, supra-class approach to the history of one's native country, which leads to the idealization of the past, to anti-historicism in one's approach to it.(9)

The ambiguity of programmatic statements such as these leaves the door open for relative freedom of discussion about the contrast between the role of ethnicity and communist "internationalism" in contemporary Soviet literature. This freedom, however, is confined primarily to Russian writers, while tighter controls are kept on discussions relating to the literature of other Soviet ethnic groups. This suggests strongly that sympathy for the ruralists Russian ethnocentricity thrives among Soviet officials.

The existence of Russian chauvinism within the central government of the Soviet Union may well have been a factor in the creation of the project to rehabilitate the non-black earth region. Certainly, there is an unmistakable Russian ethnic bias in the propaganda released to the public about the project. Statements in the press often revolve around emotional appeals to Russian chauvinism: "The non-black earth region is the authentic, deep Russia. Native, because historically the Urals, Siberia and many other areas were 'added' later, but the root, the beginning of the Russia in which we now live is here, in her so-called central zone."(10)

But the project has as its ultimate goal the destruction of what many regard as the traditional bases of Russian ethnicity. The plan to abandon hundreds of small villages and resettle their inhabitants - over half the population of central Russia - in rural centers spells the end of the Russian countryside as it has existed for centuries and the final disappearance of the ruralists' treasured "little motherlands."

Strong protests and words of caution directed at the resettlement project have appeared in the Soviet press. In 1976, one article carried an emotional attack against the project. It was cast as a poignant account of the effect of the

project on one couple whose village has been marked for resettlement. Crushed by the need to abandon his home, yet unable to bear the psychological strain of life in the slowly dying village, the husband must decide whether he and his wife should move to the box-like apartment offered to them in the regional center:

It's easy to say: think, decide. But for him it meant giving up his native home, into which he had poured all his soul and hopes of prosperity; it meant abandoning accustomed comfort, leaving the village with the graveyard on the hill. He wasn't a boy - to begin life all over again, in an alien place where it would be necessary to get used to the people, to everything around him....And his brother will not come to visit all the time. What does he care for a new place? There will be no motherland.(11)

This man's dilemma vividly illustrates the threat to the ruralists' vision of life inherent in the resettlement project. It means not only depriving people of their homes, but, more important, destroying the continuity of life, severing the deep ties to the past which are, to these writers, an essential factor in man's understanding of himself and of his place in the world around him.

While such open questioning of the project continues to appear in the Soviet press, the ruralists are being called upon with greater and greater frequency to abandon their "patriarchal," "idealized" portrayals of the village, to turn from the past to the future, and to mobilize their forces in support of this ambitious plan to alter the face of the traditional Russian countryside: "In the great transformation of the non-black earth region, literature has a great role....The irresistible influence of ideas and images, expressed by the power of the writer's talent, sets it still more firmly in the first rank of the most powerful means of communist education."(12)

There has been a call for a "new literature" to deal with the problems of the non-black earth region: "The breadth and scale of problems standing before the non-black earth region are calling to life new, great, many-faceted literature. It is destined to become the accelerator of socioeconomic transformations in the non-black earth region."(13) Such statements have the ominous ring of a call for a new rural "socialist realism," for a literature praising the economic achievements of the countryside in a spirit of uncritical optimism about the prospects for future progress. A steady stream of publicistic, economically- and technically-oriented literature about the non-black earth region, in fact, appeared in the Soviet Union between 1974 and 1976.(14) However, so

far, the main body of ruralists' work appears to have been left untouched by this trend, and it is doubtful that these writers will ever be willing to give up the relative freedom in dealing with real life problems which Soviet literature has acquired in the years since Stalin's death for a return to the largely discredited doctrine of "socialist realism." Yet, at the same time, the discrepancy between these two visions of rural literature - one future-oriented and concerned primarily with economic questions, the other focused on the spiritual values of the past - represents the dilemma in which the ruralists find themselves today. They are caught between their love for the Russian past with its cultural heritage and their desire for material improvement of life in the Russian countryside. Thus far, an uneasy compromise appears to have been established between the two factions, with the militant supporters of the regional project manipulating the ruralists to gain their own ends. However, ultimately, as the project progresses in transforming the Russian countryside, the ruralists will have to make a choice between the official model for the modernization of the non-black earth region and the nostalgic vision of the countryside as it is now portrayed in their works. The decision that the ruralists come to in dealing with this dilemma will shape the course of Soviet Russian rural literature in the future, as well as determine the future relationship between these writers and the Soviet government. The insistence of these writers on their identification with the continuity of the Russian ethnic group could ultimately prove to be an embarrassment to the Soviet government in its dealings with the other ethnic groups in the Soviet Union.

The real political importance of the Russian ruralists, however, lies in their role as a "mouthpiece" for the ethnic awareness growing among larger segments of the Russian population of the Soviet Union. While it appears that in response to the disappearance of traditional bases for the definition of Russian ethnic identity many Russians are losing a sense of their identification with the Russian ethnic group, there seems to be a growing concern with the Russian ethnic heritage. This new movement toward growing Russian ethnocentricity has manifested itself in a variety of forms, from the faddish collecting of icons and folk implements or Komsomol projects to restore old churches to the declarations of the ultra-conservative group: "A Word of the Ethnic Group" (Slovo natsii). The ruralists represent a fairly moderate element in this spectrum of Russian ethnocentricity. As "peasant writers," they are connected both with the life of the countryside and with the urban intelligentsia, and their views may be assumed to reflect to a certain extent the ideas and values of both. The attitudes of the ruralists also appear to reflect those of the older generation, of people who have

lived through war and collectivization. One of the greatest concerns touched upon in their works is the degeneration of values among the younger generation that grew up after World War II, its preoccupation with the accoutrements of modern society, and its lack of loyalty to the continuity of life in the countryside. Certainly, the magnitude of the response, both positive and negative, to the works of this relatively small group of writers would suggest that they are dealing with problems that are of the utmost concern in literary and government circles in the Soviet Union today.

The resettlement project represents the inevitable victory of the modern world over the backwardness of the Russian countryside. However, for the ruralists the passing of the old order of things also means the end of values they have idealized as the source of Russian ethnic identity. For the time being, they have devoted themselves to saving what may still be salvaged of the dying past, a mission which Abramov forcefully reaffirmed in the speech mentioned earlier:

And one of the greatest tasks of contemporary literature is to warn young people of the danger of spiritual staleness, to help them become familiar with and enrich the spiritual baggage accumulated by preceding generations.... In the final analysis, the rise of the Russian non-black earth region must rest on it.(15)

The ruralists are evidently among the most vocal, if moderate, indicators of a problem which penetrates deep into Soviet Russian society today. This problem - the search for ethnic self-identity in an increasingly standardized society - may ultimately grow into a serious threat to Soviet internationalism, if the Russian ethnic group, deprived of the traditional bases for the definition of Russian ethnicity, falls back into militant Russian chauvinism and corresponding hostility to the other ethnic groups in the Soviet Union.

NOTES

- (1) [Fedor Abramov], "Vystuplenie uchastnikov s"ezda... Fedor Abramov (Leningrad)," Literaturnaia gazeta, No. 26 (June 30, 1976), p. 11.
- (2) The material upon which this inquiry is principally based was gleaned from surveys of relevant Soviet and Western publications. Nash sovremennik, Molodaia gvardiia, Novyi mir, and Literaturnaia gazeta were surveyed for varying lengths of time during the period 1974-1976, and Current Digest of the Soviet Press, Slavic Review, The

- Slavonic and East European Review, The Slavic and East European Journal, The Russian Review, and Survey during the period 1965-1976. Further, I am greatly indebted to the Russian writer Abramov for having discussed with me at some length his views about matters dealt with in this paper.
- (3) Pavel Glinkin, "Zemlia i asfal't," Molodaia gvardiia, No. 9 (1967), pp. 253-254.
 - (4) Igor Dedkov, "Vozvrashchenie k sebe," Nash sovremennik, No. 7 (1975), p. 176.
 - (5) Ibid.
 - (6) Sergei Voronin, "Istoriya odnoi poezdki," in his Derevenskie povesti i rasskazy (Leningrad: Isdatel'stvo "Sovetskii Pisatel'," 1974), p. 515.
 - (7) Akram Ailisli, "Vyrzhat' glubiny natsional'nogo," in "Zemlia. Liudi. Literatura," Druzhba narodov, No. 9 (1970), p. 262.
 - (8) Aleksandr Khvatov, "Cherty narodnosti," Nash sovremennik, No. 1 (1973), p. 182.
 - (9) Feliks Kuznetsov, "S vekom naravne," Novyi mir, No. 2 (1975), p. 235.
 - (10) Semen Shurtakov, "Moe nechernozem'e," Literaturnaia gazeta, No. 1 (Jan. 1, 1976), p. 3.
 - (11) Ivan Filonenko, "Berezy," Nash sovremennik, No. 5 (1976), p. 153.
 - (12) N. V. Sviridov, "Nechernozem'e: problemy i knigi," Molodaia gvardiia, No. 4 (1976), p. 18.
 - (13) Ibid., p. 12.
 - (14) Ibid., See pp. 10-30, for a detailed discussion of recent Soviet publications concerning the non-black earth region.
 - (15) Abramov, p. 11.