

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR:

Katerina Clark's fine article on Chingiz Aitmatov's *I dol'she veka dlitsia den'* and its relation to the evolving canons of Socialist Realism (*Slavic Review*, 43, no. 4 [Winter 1984]: 573–87) requires no elaboration as an essay in literary criticism. Nonetheless the school she has defined as the novel's proper home compels a postscript, a last word that will link the real life of critical letters to the critical letters of real life. Chingiz Aitmatov must be recognized as an author who subscribes not only to a set of literary norms but also to the fact of their enforcement. It has its advantages. One of them in particular stands out against the background of recent events in the world of Russian literary *byt*.

Students of the times know how tenuous a hold modern Russian readers have on their immediately pre-Socialist-Realist past. Not only is the literature of that past regarded as a precious cultural commodity, but its very artifacts—the books, the private papers, the personal effects—are treasured and retreasured by succeeding generations. For many years now one of the most precious of those artifacts, the dacha at Peredelkino where Boris Pasternak lived and worked for many years, has been meticulously and lovingly preserved by his heirs as a “private” museum open to all well-wishers of the poet and his legacy. Until the very recent past one could extend one's hand and touch the inkwell that sprang to life under his pen, yielding a stream of works that are among the most universally admired in our century. Now, to paraphrase the poet (and only the present circumstances make such a paraphrase conscionable), “Nel'zia dostat' chernil, a plakat' mozhno.” The dacha, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Union of Writers, has reverted without further appeal to the Union, and has been reassigned. The fortunate new tenant is Chingiz Aitmatov. Once more, in life as in literature, Socialist Realism asserts its right of displacement.

Would it not have been in keeping with the dictates of Memory, the same Memory that has imbued Aitmatov's novel and the literary canon with new life, to let the house in Peredelkino remain a monument to its most illustrious occupant, a museum open to all the poet's readers? The official Russian literary establishment has always supported and maintained such museums—most often former residences—devoted to its most honored artists, among them Tolstoi, Dostoevskii, Aksakov, Pushkin, Chekhov, Blok, Maikovskii, Esenin, and yes, Konstantin Fedin. Is Pasternak any less deserving?

Would it not be appropriate for all those committed to the art and fact of Russian literature to persuade Aitmatov that the house should revert to its real owners, the countless numbers of Russians who read and love Pasternak, and that his voice might well persuade the Union of Writers to reconsider its decision to hand the house over to him?

The poet's spirit should not have to trouble his sleep.

RONALD VROON
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TO THE EDITOR:

While it is indisputable that the circle of Butashevich-Petrashkevskii was more important than often realized, it is hardly comprehensible that J. H. Seddon in his article “The Petrashevtsy: A Reappraisal” (*Slavic Review*, 43, no. 3 [Fall 1984]: 434–52) refers to only three secondary works, all in English, on this subject. The importance of the “Petrashevtsy” has been stated by more historians than those cited by Seddon. From my own studies on this subject I would like to mention the following points, which do not seem to be given adequate attention in Seddon's article.

1. There were a lot of circles (*kruzhki*) in the late 1840s in St. Petersburg, in Moscow, and in other, primarily university, centers that discussed the subjects of socialism and

reform of Russian society. The fact that contacts between them can be proved does not necessarily imply the existence of a large (and supposedly quite uniform) circle of Petrashevtsy.

2. The meetings at Petrashevskii's house were of a rather informal character; they were frequented by young people (students, junior civil servants, young officers) in no way uniform; no trace has hitherto been found of a more formal organization or conspiracy.

3. The existence of a library of officially prohibited books and the discussions of them are more important than suggested in the article.

4. The books read and discussed by the Petrashevtsy included not only socialist literature but also the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville, and many clues suggest that Russia in some aspects was compared to the United States of America.

5. The Petrashevtsy had no uniform ideology of their own. The analysis of published texts shows that in some cases their preoccupation with Fourier was marked more by juvenile enthusiasm than attempt at earnest study (see, for instance, D. D. Akhsharumov, *Iz moikh vospominanii* [St. Petersburg, 1905]).

6. Some of the information on the Petrashevtsy appears to be grossly overstated, for example the alleged plan of the foundation of a phalanstery in Russia or the mysterious story about a printing machine, both of which are worthy of more detailed inquiries.

7. The Petrashevtsy—like the Decembrists—acquired their importance by their sufferings rather than by their own actions; their ideas lived on among the intelligentsia in the late tsarist Russian society as part of the general emancipation process.

Examination of the original sources in the archives of the Soviet Union permits a fuller view and a more subtle interpretation of the relevant facts than have heretofore been possible; but reference to already published books also forms part of a scholarly approach. (See Wiktorja Śliwowska, *Sprawa Pietraszewców* [Warsaw, 1964]; Manfred Alexander, *Der Petraševskij-Prozess. Eine "Verschwörung der Ideen" und ihre Verfolgung im Russland von Nikolaus I* [Wiesbaden, 1979]; reviewed in *Slavic Review*, 40, no. 3 [Fall 1981]: 471).

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J. H. Seddon was invited to respond. Several months have passed and no response has been received.

TO THE EDITOR:

I wish to respond to the review by Thomas Owen of my monograph *Alexander Guchkov and the End of the Russian Empire* (*Slavic Review*, 42, no. 2 [Summer 1984]: 305). Two points can be made, the first with reference to the review itself, and the second concerning work that lies ahead for scholars of the late tsarist period.

As for the review, I was not particularly surprised by Owen's objection to the central thesis of the book. Owen himself (whose work appeared after my monograph was accepted for publication), along with Louis Menashe (whose work is cited and discussed in the first chapter), provide valuable material for Guchkov's merchant origins and background. My claim simply is that Guchkov's political career can also be understood from the perspective of the peculiar political features of the age, namely the rivalries of the great powers and Guchkov's response to that rivalry. Owen and I approach Guchkov from different vantage points. All well and good. The bothersome thing about the review was its failure to mention the central theme of the book in any sense, an obligation, I believe, of the