

# BOOK REVIEWS

*In five years it may be as dangerous to praise Stalin as it was to attack him two years ago. But I should not regard this as an advance. Nothing is gained by teaching a parrot a new word.*

—George Orwell, in September 1946.

Orwell's remarkable prophecy, made while Stalin still ruled, proved to be off by only five years. It was not until 1956, a decade later, that Nikita Khrushchev delivered his historic speech on Stalin's crimes before the Twentieth Congress of the Communist party of the USSR. There was no talk then of glasnost or perestroika. Indeed, it will be recalled that Khrushchev's denunciation of the so-called "cult of Stalin's person" was originally meant to remain a "secret" report to the party faithful. But the speech itself nonetheless led to one of those periodic "thaws" that have now become a familiar feature of Soviet political and cultural life in the post-Stalin era—thaws that, until now anyway, have always proved to be short-lived.

As far as Soviet literature is concerned, unquestionably the most important result of Khrushchev's attempt at de-Stalinization was the publication in 1962 of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and the emergence of its author as a major figure on the world literary scene. So explosive was Solzhenitsyn's short novel about life in the Gulag deemed to be by the editors of *Novy Mir*, which first published it, that they artfully contrived to have its publication personally approved in advance by Khrushchev himself, thus circumventing the censors, and the book did indeed cause the expected sensation when it appeared. Overnight the name of Solzhenitsyn became the most exalted in Soviet literature—praised, amazingly, in the official organs of the Communist party and everywhere hailed as marking a turning point in the Soviet regime itself. Yet less than three years later the KGB had launched its campaign to suppress Solzhenitsyn's work and stifle its author, and the process was begun that led first to the expulsion from the Writers' Union and then to the enforced deportation from the country itself of the writer—by now a Nobel laureate—so recently saluted in *Izvestia* as "a true helper of the party in a sacred and vital cause." Even before Solzhenitsyn was forced into ex-

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## CHILDREN OF THE ARBAT Anatoli Rybakov/Little, Brown/\$19.95

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ile, the further publication of his writings—which has meant the publication of all his major works—was prohibited in the Soviet Union. This prohibition remains in effect today.

It is in the light of this history that Anatoli Rybakov's novel, *Children of the Arbat*, needs first of all to be understood, for it was in the period of Khrushchev's thaw, with its heady but ambiguous promise of de-Stalinization, that this book was first conceived; and it is entirely to the pre-Solzhenitsyn, Socialist Realist conventions of Soviet fiction that it really belongs. Its "innovations," if they can be called that, lie in the book's political line, not in the way its characters or their story are imagined. In the immediate aftermath of *Ivan Denisovich*, it must have seemed to many a loyal member of the Writers' Union that the party line on literature had shifted at least to the extent of allowing for a few discreet horror stories about the Stalin era so long as they were told in a manner that questioned nothing fundamental about the system that had produced the horrors in the first place. It was in this spirit—which, even at this low threshold of ex-

pectation, soon proved to be unduly optimistic—that Rybakov set about the task of writing a popular novel, set in the early 1930s, that would be critical of Stalin while at the same time meeting the needs of the current party line.

Which is to say, a novel that condemned Stalin's character and policies, documented some of the less blood-curdling injustices suffered by loyal party members at his hands, and acknowledged the atmosphere of fear, coercion, and terror that he perfected, while nonetheless affirming the proposition that the Revolution itself remained just and glorious and that true believers in the Leninist ideal remained pillars of virtue and models of Soviet manhood and womanhood no matter what adversities they were obliged to endure as the result of the tyrant's malign power.

As we know, Rybakov was in a perfect position to produce such a novel. Like the book's putative hero, Sasha Pankratov, the young Komsomol member who is in every respect a figure of virtue but who is nonetheless ar-

rested on false charges at the onset of the Stalinist terror and sent to Siberia, Rybakov suffered a similar fate in his youth—he is now 77—and was subsequently "rehabilitated." He had become a popular writer of children's books and was presumably a Communist in good standing when he started writing what is, in effect, a fictional chronicle—one is tempted to say, *fictional* in every sense—of his own generation, the generation whose youth was blighted by the wholesale arrests and purges and executions of the thirties. *Children of the Arbat* may thus be said to have been conceived as a double vindication—a vindication, first of all, of Rybakov himself and those of his own generation who believed in the Revolution and who suffered from what is now to be understood as Stalin's ghastly betrayal of it; but a vindication, too, of true Communism, which it is one of the novel's functions to distinguish from the monstrous mockery that Stalin is claimed to have turned it into.

To accomplish this double purpose, Rybakov turned to the genre of the two-tiered historical novel that had long been accepted by the party bureaucrats as the form most suitable to the large-scale—or "epic," as they say—depiction of Soviet life. Hence on one level the narrative recounts the ordeals of the good Sasha and his friends and family and enemies, while on another, interwoven with this story of their personal lives and their political fate, we are given some vivid glimpses of Stalin himself as he goes about the cold-blooded task of arranging for Kirov's assassination, the event that served as a pretext for what historians now call the Great Terror. In keeping with the strict conventions of Socialist Realist fiction, none of the characters in this novel—neither the invented ones like Sasha and his friends nor the historical figures like Stalin and Kirov—are anything but one-dimensional. As we would expect from a professional writer of children's tales, Rybakov proves to be a skillful storyteller, but he is incapable—as much, one suspects, for ideological as for literary reasons—of creating credible characters. Sasha himself is simply too good—both as a man and as a Communist—to be true, and so, for that matter, is Kirov. As for the women, both young and old, they are straight from central casting.

Even so—and despite its formulaic celebration of Lenin as the all-wise



leader of the Revolution that Stalin was now said to have betrayed through "bureaucratic perversion"—*Children of the Arbat* could not be published when it was completed in 1966. Khrushchev had been removed from power two years earlier, and even before it had succeeded in bringing about his downfall the Politburo had clearly lost its taste for de-Stalinization. In fact, the all but impossible task of rehabilitating Stalin himself, rather than his victims, was now given priority. A novel that depicted Stalin as the evil betrayer of Lenin's glorious Revolution obviously didn't stand much of a chance. Twice over the years *Children of the Arbat* was announced for publication, first by *Novy Mir* and then by *Oktyabr*, but then withdrawn as the Kremlin wrestled with the problem of the proper line to be followed in depicting the past. It had to wait for Gorbachev and the policies of glasnost and perestroika for the novel to be published, and the immense success that it has enjoyed in the Soviet Union since its appearance last year certainly does tell us something important about the way the Gorbachev regime differs from its predecessors—but not, perhaps, exactly what we have been told it tells us.

The novel's portrait of Stalin, for example, though candid by the standards of the Brezhnev era, is tepid stuff compared to other accounts that have already been given to us by Soviet writers who have displayed a stronger stomach for the truth than Anatoli Rybakov; and so, too, with his description of the dawn of the Stalinist era. Next to the figure who emerges from Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko's *The Time of Stalin*—to cite one of the less famous examples—Rybakov's portrait is almost a valentine. (It was Antonov-Ovseyenko's father Vladimir who led the Bolshevik storming of the Winter Palace in 1917. He was executed in the thirties, and Anton himself spent many years in Stalin's Gulag. *The Time of Stalin* was published here in 1981. It should be better known than it is.) And compared to Lydia Chukovskaya's novel, *The Deserted House*, or to the two volumes of Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoirs, *Hope Against Hope* and *Hope Abandoned*, Rybakov's account of his characters' response to

Stalinism is the sheerest political kitsch.

*Children of the Arbat* is no better, either, as literary sociology. One notes, among much else, the almost complete absence of any reference to anti-Semitism in this book. From a reading of the novel, you would have to believe that the Jews in the Soviet Union were more or less unaffected by the political developments it recounts. Jews hardly exist in this book, and considering the milieu that many of its characters are drawn from—the Arbat section of Moscow is well known for its cosmopolitan or "bohemian" character—their absence amounts to something akin to self-censorship.

But it is, above all, in its sentimentalization of Lenin and the myth of the Revolution that *Children of the Arbat* underscores not only the limits of Rybakov's literary imagination and political perspective but the meaning of its current success—both here and in the Soviet Union. The truth is, this novel, which pretends to face some of the harshest realities of Soviet history, leaves every fundamental question about the Revolution—Lenin's Revolution—unexamined. To the extent that it deals with Lenin at all, it simply and mendaciously invokes the all-too-familiar benign icon of Soviet mythology. Yet that icon is essential to the novel's portrait of Stalin, for it allows Rybakov to make of Stalin a kind of scapegoat for the Revolution while questioning nothing important about the Revolution itself. It allows him, in other words, to write not only about Stalin but about the Revolution and the Leninist ideal in a way that is palatable to the party and its traditions. By concentrating its criticism on Stalin, *Children of the Arbat* absolves itself from having to deal with the system that made Stalin—and that much larger phenomenon, Stalinism—possible and inevitable. Which is another way of saying that it absolves itself from having to deal with Leninism. It is in this sense, perhaps, that there is probably some truth to the claim that *Children of the Arbat* truly represents the spirit of glasnost and perestroika.

As for what the novel means to Soviet literature, it serves only to remind us that the great hope that dawned with the publication of *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* more than a quarter of a century ago remains to be fulfilled. □

## THANK GOD FOR THE ATOM BOMB AND OTHER ESSAYS

Paul Fussell/Summit Books/\$17.95

Thomas Mallon

Paul Fussell's growing readership looks to him for news of three territories he has made very much his own during the last dozen years: war, travel, and status. Books like *The Great War and Modern Memory*, *Abroad*, and *Class* have displayed a happy regression in literary-career terms. Professor Fussell, respected scholar of eighteenth-century literature at Rutgers and, more recently, Penn, has become a cultural and moral commentator of considerable reach: he is more like Swift and Burke and Johnson now than when he was writing books about them.

Having become famous for a book on the First World War, Fussell has lately been turning more and more of his attention to the Second—a war that was bad for literature, because it lacked the distinguishing thing of the First: irony. "The high-minded loquacity of all those poets of the Great War! Entirely a different scene from the style of the Second War, which is silence—silence ranging from the embarrassed to the sullen." From Vietnam, fought in a "postverbal age," one must expect even less: "how is it that we know ('for certain,' it's tempting to add) that no weighty, sustained poems, or even short poems of distinction, are going to come out of it? . . . Is it perhaps that we secretly recognize that real poetry is, as Hazlitt called it, 'right royal,' aristocratic in essence, and thus unlikely to arise from the untutored or the merely street-smart?"

If some of what Fussell has to say about travel seems a little obvious this time out, he does offer the useful coinage *touristees*, for "South Sea islanders, the lifetime junk-dwellers of Hong Kong, the villagers of India, the young women of China who spend their lives making tiny stitches on horrible embroidered pictures to sell to tourists. *Touristees* are the geeks of the contemporary world . . ." In any case, the postverbal age is also, he tells us, a post-touristic one: we no longer expect to acquire wisdom from travel, just as the deconstructionists tell us we

shouldn't look for it in literature.

Fussell is fond of Linnaean classification, even when it comes to offering an anatomy, as it were, of nudism: "Nude, older people look younger, especially when very tan, and younger people look even younger—almost like infants, some of them. In addition fat people look far less offensive naked than clothed . . . the eye is repulsed much less than in normal vacation life by those hideous 'resort' clothes." Turning his slightly embarrassed eye from highly formal cavorters on the Adriatic to spectators at the Indianapolis 500, he finds three social classes:

the middles, who on race day, in homage to the checkered flag, tend to dress all in black and white and who sit in the reserved seats; the high proles, who watch standing or lolling in the infield, especially at the turns, "where the action is"; and the uglies, the overadvertised, black-leathered, beer-sodden, pot-headed occupiers of that muddy stretch of ground in the infield at the first turn known as the Snake Pit.

Even though the aphoristic and allusive Fussell has something wise to say on nearly every page ("It's amazing the way a bikini, even if both top and bottom are present, looks grossly obscene in a nude context, nastily coy and flirtatious"), *Thank God for the Atom Bomb* is probably not as varied and stimulating as his previous gathering of essays, *The Boy Scout Handbook and Other Observations*. Readers may find him straining a bit in ones like "On the Persistence of Pastoral": "It is curious that as a venue of pleasure and relaxation, a place from which you return 'refreshed,' the beach began to be popular only when the demise of formal literary pastoral had taken place." I would say such things as automobiles and Robert Moses are more to the point here. I would also, as the recognized leader in American scholarship on the British poet Edmund Blunden (up to now a non-competitive sport), take issue with Fussell's description of Blunden's "unabashed patriotism." Blunden was abashed about roughly everything, including national identities. But Fussell is absolutely right in reasoning that Blunden's chief disqualification as a "modernist" is a fondness for people. (Surely no one has offered George Or-

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