Evaluation of the achievements of Soviet literature during the Brezhnev era is of both intrinsic and extraliterary interest. On the one hand, one may—in the tradition of the great 19th-century critic of Russian literature Vissarion Belinsky—find considerable merit in chronicling the literary events of each passing year. On the other hand, developments in literature, particularly in light of the state monopoly of public publishing that exists in the USSR, also shed much light on matters of artistic and general freedom of expression there and tend to indicate many of the social and/or spiritual issues that agitate better-educated Soviet citizens.

Can we justifiably speak of a “Brezhnev era” in Soviet letters? Yes, and within limitations not much stricter than those that allow us to view the entire category of post-Stalin writings as a separate corpus, quite distinct from the one that preceded it. To be sure, as with the writings of any era, Russian literature published during the 15-odd years that L.I. Brezhnev has been leader of the Soviet Union includes works conceived or actually written earlier, even some by writers who had been active as far back as the 1920’s. However, readers ordinarily do not differentiate between revivals of long-neglected works (or initial publications of works written earlier) and the first printed efforts of younger, contemporary poets, novelists, and dramatists, but tend to view them all as “new.”

Emphasis on Private Concerns

The central feature of Soviet Russian writing from the mid-1960’s to the present has been its preoccupation with private human concerns. It is characteristic of the overall moderate conservatism of the Brezhnev years that the overtly political, reformist writing that flourished under Nikita Khrushchev is generally not tolerated. At the same time, however, there has been no major effort to reintroduce the obligatory shrill political militancy that one associates with Soviet literature of the Stalin era. Russian writing of the Brezhnev period occupies, in terms of ideological latitude, an intermediate position. It is more doctrinaire than literature of the Khrushchev era, but considerably less rigid than that of Yosif Stalin’s time. This environment, together with what may be called an official attitude of benign neglect toward moderate experimentation in form (or, more precisely, the toleration of what—by rigid standards of Soviet traditionalism—might be seen as unconventional litera-

This phenomenon is discussed in Sovetskiy chitatel’. Opyt konkretno-sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniya (The Soviet Reader. An Experiment in Concrete Sociological Research), Moscow, Kniga, 1968; B.S. Meylakh, Ed., Khudozhestvennye vospriyatiya (Artistic Perception), Leningrad, Nauka, 1971; and Kniga i chteniye v zhizni nebol’shikh gorodov (Book[s] and Reading in the Life of Small Cities), Moscow, Kniga, 1973.

Interestingly, public preferences for Russian translations from West European and American fiction, poetry, and drama in the post-Stalin era have generally mirrored attitudes toward Soviet writing too. However, there tends to be somewhat greater emphasis on pure entertainment or “escapism” in the choices of translations. See the author’s A Decade of Euphoria: Western Literature in Post-Stalin Russia, 1954-64, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press, 1977, and “The US in the USSR: American Literature through the Filter of Recent Soviet Publishing and Criticism,” Critical Inquiry (Chicago, IL), Spring 1976, pp. 519-83.
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ture), has encouraged the production of reasonably competent writing. While generally more drab and boring than the prose, drama, and verse of the Khrushchev decade, Soviet books and literary journals of the last 15 years are at least not ludicrously contrived and indeed downright offensive, as were many of those published during Stalin’s declining years. By and large, recent Soviet fiction offers believable protagonists and genuine human conflicts, both indispensable attributes for any work expecting to have a degree of reader appeal.

In evaluating this trend, one may argue that private

2Here we speak, obviously, of the “average” output of the USSR’s more than 7,000 professional writers. Kratkaya literaturnaya entsiklopediya (Short Encyclopedia of Literature), Moscow, Sovetskaya entsiklopediya, Vol. VII, 1972, p. 112, reported that the membership of the Union of Soviet Writers was 7,280.

3Vera S. Dunham’s In Stalin’s Time (New York, NY, Cambridge University Press, 1976) offers an excellent description and analysis of pulp fiction of that period.

conflicts and aspirations and preoccupation with self are proper concerns of imaginative literature as we understand it and that there is no reason why literature should grapple with social problems. In and of itself, this thesis is uncontestable, and one may find ample evidence to support it in Russia’s own 19th-century writing. Still, we discover on closer scrutiny that even these earlier works did tackle, in essence, the problem of the happiness of the individual in his oftentimes hopeless conflict with the demands of an intolerant society and an omnipotent state. In order to enlist the reader’s sympathies for their heroes, prerevolutionary Russian authors felt compelled to cast at least some doubt on society’s wisdom or the state’s justice; this was true of Aleksandr Pushkin in Bronze Horseman, Nikolay Gogol in “The Overcoat,” Ivan Turgenev in Sportsman’s Sketches, and Fëdor Dostoevsky in Poor Folk. However “apolitical,” a writer must, we submit, feel free to adopt such a critical stance.

In December 1971, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn pays his last respects to Aleksandr T. Tvardovskiy, the man who published Solzhenitsyn’s One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich in the pages of Novyy mir in 1962. Solzhenitsyn now lives in exile in the United States.

—Black Star.

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In this respect, Soviet writers of the 1970's feel far more constraints than did Russian authors of the past—particularly those who wrote during the Empire's last decades. And this, in turn, sometimes imposes severe limitations on the contemporary Soviet writer's choices of themes, protagonists, and situations—constraints that extend far beyond the overtly political. To find a comparable degree of political latitude (or lack of it), one might look to the neoclassical writing of the era of enlightened absolutism in 18th-century Russia. Then, as today, creators of poetry, drama, and prose felt reasonably free to depict, usually with considerable sympathy, an individual's sense of dissatisfaction or even of personal tragedy, but on condition of bypassing in silence its social roots.

Should today's Soviet literary confines appear intolerably narrow to a casual observer, a better sense of perspective is obtained if we recall that preoccupation with the private, the personal, at least allows authors to eschew the hortatory optimism that was all but obligatory during Stalin's last years. In addition, the manifestation of compassion for misfits and failures that is tolerated by the censors (even while they forbid authors to discuss what a Marxist critic would call the “objective” factors creating such types) is considerably closer to traditions of pre-Soviet “philanthropic” Russian literature than the contempt for weakness and failure that was the hallmark of Soviet writing during the Stalin era.

Soviet literature in the Brezhnev years has lacked the extremes of “thaw” and “freeze” that characterized the first post-Stalin period, under N.S. Khrushchev. In the wake of Stalin's death there was initially much demand for what may be called anti-Stalinist muckraking writing. The works then published exposed, with varying degrees of explicitness and artistic success, some of the evils of Stalinism. That type of writing reached its apex in 1962 with the publication of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich. This liberal “thaw” was followed by a “freeze,” which continued until Khrushchev's downfall two years later. After Brezhnev's accession to power, the “freeze” moderated somewhat, but there was never a genuine “warm spell.” Rather, the climate of public permissiveness in Soviet literature has remained at a relatively constant “chill.” Most of the liberal firebrands of the first post-Stalin decade have grown tame, and a significant number have emigrated to the West. In addition to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, these include Andrey Sinyavskiy (“Abram Tertz”), Viktor Nekrasov, Vladimir Maksimov, Anatoliy Gladilin, Grigoriy Svirskiy, Yosif Brodskiy, Anatoliy Kuznetsov, and Aleksandr Galich (the last two now deceased). By mid-1980, there were indications that other Soviet authors may soon join the ranks of the émigrés.

While the Brezhnev regime has made it clear that politically unorthodox writing will not be tolerated (thereby driving troublesome authors from public print to the catacombs of samizdat), it has made no effort to stop another process that began during the Khrushchev decade, namely, the resurrection of works by authors who had suffered boycott or worse under Stalin. In an obvious reaction to the contrived “public” character of Stalinist Socialist Realism, in which human protagonists were often but a function of political slogans, the mid-1950's witnessed a surge of interest in 20th-century Russian poets who emphasized private concerns. Thus, there was a revived demand for the few extant copies (or typewritten texts) of Osip Mandel'shtam, a victim of the Great Purges, whose work might have been assumed totally forgotten after many decades of nonpublication. There was a similar rediscovery of Anna Akhmatova, the grand old lady of Russian lyric verse, then still alive, who only a few years earlier had been denounced as a half-nun and a half-whore; of Nikolay Zabolotskiy, the singer of symbiosis of man and nature, then just recently released from a labor camp; and of Marina Tsvetayeva, another lyric poet, who had returned from

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*The novel was originally published in 1962 in Novyy mir (Moscow). An English-language translation by Max Hayward and Ronald Hingley appeared in 1963 (New York, NY, Praeger).
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Parisian exile on the eve of World War II only to commit suicide shortly thereafter. All were rescued from oblivion and were reunited, as it were, to the body of modern Russian poetry at a time when many of the Stalinist versifiers, whose rhymed propagandistic "public" writings had earlier been extolled, were viewed with condescension. In the Brezhnev era, works by the rehabilitated poets have remained "legal," if often out of print. Sometimes they have even been reprinted.

It should be noted that a number of older poets—such as Leonid Martynov, Nikolay Aseyev, Pavel Antokol'skiy, Semen Kirsanov, and Vladimir Lugovskoy—who had earlier (whether under pressure or out of sincere conviction) produced much conventional politicized verse during the Stalin era published some strong denunciations of Stalinism after the dictator's death. Indeed, Martynov and Kirsanov were among the most articulate older spokesmen for the liberal forces favoring the "thaw." Subsequently, however, these and other established poets, ranging from the carefree, joyous, and simple Viktor Bokov to the complex and philosophical Arseniy Tarkovskiy, came—under some pressure—to abandon overt politics, and reverted to poetry's traditional concerns.

Boris Pasternak, a poet who over the years had often been ahead of literary fashions (an early advocate of experimentation, he was also among the first to disavow its excesses), was, once again, a harbinger of moods that other poets would reflect a decade later. His Doctor Zhivago, a very poetic novel completed in 1955, eschews overt political concerns. Pasternak's work is an impassioned paean to the right of the individual to be entirely engrossed in his pursuit of private happiness even in the midst of momentous social upheavals. Submitted to Novyy mir, now a run-of-the-mill literary monthly but once the rallying banner of the liberal anti-Stalin intelligentsia, the novel was turned down, admittedly for political reasons, in what must surely be the longest rejection slip ever received by any author. In retrospect, it appears that Pasternak's sin was one of omission rather than commission. It was his failure to "properly" raise and then just as "properly" answer some obligatory political questions, rather than any overt political statements, that could not be tolerated in his long work.

The Brezhnev era has seen new names added to the list of victims of Stalin's purges whose works have been reprinted for the first time in many decades—most notably, Boris Pilnyak. Other purge victims, such as Nikolay Gumilev and Yevgeniy Zamyatin, remain proscribed.

Decline of the Novel

The Pasternak episode is instructive with respect to the forces which have brought a general decline of the novel in Soviet letters of the 1960's and 1970's. It is clear that fewer novels are being published than during the preceding period, and one suspects that fewer are being written. We appear to be dealing here not merely with a normal downturn in a periodic cycle of growth and exhaustion of this particular literary form, but also with a larger shift in the fortunes of it and other forms as an indirect response to the political pressures applied to Soviet literature.

In the last decade of Stalin's rule, the novel had dominated the Russian literary scene. Most of the novels of the period were crude potboilers manufactured en masse to exacting ideological specifications and differing, by and large, only in their settings. There were industrial novels, collective farm novels, military novels, and even research institute novels. In the first two categories, protagonists were crudely divided into heroes and villains, depending on their roles in the struggle for higher productivity; in the last two, the criteria were much the same, except that here it was military victories and scientific progress that were at stake. Regardless of the locales and of the professions of their central characters, many Soviet novels of the period also featured among their casts a raisonneur or two (a throwback again to the neoclassical era), who—usually in the modern guise of rural district party secretary or factory Komkomctor organizer—offered a running political commentary of sorts on unfolding events.

In their pristine form, such literary creations by and large disappeared with Stalin's demise. However, the novel form continued to be a highly politicized literary genre. By virtue of its sheer bulk, the novel is peculiarly vulnerable to political demands for the "correct"
The late Soviet novelist Konstantin Simonov at his country dacha in Krasnaya Pakhra in October 1977.

The late Soviet novelist Konstantin Simonov at his country dacha in Krasnaya Pakhra in October 1977.

presentation of “typical” situations, or for an adequate degree of political militancy. It is, therefore, not surprising that many Soviet writers have avoided this form and turned to shorter prose genres, if only because the space limitations of the latter make it impossible to conform to all political demands in every such work, thereby affording a degree of protection from such demands. Even collections of short pieces rarely satisfy all such requirements.8

Thus, while novelists of the older, Stalinist generation have continued to publish in the Brezhnev years—one thinks of Konstantin Simonov’s The Last Summer or Valentin Katayev’s semi-fictionalized

9Konstantin Simonov, Posledneye leto, Moscow, Sovetskiy pisatel’, 1971; and Valentin Katayev, Razbitaya zhizn’ ili voshebnuy god Oberona (Jaded Life, or Oberon’s Magical Year), published in Novyy mir, Nos. 7 and 8, 1972.

8Moreover, if the individual parts of such collections are unoffensive, the works as a collective may go further than the censors anticipate. Over a century ago a tsarist censor was fired for failing to discern that while every short story in Turgenev’s Sportsman’s Sketches may have appeared innocent enough, their cumulative effect was quite different and politically objectionable as an attack on the institution of serfdom.

10Naturally, we are judging only on the basis of works that have actually been published. There is the possibility that a major young Soviet novelist may currently be writing “for the drawer.” The 1960’s, for instance, saw the publication of several major novels by Mikhail Bulgakov, a writer who was not arrested by Stalin’s secret police and who died a natural death before World War II. As a consequence of these discoveries, we have had not only to revise Bulgakov’s posthumous reputation (he is now, in retrospect, certainly the greatest satirist so far in 20th-century Russian writing), but also to upgrade our estimate of Soviet writing as a whole.
August 1914, part of a trilogy in progress, appears intended as an anti-Communist response to such massive Soviet novelistic treatments of the subject of World War I and the Revolution of 1917 as Mikhail Sholokhov’s Silent Don and Aleksey Tolstoy’s The Road to Calvary.¹¹ Unlike the thought at first may appear, Vladimir Voinovich’s comic novel The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin shares the didacticism of Solzhenitsyn’s somber volumes.¹² Both authors call attention to issues that had for decades remained taboo in Soviet writing—in Solzhenitsyn’s case, the horrors of the vast Gulag Archipelago,¹³ and in Voinovich’s, the ludicrous component in two of Stalinist Russia’s sacred cows, the army and a science establishment believed capable of reshaping nature itself. Indeed, in an inverted image of Solzhenitsyn’s central concern, Voinovich’s book attempts to provide a comic picture of the Soviet secret police, depicting them as cowardly and stupid.

Toward Poetry and Short Prose

As noted, the wish to eschew political matters has encouraged many Soviet authors to forsake novels for short prose and has also contributed to the rise of poetry. However, there also appears to have been a positive consideration involved in the shift. The latter forms are more attuned to the task of probing man’s inner world. A shift in dominant literary genres similar to the one currently discernible in Russian writing occurred at the turn of the century, in the transition from the openly didactic later novels of Lev Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky to the social agnosticism of Anton Chekhov’s short prose and plays. The period was also marked by the ascendancy of the Symbolists, who were demonstratively preoccupied with esthetic ridicules, mysticism, and sexuality—all subjects their predecessors had believed unworthy of serious concern.

The roster of Soviet poets and writers of short stories who have emerged since Stalin’s death is impressive. Even though most of them were products of Soviet schools, these authors, predominantly young, somehow found in themselves the inner resources to discard the shibboleths of Stalinist Socialist Realism and seek new ways. At first, in the flush of destalinization, political concerns loomed high. But with the passage of time, the degree of social involvement abated. Several factors contributed to this development. There was, to be sure, the less permissive atmosphere of the Brezhnev years, but there was also the fact that the influx into literature of younger people—with few memories of the Stalin era—could not but dilute the degree of political involvement.

In poetry, the trend was evident in the decline of some and the emergence of other luminaries. Among the first group, Yevgeniy Yevtushenko was perhaps the most striking example. This “public” poet par excellence symbolized the anti-Stalinist rebellion of the 1950’s and early 1960’s. But, as literary political activism declined, his star faded.¹⁴ The poets that emerged in the new environment were all essentially “private.” This group encompassed three women—Bella Akhmadulina, Novella Matveyeva, and Yunna Morits—with their highly inventive and technically polished verse, particularly in the case of Akhmadulina. (Some of this poetry further enriches that marvelous treasury of 20th-century Russian poetry in which love is viewed from a female vantage point.) It also included Andrey Voznesenskiy, a poet declamatory in his manner but predominantly lyrical in his subject matter, and probably the finest writer of poetry in which love is viewed from a female vantage point.)

11 August 1914, as translated by Michael Glenny, was published in 1972 (New York, NY, Farrar, Straus and Giroux). Translations of the two parts of Sholokhov’s Silent Don have appeared in English: And Quiet Flows the Don (New York, NY, Knopf, 1934); and The Don Flows to the Sea (New York, NY, Random House, 1965). Aleksey Tolstoy’s Road to Calvary was published in English in 1946 (New York, NY, Knopf).


13 It is worth noting that the theme of Stalin’s prisons and of the quest for justice looms large in the work of three other Soviet émigré novelists, all now living in France—Anatoliy Gladilin, Viktor Nekrasov, and Vladimir Maksimov.

14 Yevtushenko is one of the dramatis personae (under the name of Rasputashonka) in what is a truly monumental satirical portrait of the post-Stalin Soviet intelligentsia, Alexander Zinoviev’s Yawning Heights (New York, NY, Random House, 1979). The author of the book, formerly professor of philosophy at Moscow University, now lives in the West.
Contemporary Soviet poets who stress personal concerns: left, Bella Akhmadulina at Moscow's House of Literature Workers in March 1978; center, Andrey Voznesenskiy at Moscow's Tchaikovsky Concert Hall in June 1978; and right, Novella Matveyeva at the House of Arts in Peredelkino (the writers' colony outside Moscow), in February 1966.

USSR, owes more to John Donne, T.S. Eliot, and the English metaphysical poets than to any Russians—unless one goes back to the intellectual and religiously colored verse of Fëdor Tyutchev and Yevgeniy Baratynskiy in the 19th century.

As for the short story and the novella, these forms have been in the ascendancy in Russian belles lettres for more than two decades now, and so far their position continues unchallenged. The short prose genres, if only by virtue of their brevity, do permit the author to pose problems (and not necessarily even within their broader context) without the obligation to suggest solutions, let alone defend their choice. It is probably in part for that reason that short stories and novellas were favored by the Soviet angry young men during the stormy period of destalinization. It was through these forms that there erupted in Soviet publications pent-up grievances against the dead dictator's regime, against at least some of its crimes (usually still only hinted at), and against the social pathology that it had bequeathed. Gradually, however, even this degree of involvement disappeared from legal Soviet publications—which is not to say that the subjects were exhausted and died a natural death. Rejected by Soviet publishers and journals, a great many works dealing with such subjects continued to circulate in samizdat, and not a few were subsequently published abroad. Here and there, short works describing poverty, social injustice, and moral corruption may still be published in the USSR—for instance, Fëdor Abramov's Dve zimy i tri leta (Two Winters and Three Summers) or Yuriy Trifonov's Dom na naberezhnoy (House on the Embankment)—but such are usually

It is worth noting that many were printed in the West without the knowledge, let alone consent, of their authors, who remained in the USSR and in many cases continued to publish "acceptable" works. Indeed, some of the most damning indictments of the Soviet regime belong in the former category. Thus, in this writer's estimate, the most chilling descriptions of Soviet labor camps are not those of Solzhenitsyn, but those found in Vlaim Shalamov's eyewitness accounts shaped into concise tales and in Georgiy Vladimov's novel Faitlhi Rusan: The Story of a Guard Dog (translated by Michael Glenny, New York, NY, Simon and Schuster, 1979), which observes the universe of the gulags through the eyes of a police dog. Both authors are still in the Soviet Union.

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In recent years, short prose has increasingly been put to other uses, perhaps, by its greatest Russian master, Chekhov. Not a political activist but at the same time not at all an uncritical admirer of the tsarist regime, Chekhov lived in an era of decline in the degree of ideological involvement among the Russian intelligentsia, a setting that bears intriguing resemblance to the USSR of the Brezhnev years. Both periods were ones of disenchantment in the wake of the euphoria and great expectations of years of great reforms. Chekhov demonstrated that the short story and the novella are ideally suited to portray paradoxes, inconsistencies, isolated incidents, chance encounters, and, above all, to convey the flavors and sounds of moods, feelings, premonitions, fears, and aspirations. Chekhov's prose offers unequaled models for the portrayal of loneliness behind a facade of outward sociability, of collectives whose members cannot communicate, of individuals who are emotionally crippled by a society that detests spontaneity—in short, of suffering and discontent that cannot be directly traced to tangible causes, economic or social. Dostoyevsky reputedly said that all of Russia's 19th century literature, with its central theme of social compassion, traces its lineage to Gogol's "The Overcoat." If similar hyperbole is permitted, then one might say that the central concerns of serious contemporary Soviet Russian writing—above all, its emphasis on "minor" private concerns as opposed to the "major" public ones of literature of the Stalin era—are clearly inspired by Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, a kindly doctor who, in his role as author, offered sympathy, hinted at a diagnosis, but never presumed to offer advice.

Echoes of Chekhov may also be discerned, not unexpectedly, in post-Stalin Russian drama, although the genre continues in its traditional position as the weakest in Russian writing. Indeed, in recent years some of the most lively and controversial events in Soviet theater have been unorthodox productions of Chekhov's own plays. But Chekhov's imprint has been most important on the Russian short story and the novella. While many "Chekhovian" attributes may be found in Soviet writing of the early post-Stalin years, they are more typically found in short works of more recent vintage, in which social concerns are kept in the background and a mundane incident in the life of unheroic people forms the modest plot of a story. This literature manifests considerable variety in both subject matter and manner of presentation. There are the touching, unassuming descriptions of love in the short stories of Yurii Nagibin; the haunting portrayals of often embittered individuals drawn against the background of lush natural surroundings in Yurii Kazakov; and the very, very American-like drifters and dreamers in the short prose of Vasily Aksënov. Each of these writers focuses in his own way not on the destinies of a nation, on military victories, or on economic battles, but on individual, often intimate concerns of men and women who are in many respects the Soviet descendants of 19th-century Russian literature's superfluous men, strong women, humiliated clerks, and frightened lovers.

(One can point to other parallels with 19th-century Russia. While overt political activity is proscribed by the authoritarian state, one can now—just as then—identify writers who are, by Soviet standards, conservatives or reactionaries [for instance, Vadim Kozhevnikov] or those who are "legal liberals" [such as Andrey Bitov or Andrey Voznesenskiy]. And the age-long Russian battle between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers continues unabated—the "internationalist" Aksenovs are regularly challenged by the "truly Russian" Vladimir Soloukhins. While the Soviet authorities are clearly more sympathetic to the latter, they refrain from officially taking sides, lest it be...
Two accomplished writers of short prose in the USSR during the last 15 years: left, Valentin Rasputin; right, the late Vasiliy Shukshin.

—TASS from Sovfoto.

suggested that any writer can presume to speak for the Communist Party.)

Three stories are, in many ways, representative of recent Soviet Russian short prose. The first is Valentin Rasputin’s Den’gi dlya Marii (Money for Maria).19 Born in 1937, Rasputin obviously has few memories of the Stalin era. His settings are contemporary, usually rural, and frequently Siberian, and he cultivates an art that is rather rare in Russian fiction—a tightly woven, gripping tale. In Den’gi dlya Marii, a farmer’s wife in distant Siberia manages the village store. An audit of the books reveals that a sizable sum of money is missing. Everybody is certain of her innocence and wants to help, but the sum is too large. The woman’s husband then decides to turn to his estranged brother, who lives far away in a big city. At the end of the story, we see the poorly dressed farmer on a train, where he is the subject of compassion and derision from more affluent passengers. We do not find out whether the rich brother agreed to help, or whether the farmer’s wife will end up in jail.

The second example is Kalina krasnaya (The Red Guelder Rose)20 by Vasiliy Shukshin, whose premature death in 1974 at the age of 45 was a serious loss. Not only was Shukshin a very promising author, one of the best among the so-called rural writers (derevenshchiki); he was at least equally prominent as a filmmaker. Kalina krasnaya tackles a subject that was once used frequently enough by Soviet authors but was later banished from Soviet writing: a criminal’s attempt to break with his past, “to go straight.”21 For the first time in decades, Soviet readers were titillated with descriptions of thieves’ dens, of “jobs” being “pulled,” and so forth. The story’s central character really desires to start life afresh—to return to farming with an honest woman by his side—but, in keeping with the hallowed traditions of similar Western writing, his dream is not to come true. He is murdered by the

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19 Valentin Rasputin’s story appeared in Vniz i vverkh po techeniyu (Downstream and Upstream), Moscow, Sovetsky pisatel’, 1972.
20 Vasiliy Shukshin’s novella was printed in Nash sovremennik (Moscow), No. 4, 1973.
21 In the 1920's, the subject was treated by such Soviet authors as Veniamin Kaverin, in Konets khazy (The End of a Gang), a novel published in Moscow in 1926, and Leonid Leonov, in Vor (The Thief), of which an English-language translation appeared in 1960 (New York, NY, Vintage Books). These were serious enough works, even if marred occasionally by an excessive desire to magnify the exotic and sensationalist aspects of the material. However, by 1934, such writings had disappeared in the face of the Soviet state’s heavy reliance on forced labor as a means of “rehabilitating” criminals. In that year, however, Nikolay Pogodin did write Aristokratiya (The Aristocrats, translated in B. Blake, Ed., Four Soviet Plays, New York, NY, International Publishers, 1937), which may well be the only comedy ever written which has as its setting a penal labor camp.
criminals whose world he wanted to leave.\textsuperscript{22}

The last example is Damski'y master (Ladies’ Hairdresser),\textsuperscript{23} by Irina Grekova (pseudonym of Yelena Ventsel). Grekova is not a professional writer; now in her 70’s, she began to publish fiction less than 20 years ago. The narrator of Damski'y master bears much resemblance to the author, who is a professor of mathematics. It is through the eyes of this narrator—now an older woman, a widow or divorcée, who somehow had managed to combine a busy career with the demanding task of bringing up two sons—that we see the world of the young, which includes her junior research associates, secretaries, and also the central character of the story, a male hairdresser. (The choice of the hairdresser’s profession is in itself indicative of the change in Soviet literature’s concerns. One can hardly visualize a member of such a “frivolous” profession—and a young man at that!—as a chief protagonist in a novella published during the Stalin years.) As the wise and tolerant narrator sees them, the young—obviously as a result of years of Stalinist regimentation—no longer know how to enjoy themselves. Even a college dance is ruined by “educational” games. It is, however, the young hairdresser who shows the deepest wounds inflicted by goal-oriented education. Everything he does must have a useful purpose. He chooses his customers (including a very pretty young woman) for the professionally educational value of the texture of their hair. Similarly, he accepts an invitation to attend a dance because this might prove rewarding as a live sociological exhibit. Instead of reading bulky novels, he is intent on studying (no doubt, for reasons of greater efficiency) literary criticism, which not only describes novels but evaluates them as well. At the end of the story we learn, with relief, that the young man has decided to enter a “normal” profession—working in a factory. Such an ending offers grounds to hope that he will be restored to emotional normalcy.

However different, these three stories share some common attributes. They have genuine human interest, and they avoid annoying didacticism and contrived situations. When viewed against the background of writing of the Stalin period, these are in themselves no mean achievements.

The Future

If prognoses are to be made for the 1980’s, one safe prediction would be that, barring major changes in Soviet policies in general, politically daring writing will probably be rare.\textsuperscript{24} Rather, it is likely that the emphasis will continue to be on personal rather than social themes.

One would also expect Russian literature to become more decentralized geographically, as it was in the 1920’s. Fewer writers will probably live in and write about Moscow, Leningrad, and the writers’ colony of Peredelkino. This development, should it come to pass, would benefit Russian literature. It not only would result in a greater variety of settings and situations but would also enrich the Russian literary language with resources borrowed from many regional dialects.

Most certainly, there will also be an ever growing number of bilingual writers who create (for reasons of

\textsuperscript{22}For translated selections from the writings of Rasputin and Shukshin, see Valentin Rasputin, Live and Remember, New York, NY, Macmillian, 1978; and Vasily Shukshin, Snowball Berry Red and Other Stories, Ann Arbor, MI, Ardis Publishers, 1977.

\textsuperscript{23}Published in Novyy mir, No. 11, 1963.

\textsuperscript{24}Such a rarity was Anatoly Rybakov’s novel Tyazhelyy pesok (Heavy Sand), published in Oktyabr’ (Moscow), Nos. 7–9, 1979. Rybakov provides an unorthodox, sympathetic account of the history of a Jewish family from the tsarist period, through the ordeal of heroism during the Nazi Holocaust, down to the placid present.
sentiment or of ethnic pride) in their native tongue and also—simultaneously—in Russian, the only language in which real literary names are made in the USSR. Hence, in the coming decade there should be more authors like Fazil Iskander, the highly effective comic author from Abkhaziya in the Caucasus; Vasily Bykov, the Belorussian; or Chingiz Aitmatov, the Kirghiz and Russian author of prose and drama. With linguistic assimilation, there will also be more non-Russian authors writing in Russian alone. Thus, there may emerge in Soviet Russian literature counterparts of such subcategories of American literature as Black writing, Jewish-American writing, and the like.

A prognosis for the 1980's must take into account as well the new émigré Russian literature that is currently being created in Western Europe, Israel, and the United States. This literature promises to produce a body of writing no less substantial than that bequeathed by the earlier émigrés, those who arrived in Paris, Berlin, Warsaw, and Prague in the 1920's.

One looks to Soviet literary samizdat for some idea of the thematic concerns and perhaps even styles that would, if permitted, surface in officially sanctioned writing. Judging from the contents of Metropol', a samizdat anthology brought out in early 1979, the aspirations are modest indeed. What are some of the taboo subjects? Well, for one, judging by Fazil Iskander's contribution, a more relaxed attitude toward human sexuality—relaxed, that is, by prudish Soviet standards, Yuz Aleshkovskiy goes further—a poem of his is entitled "A Lesbian Song," which for all we know may be the most shocking title in the annals of Soviet verse. Pétr Kozhevnikov (not to be confused with Vadim or Aleksey Kozhevnikov) describes cynical and bored Soviet 16-year-olds seeking forgetfulness in vodka and sex; his adolescents bear much resemblance to those we remember from books by Great Britain's Angry Young Men in the 1950's. Vladimir Vysotskiy, the actor and balladeer in the tradition of the late Aleksandr Galich, contributed a parody of Pushkin's Ruslan and Lyudmila. (It should be recalled that disrespect for the classics is not tolerated in the USSR, and that a parody of Pushkin's Eugene Onegin was the object of particular outrage during the postwar anti-Semitic purges.) And then there was Boris Vakhtin's "Dublěnka" (The Fur Coat), a story about a frightened little man who is a theatrical censor by trade and parrots Marxist classics. Metropol' also included contributions by Aksenov, Akhmadulina, and...

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25It is indicative that the author of the parody, Aleksandr Khazin, though a poet and playwright of some distinction, was listed in the literary encyclopedia only following his death in 1976. See Kratkaya literaturnaya entsiklopediya, Vol. IX, Moscow, Sovetskaya entsiklopediya, 1978, p. 767.

Among prominent Soviet literary artists who have emigrated to the West during the Brezhnev era: from left to right: Iosif Brodskiy, Vladimir Maksimov, and Viktor Nekrasov.

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Voznesenskiy. Rather innocuous in themselves, these items were significant as tokens of support for the enterprise by some of the most prominent of the younger Soviet authors. Indeed, when some of the less-known contributors to the volume were later expelled from the writers' union, their more famous colleagues rose to their defense.

If *Metropol'* does, indeed, offer some clues about themes that might appear in officially sanctioned journals should another liberal "thaw" occur, then we should expect more vodka and boredom. Perhaps even a more generous dose of sex, but only of the heterosexual variety. (Somehow, one finds it difficult to visualize lesbians frolicking in the pages of *Novyy mir.* ) But Soviet censorship is not likely—as long as it continues to exist—to tolerate parodies of itself. And so far there is no evidence that the institution is about to wither away.

Indeed, the present Communist rulers of the USSR seem intent on maintaining a political control over the arts which, while less severe than during the Stalin years, remains tighter than during the Khrushchev period. As long as this is the case, one would not expect Soviet literature to venture often or far into direct assessments or criticism of the existing political system. Rather, like the society at large, Soviet writers and poets can be expected to pursue their quest for meaning and truth on an inward-looking, individual basis.


In his famous interview with the journal Nuovi Argomenti in June 1956, Palmiro Togliatti, chief of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), created a swirl of controversy by suggesting that Nikita Khru-