

THE CENTENARY OF A GREAT RUSSIAN

Condensed from a biographical article

by Professor N. F. Belchikov

VISSARION GRIGOREVICH BELINSKY was born on June 13, 1811, in the town of Sveaborg, where his father, Grigory Nikiforovich served as doctor to an army boat crew. In 1816 the latter resigned from the Navy and accepted an appointment as district doctor in his hometown of Chembar, Penza gubernia, to which the entire family moved.

In his tender years Vissarion witnessed terrible scenes which he remembered all his life: serfs being flogged on the town square, exiles being herded for the march to Siberia. He heard stories of the cruel mistreatment of the serfs by their landlords of Penza gubernia. As the district doctor, his father was called upon to examine the victims and heal the maimed of body. The boy also learned about the customs of the countryside, the life and suffering of the serfs from the people who came from the villages to his father's house to study the art of vaccination.

In 1825 Belinsky graduated from the Chembar preparatory school and was enrolled in the Penza boys' gymnasium. In the gymnasium he read voluminously on history and literature, borrowing books from his teacher M. M. Popov and his friends. His favourite authors at that time were Pushkin and Zhukovsky.

The Decembrist uprising took place in 1825. The news of it spread all over the country, reaching even Penza. Talk of freedom and abolition of taxation began among the peasants. On orders from St. Petersburg the Penza police began to keep watch on the serfs, for the Tsarist Government was aware that "there were many more thinking people in this class than might be expected at first glance."

One of Belinsky's close friends was the son of a serf, Dmitry Kalinin. This high school friendship with a serf naturally set him thinking about the destiny of the capable lad who was doomed to pass his whole life as a slave.

BELINSKY did not finish the gymnasium. He left the third course to enter the University of Moscow in 1829.

In September, 1829, he successfully passed his examinations and entered the university. His limited means forced him

to apply for State accommodation. Early in 1830 his request was granted, and he moved into the dormitory. Soon, however, the "pleasures" of dormitory life prompted him to write home indignantly: "Conditions here make it preferable to be a scrivener in Chembar district than live in this accursed, dungeon-like State dormitory."

Young Russia was brought up at Moscow University in the thirties. Recovering from the defeat of the Decembrists, fresh energy began to flow in its veins. According to the memoirs of a contemporary, the students of those years believed that it was for them to raise the banner of liberty which had fallen from the hands of the Decembrists and hand it on to the succeeding generations.

One of Belinsky's contemporaries described the intellectual vitality of the young people of his time as follows: "At our get-togethers, we recited the prohibited poems of Ryleyev and Pushkin... everything excited and gripped us and elevated our spirits."

This was the atmosphere which surrounded Belinsky. His university years were a period of rapid spiritual development. Around him there formed in 1830 a circle of students who like himself were not well-to-do and were living at State expense.

This circle held meetings, at which it discussed university lectures, magazine articles and its members' own compositions.

In December, 1830, Belinsky read the students of the circle his drama "Dmitry Kalinin."

In this drama, Belinsky criticised serfdom through the lips of his hero (whose name coincided with that of his gymnasium friend Dmitriy Yegorovich Kalinin) and defended the human rights of the disfranchised: "Who gave some people the destructive right" he asked, "to bend others of their own kind to their will, and deny them that most sacred of things, their liberty. Who permitted some to despise the laws of nature and mankind? A lord can, to divert or amuse himself, skin his slave alive; he can sell him like cattle, exchange him for a dog, or horse, or cow, separate him for the duration of his life from his father, mother, brothers, and all he holds dear... Merciful God in Heaven... Our Father... tell me: Was it your wise hand that brought these snakes, these crocodiles, into the world... these tigers, who feed on the bones and meat of their own kind, who drink blood and tears like water?"

Belinsky's student friends were deeply moved by the drama. A month later the

author submitted it to the committee of censors for permission to publish. Its anti-feudal content, however, shocked the censors. They banned it, calling it "unethical and a dishonour to the university."

The censors' ban was a severe blow to Belinsky. Still, it did not break him. He continued to attend lectures, write poetry and reviews. Some of them were printed. Gradually, Belinsky was preparing himself for a literary career.

Early in 1831 he fell seriously ill, and was confined to hospital for several months. The university heads fearing the influence on the other students of his daring defence of the serfs and exposures of the feudal system, decided to get rid of Belinsky and expelled him from the university.

OSTED from the university, the young man was faced with a new care . . . how to earn his daily bread. He tutored and translated, but still lived in "desperate" need. He was helped in this difficult period of his life by a young professor at the university, N. I. Nadezhdin, who even earlier had placed certain paying literary pursuits his way. In August, 1834, he gave Belinsky "room and board" for his work in the journal "Telescope."

One month later, Belinsky's first noteworthy work "Literary Aspirations" (1834) began to appear in "Molva" (published as a supplement to the "Telescope"). It was the literary manifesto of the new Russia. Young Russia demanded that writers express "in their exquisite creations the spirit of the people among whom they were born and bred, with whom they lived one life, whose breath they breathed."

Belinsky saw the gulf that separated the people and the upper classes. "The people, or, to put it better, the masses of people, and society have parted ways. The former retain their old way of life and plaintive songs, into which they have poured their soul in sorrow and joy; the latter has changed beyond recognition and forgotten everything Russian, even the Russian language."

Belinsky justly reproached the nobility with contempt for their native culture. He placed his hopes on the people. In his "Literary Aspirations" the critic speaks of the necessity of enlightening the masses of the people. He says the Russian people "have always been waiting to study, but must begin their education from A.B.C., and not philosophy, from the preparatory school, and not the Academy." And Belinsky believed that a time would come when "education would sweep over Russia in a mighty wave."

But the idealism which marked Belinsky's outlook at this time, an idealism shaped under the influence of the German philosopher Hegel, led him to make mistakes of a political character. Misinterpreting Hegel's expression "All that is—is reasonable," he, the champion of the people's interest, came to the conclusion that consequently the

Tsarist autocracy was reasonable, that is, right!

Later, he recognised his mistake and criticised himself severely. "I condemn my unworthy desire to reconcile myself to base reality" he wrote. "Long live reason, away with darkness." Thus from "reconciliation" with the Tsarist regime, Belinsky goes over to recognition of revolution. "It is ridiculous to imagine that this (i.e., destruction of serfdom, of the Tsarist regime—Author) can happen of its own, with time, without violent upheavals or blood."

Now Belinsky espoused socialism, and was fired with a burning interest in the life of the socially downtrodden. Once again he came forth as the enemy of those who prosper at the expense of others.

BELINSKY's activity reached its height in St. Petersburg, to which he moved in 1839, and where he lived until his death. Belinsky published his articles in the journal "Otechestvennye Zapiski," and, after 1846, in the "Sovremennik."

In this period he enjoyed the reputation of teacher; he became the "ruler of the minds" of the younger generation and all forward-looking people in his time. "Young people in Moscow and St. Petersburg anxiously awaited the appearance of Belinsky's articles on the 25th of every month" Herten related. "Students kept coming into the cafes asking had the 'Otechestvenniye Zapiski' come yet. The thick number was torn from hand to hand. 'Is there an article by Belinsky?' 'Yes.' And they would swallow it down with feverish approval, laughing, arguing, and three or four of the ideas they believed in vanished like smoke."

St Petersburg cured him of his metaphysics, his idealism, his abstract theories. "I was crushed" Belinsky said, "by the spectacle of a society in which scoundrels and sheer mediocrities rule and have a say, while all that is noble and gifted languishes in shameful inactivity. My love of country, of the Russian, became more poignant."

Belinsky gave all the strength of his intellect and character to the fight against the feudal system, proclaiming his progressive ideas with passionate fervour. "Probably no one in the history of Russian literature and publicism" wrote M. I. Kalinin, "ever swayed men's minds as Belinsky did, or fired their civic sense so strongly, stirring them to the struggle against autocracy, for a democratic revolution."

The last years of the great critic's life were darkened by a terrible illness—consumption. Belinsky's suffering was intensified by the damp St. Petersburg climate, and "a vague and oppressive foreboding of something baleful." A contemporary tells us that during the last year of his life "rumours unfavourable to him began to circulate, and everything became more stifling and darker around about." The reports against him to police headquarters increased in number. One of them says plainly that "in his works

there is something that resembles Communism, and the younger generation may become altogether communistic from them."

When in February, 1848, rumours of the revolution in Paris reached St. Petersburg, Lieutenant General Dubbelt, head of the third department sent Belinsky a summons, but the critic did not report to headquarters.

He sensed, however, that there was trouble afoot. He knew that the Government had long been anxious to deprive him of his liberty. On meeting Belinsky on Nevsky Prospect, the commandant of the Peter and Paul Fortress joked: "And when are you coming to stay with us? I've a warm little cell that I'm keeping just for you."

Already a sick man, Belinsky made fun of the threats of the Government and talked of how well armed the Peter and Paul Fortress was. "That's because they're afraid I'll take it" he jested.

"By the Spring" a contemporary has told us, "his illness began to make rapid and grave inroads. His cheeks sank, his eyes grew dim and only rarely burned with fever, his chest fell, he could hardly walk, and his breathing became terribly difficult. Even the presence of friends became too much of a burden."

On June 5 and 6, Belinsky was delirious. He died at five o'clock in the morning, on June 7, 1848.

BELINSKY published his best articles in the journals "Otechestvennye Zapiskie" and "Sovremennik," including a series of eleven articles on Pushkin, several articles on Lermontov (his novel "A Hero of Our Times" and poems), on Gogol's poem, "Dead Souls," on Krylov, and remarkable reviews of Russian literature over the years 1842 to 1847.

Belinsky knew 18th and 19th century Russian literature thoroughly. He put Pushkin's genius above that of all other writers. "Pushkin is the most national Russian poet of any of his predecessors."

Pushkin's poetry is marked by respect for man as such, regardless of his origin, nobility, wealth or titles. "One of the highest and most sacred principles of real ethics" wrote Belinsky, "lies in respect for the human worth of every man, no matter who he is, first of all because he is a man, and then only because of his personal merits to the extent that he is endowed with such..."

Belinsky made equality and humanism in the relations between men the basis of society. Pushkin's poetry supported this principle, and the critic placed the poet very high, and predicted a grateful recognition for him by posterity. "A time will come when he (Pushkin) will be a classical poet in Russia. A time will come when posterity will erect an everlasting monument to him."

After Pushkin, the head of the new trend in literature was Gogol. He did away with all that was false in it, that interfered with

the portrayal of the genuine national qualities of the Russian. Gogol created profoundly authentic, purely Russian types. "He (Gogol) does not flatter life, but neither does he slander it; he is glad to bring to the surface all that is beautiful and human in it, but at the same time he does not in the least hide its blemishes... he is faithful to life to the nth degree."

Gogol dealt a crushing blow to another harmful trend—preference for the upper class hero. "contempt for the plain people of the world reached the limit. Anyone who did not have a colossal character, who worked quietly in his department, spoke simply, did not read verses... was unfit to be the hero of a novel or story." Gogol chose plain people, poor officials, the "little" man as the character of his works. Gogol, as Belinsky said, recognised the truth that "real people live on the earth and in society, and not somewhere up in the air, in the clouds... Man, who lives in society, is dependent upon it both in the way he thinks and the way he acts."

BELINSKY met Gogol in St. Petersburg. Their last meeting took place in Moscow in 1841. Gogol gave Belinsky the manuscript of the first part of his poem "Dead Souls" for him to take to St. Petersburg, since the Moscow censors had banned the publication of the poem. In St. Petersburg with Zhukovsky's help permission was secured and the poem saw the light of day.

But soon Gogol was frightened by his own works, in which he stigmatised the evils of the feudal system. In his book "Selections from My Correspondence with Friends" he denied the reality of his characters and declared that the immortal personalities he had created were the figment of his imagination, the "history" of his "own soul." Gogol was scared of the revolutionary implications of his "Dead Souls" and began to preach humility and submission to the Government and the church.

In reply to this reactionary thesis of Gogol's, Belinsky wrote him his famous letter of July 15, 1847, in which he mercilessly condemned the views expressed by the writer in his latest book. The critic was living abroad at that time, in Salzbrunn, and was therefore not hampered by the censors.

This letter to Gogol is one of the finest productions of the uncensored democratic press. It goes without saying that Belinsky's letter, expressing as it did the feelings of the serfs against feudal law, could not be printed. Belinsky sent it to Gogol through friends, but the letter became widely known before long among the progressive circles of Russian society.

A copy of the letter reached Herten, who printed it abroad. In Russia it had its first complete printing only after the revolution of 1905. For dissemination and

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HE CREATED RUSSIA'S NATIONAL THEATRE

ALEXANDER OSTROVSKY—1823-1948

By DAVID MAGARSHACK

YOU have given Russian literature a whole library of works of art and you have created a world of its own for the Russian stage," I. A. Goncharov wrote to Alexander Ostrovsky on the occasion of the thirty-fifth anniversary of his work for the stage.

"You have completed the building for which Fonvisin, Griboyedov, and Gogol laid the foundation stones. It is only after you that we Russians can proudly claim to possess a national theatre of our own—a theatre that can justly be called the Theatre of Ostrovsky."

This tribute from one of Russia's greatest novelists to one of Russia's greatest dramatists is as true now—a hundred and twenty-five years after Ostrovsky's birth—as it was true about seventy years ago. In a certain sense it is even truer to-day—for to-day Ostrovsky's audience in Russia is much larger than it has ever been.

The remarkable growth of Ostrovsky's popularity on the Russian stage is due mainly to the vitality of his art. Ostrovsky wrote about fifty original plays. He is the creator of about five hundred original characters from every walk of life—characters that are as alive to-day as they were in Ostrovsky's own day. In not a single one of his plays, not even in his pot-boilers, was he ever untrue to life or to his art as a dramatist. Of him it can be truly said that he saw life clearly and saw it whole.

Ostrovsky was born on April 12th, 1823. He was educated at a Moscow grammar school and spent three years at the law faculty of Moscow University, which he left without taking his degree. His family belonged to the clergy. His grandfather was an ordained priest who at the end of his life had entered a monastery, and his father had left the church to practise law.

Ostrovsky himself started life as a clerk in the Moscow Court of Conscience, an arbitration court that dealt mainly with cases of a domestic character; two years later—in 1845—he took up an appointment in the Moscow Commercial Court.

From the very beginning of his active life, therefore, Ostrovsky had a first-hand experience of affairs—a fact that stood him in good stead when he began writing his first cycle of plays which deal mainly with the life of the Moscow mercantile community in the Zamoskvorechye quarter of the city. His

first full-length play—"The Bankrupt," or (as he subsequently renamed it) "Just A Family Affair"—was begun in 1846—that is to say, in his twenty-third year—and finished four years later.

FROM 1851 Ostrovsky devoted himself entirely to his work as playwright. All his life he fought against the serious shortcomings of the theatre of his day, which was almost entirely in the hands of officials who knew little and cared even less about the art of drama. He was constantly in financial difficulties, and was frequently in trouble with the censorship.

The theatrical authorities never regarded him with favour, and it was only in the last year of his life that he was appointed director of the repertoire of the Moscow Imperial Theatres. But by that time his health—never too sturdy—had gone completely, and he died on June 14th, 1886.

Ostrovsky's first full-length play—"Just A Family Affair"—made him famous throughout Russia, but it also brought him for the first time into conflict with the authorities. The play, which was first published in the Moscow journal "Moskvityanin" in 1850, deals with the dishonest business practices of a rich Moscow shopkeeper who comes to the conclusion that to be really successful in life one has to be cleverly dishonest.

Albeit vaguely troubled by twinges of conscience, Bolshov, the rich shopkeeper in this play, carries out his plan of fraudulent bankruptcy by transferring his fortune to his chief manager Lazarus Podkhalyuzin, the only man he thinks he can trust, and to make assurance doubly sure he marries Lazarus to his only daughter.

In the end, Lazarus, who is even more cleverly dishonest than Bolshov, refuses to come to an understanding with his father-in-law's creditors, arguing, as Bolshov himself had argued, that it was only a matter of time before they agreed to accept his own terms of settlement. The play ends with Bolshov being marched off to jail, while Lazarus, who is left in the full enjoyment of his father-in-law's wealth, turns to the audience with the reassuring statement that if they patronise a new shop he is just about to open, he will not cheat their children of their small change.