HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

Title	Guiding Soviet Writers: Nurturing versus Browbeating, 1920’s-1940’s
Author(s)	Any, Carol
Citation	Acta Slavica Iaponica, 46(1), 69-84
Issue Date	2025
DOI	https://doi.org/10.14943/ASI.46-1.69
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/99137
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	04_Acta46-1_Any.pdf

Hokkaido University Collection of Scholarly and Academic Papers : HUSCAP

Acta Slavica Iaponica, Tomus 46, Issue 1, pp. 69–84

Guiding Soviet Writers: Nurturing versus Browbeating, 1920's–1940's

Carol Any

The Bolshevik experiment in engineering an eminent national literature of world renown had multiple and ambitious goals. Fiction was to tell the story of the country's revolutionary upheaval, letting readers see themselves reflected in a story of sacrifice, heroism, and triumph. Memorable literary heroes would enter the popular imagination, helping to create new cultural mythologies and values. Soviet literature would be a source of national pride at home, while stirring admiration and envy abroad, not only of the country's social equality, but also of its prizeworthy literature.

How could the state help realize this literary vision? In a capitalist democracy, the dominant view would be to leave writers and publishers to their own devices, perhaps offering government funding for selected projects. By contrast, the Bolsheviks' prioritization of top-down organization led them to think in terms of party-sponsored literary institutions. The most obvious of these—and the first to be operational—was censorship, inherited from the monarchy and made far more stringent. If it seems obvious that censorship itself kills off literary greatness, we should note that the Bolshevik leaders did not make this assumption. They saw, rather, that censorship would be an insufficient tool, because establishing and enforcing boundaries does nothing to ensure the quality of what actually gets produced within those limits. Censorship could excise and patch, but it could not bring good literature into being. No policy or institution could directly bring about a high-quality literature, so it would be necessary to rely on indirect means, re-educating or otherwise influencing the writers who would create it. The question then became, what kinds of institutions should be established for Soviet writers? What should be their core premises, especially when it came to defining writers' relationship to the party, and the related question of how writers should be treated?

Influencing writers meant devising a multi-pronged approach that could address both the current generation of writers, who were overwhelmingly non-party intellectuals critical of Bolshevik practices, as well as the rising generation who would gradually replace them. Different categories of writers presented different challenges for the young regime—established communist writers, old intelligentsia non-party writers, factory workers whom the regime was eager to recruit into literature, and young, aspiring writers from across social and educational backgrounds, with varying degrees of commitment to communism.

In the revolution's first decade, the Bolshevik debate over literary policy reflected two competing attitudes towards literature and the nature of the

creative process. A natural reflex to manage the non-party intelligentsia through a hardnosed censorship and personal pressure was partly restrained by some leaders who believed that positive encouragement through personal mentoring would ultimately prove more successful in bringing skeptical writers over to the Bolshevik side. Both of these opposing viewpoints could be found in their general philosophy of governance. David Brandenburger notes, for example, that Lenin believed the masses would back the revolution, but that they were nonetheless susceptible to emotional influences that could derail their support. It was the job of party activists to ensure the masses did not veer off course. As Brandenburger writes, the party felt the need to "coax, convince, scold, and chide ordinary workers and peasants into embracing the cause of revolution …."[1] Coaxing and scolding were opposite ends on a spectrum.

The Bolshevik predisposition toward constant mobilization campaigns surely prioritized scolding as a means of keeping the population in line. If this was true of the party's stance towards the masses, it was no less true of its treatment of editors and writers—the people whom the party was pressing into service as the vanguard—who might be wobbly when it came to producing the very literature tasked with shaping revolutionary consciousness. Eventually, the main proponents of literary nurturing—Lev Trotskii, Nikolai Bukharin, Anatolii Lunacharskii, Maksim Gor'kii, and Aleksandr Voronskii—died or were eliminated and literary life descended into grim, unrelieved hectoring. The vanquished "nurturing" strand, however, survived in pockets here and there throughout the Stalin years, continuing to exert a beneficial though limited influence. For the most part, this occurred thanks to the efforts of dedicated individuals, often non-party old intelligentsia, who held posts that brought them into contact with beginning writers in a pseudo-private space, such as a classroom or an editorial office.

The 1920's: Nurturing and Browbeating in Parallel

In the early 1920's, even natural proponents of the cudgel agreed on the importance of winning over undecided writers. Stalin and Trotskii in 1922 both worried that the non-party intelligentsia would be driven away by highhanded treatment from arrogant editors and low pay rates for manuscripts.[2] The establishment of *Krasnaia nov'* (*Red Virgin Soil*) in 1921 had been intended to address that concern, and the choice of Voronskii as its editor reflected party leaders' calculation that writers who were as yet uncommitted to Bolshevik rule

I am grateful to Marina Balina for her comments on an earlier version of this article.

1 David Brandenburger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927–1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 10.

2 *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia*: *Dokumenty TsK RKP(b)-VChK–OGPU–NKVD o kul'turnoi politike; 1917–1953 gg.* (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond "Demokratiia," 2002), pp. 36–38.

should be given some time and space to accept it more fully. It was this idea that lay behind the designation of these writers as "fellow-travelers." Voronskii's mission was to lead them gently to unqualified acceptance. Publishing some of their politically dubious stories would be an acceptable advance payment on their eventual embrace of the regime.

The ex-seminarian Voronskii, whose revolutionary politics were shaped by his impassioned reading of the classics in his formative years, believed that great literature revealed the world, that it came about through the writer's intuition, and that the creative process was largely unconscious.[3] Even among Bolsheviks who favored the nurturing approach, Voronskii was an outlier in his conviction that the writer's imperative was to "surrender to the power of his immediate perceptions" and to resist "correcting those [perceptions] by imposing … rational categories," as Yuri Slezkine phrases it.[4] This position is decidedly unBolshevik in unashamedly removing from writers' control a key part of their creative process. It is not the view of someone who regards literature as a political tool, much less a proponent of browbeating. Nor was it the conclusion of a political theorist. It was a personal conclusion based on Voronskii's love of literature, developed through his own reading. It is difficult, however, to see how he thought nurturing could be of use, if a writer's intuition and unconscious creative process led him to write unacceptable works.

Beyond his own nurturing of as yet politically uncommitted writers, Voronskii sought to make *Krasnaia nov'* a literary space where writers of different generations appeared in the same pages, with each issue bringing young writers in contact with their elders, so that they might read and learn from them, whether minor writers who had served the revolution, like Aleksandr Neverov and Nikolai Nikandrov, or (to a lesser extent) old intelligentsia writers including Aleksei Tolstoi and Mikhail Prishvin.[5] Valuing Gor'kii's literary achievement, taste, and voluminous reading of new manuscripts which came to him from writers near and far, Voronskii relied on his advice on which manuscripts to publish. For the first several months of the journal's existence, Gor'kii served as the editor of its literature section, and even after his emigration from the Soviet Union at the end of 1922, he continued to be heavily involved.[6]

Away from the capitals, Siberian writers had a gifted and nurturing editor in Vladimir Zazubrin at *Sibirskie ogni* (*Siberian Lights*), which was inspired by *Krasnaia nov'* and began publication in March 1922.[7] Just twenty-eight years old when he took the helm in 1923 but already recognized for his novel *Dva mira*

3 Yuri Slezkine, *The House of Government: A Saga of the Russian Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 282.

4 Ibid., p. 282.

5 Robert A. Maguire, *Red Virgin Soil: Soviet Literature in the 1920's* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 83.

6 Ibid., p. 28.

7 Ibid., p. 375.

(*Two Worlds*), Zazubrin was known as the "mentor-bear (*pestun*) of Siberian literature,"[8] traveling in search of budding talents, nurturing his contributors, and "teaching [them] … literary mastery."[9]

The nurturing model of *Krasnaia nov'* and *Sibirskie ogni* had no shortage of detractors among proletarian literary groups, with RAPP (the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), led by the well-connected Leopol'd Averbakh, emerging as a formidable challenger, seeking and gaining ever stronger party backing. The Onguardists, or Octobrists, as the RAPP leadership was variously known, had the editorship of three journals, *Molodaia gvardiia* (*Young Guard*), *Oktiabr'* (*October*) and *Na literaturnom postu* (*On Literary Guard*) and delighted in wielding the cudgel against their fellow-communist rivals and non-party writers alike. Browbeating resulted from the confluence of Bolshevik modus operandi, aesthetic philosophy, and personal animus, a phenomenon that was most obvious in the behavior of the Onguardists.

As the balance of favor shifted to the RAPP leadership, Voronskii and Zazubrin were removed from their editorships in 1927 and 1928 respectively and expelled from the party. These moves were followed in December 1928 by a Central Committee resolution that made clear, as Brandenburger puts it, that "all material printed in the USSR was henceforth to be regarded as a tool of mass mobilization."[10] Browbeating became a staple of newspaper and journal editors. Not only influential non-party writers, but communist writers great and small could be subjected to it at any time.

Establishment of the Writers' Union

The creation of the Writers' Union in 1932 marked a shift in the party's attitude to non-party writers. It ceased regarding them as "fellow travelers," instead granting them full acceptance. Equally important was a shift in strategy, by which controls and incentives were combined and intertwined. Incentivizing, however, is not the same as nurturing, and what the Writers' Union did was to use incentives *in place of* nurturing. Stalin calculated that in exchange for better housing, improved access to food, working vacations, and elite status, writers would produce literature that heroized the state. Writers were being co-opted, not nurtured.

Gor'kii played a prominent role on the Writers' Union *Orgkomitet*, but no sooner did the First Writers' Congress conclude its two weeks of celebratory speech-making in September 1934 than Stalin shoved him aside, placing the

8 Veniamin Borovets, "Zazubrinskie kostry" [https://res.krasu.ru/calendar/28.html] (URLs below are current as of June 20, 2025).

9 Ibid.

10 Brandenburger, *Propaganda State in Crisis*, p. 23; *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsia*, pp. 88–90.

Writers' Union in the charge of Aleksandr Shcherbakov. The two non-party writers who regularly attended the new Union's presidium meetings, Viktor Shklovskii and Boris Pil'niak, tried to educate Shcherbakov, who had no literary background, by explaining the need for magazine editors to cultivate nurturing relationships with their contributors.[11] Shcherbakov was not interested. Over the next two decades, party and non-party writers alike made this plea time and again, and time and again it was ignored.[12] In any case, the majority of editors were in no position to nurture literary talent. Often they were party bureaucrats without literary background, like Ivan Gronskii, who edited *Novyi mir* from 1931–1937, or substandard writers, like Gronskii's successor, Vladimir Stavskii.

Stalin was no fan of nurturing, although when it was convenient, he paid lip service to the idea. He used his decision to disband RAPP in favor of a new Writers' Union as an occasion to publicly reprimand the deposed RAPP leaders for their arrogance and failure to nurture non-party writers and communist writers whom they disliked.

> You hushed up and persecuted writers who did not belong to your group, and in doing so you alienated them instead of attracting them …. You stripped [the communist writer Georgii Nikiforov] bare and smeared him with mud ….
>
> There was a time when I, too, was non-party, did not know the rules of dialectical materialism, and did not understand many things. My senior comrades did not rebuff me for this, but taught me how to master the dialectical method. I also did not master it all at once. But you approached non-party writers in these matters with impatience and an utter lack of skill.[13]

Stalin's purpose in making these comments at a high-profile gathering of party writers was to subject Averbakh and his inner circle to a public shaming. This act of humiliation was repeated on a grander scale a few days later at the *Orgkomitet*'s first plenum, before an audience of 500 party and non-party writers.[14] But Stalin was getting rid of Averbakh for ignoring party directives, not for browbeating.[15] (Stavskii later noted that "Comrade Stalin says nurturing is done by harsh criticism.")

One small sign that Stalin did not intend his words as a future road map for literary cadres is the absence of Lunacharskii from the *Orgkomitet*. This nurturing communist had been removed as Commissar of Enlightenment in 1929, at

11 RGALI (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva), f. 631, op. 15, d. 13, ll. 22–24.

12 Carol Any, *The Soviet Writers' Union and Its Leaders: Identity and Authority under Stalin* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2020), pp. 87–88, 105, 182.

13 L. V. Maksimenkov, "Ocherki nomenklaturnoi istorii sovetskoi literatury (1932–1946)," part 1, *Voprosy literatury*, 2003, no. 4, pp. 225, 231.

14 Any, *The Soviet Writers' Union*, p. 51.

15 Ibid., p. 63.

the height of the cultural revolution, when the call for class struggle validated RAPP's politics of browbeating. When the cultural revolution gave way to the policy of inclusion in 1932, deposing the Onguardists, it would have been natural to give Lunacharskii a role in the Writers' Union. Had the Union's mission really been the overtly stated one of including all writers, he would have been a good choice to lead the *Orgkomitet*. Lunacharskii kept on trying to spread his inclusive approach, asking to be allowed to address one of the orgkom plenums[16] and continuing his public pronouncements in support of a wide range of literary approaches. His mentoring efforts were not limited to the graduate students of Pushkinskii Dom, which he headed from October 1930 until his death in December 1933.[17] He also defended futurist poets who were under attack; and his public praise, in speeches and in print, for writers of children's literature, including Vitalii Bianki, Nikolai Bogdanov, Kornei Chukovskii, Sergei Grigor'ev, Samuil Marshak, Iurii Olesha, and Boris Zhitkov, was surely meant, in part, to protect them against RAPP's defamations.[18]

In the Writers' Union's first four years, while Gor'kii was alive, writers had a reprieve of sorts. Gor'kii was a lone nurturer in the Writers' Union. He read innumerable manuscripts, sending his comments to their authors. But although he was the figure most associated with the Writers' Union publicly, his work with writers occurred outside the organizational power structure of the Writers' Union, where Shcherbakov ran the presidium and secretariat.

Gor'kii communicated with writers from his writing desk. He was a mentor in an isolation cubicle, while the Writers' Union itself did nothing to assist creativity. Under Shcherbakov, it did not even arrange readings for its members. Writers picked up the slack themselves, getting together in one another's homes to read their work in progress.

Nurturing of Proletarian Writers

There was, however, one category of writers whom the Writers' Union did attempt to coach by offering literary consultations. Recruiting factory workers into literature had been a cherished goal from the onset of Bolshevik power, and RAPP had overseen the establishment of factory literary circles, where workers were encouraged to write short pieces for their factory newspaper as a means to identifying literary talent. After the establishment of the Writers' Union, it took charge of the consultations through its Commission on Beginning Writers.

16 Ibid., p. 55.

17 K. I. Rovda, "Predislovie k lektsii dlia aspirantov Pushkinskogo Doma" [http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/neizdannye-materialy/predislovie-k-i-rovdy-k-lekcii-dlya-aspirantov-pushkinskogo-doma/].

18 For his defense of the futurists, see A. V. Lunacharskii, "Puti detskoi knigi," *Kniga detiam*, 1930, no. 1, pp. 4–15; an abridged version is at [http://lunacharsky.newgod.su/lib/o-detskoj-literature/puti-detskoj-knigi].

A tragicomic example of this attempt at nurturing came during a literary competition for worker-authors in 1934. The two winning selections were to be read aloud to the Seventeenth Party Congress. Each of the hopefuls came before the selection committee to read their piece. On hearing a song making reference to "Stalin's winged eyebrows," one committee member responded, "Of course, writing songs about Stalin is necessary. In the case of this one I would … not speak about eyebrows, but instead say that under Comrade Stalin's direction, we dealt with the kulaks and that Comrade Stalin has kept the party of Lenin safe from opportunists …."[19]

Unlike magazine editors, the literary consultants did not have to worry about filling the next issue of a journal or approving publication of a work that could get them into trouble. They were simply seasoned writers and critics, many of them non-party old intelligentsia, like Konstantin Paustovskii, Leonid Il'inskii, and the poet Nadezhda Pavlovich, as well as writers of more modest background with a revolutionary past, like Nikandrov. However, the nurturing was in most cases fruitless, because these beginning writers often had no literary exposure and only a primary school education. The reviewers often found submissions too ungrammatical, lacking in "literary taste," or devoid of interest. When this happened, they would write to the author, sometimes with encouragement (if they saw signs of talent), and sometimes bluntly discouraging them from pursuing a literary career.

If a manuscript had promise, the referee would recommend having the author work toward publication with an established writer. The Commission chair would then seek a writer who would agree to work with the author. If the Writers' Union decided that a beginner's manuscript merited publication, it would negotiate with the Writers' Union publishing house, Sovetskii pisatel'. In one case, Sovetskii pisatel' agreed to publish a manuscript, but balked when the Writers' Union recommended a second work by the same author.[20]

Overall, the effort to recruit workers into literature was misbegotten. One referee, Ia. Rykachev, commented on a writer who had been "in literature" for ten years and had publications (presumably in small local newspapers), but was still a "beginning writer."[21] After ten years, Rykachev noted, it would be cruel to tell him to find another profession. Another beginner produced a nine-hundred page manuscript about which the consultant confined himself to saying that it needed a great deal more work.[22] At times, consultants vented a broader frustration. N. Chetunova stated bluntly that optimism as a literary mandate had "greatly harmed our literature, and what is especially sad, our theater" and categorically dismissed a manuscript written in this manner.[23]

19 RGALI, f. 631, op. 1, d. 41, l. 54.

20 RGALI, f. 631, op. 10, d. 2, l. 39.

21 Ibid., l. 58. Other consultants included V. Il'ina, N. Chetunova, and A. Vinogradov.

22 Ibid., l. 34.

23 Ibid., l. 51.

This nurturing effort, if indeed it should be called that, was a waste of time. There were two venues, however, where meaningful nurturing did take place, and on a much deeper level than what Voronskii, with his literary sensitivity born of his activity as a reader but not as a writer, had been able to do at *Krasnaia nov'*. At the Literary Institute and in the Children's Literature Department of Gosizdat (the State Publishing House), young writers and editors received invaluable training under taskmasters who were both nurturing and exacting, and who transmitted their love of literature to their apprentices.

The Literary Institute

On occasion, Writers' Union's consultants would recommend that a worker who showed literary talent apply to be a correspondence student at the Literary Institute. This unique institution, which opened its doors in December 1933, was the result of Gor'kii's personal campaign, both in the press and with Stalin personally, to ensure that no undeserving factory "writer" would see print. Gor'kii, although keenly interested in attracting workers to literature, saw no literary potential in the factory circles, which generated simpleminded and ungrammatical writings, and he opposed them vociferously. After a long and bitter debate, he prevailed. The battle over the creation of the Literary Institute was a latter-day iteration of the debate ten years earlier over the merits of nurturing versus browbeating. In essence, that debate had been about social and class background, a concern over what to do with intelligentsia writers who had chosen the Soviet Union over emigration and who were the country's leading writers at that time. By the early 1930's, party leaders turned their focus to the rising generation, whose education and formation they had the power to shape. RAPP leaders wanted to continue prioritizing the recruitment of workers as writers. Gor'kii wanted to prioritize literature itself, which meant prioritizing literary standards. He proposed establishing a specialized institute of higher education that would provide rigorous training to every aspiring writer, from the factory worker to intelligentsia youth.

Gor'kii lost an early round of the battle when the Leningrad Evening Workers' Literary University opened its doors in 1931 with a mandate to provide what amounted to a remedial education to the factory circle writers.[24] To Gor'kii, this initiative would ensure literary mediocrity or worse. He gained a partial victory the following year when the Central Committee authorized the establishment of a Literary Institute.[25] But the resolution left unclear whether it would be an institute of higher education (a *vuz*). The composition of its student body also remained a matter of contention, and since the responsibility for

24 A. S. Kurilov, "Gor'kii i Vechernii rabochii literaturnyi universitet (VRLU)," *Literaturovedcheskii zhurnal* 29 (2011), p. 266.

25 *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia*, pp. 182–183.

organizing it was given to the former Onguardist Stavskii, he filled its inaugural class by soliciting applications from workers. Gor'kii, however, refused to give up, and the following year, his vision was in place: the matriculating class of 1934 included many of intelligentsia background, such as Margarita Aliger and Konstantin Simonov.[26]

Many of the Literary Institute's graduates later recalled the exceptional nurturing that they received from the instructors who taught the specialized seminars. Many of these instructors were well-known writers, often non-party (perhaps reflecting Gor'kii's legacy). Writers like Il'ia Sel'vinskii and Paustovskii held their students to strict standards while also offering encouragement when needed and praise when deserved. One cohort of student poets lucky enough to be assigned to Sel'vinskii's seminar met with him once a week for three years.[27]

The same instructors who mentored their students in this way also schooled them in how to behave when judging other people's work. Like students the world over, Litinstitut matriculants began their studies eager to outshine their fellow students. They arrived at the Institute having already internalized from *Pravda* and other media outlets techniques for belittling others. Seminar instructors like Paustovsky, Sel'vinskii, and Mikhail Zoshchenko counteracted the example set by the press. If a student made harsh criticisms of a classmate's work, they would take the browbeater aside and make clear that such behavior was unseemly.[28]

Students received a career boost from *Novyi mir*, whose office was located near the Institute, and which helped them get their publishing start by looking favorably upon their work.[29] Here again, giving young writers their big break did not rise to the level of nurturing. Every journal was desperate for quality submissions, and in any case, they had to fill their pages one way or another.

At the same time that faculty were nurturing their students, they themselves might be getting harassed in the press, as happened with Paustovskii,[30] or interrogated before the politburo and central Committee secretaries. An exchange between Sel'vinskii and *Orgbiuro* chair Georgii Malenkov at one such shaming ritual in November 1943 illustrates browbeating as a favored tactic

---

26 Kurilov, pp. 259–260, argues that Gor'kii was not involved in the Literary Institute, and Olga Nechaeva, in her research in the Institute's archive, has found no references to Gor'kii there. The fact remains, however, that Gor'kii worked doggedly to exact from Stalin a commitment to create a university-level institute that would provide a rigorous academic education. Kurilov himself cites a letter of Gor'kii to Stalin, which is just one instance of Gor'kii's effort to lobby him. (Separately, the Leningrad VRLU continued to exist until 1938.)

27 Sergei Narovchatov, "Gody uchen'ia," in V. F. Pimenov, ed., *Vospominaniia o Litinstitute 1933–1983* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1983), p. 102.

28 Sarra Shtut, "O proshlom dlia nastoiashchego," in Pimenov, ed., *Vospominaniia o Litinstitute*, p. 69.

29 Semen Babaevskii, "Prikhozhu po Tverskomu ...," in Pimenov, ed., *Vospominaniia o Litinstitute*, p. 59.

30 Anatolii Mednikov, "Na urokakh Paustovskogo," in Pimenov, ed., *Vospominaniia o Litinstitute*, p. 88.

of party officials, and follows a template for such hearings, including hostile questioning designed to elicit a predetermined "confession;" refusal to believe the accused's answers to their questions; intimidation; and explicit threats. Such hearings also contained pre-planned theatrics intended to crush the victim, in the form of a surprise "face-to-face" encounter with an accuser. In all of this there was the flavor of a Liubianka interrogation.

In advance of Sel'vinskii's hearing, Malenkov had had Agitprop draft a resolution, "On the Errors in I. Sel'vinskii's Creative Work." Among other things, this text stated that Sel'vinskii was to be put on notice that should he repeat his errors he would be permanently blocked from publication.

> Malenkov (inquiring about the "freak" in Sel'vinsky's poem "Kogo baiukala Rossiia" [The One Whom Russia Sang to Sleep]): Who is this freak? … Don't try to make money on us. Tell us straight and frankly: Who is this freak? Who exactly did you mean? His name?
>
> Sel'vinskii: I meant holy fools.
>
> Malenkov: Not true! You knew how to steal, know also how to give an answer!

At this point, it dawned on Sel'vinskii that since he had given the character a pock-marked face, Malenkov took him as a coded Stalin. And at that very moment, Stalin himself suddenly appeared in the room.

> Stalin: We must be careful with this person—Trotskii and Bukharin liked him very much. (Walks away.)
>
> Sel'vinskii: Comrade Stalin! During the struggle with Trotskyism I was still non-party and didn't understand a thing about politics.
>
> Stalin (going up to Malenkov): Have a thorough talk with him. This person … must be saved.

Sel'vinskii, by his own account, never recovered from this incident.[31]

Children's Literature

Apart from the Literary Institute, nurturing flourished in the editorial offices of children's literature, thanks to one earnest individual who found himself in the right place at the right time. This was Marshak, who became the guiding spirit of children's literature when he joined the Leningrad branch of Gosizdat in 1924 as a "staff literary consultant," a humble designation that belied the enormous

31 Denis Babichenko, *Pisateli i tsenzory: Sovetskaia literatura 1940-kh godov pod politicheskim kontrolem TsK* (Moscow: Rossiia molodaia, 1994), pp. 86–88; Maksim D. Shrayer, *I Saw It: Ilya Selvinsky and the Legacy of Bearing Witness to the Shoah* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013), pp. 156–157.

influence he would exert.[32] Marshak learned his methods from the folklorist Ol'ga Kapitsa, a model of nurturing mentorship whose studio for children's writers he attended beginning in 1922. At Gosizdat, he took an interest in writers, editors, and readers alike. He gathered his editorial staff around him in his Leningrad office in the spirit of a collective, helping them develop literary taste and schooling them in how to recognize a manuscript's strengths and weaknesses. More than this, he taught them how to treat writers and help them improve a manuscript. Lidiia Chukovskaia later recalled how she and her colleagues would stop work and listen when writers waiting to see Marshak would pass the time talking among themselves. The editors were not shirking. They were taking an opportunity to understand each writer's interests.[33]

Marshak's staff at Detgiz saw him take chances on authors whose unacceptable manuscript showed sparks of originality. With the right mentoring, Marshak thought, that author might develop into a fine writer. In his office, manuscripts were revised not primarily with an eye to passing censorship, but with the goal of creating a story that would bring pleasure to its author and readers. Marshak's advice to writers was, "Write … only about what really excites you! And only when you really feel that you can't not write about it!"[34] His watchword to editors was, "An editor, if he is to perceive a writer's creation and become a co-participant in the creative act, must know how to go as deeply [as the author does]."[35] An important part of his nurturing lay in his policy of not sending manuscripts to external reviewers, but having them refereed by his own trusted staff, trained by him in the office day after day.

In this corner of Soviet literature, less politically sensitive and perhaps considered less important because it was "only" for children,[36] Marshak extended

32 Scholarly literature frequently refers to Marshak as the main editor of Gosizdat's children's literature department, but his contemporaries understood that this was not the case. See Lidiia Chukovskaia, *V laboratorii redaktora*, 3rd ed. (Arkhangelsk: Pravda Severa, 2005). Also online at [https://www.chukfamily.ru/lidia/prosa-lidia/books/o-redaktorskom-masterstve/glava-sedmaya-marshak-redaktor]; Ian Larri, "V poiskakh prozrachnogo slova," in B. Galanov, I. Marshak, and M. Petrovskii, comps., *Zhizn' i tvorchestvo Samuila Iakovlevicha Marshaka: Marshak i detskaia literatura* (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1975), p. 171; D. Iu. Leshchik, "Leningradskii zhurnal 'Ezh'" [https://institutspb.ru/pdf/hearings/11-04_Leshik.pdf].

33 Chukovskaia, *V laboratorii redaktora*.

34 Aelita Assovskaia, "Kak pisatel' Ian Larri Stalina prosveshchal," in Zakhar Dicharov, comp., *Raspiatye: Pisateli-zhertvy politicheskikh repressii*, vypusk 1: *Tainoe stanovitsia iavnym* (Sankt-Peterburg: Severo-zapad, 1993), p. 219.

35 Chukovskaia, *V laboratorii redaktora*.

36 Party resolutions of 1924 and 1932 show that Bolshevik leaders accorded great ideological importance to children's literature, even as they acknowledged that authors needed to have leeway to make a story appealing to children; see Marina Balina, "Creativity through Restraint: The Beginnings of Soviet Children's Literature," in Marina Balina and Larissa Rudova, eds., *Russian Children's Literature and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 9–15. My point is simply that a tendency of adults (across cultures) to see the category of "children's" as less than serious may well have affected publishing decisions.

a salutary influence that reached beyond children's literature. Through his "Marshak Academy," as it affectionately came to be known, he was shaping the literary taste of future readers, all of whom start out as children. It was through his outreach to gifted Soviet writers that many of them began to write for children, among them Ol'ga Berggol'ts, Veniamin Kaverin, Nikolai Tikhonov, Aleksei Tolstoi, and Zoshchenko.[37] Marshak persuaded them to try their hand at writing for children by presenting it as a challenge and an artistic test.

To build a title list, Marshak did not rely solely on professional writers. He sought out divers, aviators, and other experts for books on specialized topics, looking for professionals across occupations who might have the interest and ability to write an informative and engaging children's book.[38] One such project wound up in the hands of the science fiction writer Ian Larri, after Marshak asked an acquaintance, the renowned biologist Lev Semenovich Berg, to recommend someone to write a children's book on insects. Berg thought of Larri, who had once been his student. When Larri received the request, he was on the point of quitting literature. "My manuscripts were so heavily edited that I couldn't recognize my own work, since in addition to the book's editors, anyone with free time took an active part in correcting my 'opus,' starting with the chief editor of the publishing house and ending with the bookkeeping staff …. Everything the editors 'improved' sounded so wretched that now I am ashamed to be considered the author of those books."[39]

Larri decided to write the book about insects. As it turned out, his manuscript was vetted not by Marshak's Leningrad staff but in Moscow. *Neobyknovennye prikliucheniia Karika i Vali* (*The Unusual Adventures of Karik and Valia*), which eventually became a beloved children's classic, revolved around a professor and two children who shrink to a miniscule size and must then develop survival techniques against giant predator insects. The Moscow editors found the entire plot inadmissible. Their report instructed Larri in the "correct way to present nature to children." Shrinking the characters was a fatal flaw, because it presented nature to children as a threat rather than something for humans to master.[40] This assessment was the exact opposite of the approach Marshak had instilled among his Leningrad apprentices: "our young readers think in images, not abstract concepts, and a book must appeal to their imagination rather than be didactic."[41]

This children's classic nearly wound up in the trash can. Marshak seems to have been unaware of the editors' assessment until Larri, after considerable hesitation, decided to appeal to him. Marshak overruled the referees (and also

37 Chukovskaia, *V laboratorii redaktora*.

38 Ibid.

39 Assovskaia, "Kak pisatel' Ian Larri Stalina prosveshchal," pp. 217–218.

40 Ibid., pp. 218–219.

41 Chukovskaia, *V laboratorii redaktora*.

worked with Larri to improve the manuscript).[42] When the revised manuscript was submitted, the editors' report praised it for traits it had already had before the revision, and went on to note that it included accurate science education in a plot that would be appealing to young readers.[43] It is not clear if these were different editors from those who reviewed the original manuscript, or whether Marshak intervened in the assessment of the revised version. Larri's book was published in 1937 and continues to be reprinted today.

The review process for Larri's manuscript took place amid the hysteria of the purges, with Marshak's Leningrad staff in turmoil. The NKVD was beginning to arrest the *Oberiu* writers whom Marshak had brought in to run the children's magazines *Ezh* (*The Monthly*) and *Chizh* (*The Highly Interesting Magazine*)—Nikolai Oleinikov (in 1937), Nikolai Zabolotskii (in 1938), and later Daniil Kharms and Aleksandr Vvedenskii (both in 1941). Perhaps to avoid arrest himself, Marshak moved to Moscow in 1938,[44] continuing his editorial work from the offices there.

Shaming of Leading Literary Cadres

With Stalin's literary policy based on periodic public shaming campaigns, notably in 1936, 1940, 1946, and 1949, browbeating was baked into literary policy. The results were the opposite of the desired world-renowned literature, as writers and editors retreated ever further into the safety of literary cliché. While the 1936 campaign against formalism and naturalism, led by *Pravda* over three months from late January through April, was aimed mainly at non-party writers, communist writers, too, increasingly came under attack. This was especially so after the war, when acclaimed party writers of proven loyalty who occupied prominent positions, such as the Writers' Union general secretary, Aleksandr Fadeev, his deputy Simonov, and the editor of *Oktiabr'*, Fedor Panferov, were subjected to public shaming. By early 1946, these party stalwarts found themselves uncomfortably in agreement with a wide swath of writers who were rebelling against their literary minders.[45] In May, Panferov wrote an editorial for *Oktiabr'* arguing that the officials in charge of literature were unqualified. His decision to pen this critique took shape amid a groundswell of literary discontent that gained steam in these months before the notorious party resolution of August 1946 against Zoshchenko and Anna Akhmatova. He took the precaution of alerting Malenkov and Andrei Zhdanov in advance.

42 Assovskaia, "Kak pisatel' Ian Larri Stalina prosveshchal," *Raspiatye*, p. 219.

43 Ibid., pp. 218–219.

44 Ben Hellman, "Samuil Marshak: Yesterday and Today," in Balina et al., eds., *Russian Children's Literature*, pp. 231–232; Maxim D. Shrayer, ed., *An Anthology of Jewish-Russian Literature: Two Centuries of Dual Identity in Prose and Poetry*, vol. 1 (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2007), p. 193.

45 Any, *The Soviet Writers' Union*, p. 181.

Instead of warning him not to publish it, they set him up for punishment, following a standard tactic: let the miscreant print his piece so as to blast him in a withering reply.[46]

In November 1947, Fadeyev's novel *Molodaia gvardiia* (*The Young Guard*), which had won a first-class Stalin prize a year earlier and been adapted for the stage, suddenly came under withering attack.[47] Simultaneously, Simonov, who had enjoyed a meteoric rise, was similarly berated for supposed errors in his new novel *Dym otechestva* (*Smoke of the Fatherland*).[48] It is telling that Fadeev, while humiliated in this way, was kept on as head of the Writers' Union, and Simonov kept his post, too. Keeping a shamed person in a position of high visibility made for a more compliant official while also providing a graphic example of humbled obedience for everyone else to contemplate.

The targeting of Zoshchenko in the August 1946 resolution on literature is highly ironic. The resolution objected to Zoshchenko and Akhmatova on grounds of immorality, accusing them of defaming Soviet society (Zoshchenko) or of debauchery (Akhmatova); as such, they were in no position to provide readers with a moral example. The Zoshchenko story that the resolution attacked, "Prikliucheniia obez'ianki" ("Adventures of an Ape"), although published in the prominent literary journal *Zvezda*, had appeared nine months earlier in the children's magazine *Murzilka*. Zoschenko had begun to write for children in 1935 at the request of Marshak, for whom moral upbringing was a central concern of children's literature.[49] If we are to believe Chukovskaia, it was precisely that consideration that drove Marshak to approach Zoshchenko, in whose stories for adults he sensed an underlying, yet not didactic, ethical concern. That original nurturing impulse was now hijacked by the browbeating reflex.

It is possible that Zoshchenko may have been nothing more than collateral damage in the infighting between politburo rivals Malenkov and Zhdanov.[50] Regardless, in most cases, infighting bred further browbeating. On rare occasions, however, it could have the opposite effect, as when Agitprop officials, resentful of Fadeev's haughty treatment of them, threw their support to a group

46 Fedor Panferov, "O cherepkakh i cherepushkakh," *Oktiabr'*, 1946, no. 5, pp. 151–162; O. Kurganov and A. Koleskov, "Ob 'ispovediakh' i 'propovediakh' v zhurnale 'Oktiabr'," *Pravda,* June 24, 1946, cited in Babichenko, *Pisateli i tsenzory*, p. 115.

47 "'Molodaia gvardiia' na stsene nashikh teatrov," *Kul'tura i zhizn'*, November 30, 1947; "'Molodaia gvardiia' v romane i na stsene," *Pravda*, December 3, 1947; "Roman 'Molodaia gvardiia' i ego instsenirovki," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, December 7, 1947.

48 N. Maslin, "Zhizn' vopreki ...," *Kul'tura i zhizn'*, November 30, 1947.

49 The date can be deduced from M. Zoshchenko, "Deti i literatura. Iz rechi na sobranii komsomol'skogo aktiva Leningrada," *Detskaia literatura*, 1940, no. 1–2, pp. 41–42, cited in Chukovskaia, *V laboratorii redaktora.*

50 Vitalii Volkov, "Za kulisami," *Avrora*, 1991, no. 8, pp. 144–146; V. I. Demidov and V. A. Kutuzov, "Poslednii udar," in V. I. Demidov and V. A. Kutuzov, comps., *Leningradskoe delo* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1990), p. 51, cited in Babichenko, *Pisateli i tsenzory*, pp. 119, 133.

of rebellious liberal dramatists who made a public stand opposing literary policy and Fadeev as its chief representative. With Agitprop's support, these dramatists commandeered the proceedings of the All-Russian Theater Society in November 1948, and also made a strong dissent at the Writers' Union's Twelfth Plenum the following month. This brief flirtation with liberalism on the part of Agitprop quickly faded when Fadeev complained to Malenkov and others.[51]

Conclusion

The Central Committee secretaries settled on the twin policies of harsh censorship and browbeating, even as they were perennially unhappy with the literature this combination produced. Proponents of nurturing were liquidated while browbeating editors were kept on as the party's leading literary cadres. The Central Committee secretaries seemingly went to extraordinary lengths to avoid concluding that attempting to achieve a literature of world renown while employing a strict censorship was a fool's errand. Neither the yearly plan that every journal had to submit for Agitprop's approval, nor the establishment of a special Agitprop sector devoted exclusively to fiction, nor the constant reconfiguring of Agitprop and other organs of control produced the desired literary results. While it is obvious that these policies led to the publication of substandard works, it is worth pointing out that so did party-sponsored nurturing of working class literary recruits, whose deficiencies made them poor candidates for a literary career.

True nurturing, in the pockets where it managed to flourish, came primarily from non-party writers who found themselves in environments that were not closely monitored—"holes" in institutional supervision that afforded opportunities for sustained nurturing. The beneficiaries showed their gratitude when it was their turn to lead. By 1956, the Literary Institute had institutionalized the nurturing practices of Sel'vinskii, Paustovskii, and others: first-year students were not allowed to make criticisms, a prohibition meant to teach them that it was not permissible to shred one's colleagues out of envy or opportunism. Beginners were instead tasked with finding things to praise in one another's work.[52] This mandate to search for what was positive exactly coincided with the teachings of Marshak, whose activity at Gosizdat's children's literature department offers perhaps the most striking example of a methodological and philosophical "bypass" within a state literary institution.

51 Gennadii Kostyrchenko, *Tainaia politika Stalina: Vlast' i antisemitizm; Novaia versiia*, tom 2 (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2015), p. 76.

52 Inna Vishnevskaia, untitled essay, in S. N. Esin, ed., *Litinstitut v tvorcheskikh seminarakh masterov: Portret nesushchestvuiushchei teorii* (Moscow: Izd-vo Literaturnogo instituta im. A. M. Gor'kogo, 2000), p.156.

Writers like Mandel'shtam, Akhmatova, and Pasternak, who topped the Soviet pantheon, had no platform from which to engage in mentoring. Working in the private space, they produced the brilliant literature that writers working in the Soviet public space could not. That literature did not match the authorities' vision, so they suppressed it. When a renowned literature turned out to be incompatible with keeping up appearances, keeping up appearances won.