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Science Fiction and the Thaw

Of the many creative boom periods in the history of sf—fin-de-siècle England and France, revolutionary Russia, the US Golden Age, the New Wave, cyberpunk, Japan in the 1990s—none has had as much immediate impact on the public sphere, the political culture, and the currents of mainstream literature—or was viewed as such a potent threat by the ruling order—as the sf of the Soviet post-Stalin Thaw. Inevitably associated with its most prominent authors, Ivan Efremov and the Strugatsky brothers, the sf of the Thaw was in fact the work of a large creative community that included many other writers as well, among them Sever Gansovsky, Vladimir Savchenko, Olga Larionova, Valentina Zhuravleva, Gennadi Gor, Ilya Varshavsky, Vadim Shefner, Rafail Nudelman, Ariadna Gromova, and Kir Bulychev. A generation of Anglophone readers was introduced to some of their works when, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a few publishing houses, led by the UK-based Macmillan, embarked on an ambitious project of publishing major works of Soviet sf, primarily of the Thaw cohort. Several volumes of the Strugatskys' oeuvre appeared in English translations, as well as some stories and single novels by others.[1]

The translation project was typical of the internationalist mood of the English-speaking cultural atmosphere of the time, when works of the Latin American boom, of Japanese and African fiction, and eccentric European writers like Lem and Calvino appeared on bookshelves in unprecedented numbers. Translations of Soviet sf, however, were doubtless also driven by the wish to further the "spirit of détente," the pause in the Cold War inspired mainly by the threat of nuclear war, the passion for space exploration, and the drive for consumer goods—shared by the people of the US and the USSR, and, not incidentally, characteristic inspirations for sf. Soviet sf also spoke to Western readers' desire for otherness. At a time when Western sf was itself booming with experiments in form and social imagination, Soviet sf represented an alternative tradition altogether, an ethical-literary environment far different from the fast-forward techno-modernity of most Western and Japanese sf. Later (indeed, at the time many of the translations finally appeared in print), as the Brezhnev regime clamped down tight on all forms of opposition, there was a wish to see Soviet sf writers as low-key dissidents, one step away from *samizdat* and persecution.

In the West, we read the Thaw writers in the frames we had ready for them. And before we could really get to know them, the favorable moment passed. A few of the Strugatskys' novels that were still in the pipeline were published in the mid-1980s. Then it was over. Important later works, like the Strugatskys' *Lame Fate* (1986), *The Doomed City* (1988), and *Burdened by Evil* (1988), and Efremov's *The Hour of the Bull* (1970), have not seen light in English. (English translations of Efremov's *Andromeda Nebula* [1957], the founding text of post-

World War II Soviet sf, have never been published outside of the Soviet Union.) Aside from a few academics and connoisseurs, there were few takers. At this writing, not one of the translations is in print. As the historical Soviet Union passes into memory, and—at least for most Western readers—fades even from there, there is good reason to try to gain a new understanding of that movement, one of the most original attempts to frame imaginary futures out of the substrate of bureaucratic despotism. As Roman Arbitman shows us in the memoir published in this issue, Russian writers themselves return to it for inspiration. For Westerners, the sf of the Thaw offers, through its alternative futures, a privileged way of understanding a society whose present was already alien to us.

To understand the role of sf in the culture of the Thaw, we must establish its context. In the past, critics have tended to take one of two approaches to the Thaw writers. Some hoped to find evidence of an oppositional assertion of Marxist humanism against the inhumanity both of Western monopoly capitalism and Soviet Stalinism. They constructed Soviet sf as a partner in the New Left project of socialist reform. Others expected the Thaw cohort to be courageous dissidents, closer in spirit to contemporary fantastic satirists like Sinyavski, Zinoviev, and Voinovich, than to mere crafters of sf. Neither of these is an entirely false stereotype. Many of the Thaw writers were faithful Marxists and Communists (they were often instrumental, however, in showing that these are not identical concepts, just as revolution and utopia are not) who took Khrushchev at his word when he promised a reform of socialism and the emancipation of science for the good of humanity. Many were also persecuted for their writing, either overtly prevented from publishing altogether, or forced to publish work that was fatally compromised. A few of the Strugatskys' works were indeed published in *samizdat* form by an émigré publisher.

But, as Arbitman's and Erik Simon's essays make clear, Thaw sf was in fact a popular literature that addressed the feelings of a large sector of the Soviet population in the Khrushchev and early Brezhnev eras. It spoke especially to the young intelligentsia—students, young scientists and engineers, and humanists for whom science represented freedom from Stalinist superstition. This new intelligentsia was being encouraged to take a leading role in the transformation of Soviet society into a technologically advanced one, and even to lead it into a shining Communist future based not on hollow phrases but material-scientific achievements. For a generation unburdened of Stalin, witnessing the Space Age, believing in the promise of gradual (albeit minimal) improvements in personal life, sf represented a potent synthesis of ideology and science, of personal and social happiness. Utopia, which had inspired the classic sf writers of the revolutionary period, and had been outlawed by Stalin, once again became topical. As Khrushchev's Communist Party itself incorporated utopian imaginings into its 22nd Congress, the scientific intelligentsia was given license to dream about engineering social—and personal—happiness.

The Thaw. Establishing dates for the Thaw is not a simple matter. A "long thaw" begins with the death of Stalin in 1953 and ends around 1972, with the final slide of the Brezhnev regime into the period of "Stagnation." It is more

orthodox to date its beginning at 1956, with Khrushchev's secret speech to the 20th Communist Party Congress, attacking Stalin for his purges (although, significantly, not for his crimes against the population). Since every act of liberalization at this time was inspired by reaction against Stalinism and the "cult of personality," a reasonable end-date for the Thaw is April 1968, when Brezhnev announced to the Plenum of the Central Committee that "consequences of the personality cult" had been officially eliminated (Rothberg 236).

There is little dispute about the main aspects of the Thaw. Khrushchev understood quickly after rising to power that the Soviet Union was dangerously backward compared to the technological and economic development of the West. The population was exhausted and demoralized after years of war, tyranny, and deprivation. Khrushchev initiated new policies that were diametrically opposed to Stalin's. He encouraged science education, decentralized industrial and educational institutions, and opened the country to Western scientific ideas. Quantum physics, relativity, cybernetics, and genetics—all of which had been proscribed by Stalin as "bourgeois science"—were incorporated into the curriculum. Khrushchev's interest in science was purely pragmatic; he saw it as the only means to specific goals: nuclear arms, a space-program, and above all, highly efficient economic (especially agricultural) production.

The policy produced obvious successes. The Sputnik launch in 1957, and Yuri Gagarin's orbital flight in 1961, both the first achievements of their kind, were spectacular selling points for the Soviet system, at home and abroad. The emphasis on science led to the construction of special Science Cities that were to be devoted to scientific research and development. (The first and largest of these, Akademgorodok, near Novosibirsk, was established in 1958.) Khrushchev also began to invest in the production of consumer goods on a mass scale. Most of all, his stated policy of "peaceful coexistence" with the bourgeois democracies reassured his population that they could abandon the war mentality upon which Stalin had depended.

Many of the reforms created entirely new problems. The decentralization of production and education led to inefficiency—sometimes from the redundant allocation of resources, sometimes because of competition among semi-autonomous agencies, sometimes because of conflict between policies of the center and provincial concerns. Disastrous droughts forced Khrushchev to import grain—an enormous prestige loss for the breadbasket of Europe—and the catastrophic failure of his "adventurism" during the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 made his regime vulnerable to attack by his political enemies.

The liberalization policy was strictly limited to economic activity and daily life. Liberalization was not a goal in itself for Khrushchev, and the history of the Thaw is largely one of negotiations, improvisations, and policy shifts dictated by what the regime required to remain in power. The Stalinist old-guard retained considerable power in the Politburo, and especially in the provincial governments and party leaderships. Khrushchev clearly wished to use the populace and the intelligentsia, both enjoying new, albeit extremely limited freedoms, as his base against the entrenched conservative apparatchiks. But whenever these elements threatened his power by demanding too much freedom,

the regime reacted quickly and forcefully. Because of this readiness to freeze up conditions whenever it served the regime's purposes, the Thaw is actually better thought of as a volatile alternation of thaws and freezes, one succeeding the other at a dizzying pace.

The Centrality of Literature. To understand why a popular form of fiction like sf should have had a significant role in this process, it is important to see how central a role literature played in public culture in Soviet Russia. Given the party-state's total control over mass media and the low level of mass-communication technologies, literature was the privileged institution of communication in language. While in the West literature became increasingly harmless and peripheral following World War II, as it was supplanted by new public media, in the Soviet Union literature remained the most powerful, and potentially the most dangerous, forum for expression. The highly restricted, formalized, and ritualistic official discourse not only limited writers' language, but it also meant that every nuance and variation took on significance. Stalin moved early to control literature by establishing central and regional Writers' Unions. Modeled on the Communist Party, the Unions gave writers access to health insurance, pensions, grants and loans, vacations, and lecture fees; outside it, a writer was officially a "parasite." Censors were placed at every gateway to publishing; and under Stalin, even the faintest manifestation of originality and individuality might be fatal.

The "long thaw" certainly began with literature. Following Stalin's death, writers began a campaign against the wooden formulas of socialist realism, the heroicized collective subject, and the relentless demonization of "enemies" (who changed as the party line required). The writers demanded the right to express themselves sincerely and honestly, to depict personal feelings and emotional complexity. The campaign was suppressed, and its leaders practiced self-criticism. A few years later, however, Khrushchev determined that "sincerity" and personality were powerful tools he could use to his advantage.

> In the new circumstances after Stalin's death the role required of the writer became more subtle, ambiguous, and difficult, yet more important than ever to the ruling elite. If they were to enlist the support and co-operation of the people, if they were to steer a course between Stalinism and liberalism, the ruling elite needed the writers to walk the political tightrope with them, and in doing so, help them define the party line, as well as to promote and support it. (Rothberg 12)

With the secret speech in 1956, which became common knowledge by word of mouth, came also a demand to tell the truth about the past, how it could have happened, and why it was lied about. Memoirs and novels—typified by Dudintsev's *Not By Bread Alone*—appeared that inverted the formulaic production novel of socialist realism, depicting the ruination of decent socialists who wish only the best for their society by careerists and parasites of the local councils and the Party. Khrushchev responded quickly. Addressing writers directly at a meeting of the Writers' Union, he announced he would not permit the kind of liberal literature that had led to the revolution in Hungary,

threatening particular writers personally. For several years, the regime established a policy of "cautious retreat" from de-Stalinization. The Writers' Union was decentralized (to dilute the influence of the metropolitan rabble-rousers of Leningrad and Moscow), the editorial boards of the major literary journals were purged, and the party line became that Stalin's cult of personality did not corrupt the main line of socialist realism. Party-consciousness (*partijnost*) remained the guiding principle of approved literature.

Even so, the regime needed the writers for popular support, and most writers were happy to compromise with rulers who valued their opinions so highly. Writers, who had essentially been prevented from saying anything for a generation, had been given a role, one which could be practiced "sincerely" even within the tight restrictions.

> The issues [raised by de-Stalinization] rocked the very foundations of Soviet society, and writers seemed suddenly to be giving voice to all those who for so long had kept silent because they had no public forum for discussing political ideas, for criticizing the institutions of Soviet life, for a radical and searching examination of all the afflictions of Soviet society. Now, through the liberal writers, they might in fact be able to say something about how their lives were to be lived, how the future of their society was to be organized. They might not be able to "do" much, but even speaking out in the Soviet Union was "doing a great deal." (Rothberg 15)

It was in this role that sf writers represented a significant voice in the liberalization process. It was their mandate, as it were, to imagine "how the future of their society was to be organized."

The Khrushchev Thaw reached its schizophrenic apogee in 1962. Khrushchev personally approved the publication of Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*, which he viewed as a weapon against his still-powerful rivals in the Politburo. The poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who along with Andrei Voznesensky, had acquired an adoring following not only in the USSR, but in the West as well, published "Heirs of Stalin," an unambiguous attack on the same forces. But, weakened by the Cuban missile fiasco and the impending break with (Maoist, i.e., Stalinist) China, Khrushchev reversed his positions in a famous fulmination against abstract art. The retreat from liberalization speeded up as it became clear that the reform process was no longer under control. Grave food shortages, labor strikes, and even mass abandonment of major construction projects by workers at home, added to the foreign policy failures. Khrushchev was deposed in 1964 by his rivals. In the years that followed, the freezes outnumbered the thaws. Dissident writers were tried and imprisoned. Solzhenitsyn was expelled from the Writers' Union for the intellectual sabotage of providing the enemies of Socialism with ammunition. Liberal editors were purged. Public discourse returned to the clichés of Stalinism. Foreign travel was restricted. In 1968, de-Stalinization was officially complete; Czechoslovakia was invaded. The improvisations ceased.

On a side note, the Khrushchev Thaw was distinctly colored by the unusually personal involvement of the First Secretary with writers. Khrushchev attended

many Writers' Union meetings, not as a distant authority (and certainly not as a connoisseur of literature), but as a debating partner—sometimes abusing writers face to face, sometimes encouraging them, but also leaving himself open to rebukes by the most powerful of them. The undisciplined, personal character of his involvement is also shown in the fact that the fluctuating policy toward literature is expressed in occasional, and even extemporaneous, remarks and declarations—indicative not only of Khrushchev's arbitrariness, but also of his willingness to be persuaded, sometimes even by the liberal intelligentsia.[2] It says much about the situation that the writer with whom Khrushchev had a relationship most akin to that between Gorki and Stalin was Yevtushenko.

The New Scientific Intelligentsia. While the centrality of literature as a propaganda medium helps to explain why sf literature could become so important as an expressive medium, the other important factor was the influence of the genre's target audience, the scientific intelligentsia, especially the young engineers, research scientists, and students.

When he came to power, Khrushchev gradually accepted that the backwardness of the USSR vis-à-vis the West was related to the ideological restrictions placed on science and technology by Stalin. In the most important domains of postwar technology, the Soviet Union could only catch up and surpass the bourgeois West by freeing up scientific work. This meant that the Stalinist conception of science as an aspect of the superstructure, rather than as the productive base—that there was a difference between "socialist science" and "bourgeois science"—had to be jettisoned. Science and technology had to be reconceived as productive forces: the so-called Scientific-Technological Revolution (STR) was real, and Soviet society should participate in it and eventually lead it (Buccholz). With this armature, not only could resources be allotted to science education and the development of a scientific infrastructure (like the Science Cities and semi-autonomous institutes), it could also become a guiding force of Communism, making it a model of material development that other nations would follow, and that would produce the material conditions of a bona fide Communist utopia.

The empowerment of the scientific intelligentsia was linked to the literary thaw. This was partly because many of the influential writers were originally trained as engineers and scientists and maintained their connections with the scientific community. Solzhenitsyn had been trained as a physicist and mathematician; Vasily Aksyonov was a physician; Daniil Granin an engineer. Among sf writers this was even more common: Efremov was a paleontologist, Boris Strugatsky an astrononomer, Savchenko an electrical engineer, Eremei Parnov a chemist, and his partner Mikhail Emtsev a physicist. (This continues a tradition that goes back to the revolutionary period: Zamyatin was an engineer, Bulgakov and Bogdanov both physicians.) The close associations with scientists enabled many of the sf writers to depict scientific work in highly personalized ways.

The cultivation of science necessary for increased productivity both in the present (Khrushchev's main goal) and in the future utopia encouraged the habit

of asking for more freedom, of access to foreign research, international exchanges, and an end to interference from ideologists. Here, too, the contradictions were to become pronounced. By the end of his rule, Khrushchev declared emphatically that freedom of thought had to remain confined to the laboratory; there could be no peaceful coexistence in the realm of ideology. This policy became one of the guiding principles of Brezhnev's assertion of control over the scientific community, and one of the reasons why the dissident movement was embodied increasingly by scientists rather than writers in the 1970s.

In this political landscape, Thaw sf occupied a middle zone between opposition and conformity. In very few cases do we find open attacks on the system or the ideals of Communism. Even where these are detectable, as in the Strugatskys' *Tale of the Troika* (1968), the critique is softened by genial humor. Sf's particular role was to use the whole armory of indirection to present imaginary alternatives to present conditions, without proposing any historical cause-and-effect connections. The emphasis was on "humanizing" social-technological progress, saving utopia from the mechanical laws of Marxist-Leninist history, and encouraging a sense of personal hope in the future. In this sense, sf served the purposes of the Thaw reforms perfectly. It encouraged the scientific intelligentsia and youth to imagine themselves as personally inhabiting the world they would construct—one adequate for them, replete with problems to be solved and obligations to be met. It encouraged a synthesis of personal and social heroism, and it humanized Socialism with a cheerful voice, in sharp contrast to the withering scorn of the leading critical writers. The pain of the past would be relieved by their futures.

As the freeze hardened in the 1970s, science became more difficult to practice; dissident scientists—including leaders of their fields, like Andrei Sakharov, Pyotr Kapitsa, and Zhores Medevedev—were fired from their positions, exiled, or imprisoned in mental institutions. Among writers, the polarization was complete between regime lackeys and the dissidents. Even as it pursued its compromising middle way, sf reflected this poisoning of the atmosphere. The leading writers of the generation, Efremov and the Strugatskys, were effectively prevented from publishing.

SF and the Thaw. Reflecting back on Soviet sf's Golden Age, it is clear that it spoke to, and helped to construct, a subject that is almost unimaginable today—and perhaps precisely because the creation of that subject was the common mission of its writers. This "New Man," the subject of Elana Gomel's essay, was one or another variant on the utopian synthesis of individuality and collectivity. Genuinely attempting to humanize socialism and science, Soviet sf attempted to imagine the human species as the engineer of technology and personality, rather than the opposite. Although very little useful theory of sf and the fantastic was produced in the Soviet Union, even during the Thaw, the work of Tatiana Chernyshova, whose essay "Science Fiction and Myth Creation in our Age" we present for the first time in English, stands out as a theory of myth construction that parallels the actual myth shaping of Efremov and the

Strugatskys. Her ideas show the influence of exchanges with Western thought, in particular with Claude Lévi-Strauss (who, as an avowed—if not quite demonstrable—Marxist, was acceptable to Soviet censors). The conception of sf as a modeling activity with similarities to scientific writing that brings scientific theory down to earth endows sf with the power to help shape the collective understanding of the age. It also offers sf and myth as levers to open up Soviet Marxist-Leninist ideology to inspection as a model saturated with fiction.

It was our original wish to collect articles on the writers who are virtually unknown to English speakers. But those articles have yet to be written. Erik Simon's and Roman Arbitman's assessments of the Strugatskys and the generation of the 1960s, respectively, show us how little we understand the writers we do know, and help us to appreciate how much, in a society in which every aspect of life was controlled, observed, and judged, even the most oblique deviations from conformity could cost, and how much quotidian heroism was required.

Finally, we have included two short notes on the metamorphosis of one of the masterworks of the Soviet Golden Age, the Strugatskys' *Roadside Picnic* (1972) into Andrei Tarkovsky's acclaimed film, *Stalker* (1979). Daniel Kluger and Arkady Strugatsky give us a taste of the difficult process by which one of the models of sf narrative was transformed, by intuited degrees, into a spiritual parable with no trace of science-fictionality. It is a subject worth pursuing in greater depth. For in this famous meeting of some of the most admired artists of the last days of the Soviet Union, we witness not only the epitaph of the Thaw, but perhaps also of the Soviet period itself.

NOTES

1. A partial list of Soviet sf translated into English is available on William Contento's Index to Science Fiction Anthologies and Collections <http://users.ev1.net/~homeville/isfac/0start.htm> and The Locus Index to Science Fiction (1984-1998) at <http://www.locusmag.com/index/0start.html>.

2. Rothberg describes an exchange between Khrushchev, who vehemently attacked the sculptor Ernst Neizvestny, and Yevtushenko, who rose to Neizvestny's defense, at a special meeting with four hundred writers in December of 1962. To Yevtushenko's mediating gestures:

> Khrushchev's reply was blunt and threatening: "As they say, only the grave straightens out the hunchback." Swiftly, Yevtushenko admonished him: "I hope, Comrade Khrushchev, we have outlived the time when the grave was used as a means of corrections." The stunned audience burst into applause in which Khrushchev himself sheepishly joined. (64)

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