H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Evgeny Dobrenko. *The Making of the State Writer: Social and Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Literary Culture.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000. xxi + 484 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-3364-9.

Reviewed by Karl Loewenstein (Department of History, University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh)
Published on H-Russia (May, 2004)

How Soviet Writers Learned to Love Socialist Realism

How Soviet Writers Learned to Love Socialist Realism.

Evgeny Dobrenko has written a thought-provoking analysis of the development of Socialist Realism and the creation of a corps of Soviet writers. A sequel to his *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of their Reception of Soviet Literature* (Stanford University Press, 1997), it approaches the subject from the inverse perspective. In the first work, he examined the way in which readers were taught to demand certain forms of writing. Here, he argues that writers were conditioned to write in certain ways under pressure from both above and below. The core of his argument is that journeyman Soviet writers essentially internalized the principles of Socialist Realism in response to the pressures of the 1920s and 1930s. Reversing traditional thinking about Soviet literature, Dobrenko argues that the process leading to the First All-Union Congress of Writers in 1934 made censorship unnecessary for the vast majority of Soviet writers.

"The problem of censorship cannot exist for a Soviet Writer," writes Dobrenko (p. xv). He then suggests that the binary oppositions of "sovietology," freedom/unfreedom and truth/falsity, do not apply to Soviet literature and do not aid our understanding of it. The key piece to Dobrenko's argument is a reconceptualization of what Socialist Realism was. Instead of being simply a type of literature, it was a self-managed sea of artistic production. Soviet literature became a self-regulating entity that did not need censors. Writers became bureaucrats and watched over other writers.

Dobrenko begins by tracing the evolution of revolutionary writing from the nineteenth century to the 1930s. He notes that Russians have been obsessed with finding "people's poets" at least since Pushkin. Then Dobrenko argues that Socialist Realism has its roots in the 1860s. With the rise of the revolutionary movement, literature became tied to struggle and heroism. The greatest exemplar of this trend was Nikolai Nekrasov. As these raznochintsy writers tried to connect with the people, they combined the high and low parts of Russian culture. Dobrenko describes this process as "transforming high literature into lubok and lubok into high culture" (p. 60). These are the roots of Socialist Realism.

He then follows the process through which literature was shaped before the revolution. He discusses a series of authors who were emblematic of the bridge between high and low culture. Writers, such as Mikhail Sivachev, hated the intelligentsia while striving to be a part of it. Once the October revolution had come about, however, the questions began to change. First was the rise of the proletcult movement, which wanted to create a "flood of proletarian writers." This movement, however, was divided. The leaders struggled to decide between those who advocated "proletarian literature" and those who insisted on "party literature." Party literature, or writers who put the interests of the Bolshevik party first, won. Dobrenko believes that this victory was inevitable.

In chapter 3, he examines the Young Guard (Molodaia gvardia) movement. Writers associated with the journal of the same name were minor players in the debates over literature in the 1920s, but their approach foreshadowed the one that would win in the end. They stressed that writers should desire to write in the way the party wanted them to. Although this movement collapsed by the mid-1920s, they had seen the future.

In the course of that decade, the terms of the debate shifted again. The question became how new literature could be created. The Young Guard had argued that professional writers should freely choose to follow the state. RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), the dominant literary organization of the late 1920s, wanted to discard established writers completely. The organization advocated the creation of a "mass literary movement," where writers would naturally arise from the working class. They sponsored contests and literary cir-

cles by means of which they hoped to find proletarians who would be able to write for the state. This was an important component of Soviet literary policy through the late 1930s, though RAPP would eventually be disbanded in 1934. After the First Congress of Soviet Writers, in Dobrenko's perspective, Soviet writers would be primarily readers who wrote books. In other words, the new generation of writers, created out of the crucible of the revolution, read works written in the official style and then tried to copy them. They did not (and could not) create anything but Socialist Realist works. This new type of literature became, in Dobrenko's words, "unconscious parodies of 'high literature"' (p. 247). Mass literature copied other, more famous works in the most simplistic, jargon-laden way, but authors seemed not to notice the irony in their twisted phrases.

Next, Dobrenko looks at how this untrained mass of proletarian writers was transformed into those who made up the core of Socialist Realist writers. RAPP came to believe that the main question was not one of creativity, but of proper training. That is to say, masters were not born, but could be drawn from the working class and created. He particularly investigates the institutions for training these new writers. There were a series of journals dedicated to this task. Maxim Gorky edited the most important, entitled *Literaturnaia ucheba*. However, these organizations were not very successful in creating new, good writers, and began to exist primarily as a threat to bring professional writers under control.

The entire process came to an end with the formation of the Writers' Union in 1934. It took fifteen years to prepare for Socialist Realism. The professional writers returned to prominence, and the amateur writing that had been so important for the last few years was jettisoned. Only those trained at the Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow would ascend to prominence in Stalinist Russia. Professionally produced Socialist Realism became the official literature of the Soviet Union. Writing about "reality in its revolutionary development" had been transformed from necessity to freedom. New individuals, created by reading and accepting the established texts of the Communist party, could produce Socialist Realism quickly and joyously, as if a shock-worker on an assembly-line became the backbone of culture.

Dobrenko's argument here, very carefully developed, is that it is a misunderstanding to see Socialist Realism as repression. Coming through the forge of the 1920s, professional writers came to accept Socialist Realism as both truth and freedom. If one looks at the vast majority of Soviet writers, one can see that censorship and control was not the issue. More often the issue became one of quality and interest, not ideology. As he concludes, "Thus, between the Soviet writer (to the degree, of course, that he remained Soviet) and authority, no 'gap' existed: Soviet literature was the natural form of 'bureaucratic writing' and needed no repressions against bureaucrats (Soviet writers)" (p. 405). Dobrenko wants us to break from traditional binary visions of conformity/nonconformity to look at the way that all writers created in the 1930s internalized the tropes of Soviet culture.

This pattern continued until the end of the Soviet state. As new generations arose in the 1950s and 1960s, the Writers' Union devoted great efforts to train them as the first had been trained. The leadership stressed that talent had to be nurtured, and did not arise spontaneously. Although the cadres at the union aged and fretted over the small number of writers emerging after the war, mass literature remained unchallenged and self-perpetuating through the 1970s and 1980s.

Dobrenko shows the ways in which Socialist Realism was more than simply an imposed style of writing. His approach provides great insight into the mechanisms of Soviet culture and the ability of the state to shape it. The emphasis on the way that writers became their own editors and supervisors is a persuasive one. It is useful to think about the majority of Soviet writers who accepted and sometimes enthusiastically joined in the production of Socialist Realism.

I am not completely ready to accept the extreme dismissal of the role of coercion, however. Notwithstanding the self-censorship mechanism, a powerful bureaucracy oversaw literature. Regardless of the fact that the Writers' Union was a quasi-independent organization, the party leaders kept a close eye on writers. See, as only one example, a report about "counter-revolutionary activities among Leningrad writers" sent to Zhdanov by the NKVD in 1935.[1] This particular document lists dozens of writers who were meeting privately and complaining about the current situation in literature. Although these writers published Socialist Realist works, they did not seem happy about it! It is clear that many writers, good and bad, famous and unknown, chafed at the system of administration and editing that they were all forced to deal with.

This work also has a difficult time addressing the growing problems of dissent in the post-war era. Dobrenko's approach is to argue that these dissenters were a very small subset of writers and were rarely, if ever, part of mass literature. By their dissent, they separated themselves from the main channels of Soviet writing. Even

though challenges flared up regularly, they never shook the deeply embedded, routine constructions of Socialist Realism. In other words, the exception of dissent proved the rule of the Socialist Realism. I am not sure that this model captures the deep cynicism and disillusionment of the last decades of the Soviet Union, but perhaps someone else will trace the threads developed here into the second half of the twentieth century.

In any case, this book is a provocative and useful rethinking of Soviet culture and the mechanisms of control as they emerged during the 1920s and 1930s. I would recommend it to scholars and graduate students interested in understanding Soviet literature and cultural life.

Note

[1]. A. Artizov and O. Naumov, eds., *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsia: documenty 1917-1953* (Moscow 2002), pp. 238-50.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Karl Loewenstein. Review of Dobrenko, Evgeny, *The Making of the State Writer: Social and Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Literary Culture.* H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. May, 2004.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=9376

Copyright © 2004 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.