



Ivan Bunin. *Cursed Days, A Diary of the Revolution*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher, 1998. xiii + 286 pp. \$28.50 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56663-186-0.

Reviewed by Linda P. Rose (Graduate School of Education & Information Studies, University of California at Los Angeles)

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## Revolutionary Days: Still Cursed?

*Cursed Days*, Ivan Bunin's diary/notebook written during and about the Russian Revolution and the Civil War, became immensely popular in Russia after the Soviets lost power through a bloodless revolution. Since 1991, no less than fifteen separate editions of Bunin's diary/notebook have been published in Russia. There can be many explanations for the diary/notebook's popularity. Bunin's diary/notebook and other works, along with the books of other Russian emigre authors, were banned by the Soviets by the end of the 1920's. Although they could not be bought in stores, these authors could not be eliminated from the hearts and minds of some Russians. With the Soviets' downfall, many sought to know more about the events that had occurred between 1918-1920. Another, perhaps more pressing motive for the readers was to understand more about their own evolving revolution. While the Bolsheviks' dependence on bloodshed to re-shape Russia has not been copied by their successors since the 1991 Revolution, ethnic strife, economic woes, and social upheaval have accompanied the revolution. The battles in Chechnya continue. Economic problems are common, and many public servants and the military personnel get sub-existence wages. Radioactive contamination and nuclear reserves are feared. The anguish expressed by Bunin about the Bolshevik revolution is palpable to his new Russian readers.

The Soviets banned *Cursed Days* after it was first published in 1936. That the author, a Russian emigre, had received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1933 was only one of the reasons for the ban. Bunin had not remained in the Soviet Union after the Bolsheviks consolidated their power. He was the first author to receive the Nobel Prize in emigration. Also, Bunin was descended from a line of Russian nobles. He used *Cursed Days* as a forum to castigate Bolsheviks leaders, publishers, and the writers like Aleksandr Blok who joined their ranks. He labeled the Bolsheviks criminals and expressed his contempt for

them on many pages of the diary/notebook. The Soviets did not like Bunin's observations of the Russians he encountered as he walked the streets of Moscow and Odessa. He was just as likely to talk to and quote a poor peasant woman as he was a noble or a writer. In his diary/notebook, he defied some Bolshevik myths about the *ancien regime*: he was not anti-Semitic and he did not idealize peasants and workers but depicted authentic characters, realistic because of his use of detailed, authentic descriptions.

English readers interested in the Russian Revolution and Civil War (1917-1920) can now read about the times experienced by Bunin and many other Russians through Thomas Gaiton Marullo's excellent English translation. Marullo, a noted scholar on Russian literature, has published two previous volumes on Bunin's life and literature. In *Cursed Days*, Marullo's preface, introduction, and footnotes provide a scaffold for the reader to move back and forth between Bunin's comments and descriptions and the real social and literary history of the times. Marullo gives the reader a sense of Bunin, the man, while also providing extensive information about contextual issues. Bunin's comments about writers, publishers, newspapers, journals, and politicians are carefully explained by Marullo. He is able to align Bunin's comments about events in Russia with actions and reactions occurring in Europe. The reader is also helped by Marullo's explanations of geographical contexts.

Marullo conveys the irony in the survival of what Bunin terms his diary/notebook. He explains that in 1925, Bunin's wife noted in her diary that her husband had burned all his diary manuscripts, saying that "I don't want to be seen in my underwear" (p. ix). But Bunin tells his wife that "I have another diary in the form of a notebook" (p. ix). The surviving diary/notebook displays Bunin's anger and grief over the revolution and civil war as well as those he meets on very dirty and dangerous

streets in Odessa and Moscow. Bunin does not moderate his despair; it is a constant throughout the diary. At one point he writes, "I am simply dying from this way of life, both physically and spiritually" (p. 196).

Bunin loved diaries—writing his own and reading those written by others. His diary/notebook may have been used as data for his later works but his notebooks still tell the reader much about the author's feelings. They have little in common with the spare, emotionless diaries of the Tsar Nicholas II filled with details about the weather and time. Bunin's diary/notebook is a compendium of gossip about the interventions into Russia by outside powers, approaching or retreating German armies, the Bolsheviks and their antagonists, the Whites (led by members of the *ancien regime*) and the Greens (Ukrainian nationalists or partisans from villages and small towns). Much of the gossip reflects gaps in communication with the world outside of Moscow or Odessa. Marullo contrasts the gossip to real stories.

Bunin was born in 1870 into a world that was already changing. The Russian empire was still powerful under Tsar Alexander II, but the end of serfdom nine years before had signaled changes in the lives of the nobility. Ivan Alekseevich Bunin's forebears had been nobles for centuries, but both wealth and power had been dissipated after the end of serfdom. Bunin's father had preferred cards and drink to preserving his family's dwindling income. Besides surviving the Russian Revolution, Bunin endured two world wars that led to the geographical and social transformations of the world he knew.

Bunin's childhood was an enjoyable one, spent on his father's estate in Orel province. His early education was supervised by an eccentric nobleman who taught Bunin to read from the *Odyssey* and *Don Quixote*. Under his tutelage and because of his mother's interest in poetry, Bunin wrote poetry at an early age. His free time was spent with the peasant children in the neighborhood. At the age of eleven, his family enrolled Bunin in school but he proved to be a poor student. After five years, Bunin chose to quit school and return home. Bunin's older brother, a political activist then under house arrest, took charge of his education. With his brother, Bunin was able to study the subjects he liked—history, political science, and literature—and to write poetry. His first poem was published when Bunin was seventeen.

Bunin's first job was working on a journal, but he wrote poetry and prose in his free time. Later, he took a job within the statistics department of a *zemstvo* (provincial administrative apparatus). He admired Tolstoy and adopted his belief in the need for simpler life. After

Bunin's first book of short stories was published, he moved to Odessa in 1898 to work for a newspaper. He married quickly but two years later left his wife before their child was born. The couple's interests and temperaments were too different for Bunin to endure for long. By 1901, Bunin had published several books of poetry and was recognized by the critics of his time as a poet of great distinction. He had also widened his knowledge of the world through extensive trips abroad to Europe and Constantinople. >From these trips and later ones to Asia and the Middle East, Bunin developed both spiritually and philosophically. After the first Russian Revolution in 1905, Bunin married again and this time the match was successful and endured for the rest of his life. *The Village* was published in 1910 and secured Bunin's position as a prose writer of great standing. It also created notoriety for him as it rejected the view of peasants as inherently good and as innocents.

In several works written before World War I, Bunin conveyed his fears for the future. He was deeply troubled by the unprecedented number of Russian deaths in the War and by societal problems observable to many Russians: a growing chasm between the monarchy, the nobility, and the Duma (Russian parliament) that was attributed to the empress (called the German Woman" by some); her high regard for a dissolute peasant turned healer named Rasputin; and the unwillingness of the tsar to appoint a "responsible" government. By the end of the winter of 1917, Nicholas II gave up his empire for himself and his son when asked to do so by his generals. He abdicated in favor of his brother, who declined the offer.

*Cursed Days* begins immediately after the beginning of a new year in Moscow. The year is 1918 and the Bolsheviks are determined to consolidate their weak hold on Russia, yet the diary/notebook begins on a note of hope for the new year. Bunin's conversations with the old and young Muscovites that he encounters reflects that same hope but it is soon destroyed. The Bolsheviks disband the Constituent Assembly, and representatives of the populace will not be allowed to decide Russia's future. Life does not become better as was almost universally expected after the tsar's abdication. Food and fuel shortages continue to worsen, the enemy (the Germans) seem to be at the gates. Bunin continues to write in his diary/notebook but so dismal are the times that Bunin can not use his pen to create fiction.

Bunin and his wife receive permission from the Bolsheviks to leave Moscow in June 1918. They chose Odessa. The Germans had wrested control of Odessa

from the Bolsheviks in January, 1918 and had restored an order that was more acceptable to Bunin than the one that existed in Moscow. After the Germans departed in November, 1918, the city yo-yoed back-and-forth between conquerors. Bunin's anguish over his country's fate multiplies on the pages of his notebook. By the beginning of January, 1920, Petlyura's Ukrainian nationalists, British and French troops, Bolshevik troops, and Anton Denikin's White Russian troops have all moved in and out of Odessa. Each has sought vengeance. Still, Bunin is reluctant to leave his homeland and he waits until the last possible moment to flee the city. Odessa is retaken by the Soviets on the following day. After leaving Russia, Bunin was to spend the rest of his physical life as an emigre in France, but Russia remained the source of his spiritual life and the soil for his writing.

The Moscow entries in the diary/notebook are complete according to Bunin but the Odessa days end in June, 1919. Symptomatic of the times, Bunin had buried the notes and could not find all of them before his precipitous departure from Odessa, running from the Bolsheviks. The Odessa entries are followed by a section called "Coda" that seems to include a random mixture of diary entries, poems, a lecture, and an article that imagines conversations between Tolstoy and the tsar. Some

segments are called "notes."

In thinking about the overall effects of Bunin's notebook/diary, it is important to note that Bunin was known for continually revising his works, even those already published. The first four books of *Arseniev*, his major work written in emigration, were published serially between 1927-29. The four books were translated into English in 1934 by Gleb Struve and Hamish Miles under the title *The Well of Days*. In 1933, Bunin began writing and publishing a book called *Lika*. The first four books and the fifth, *Lika*, were eventually published in 1952 as one book, *The Life of Arseniev*. It would not be surprising if *Cursed Days*, too, was a work in progress until it was published in the mid-1930s. If Bunin were alive today, he might well add on another section. The new chapter of *Cursed Days* would illustrate the experiences of Russians, young and old, successful and unsuccessful, who are attempting to reconcile the promises of the leaders of a later Russian Revolution to the escalating economic and social problems that threaten to engulf them.

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