

LITERATURE, REMEMBERING AND THE END OF WAR IN THE NORTH-WEST OF RUSSIA

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In the far North, the peculiar characteristics of the living conditions there usually participate in the strategies of self-identification employed by those who write about it. In such cases, the North is likely to constitute a challenge, or an alternative, to the comfortable lifestyle offered by the city. Even though in the Russian literature of the second half of the 20th century the North is closely associated with the "village prose" movement, the contrast with the urban is not necessarily or at all times its main focus. When this geographical area is written about by those who are themselves from the North, it can serve as a landscape that is lived in and identified with on a day-to-day basis. As the authors and literary critics of village prose viewed it, the agricultural potential of the area and its rural settlement pattern provided it with its main characteristics. Thus, Abramov's tetralogy *Brat'ja i sestry* (*Brothers and Sisters*) – one of the most acclaimed texts of Russian culture set in the North-West – focused on the life of the peasants in a circumpolar village which was also a Soviet collective farm. World War Two, or the "Great Patriotic War" as Russians call it, constitutes an important backdrop for its events. That history is not written exclusively in the battlefields or in the capitals appears to be one of the messages of the tetralogy. In the first novel, the events it describes take place behind the northern front; the two subsequent novels deal with the post-war recovery; while the fourth novel traces the life of the same characters in the 1960s and 70s.

In the wake of the 2005 international celebrations of victory in World War Two, when Russia was in search of "useful pasts", critical

assessments of the Soviet cultural legacy overlooked this tetralogy. A special joint issue of the Russian journal *NZ* and the German *Osteuropa*, for instance, was devoted to the study of the cultural memories of war in the respective countries. One of the contributions argued for a chronological account, in which the Stalinist post-war suppression of memory, made manifest by the temporary banning of the Victory day celebrations, was replaced by the upsurge in lyricism that characterised the Brezhnevite attitude towards it. "The radically *affective* front-line perception" was thus streamlined for the needs of the closed, militaristic and bureaucratic Soviet society and served, without exception, the "histories of victory" and "the theme of heroic sacrifice, the test of true human values and relationships" (Gudkov 2005: 51; 54). This is the nationalist pattern that the official Russia of today recycled for the staging of the 60-ieth anniversary of victory. Others, on the contrary, find some historical evidence of an increasing adaptation to emotionally uncomfortable experiences in Soviet culture, especially in the "war literature" of the 60s and 70s. There are grounds for distinguishing between the state of emotional affect as such and a potentially mind-changing experience. By and large, the ban in Soviet culture applied primarily to the evocation of *existentially* uncomfortable experience (Kukuljin 2005: 326).

One of the reasons why Abramov's tetralogy was ignored can be found in the extreme compartmentalisation of the group labels that were applied to literature during the Soviet period. The re-examination of Soviet literature currently taking place tends to focus almost exclusively on what was then called "war literature"; Abramov's tetralogy has not commonly been included in this category. The Northern outpost in the tetralogy remained relatively safely removed from the frontline. Another reason could be that this is an extensive work (which is in itself worth examining in terms of the

history of literature) and that it does not fit the chronologies that have been offered this far. Gradually, it carves out a literary space that has an alternative, contradictory and far less victorious, sense of wartime history. Most importantly, it will be argued, it attempts to overturn the ban on expressing not only the sense of emotional discomfort caused by history, but also existential discomfort.

When the criteria "emotionally uncomfortable experience" or "the radically affective front-line perception" crop up in scholarly assessments of the topic of war, they relate to the psychoanalytical model. Among other sources, psychoanalysis has informed studies of cultural memory; it views forgetting as "an active process of repression, one that demands vigilance and is designed to protect the subject from anxiety, fear, jealousy, and other difficult emotions" (Sturken 1997: 8). The biographical literature on Abramov, who fought in Leningrad when its siege by the Germans was claiming hundreds of thousands of lives, can serve as an example. One of the authors of the reminiscences admitted it was hard to find words to describe Abramov's cries for food when he arrived, severely wounded, at her hospital (in Krutikova-Abramova 2000: 63). Traumatized individuals develop screen memories in order to protect themselves from difficult and socially unacceptable emotions. When such screens are not available, they may well find themselves lacking a language for their past. Memory studies have taken to examining cultural media as the manufacturers of collective screen memories. These, when concerned with war, often impose a patriotic, or nationalist, gloss upon recollections of suffering.

As a writer, Abramov no doubt took part in the manufacturing of screens, yet his tetralogy at times also shows a keen awareness of the abuses of the memory of war propagated by the official discourse. Words and images invoking patriotism and nationality in *Brat'ja i*

sestry are distributed unevenly. Few such tropes can be found in the second and third books, while their number is higher in the first and last books of the tetralogy. This is one of the problems to which this article seeks to offer an explanation. Perhaps, it was that shift of angle – war seen from the far North – that made the author aware of a lack of sufficient collective screens to cover it. This article examines the existential moment as a moment of conflict between various strategies of self-identification available to his literary characters, the moment when the choice is no longer obvious. Perhaps, it was also the unspeakable element of Abramov's own participation in war that was leading him beyond the confines of the collective memory. The first novel in what later would become a tetralogy was published in 1958. If the tetralogy is duly considered a part of the new village prose movement, this, the first, village prose novel on the life of the countryside in 1942 still sported many of the clichés of the Stalinist socialist realism. The title, *Brothers and Sisters*, served well the purpose of its plot, which is best summarised by the following quotation from the text:

And with the greatest happiness was one to subject oneself wholly and fully to this force now, since it punished mercilessly anything that attempted to break out of the shared flow, to live its own, separate life. And perhaps therefore his soul lacked peace at that moment; as his body was becoming suppler, so also personal wishes made themselves more strongly heard. They were isolating him, forcing him out of the shared flow, day by day destroying that harmony of a complete dissolution in the collective, in which he had lived at the frontline and during his first weeks in Pekashino. (1990: 180)

The recovery of the protagonist, wounded and sent to the countryside as a party envoy, urges him to get back to the front. After a brief lapse, he attains a renewed consciousness of unity with the people, or the

nation. Socialist realism recycles the Tolstoyan intonation of *War and Peace* in order to fit the self-reflection by the hero illustrated above. Whereas Tolstoy pledged pacifism, though, the nation is here self-righteously coercive. The novel still managed to seem like a literary revelation for some against the backdrop of the even more cliché-ridden collective farm literature. Providing the frontline with food supplies was not an easy task for its characters – women, old people and children – in the circumpolar conditions. Those who were left behind were ready to make sacrifices in order to contribute to the defeat of the external enemy.

While lyricism is believed by some to be a Brezhnevite addition to the renditions of wartime, Abramov has not entirely escaped it in this text of 1958, in spite of his, already pronounced, distaste of rose-tinted verbal palettes. Lyrical descriptions of nature appear only in the first novel of the tetralogy, which are written in the specific "generalised-personal" mode of Russian grammar. The following quotation stems from a description of the Polar day: "Neither is day day, nor night night. [...] You are wandering around the village – and the houses and trees start slightly as if to melt and wave – and you yourself cease to feel the weight of your body [...] ..." (1990: 106). This mode of lyrical description, unusual in large prosaic genres, helps the novel to unify the discourse of the author and the characters, as well as the private and public spheres of the characters on the level of content (Kudrjajtseva 2003). The poetisation of nature also goes hand in hand with nationalism:

Perhaps, he had heard or read about it somewhere, but he firmly remembered a belief that prior to the arrival of the Russians there were no birches in Siberia. And now, when he was examining these snow-white trees in awe, he was imagining the roads of the Russian man on earth, marked out by birches. (1990: 181)

As the peasant characters of the 1940s are revealed as, at best, semi-literate, it is their concern with the development on the front that helps them to learn the map of the nation, of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the text naturalises this map in the accessible and sentimental sign system "marked out by birches" and connects it with an inherent Russianness.

It took Abramov two years to publish his literary debut, and the biographical literature on the writer highlights particularly the problem of its title, *Brothers and Sisters*. It is significant for the purpose of discussing the issue of nationalism that the title connotes Stalin's first address to the Soviet people after the outbreak of war with Germany, the likelihood of which he had gone to great lengths to deny. This mobilisation of a Christian form of address (which had previously become tainted in the communist worldview) had a positive effect on the mobilisation of the nation. None of Abramov's contemporaries discuss the quite obvious connection to Stalin's speech. Instead, they recall that the editors attempted to turn down the title, but on the grounds of its Christian connotations (in Krutikova-Abramova 2000: 89). The issue of Stalinism was allegedly not brought up in the late fifties, the time of de-Stalinisation.

While the first novel is worth considering as an instance of one author's slow transition from a Stalinist socialist realism to village prose, Abramov advanced much further along this path in the second novel. Little lyrical sentiment and no weightless bodies can be found in this publication of 1968. The multitude of physical conditions, mutilations and painful deaths is striking in the postwar countryside of *Dve zimy i tri leta* (*Two Winters and Three Summers*): "choking on the sticking moss, suffering from constipation they would no more cry from the outdoors "Mo-o-the-er, I am dying" (1990: 264); "they have

dried out, poor women, their toothless mouths caved in, and they had such a guilty, searching look, as if they asked for forgiveness" (1990: 300); "the odour and the lice that floated up on the water in the washing basin made her nauseous" (1990: 329); "pneumonia", "her whole body was covered in weals, she could neither sit up nor lie down, and spent the last night on her knees, as if at prayer", "his back was burned to the bones" (1990: 338). The last set of examples describes the impact of the compulsory winter works in wood-felling, an additional task to that of providing food supplies. The typical heroes and heroines of the Stalinist literature were to be blond and blue-eyed (Clark 1981), and any physical imperfections in bodily representations of the rulers were to be eliminated (Dobrenko 1993). Yet the Stalinist canon also sported the ailing protagonist of *Kak zakal'alas' stal'* (*How the Steel was Tempered*) as an example of the ultimate self-sacrifice of the body to duty.

The conditions of the wartime and post-war years are gravely discomfoting in the second of Abramov's novels, but the very lack of a foreseeable change to accompany the transition from war to peace brings the rhetoric of sacrifice into question. While this novel reveals more about the wartime than the first one ever did, an ironic opposition also emerges on numerous occasions between the war and the postwar conditions. The following example concerns the wood-felling after the war: "Here is the celebration. Ten thousand four hundred square meters. They have never been given a norm like this during the whole of the war" (1990: 324). Another instance concerns the burden of taxation: "they were not at war, yet they took every house from the back" (1990: 445).

The inapplicability of war as a universal justification, and metaphor, for every action appears also in connection with the issue of the Soviet prisoners of war. One of them is driven to death by wood-

elling after his return from German captivity (having possibly first spent a period of time in a Stalinist camp). This death signifies the turning point for the protagonist: "Timofej was not chased into the woods by the war. By people..." (1990: 467). The protagonist is forced "almost to kiss the deceased" while saving the body from being washed away into a river (1990: 469). The symbolism of the episode has not so much to do with official Soviet humanism, as with the kiss of Judas and Christian repentance. Abramov, however, is not ahistorical: Christian patience is inadequate in the face of the continuing debasement brought about by poverty. The focus of the text is more social than in many other village prose writers.

When one's work ethic is not rewarded in the collective farm, and yet family responsibilities make it impossible for him to leave for the city, the hero of the Soviet novel starts to question the existential condition: "I am a grown man – and nothing works out for me. [...] Who is crying? Ilja the victor" (1990: 536). The "literary" style alludes to Dostoevsky's Marmeladov in "There was nowhere to go. Not a single light around" (1990: 395), instead of the countryside vernacular found in a similar episode (1990: 540). As the village community interferes unnecessarily with the protagonist's private life, neither does traditionalism remain an unquestioned option. If Soviet literature occasionally approached the existential when describing "the desperation of a person, who remains true to his principles, but this faith cannot save anyone and cannot be confirmed by anyone" (Kukulin 2005: 334), this is fitting for parts of *Dve zimy i tri leta*. In Abramov's words, moreover, he was writing "a man, who is scared because he is beginning to think differently" (1990: 626).

However supportive Khrushchev and Brezhnev are both perceived to have been of agricultural topicality, by 1968 Abramov had been subject to a 5-year ban on publishing. Only the journal *Novyj*

mir could accept *Dve zimy i tri leta* for publication a year before the dismissal of its chief editor, the acclaimed "war poet" Tvardovsky. The latter's personal approval made publication possible, yet he was in favour of divorcing the style of the external narrator from the style of the characters, in effect, of divorcing the novel from its disturbing style. Grave physical descriptions may also have been noted by him – although they have been ignored by criticism, unlike the turning to the vernacular as a token of the more general development in Soviet literature away from Stalinist pseudo-classicism. A novel is not unthinkable, which allows for the physical and emotional discomfort and the vernacular of the characters, but which lets the discourse of the narrator objectify their experience. Abramov seems to have refrained from doing this in order to underline the characters' own questioning of their living conditions.

Finally, there is the question of whether these characters embody or stand in for the author's own memories. Abramov did work in his native village when recovering from the wounds he received in Leningrad. For the rest of the war, however, he was called to serve in the Arhangel'sk office of the feared Stalinist counter-espionage police. One publication refers to a rumour, apparently citing Abramov's own words, which attributed to him killing 14 people¹. Was he not giving words to his own memories in the most emotionally and existentially charged novel of the tetralogy? During times of peace, when it becomes the unspeakable, the trauma of killing may come to haunt even the most assured soldiers. If this is so, the question remains whether Abramov's text constitutes an act of repentance or a cover-up. The novel form is a complex answer; if nothing else, this particular novel highlights various facets of necessity that push its protagonist towards the making of a choice.

¹ anonymous editorial in *Kontinent* 37, 1983: 384

The third novel of the tetralogy, *Puti-pereput'ja* (*Roads and Crossroads*) adheres to the same plot as the novella "Vokrug da okolo" ("Round and About"), which brought about the ban on publishing Abramov. In it, illegal action replaces existential questioning: the chairman of the collective farm uses its property to pay its still starving workers illegally. He is imprisoned and his fate is not resolved at the end of the narrative. Posthumous, perestroika, publications based on Abramov's archive reveal that a discussion of the continuing presence of wartime communism in the country was crossed out by the censors. This was the first of Abramov's novels to suffer severely: a minimum of 60 alterations were made before it could finally appear in print in 1973. A key passage, however, was left in place: "We have to understand once and for all: the extraordinary working conditions have come to an end. [...] You want to make the condition of war permanent, but we should cross it out from the life of the people as soon as possible" (1991: 219). This passage concerns improving the standard of living in the Northern periphery, against the prevailing attitude of the centre. The agricultural policies and the commemoration are separate issues, as the protagonist of the novel is assured: "You see, one cannot forget the war even if one wants to. There is no need to worry about that, I believe" (1991: 97).

In contrast, when charged with the illegal actions of the chairman of the collective farm, the head of the district party committee plots his own defence in a language that affirms the wartime metaphor: "Victory! Zarudnyj has been shown to his place. Now he himself, Podrezov, will be leading the parade" (1991: 220). At the end of the narrative this character nonetheless also accepts his responsibility for the case. This, ironically, causes the text to make the journey back from the critical realm of village prose into socialist realism with its conscientious and conscious party figures.

In the last novel, *Dom (House, 1978)*, the countryside of the 70s is finally modernised and heavily subsidised. When forgetting has already taken place, the maintenance of what has been inherited – remembrance - becomes an issue. There appears a certain poeticised nostalgia in the treatment of the wartime: "God forbid them once again to experience the same hunger as during and after the war, god forbid those horrible times to repeat... But still, still... [...] Never did they, the Pryaslins, have as much happiness and joy. All the falling outs and clashes, all of life's floatsome is now forgotten, what remains is purity and conscientiousness, brotherly soldering and help" (1991: 389-390).

Subsequent to the publishing of the last novel, the tetralogy received its collective title from the title of the first novel, "Brat'ja i sestry". It would be wrong to read this as indicative of a total idealisation of the past. The motif of war reappears in the reminiscences of the peasant wife of one of the "first communists". Their scope stretches from the Civil War and the conflicts in the Southern borderlands to the Patriotic War and the post-war years. Her husband is imprisoned as an "enemy of the people" at the outbreak of the war with Germany, which generates a new contrastive mode in the tetralogy: "Everyone was screaming, the whole world was howling: the war, the war [...] but to me the war brought some relief, forgive my sins. I was allowed to work" (1991: 477). Her young son volunteers: "They accepted him, allowed him to die. [...] He said he would prove that his father was not an enemy" (1991: 478). Stalinist repressions are thus revealed as worse than the war. The latter, ambivalently, helped these characters partially to return into the compass of the nation. These passages remained in the text after three rounds with the censors; many others were taken out. Bearing in mind the sensitivity to the topic of Stalinism in the Brezhnevite epoch, the fact of their publication is still remarkable.

The collective title can therefore be seen as a clever inversion of the Stalinist sentiment. As much as anything else, the title had to do with the affirmation of familial heritage and the unity of the Pryaslin family in the face of historical hardships. The designations "Russia" and "Russian", along with the word "nation" return in the tetralogy and thereby also signal a divorce between the ethnic family, "Russia", and "Soviet Union". The process of remembering historical events traces a boundary that delimits the ethnic "other". One strongly worded example has the Southern borderlands as a context: "She was a poisonous young snake, of other nations" (1991: 410). Another Krihiz character deserves the following characterisation: "Although not of our nation, although he has brought us to the edge of the world, I wouldn't say a bad word about him. A communist!" (1991: 408). Apparently positive, this quotation still draws a distinction between the different Soviet nationalities and reinforces a spatial distance between them. In the continuation of this passage in the text, the protagonist, who is critical of the exploits of Evdokija's husband, argues: "Kalina Ivanovič himself did not give a damn about his house. But Russia, by the way, consists of houses... Yes, the wooden ones, carpented by people" (1991: 411). The title of the novel, *Dom*, translates both as "home" and "house", as does the corresponding word in this quotation. The other nations remain outside this home and the confines of Russia. All of this suggests in the late 70s a reapproachment on Abramov's part with the nationalist tendency of other village prose writers, where Russian nationalism would equal "minority" nationalism in relation to state nationalism.²

This does not, however, lessen the diversity of war metaphors that the tetralogy explicated in Soviet culture. War was a vehicle of national consolidation in early Abramov. Later, war became

² This tendency was deployed in Brudny (1998).

synonymous with severe physical and emotional discomforts that provided the background for existential questioning and contributed to a higher degree of individuation in the protagonist. At the same time, war was revealed as an undesirable metaphor for the centre's attitude to the rural periphery. Finally, war with Germany in part provided a parallel for Stalinism in late Abramov. In part, memories of war recreated a sense of an external "other" and became a vehicle for a new collective identity, that of minority nationalism. In line with Brudny's main argument (1998), it could be argued that the combination of higher education, veteran status and peasant origin made Abramov a member of the elite, and that his writings promoted the changing policies of the time. This article has therefore focused on the disjunction of the tetralogy from the official chronologies and those of village prose, which demonstrates that this is a truth with several qualifications.

On the boundary between "war" and "village" prose, in the circumpolar outpost, there can be found a less conventional treatment of the topic of war, which makes the nation less homogenous. A study of 1983 noted that, when combined, war prose and village prose provided Soviet literature with new expressive means (Belaja 1983: 9). This was interpreted as indicative of a drive towards a synthesis (arguably an epic one) and of an abandonment of the labels "village", "war", "city", "youth" etc. literature, which had been established since the 60s. The Soviet Union had experienced its own upsurge of memory and "identity" writings, but, instead of synthesis, an even deeper stratification took place under perestroika. A transition from politics by culture (which occurred in the absence of a proper political debate) to professional politics, of which nationalism was also a part, was taking place. The question of whether the memories that the Soviet

writings on war have left behind were uniform or not is still one that is well worth looking into.

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