Analysis of Moscow to the End of the Line

by Sharon MacNett

Communist Party censors denied publication of Venedikt Erofeev's 1970 novel *Moscow to the End of the Line* for its rejection of Soviet ideology. The novel circulated underground in samizdat format within the USSR until after CPSU General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev introduced the policy of *glasnost'* in the late 1980s. Prior to *glasnost'*, creative works in the Soviet Union were subject to the standards of socialist realism. Developed in the 1930s, socialist realism offered an official party framework for the arts. Socialist realist works depicted socialism as it should become, offering visuals and storylines in which the New Soviet Man evolved into a "positive hero," an enlightened socialist.[1] As socialist realism developed, a "master plot" emerged which functioned as a blueprint for Marxist-Leninist allegory, following a figure of modest origins whose life embodied the upward trajectory of historical development and progress according to Marx.[2] This common narrative arc offered a vision of the utopian socialist future in microcosm, the future of the USSR as personified by virtuous heroes of labor, purified of their backwardness and personal failings. In 1961, less than a decade before Erofeev wrote *Moscow to the End of the Line*, Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev promised the Soviet people that the USSR would achieve communism by 1980.[3] By the time Erofeev wrote his novel, economic torpor had set in under the leadership of First Secretary Leonid Brezhnev. The plausibility of achieving communism seemed remote at best to a great deal of the educated urban public. Within the socioeconomic context of the Brezhnev era, *Moscow to the End of the Line* represented a stark counterpoint to socialist realism, a vision of decline and degeneration rather than progress and enlightenment. Soviet censors rejected Erofeev's darkly funny, scathing derision of the promise of a Soviet utopia because it represented an unacceptable danger to official Party ideology.

Erofeev's novel addressed and found popularity with readers in Brezhnev's Soviet Union. Contending with the legacy of Stalinism, Brezhnev's predecessor Khrushchev had implemented an array of reforms during his term as First Secretary. Many of these reforms fell short of their goals while creating instability. The inconsistent and limited nature of Khrushchev's cultural "thaw" did little to bring about genuine artistic and intellectual freedom, frustrating the aspirations of a broad section of the educated public.[4] His agricultural policies led to food shortages and high prices in cities, creating popular discontent.[5] Attempts at government reform, such as Khrushchev's

policy of decentralization and implementation of term limits, generated resentment within the party's "old guard" of entrenched elites.[6] When Brezhnev took office, he and other members of the Stalinist "old guard" led a conservative backlash against Khrushchev's legacy, repealing a number of his policies.[7] Brezhnev removed term limits for party officials[8] and left many in their posts for life,[9] creating a Soviet "gerontocracy" as old guard party members aged.[10] Brezhnev also recentralized state control, abjuring Khrushchev's faltering attempt at revitalizing democracy in the regime.[11] Economic reform was eventually abandoned in favor of maintaining the status quo, and economic growth slowed to a crawl.[12] Under Brezhnev, the party orchestrated show trials of dissident writers Andrei Siniavskii and Iulii Daniel[13] and suppressed the Prague Spring uprisings in Czechoslovakia.[14] The Soviet people, meanwhile, staggered under rampant alcoholism, high infant mortality rates, and growing disillusionment with the limitations imposed on an increasingly educated public.[15] The political and economic stagnation of the Brezhnev years gave rise to a small but growing dissident movement, and samizdat circulation increased dramatically while shifting to more overtly political materials.[16] In this context, Erofeev's parody of socialist realism alarmed Soviet censors yet managed to reach a broad audience in the greater populace, where it resonated widely.

A fictionalized version of Erofeev (Venichka) narrates an alcohol-fueled day in which he attempts to reach Petushki, a suburban city east of Moscow where a woman and his child await him and which he describes in utopian terms. Venichka wakes up drunk in a stairwell on a Friday morning, and as he walks around Moscow looking for a drink, he recounts going on a bender for several days in the aftermath of losing his job as foreman of a cable-laying crew for charting their workplace drunkenness. He boards a train to visit his lover and his child in Petushki. On the train, Venichka continues drinking and engages in a series of fantastic and likely hallucinatory conversations with both the audience and other passengers, discussing literature, writers, alcohol, love, and philosophy. As he lapses in and out of increasingly disturbing dreams and drunken delirium, he questions whether he has indeed reached Petushki. Walking through city streets in the middle of the night, Venichka realizes he must be in Moscow after all. Attempting to flee a group of attackers, likely the police or some other embodiment of Soviet authority, he tries to take refuge in a stairwell but is unable to escape. As he finally catches sight of the Kremlin, a structure he claims several times in the novel to never have seen in his years living in Moscow, his attackers kill him.

Venichka is a sympathetic anti-hero, a postmodern reimagining of the superfluous man archetype common in 19th century Russian literature. Soviet

audiences would have recognized in Venichka the idle intelligence and existential ennui of Alexander Pushkin's prototypical superfluous man, Eugene Onegin. Interestingly, whereas Pushkin wrote Onegin as something of a glibly charming dilettante, Erofeev's Venichka is perhaps more well-read, if lacking in much formal education, peppering his drink-addled diatribes with references to literature, history, philosophy, and art. Onegin's sense of alienation derives from the frivolity of the *obshchestvo*under the faltering imperial order. Drawing a parallel to the specter of rot looming within the Communist regime, Venichka's disaffection emanates from his existence on the margins of Soviet society. While Onegin's nonchalance reflects the prospect of an emotionally vapid but materially charmed life, Venichka's spiritual crisis runs deeper. In a moment of drunken despair late in the novel, he asks the reader, "[W]here is that happiness which they write about in the newspapers?"[17]As his journey continues, he dreams he is violently attacked by the figures in Vera Mukhina's Moscow statue *Rabochiy i Kolkhoznitsa*. The statue is a quintessential example of socialist realist propaganda, a larger-than-life depiction of the powerful unity of worker and peasant. Waking from this dream, Venichka reflects drunkenly on the apparent impossibility of reaching Petushki. Robbed of the hopes he placed in the promise of this utopia, he tells the reader, "If every one of the Fridays ahead is like this one, some Thursday I'll hang myself."[18]

Perhaps more tellingly than any other moment in *Moscow to the End of the Line*, this grim appraisal of his own prospects portrays Venichka as the antithesis of the New Soviet Man. His degeneration into depravity, excess, and nihilism plots a course flagrantly opposite to the trajectory of self-improvement and advancement familiar within socialist realism. Just as heroes of socialist realism embody the inevitable success of the Communist regime, Venichka embodies the imminent decay of the Soviet system. Erofeev ridicules the regime most explicitly through Venichka's drunken plenum. Venichka, after being elected president of his apocryphal plenum, scathingly attacks the Soviet regime, beginning with its origins. Soviet leaders following the death of Stalin commonly called for a return to Leninism and the early ideals of the revolution, and Venichka's criticism of this era stands in contrast even to popular notions that the regime had simply gone off course under Stalin. He moves from one leader to the next in what seems an effort to highlight continuity rather than change within the Soviet system. Conjuring the regime under Lenin, he scathingly calls the issuing of decrees "the crowning labor of any revolution" and remarks that debate is secondary to decrees, seemingly a critique of the quelling of debate under democratic centralism and the ban on party factions.[19]Like Lenin's decree on land, which expropriated and redistributed land in the countryside,[20]Venichka proposes a

decree on land in order that the people might expropriate the means of intoxication. He then suggests getting drunk, making a declaration on human rights, and beginning a terror campaign. Shifting his commentary to the Stalin era, he parodies a common apology for the terror of Stalinism, saying, "[I]n our affair it's impossible not to make mistakes, because our affair is unheard-of and new."[21] Drawing a further line of continuity through Soviet history from Lenin to Brezhnev, he lampoons the legacy of personality cults surrounding Soviet leaders. Venichka says as President of the plenum, he will become a "personality above the law."[22]

Following the plenum, Venichka falls into a depressed stupor. He becomes embroiled in a heated argument with his own sense of reason.[23] When Venichka notices that night seems to have fallen even though he boarded the train in the morning for a journey of only a few hours, his reason mocks him for his dislike of darkness. It argues that merely disliking the dark does not end darkness. It tells him not to try to supercede natural laws, that to accept and experience it is the only way out of darkness. The concept of "darkness" would have been significant to Soviet readers. Darkness — shorthand for ignorance, moral deficit, backwardness, and lack of culture — had long been ascribed to the peasantry in pre-revolutionary Russia by elites and the intelligentsia.[24] The crux of socialist realism in the arts and Party sloganeering was the rejection of the darkness of the pre-socialist past by envisioning a future in which it had been overcome. Venichka's reason levels criticism at the regime for attempting to rid the people of darkness without employing sufficiently substantive means to do so. Marxism frames history in terms of natural laws and development, and Venichka's reason argues that the Party had attempted to violate nature by skipping the capitalist phase of development, an ill-advised attempt to circumvent "the dark." Venichka's reason taunts him, saying the distance from Moscow (the still-dark Soviet regime) to Petushki (an enlightened communist utopia) is "oh-h-h so long."[25] Needling Venichka for his alienation from the true believers of Soviet society, reason asks him why he does not wait patiently to reach Petushki, as the other passengers on the train do.

As indicated above, Erofeev employs Moscow itself to stand in for the Soviet system. Venichka spends the novel desperately trying to escape it in favor of the utopian Petushki. The Garden Ring road in Moscow figures into Venichka's experience of the inescapability of the city and the regime. After his argument with his reason, Venichka's hallucinations take shape as a sphinx. The sphinx tells Venichka a series of largely nonsensical riddles, and it seems to take cruel pleasure in Venichka's confusion and dismay. As Venichka tries fruitlessly to make sense of the fourth riddle, the sphinx goads him toward the

realization that even travel away from Kursk Station always leads back to the station, located on the circular Garden Ring road.[26] At this point, he also realizes the train is heading back to Moscow rather than toward Petushki. Venichka is overwhelmed by the futility of attempting to escape Moscow and by proxy the Soviet system.

Although written as a desultory first-hand account of the drunken spree of a degenerate alcoholic, Erofeev carefully and deliberately indicts the Soviet system throughout *Moscow to the End of the Line*. Venichka, his debauched behavior all the more startling against the backdrop of his obvious intelligence, is a supreme caricature of everything the upstanding New Soviet Man should be. Through his drunken monologues and conversations, Venichka disparages the brokenness of the Soviet system. He condemns Soviet leaders reaching back to Lenin, a virtual sacrilege within Soviet society. He laments the empty promises of socialist realism and the untenable futility of daily life in a doomed system. Importantly, Venichka's sense of alienation was not unique. Party censors banned the novel, fearing Erofeev's alcohol-muddled invective would lend an eloquent voice to the growing discontent within the Soviet public in the Brezhnev era. The novel's popularity in *samizdat* suggests that censors were correct.

Endnotes

1. Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press), 10.
2. Clark, 9-10.
3. Donald Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 3.
4. Gregory L. Freeze, "From Stalinism to Stagnation: 1953-1985," in *Russia: A History*, ed. Gregory L. Freeze (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 429.
5. Freeze, 430-431.
6. Freeze, 433.
7. Freeze, 434.
8. Freeze, 435.
9. Freeze, 439.
10. Freeze, 440.
11. Freeze, 435.
12. Freeze, 440.
13. Freeze, 437.
14. Freeze, 436.
15. Freeze, 444.

16. Freeze, 446-447.
17. Venedikt Erofeev, *Moscow to the End of the Line*(Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 150.
18. Erofeev, 153.
19. Erofeev, 122.
20. Daniel T. Orlovsky, "Russia in War and Revolution 1914-1921," in *Russia: A History*, ed. Gregory L. Freeze (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 292.
21. Erofeev, 123.
22. Erofeev, 126.
23. Erofeev, 132.
24. Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917*(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 132.
25. Erofeev, 132.
26. Erofeev, 140.

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