THE PROPHET DISILLUSIONED:
MAXIM GORKY AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates Maxim Gorky’s public and literary life based on new materials from Italian and Russian archives (Archivio Centrale Dello Stato and the Archives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs), which bring to light Gorky’s reasons for returning to the Soviet Union in 1928 and to travel back and forth to Italy until 1933, when he decided to remain in the Soviet Union. The period under examination, the years of Gorky’s life (1868-1936), witnessed the Revolution of 1905, World War I, the February and October Revolutions, the Civil War, NEP, and a cultural revolution of which Gorky became a zealous architect. This study argues that Gorky’s personal experiences with violence at the hands of the Russian petit bourgeoisie and peasantry generated his strong and tenacious desire to recast Man and heal Russia and Russians from their innate pessimism and laziness. Once Gorky accepted selective use of violence in building an ideal Soviet society and offered Russia a utopian project – the creation of a new, improved human being—he contributed to the horrifying reality of the 1930s, making himself an unintentional accomplice in the Soviet revolutionary and repressive experiment. The dissertation also analyzes Gorky both as a public servant and a writer with a unique interpretation of late imperial politics and the Russian literary scene.

The first chapter focuses on Gorky’s childhood memories and how they shaped his vision as a public servant. The second chapter explores Gorky’s conceptual affinity and differences with the Bolsheviks and demonstrates his view of the Revolution of 1905 and World War I. It also analyzes Gorky’s experiment with God-building on Capri and its ultimate failure. The third
chapter examines Gorky’s criticism of Lenin’s fanaticism, Marxist ideology, and the October Revolution. It also explores why Gorky decided to begin collaborating with the Bolsheviks. The fourth chapter demonstrates that Gorky became disillusioned with European politics, criticized Nazism and Fascism, and became more drawn to Soviet reality. Gorky made a pact with the Soviet government based on his grand delusion in order to continue writing his works for a Russian-speaking audience, preserve Russian and European cultures at a time when Fascism spread in Europe, and, most importantly, construct a new, creative, hardworking, and educated common people. He was continuing his crusade to recast “Man.” Finally, the fifth chapter explores Gorky’s role in building the Soviet cultural system. His preservation projects saved Russian culture, but not the millions of people who perished in Stalin’s labor camps. However, Gorky’s literary legacy, particularly his plays, where the human being occupies the center, still teach us to appreciate the humane, beautiful, and sublime without venerating money. Gorky’s belief in the human imagination and man’s abilities to create a good and purposeful life for oneself remains a matter of admiration and inspiration.
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Introduction

Grand Delusion or Great Dreams?

“My Lord, we know each other’s faces, but for our hearts, he knows no more of mine, than I of yours.”

“Richard III” William Shakespeare

“Gorky is on the crossroads his entire life.”

Kornei Chukovskii

“Hell is paved with good intentions”

Samuel Johnson

While it was prestigious and advantageous to analyze Gorky’s literary works in the Soviet Union under Communist Party’s gaze, in the 1990s the “Gorky” studies fell into oblivion. Today one finds the Communist Party attention to Gorky improbable, but there is no exaggeration in the assumption that Gorky’s status as a leading “proletarian” writer and founder of socialist realism influenced Soviet scholars’ well-being, career, and social status. In the USSR, all Ph.D. candidates who focused on Gorky had to be approved by the Politburo committee -- their notes were thoroughly checked after hours spent in the Gorky archive -- but as the Soviet Union began to fall apart, the Russian intellectuals started to treat the “proletarian writer” with contempt, skepticism, and suspicion. Russian Gorky’s scholars began to reevaluate his writings produced during the revolutionary times and openly debate new interpretations in Russian major journals. In the twenty-first century, Gorky’s scholars have neither such

2 Kornei Chukovskii, Dve Dushi M. Gor’kogo (Moscow: Russkii put’, 2010), p. 83.
promising incentives as in the USSR nor a derisive attitude towards a “proletarian writer” as in the 1990s. Now the writer who laid the foundation for socialist realism, a grandiose phenomenon in itself, often appears in the guise of a bronze figure solemnly installed on a pedestal in all major Russian cities. Gorky, however, was a living, creative personality with his own life-story, aspirations, contradictions, and most importantly, consistencies. The course of his life was closely connected to the time, culture, and the place in which he lived and worked—Russia. But even Russians are often familiar with his face, but as far as his public and creative life, still know little.

In the 1990s, Gorky’s Untimely Thoughts surprised the Russian audience. While growing up in the Soviet Union, they were used to reading about Gorky’s promotion of proletariat and his friendship with Lenin and Stalin, but Soviet publishing houses could never make his critique of the Bolshevik revolution public. Russians were familiar with Gorky’s dramas and short stories while his novel Mother, an obligatory reading in the Soviet Union, exhausted many. Gorky’s belief in man’s capability to achieve his dreams inspired them, but his support of the Soviet government’s repressions and forced labor in the 1930s bewildered the Soviet creative intelligentsia. Undoubtedly, Gorky was full of contradictions. Was there an early romantic version of him and a later, more mature, but less sensitive one?

Gorky, as Kornei Chukovskii rightly put it, was always on the crossroads between centuries, continents, social strata, and schools of thought. Being on the crossroads gives a different, additional perspective on life, but the state of perpetual crossing from one point to

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7 Maxim Gor’kii’s Untimely Thoughts was first published in 1990 in the Soviet Union. Maxim Gor’kii, Nesvoevremennye mysli: zametki o revoliutsii i kul’ture (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1990).
8 Interview with sculptor Gregory Pototskii, Russian Embassy, Washington DC, 15 November, 2014.
9 Kornei Chukovskii, Dve dushi, p. 83.
another is not an easy one and has its own pitfalls. One cannot resist comparisons, doubting, going back and forth in time, searching for a better way of life without ever achieving satisfaction. Unending doubt gives rise to inconsistencies in thinking that in Gorky’s case turned into inexplicable actions. How could anyone who wrote Untimely Thoughts to expose Bolsheviks’ fanaticism in pursuing their aims return to the Soviet Union and strongly support the Soviet leadership and its projects? Was it “old loyalty” that played an instrumental role in his return? Or was it his search for a better way of life and hope to find happiness for all that played a crucial part in his decision? Or were his readers part of the cause? His main reading audience then and now remains in the Soviet Union and he was aware of it. Russian life with its misery, perpetual deceit, and joy from suffering remained his source of inspiration, fed his imagination, shaping his literary path.\textsuperscript{10} Although he wrote about numerous human cruelties and abominations, there was always hope, at times false hope, that life could get a little better among these horrifying descriptions of violence and abuse. Chukovskii underscored that Gorky spent his life, searching for a remedy for people to make themselves happy.

In this dissertation, I argue that Gorky’s personal experiences with the violence of the Russian bourgeoisie and peasantry generated his strong and tenacious desire to recast Man and heal Russia and Russians from their innate pessimism and laziness. Once Gorky accepted selective use of violence in building an ideal Soviet society and offered Russia a utopian project – creation of a new, improved man, he contributed to the horrifying reality of the 1930s, making himself an unintentional accomplice in the Soviet repressive, albeit revolutionary experiment.

The revolution of 1905, World War I, and the Russian revolutions of 1917 only reinforced his skepticism and disillusionment with the Russians and their ability to overcome

\textsuperscript{10} Kornei Chukovskii, \textit{Dve Dushi}, p. 96.
their condition. He vacillated between mild educational and radical violent measures for change. Yet, living in spiritual contradiction with himself, he preferred to deny the bitter truth for the sake of a slight hope that in the 1920s and 1930s was tenuous at best. Like Luka from “The Lower Depths” with his small lies that had given rise to hope, Gorky ran the risk of perpetrating violence with his grand delusion. However, he found exoneration in writing and numerous public projects that preserved Russian culture and laid the foundation for its further development. Although he died disillusioned, the result of his tremendous work manifested itself in several generations of the Russian intelligentsia. The key to his success was his affirmation that there was nothing better than Man. In other words, his strong belief in Man’s ability to rise above his circumstances. Gorky’s power of imagination and discipline energized and catapulted him from a prospect of a life in obscene poverty to a meaningful life of one of the great Russian writers and public servants, but in the 1930s, in the age of technological modernization and ideological competition, that was not enough. Gorky was a humanist with strong reason but lost soul or as Pavel Basinskii called him, a humanist with an inhuman beginning (гуманист с негуманным началом).

Not a single Russian writer apart from Gorky felt so keenly and deeply that Russian life was excruciating and agonizing because he grew up within the mass of the backward population, which lived in Russia a century ago. As a child, Gorky witnessed and experienced the physical and psychological pain and violence firsthand that he portrayed in his trilogy. “Any reader of Gorky’s autobiographical trilogy,” writes Barry Scherr, “will confirm [that] the future writer’s

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12 Pavel Basinskii, Gor’kii (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2006), p. 434.
childhood, youth, and adolescence make for a tale of extreme and virtually unrelieved deprivation, both material and emotional.” In his novel, *Childhood*, a little boy, Maxim Gorky, not only watches how his uncles beat and kill their wives, but also how people in chains are taken to executions, or how prostitutes sell themselves to clients at the bawdy house located next to his dwellings. Gorky himself gets a flogging from his grandfather and falls unconscious. Chukovskii once astutely observed that “Gorky’s family prepared him for hard labor in Siberia, not the university.” Chances that Gorky would remain at the bottom of his existence and turn into a vicious, lazy, emotional abuser were high. Nothing in these dismal surroundings with atrocious people, resembling animals far more than human beings, portended Gorky’s literary fame and rise to public power. Thus, from his childhood Gorky closely observed the Russian petty bourgeoisie and the life-style and mores of those patriarchal strata of the Russian peasantry who made up the bulk of the population. This was a milieu full of contradictory socio-psychological qualities, and from his early years Gorky came across an almost animal egotism, the power of primitive instincts, indifference to everything except a full stomach and a resignation to circumstances which easily combined with explosions of ungovernable, spontaneous cruelty. As if in deliberate contrast to this, Gorky carried within him from the very start of his chosen path the concept of an individual possessed of very different qualities, an individual open to the world and to his fellows, an individual free from bondage to circumstances and capable of action, creativity, and struggle. He sought to discover the characteristics of such a Man written with a capital “M” (and it was he who introduced the concept) in actual people and to embody them in his characters. It was not enough that this Man should exist simply as an

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15 Kornei Chukovsky, *Dve Dushi M. Gor’kogo* (Moscow: Russkii put’, 2010), p. 22.
ideal, as a concept of what ought to be—Gorky sought to find him in reality, desired to see, and depicted him existing as a genuine part of that reality. To begin with this found expression in the heroes of his early prose, in people who had sunk down to the very bottom of society, who had renounced their position in society in order not to have to obey its unjust laws. He drew his material from his own impressions: in his youth he had, like his own heroes, travelled across the whole of the south of European Russia in search of both work and the truth about men. The central characters in Gorky’s first novels—Foma Gordeyev and Ilya Lunev—are men who are unable to accept the norms of a society based on private property.17

Gorky’s invaluable character trait was his will power. Like other people who strove to improve people’s conditions, he propagated his ideas and theories perceptively and intelligently, but also consistently and forcefully, at times rendering “desirable as real.” Gorky focused his entire work on portraying Russian life with its hardships and showed how these conditions inevitably shaped people’s pessimistic view of their own country, prompting some literary critics a century later to note that “he possessed an exceptional ability to notice nasty things in life.”18 Gorky’s observation that Russians “enjoy suffering” is one of central leitmotifs in his novel Childhood. “After a long time, I understood that poverty and scarcity of the Russian life makes Russian people take pleasure in suffering, play with it as if they are children without being ashamed of displaying their unhappiness for weeks on end, while looking upon sorrow as joy, fire as fun, a scratch on the face as an embellishment.”19

In fact, there is nothing new in writing about Russians’ pessimistic view of life. Long winters, cold temperatures, and open spaces affected Russians’ self-view. Numerous Russian

18 Dmitry Bykov, Byl li Gor’kii? (Moscow: Eksmo, 2010), p. 10.
19 Maxim Gor’kii, Detstvo, PSS, vol. 15, p. 120.
thinkers and intellectuals commented on the Russian proclivity to underestimate their own culture and to be harsh critics of themselves. Dmitrii Likhachev wrote that Russians often engage in self-inflicted criticism that results in exaggeration of backwardness of its own culture.

“Russians particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries manifested self-deprecation to their own detriment.”

Fedor Dostoevsky also noted in his article “Two Camps of Theoreticians” that the Russian people “showed their shortcomings with relentless power, ready to explicate their sores in front of the entire world, ruthlessly inflicting pain on themselves and being utterly unfair to their own nation for the sake of indignant love for the truth…”

But unlike other Russian thinkers, Gorky went a bit further and observed that Russian people took pleasure in displaying their pessimism although he differed from his social stratum precisely because he did not succumb to pessimism. He did not complain about “ saturnine abominations of Russian wild life” (свинцовые мерзости русской дикой жизни) but offered a solution and hope. Gorky’s approach to life was utilitarian, practical, and active, not idle. “Gorky could never remain a bare witness; he always got into the thick of things; he was all about action,” noted Evgeny Zamiatin. Gorky’s chemist-revolutionary in *Childhood* famously notes: “Knowledge alone is not enough, it is all about learning how to act upon it.”

While other dominating and popular Russian writers such as Leo Tolstoy and Fedor Dostoevsky, Aleksandr Blok and Valery Briusov searched for the invisible and infinite, trying to resolve deep ethical and philosophical questions and aiming to achieve rebirth rather than a simple change in the way people lived, Gorky preferred Human Kingdom to God’s Kingdom, action to contemplation,

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23 Maxim Gor’kii, *Detstvo*, PSS, vol. 15, p. 89.
concrete recipes for better life to abstract narratives. Chukovskii called him ironically a “utilitarian hedonist” who was looking for simple human happiness. He was not concerned about complex, metaphysical questions, but aimed at experiencing and promoting ordinary physical pleasures and occupations that would be of use to ordinary people. One of protagonists in his play, “Sun’s Children,” points out: “Your sweet mind thinks much about great things, but very little about the best among the great—people.”

To support the helpless and desolate, Gorky decided to play a role of a ‘healer/adviser’ who acted upon his knowledge by buying books for various libraries, writing checks for young people to study abroad, supporting Jews and women, and genuinely believing that the collective effort would alter dismal reality. In other words, Gorky did not need Dostoevsky and Tolstoy with their concept of a soul and Christian morality, but cared for simple people with their elementary ideas about how to fish, how to write, how to make bread, how to carry out scientific experiments, how to build a new hydroelectric station or an atomic station, a new bridge, a wide road, or a new city. He drew dismal reality in his literary works, but ended with instructions on how to act, change, and reach happiness no matter how utopian his ideas seemed to his readers.

It is evident from his letters and non-fiction that he hated Russian backwardness, peasants, and praised the city as a harbinger of a new, happy life. He genuinely believed in the power of art, imagination, and culturalization as a process that ameliorated people’s lives by making them believe in themselves. In his novel *Childhood*, a young Gorky and his friends doomed to live in abject poverty with alcoholic parents dreamt about getting education that

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25 I use a strong qualifier “genuinely” because of his consistent use and insistence on the power of art and imagination in his correspondence. See Gor’kii’s letter to Teleshov: “There is little that is good about the world!” wrote Gor’kii in Nikolai Teleshov’s memory book. “The best is art, and in art the best and the noblest is the art of imagining what is good,” *PSSP*, vol. 3, p. 74.
would lead to a better future. For them, imagination became the first step to finding a stable life. “There is little that is good about the world!” wrote Gorky in Nikolai Teleshov’s memory book. “The best is art, and in art the best and the noblest is the art of imagining what is good.”26 By imagining what is good, Gorky overcame his own malicious family environment.

In the novel, Into the People, a young philosopher noticed that Gorky possessed an unbridled imagination. When he introduced Gorky to Empedocles, a young boy came up with his own interpretation of a respected philosopher and a story about thousands of cut-off heads, legs, eyes, noses, and ears. Gorky “imagined” philosophy and theory, painting it with vivid pictures. For him, a move from a village to a city resembled a change of an uncivilized peasant who beats his wife daily into a city dweller who works hard for the good of oneself and society. That was his theory. That was also his own story. Having experienced numerous hardships and man-made impediments, he overcame his circumstances by conjuring up a better future for himself. He also tirelessly worked as a writer and a journalist for his own good and society’s welfare.27 His will power and strong belief in education and hard work paid off, so he offered a similar remedy for his readers. Among his most famous aphorisms are the following: “books are your best friends,” “I owe everything to books,” “when everything is easy, one quickly gets stupid,” “the future belongs to those who work honestly…” “the meaning of life is in man’s self-perfection,” “the root of a word is work,” “we must always learn; we must know everything. The more you learn, the more powerful you become,” “we live at the time when the distance between the wildest fantasies and reality is decreasing with an incredible speed.”28 The last citation is particularly interesting because it reflects Gorky’s own becoming and what he saw happening in the Soviet

26 Nikolai Teleshov, “From Notes of a Writer,” in Gor’kii and His Contemporaries (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989), pp. 40-41
27 Nikolai Teleshov, “From Notes,” p. 36.
Union in the 1930s. All technological achievements seemed to him as the humankind’s dreams finally coming true. Imagination for Gorky was the source and the remedy for a successful realization of his dreams and, most importantly, his life.

In Gorky’s world, ideas and fantasies turned into a myriad of bright images. There is nothing surprising then that his Soviet writings represented great propaganda with vivid, picturesque descriptions. He wrote about Soviet modernization projects as if he were offering another therapy for making life better. It was a natural product of his imagination and an effort to believe in the sincerity of Bolshevik projects. However, his blind faith in progress and technology misled him. Gorky overlooked the consequences of modern technological development and means of achieving Soviet five-year-plan goals. One of the main dilemmas of the modern world, as Dmitrii Likhachev suggested, is to combine technical development with humanism harmoniously.²⁹ Technological advances achieved at high human prices wreak more havoc and result in a debilitating and violent society where the powerful few control most helpless and weak individuals. One must consistently develop both—culture and technology in a harmonious way for a civilized society to produce prosperity and equality for the majority. Gorky underestimated the nuances of consequential interaction between technology and culture. This oversight might explain his astounding acceptance of labor-correction camps and the construction of the White Sea Canal. In other words, he did not have a clear eye on contemporary realities—on technological advances that have at once enhanced the state’s capacity for surveillance and enforcement and diminished the individual’s ability to withstand that power; and on transformations in media which threatened to weaken people’s ability and

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willingness to think for themselves.\textsuperscript{30} Once Gorky accepted enforcement for progress’s sake, his utopian project of building an ideal society became jeopardized.

He was an idealist who “hated the truth,” but idealism is dangerous if one overlooks at what human price idealistic goals could be achieved.\textsuperscript{31} Sometimes he preferred to render “the desirable as real.” “Gorky was utterly bored and irritated by the condemnation of petty lies,” wrote Vladislav Khodasevich, “as much as he was with the destruction of a big dream. Resurrection of truth seemed to him as a gray and vulgar triumph of prose over poetry.”\textsuperscript{32} In the play “The Lower Depths” one of the characters declaims:

\begin{quote}
If no path can be found that leads
To the realms of sacred truth,
Then blessed the crazed mind
That brings men soaring dreams.\textsuperscript{33}
\end{quote}

This is not a detail, an aside. These words express one of the aspects of Gorky’s view of reality and men. He used every means possible to inspire people with a hope which would strengthen them and ennable their lives. This is why Gorky’s literary creativity contains both a realistic current, which speaks the truth and seeks to reveal to the oppressed the actual situation and another current which, in addition to asserting the truth, and alongside that truth, seeks to support everything, which in some way or other adorns reality or refuses to face reality, seeks to add something which does not exist in that reality. Sometimes this aspect of his attitude to the world reveals itself in an extreme form. In his reminiscences of Gorky, Khodasevich quoted a

\textsuperscript{30} For further discussion of the conflict between authority and the individual in the modern world, see Bertrand Russell, \textit{Authority and the Individual} (London: Routledge, 2010).
\textsuperscript{32} Vladislav Khodasevich, “Gor’kii,” p. 169.
\textsuperscript{33} Maxim Gor’kii, “The Lower Depths,” in \textit{P’iesy}, vol. 1, p. 137. One of the main characters in a play, “The Lower Depths,” an actor who is a drunkard, but the only character who speaks his mind straightforwardly pronounces this short speech in Russian, “Господа! Если к правде святой/мир дорогу найти не умеет/честь безумцу, который навеет/человечеству сон золотой...” (Above is my translation of this speech in English)
sentence from his letter to Ye. D. Kuskova in 1929: “I quite sincerely and unwaveringly hate the truth.”

This, of course, is somewhat of a paradox, but it reveals Gorky’s complex literary position, a complexity manifest in one of his best works, the play “The Lower Depths.” Here truth and invention, proud assertion of human worth and pity for men are equally present. Compassion for men rather than the truth which oppresses them is preached by the wanderer Luka, perhaps the most enigmatic of Gorky’s characters who retains to the end the attractive power of his love for men.

Gorky’s sense of compassion for men was subjected to its harshest test in the years of revolution and Civil War. In the first months, and even years that followed 25 October 1917, he found it difficult to come to terms with the Bolshevik party, which had taken power. He was troubled and repelled by the same factors which also blinded many others in that dramatic, uncompromising period – “the inevitability” of revolutionary violence, its excesses and the dark wave of anarchy, lawlessness and spontaneous cruelty which accompanies any massive uprising. Gorky always remembered what he termed karamazovshchina – the dark, stagnant forces which lay latent in the psyche of large but backward strata of the people. He witnessed the explosion of these forces in the events of 1917, and at first, he doubted the ability of the revolutionary party to gain control of them. It seemed to him that the Bolsheviks only instigated this explosion and were taking the revolution along a wrong, mistaken path, that they had unleashed it in the absence of the necessary conditions. All of this found expression in the cycle

34 Vladislav Khodasevich, “Gor’kii,” p. 169.
35 See Maxim Gor’kii’s Untimely Thoughts (Yale: Yale UP, 1995).
of his articles entitled *Untimely Thoughts*, which he printed in his newspaper *New Life (Novaya Zhizn’)* that Lenin closed down in 1919.

Gorky suffered immensely as a result of his differences with the leaders of the revolution, including Lenin. A sense of compassion for men, responsibility for bringing Bolsheviks to power, and belief in the necessity of deceit as well as in Bolsheviks’ skills to deal with Russian violence were at the source of Gorky’s consequent collaboration with the Bolsheviks. On several occasions to Zamyatin as well as Russell, Gorky said that the Bolsheviks were the only power that could deal with cruel and violent *muzhiks*. However, to explain his cooperation with the Bolsheviks and support of the Soviet regime with full certainty and irrefutable evidence is impossible.

The problem is that we have few documents, letters, or testimonies to find out what exactly happened in the 1930s on Malaya Nikitskaya, where Gorky lived, and in the Kremlin during Gorky’s meetings with the Soviet political leadership, particularly with Josef Stalin. First, Gorky, then Stalin, and later Khrushchev destroyed numerous documents, making it impossible to learn with certainty how much Gorky knew about the abuses that took place at these correctional institutions or whether he objected to this kind of violence and stood up for the labor camp prisoners.36

To exacerbate the problem with the purging of seminal documents by historical actors themselves, Gorky’s main archive at the Institute of World Literature is usually off limits to historians or literary critics who do not work for the Institute. The entire staff of the Gorky archive works almost exclusively with the Institute specialists on publishing twenty-four

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volumes of his correspondence. Their aim is to circulate in print his entire annotated correspondence. So far, they have published twenty volumes. A problem arises every time someone asks for a letter that has been published by the archival team before. An instant refusal follows and all pleas about how important it is to appraise Gorky’s handwriting, paper, different marks on letters or that sometimes originals can tell you something that other scholars could miss usually are in vain. While conducting research for this dissertation, I went to Rome, Italy, to the Italian Central State Archives, and found Gorky’s file that the Mussolini Internal Police kept on him. I also worked at the Archives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and looked through dozens of files of the Soviet ambassador, Dmitry Kurskii, and other Soviet Embassy reports that covered the time Gorky spent in Sorrento from 1924 until 1930. I did manage to look at some files at the main Gorky archives that had not been published yet.

As for the scholarship on Gorky in the West, most recently, scholars have focused primarily on his role in building Stalinist culture. Their studies explore history and construction of the Stalinist correctional, cultural, and educational systems. Since Gorky played an instrumental role in supporting and promoting the Bolshevik experiments and achievements, he emerges in these studies as one of the seminal public figures. Katerina Clark analyzed Gorky’s role in building the Soviet cultural system in her recent monographs, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome* and *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution*.³⁷ Michael David-Fox explored Gorky’s role in institutionalizing Soviet cultural diplomacy in his *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, while Cynthia Ruder investigated the history of the construction of the Stalin White Sea-Baltic Canal. She argues that the project was the first to institutionalize the philosophy of perekovka, the idea

that a new people who personify the Soviet Union in action and deed could be forged through forced labor and ideological reeducation. Ruder, however, fails to mention the irony: with the publication of the White Sea-Baltic Canal volume, which Gorky edited and compiled, even though he himself never visited there, he inscribed his name into eternal association with Stalin. Elizabeth Papazian in her *Manufacturing Truth* looks into how Gorky played a role in supporting documentary approaches in literature and film and how in turn this documentary impulse influenced the development of Stalinist culture. Documentary approaches in literature and film became a central means for redefining the role of the artist, of the art itself, and the institution of art in the new post-revolutionary Soviet society.

In 1999, Tovah Yedlin published a political biography of Gorky in which she analyzed his life as a political and national figure. But Gorky was a writer first and his literary work informed and shaped his political views and actions. Like other Gorky’s scholars in the US and Russia, she argues that at the source of Gorky’s political involvement was his naïve and blind commitment to a radical “change.” In my dissertation, I will demonstrate that at the source of Gorky’s political decisions was always his strong belief in a Great Man and his ability to change himself to create a better future. The European Humanist idea that a man can make himself better and by the same token make the world a better place had a profound influence on Gorky. I will demonstrate based on Gorky’s literary images and concepts of culture and Man that he based his utopian project of recasting Man on his artistic insight generated by his childhood experiences. His personal experience in the late 19th century Imperial Russia buttressed his idea of possible

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change, yet, World War I, the Russian Revolutions, and the subsequent Civil War caused doubts as to a possible existence of that Great Hero or Man imagined. His attempts to recast humanity and do it in an organized, collective way became futile. Gorky always vacillated between his strong faith in possible change and impossibility to ever carry it out.

In Russia, Gorky’s scholars centered their research on dismantling myths around Gorky and reevaluating his relationship with the authorities by using documents and Gorky’s letters unknown to the public and scholars before. Among these scholars stands out Lidiia Spiridonova who wrote a monograph entitled *True Gorky: Myths and Reality*, in which she argues that Gorky’s larger-than-life persona gave rise to legends and myths around his name. In this study, she suggests that Iagoda killed Gorky because he refused to support a plot against Stalin. Gorky became separated from the writers in emigration because of the differences in the way they viewed the revolution. The émigré writers could not accept and reconcile with Gorky after the revolution. V. S. Barakhov published a collection of essays in which he analyzes Gorky’s drama of the last years and also suggests that Gorky’s reconciliation with the Bolsheviks created a schism between him and the Russian intelligentsia circles.

My dissertation is different from the work that has been done in both the west and Russia because I am writing about Gorky’s consistencies through time – his hatred of Russian pessimism, cruelty, as well as passivity, his fight against any kind of violence, and his struggle to

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42 V. S. Barakhov, *Drama Maksima Gor’kogo (Istoki, kolliizii, metamorfozy)* (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2004).
find the recipe for human happiness as major historical cataclysms unraveled in Europe and
Russia. Most importantly, I see the source of all Gorky’s contradictions in his consistent belief in
possibility of making Man better in order to create an ideal society even by resorting to coercion.
Neither in 1907 nor in 1927 did he lose his belief in creation of a new man satisfied with his life,
although he was disappointed and disillusioned numerous times. His perception of the Russian
way of life as cruel and violent never changed even in the late 1920s when after living in Fascist
Italy for three years, he concluded that the Soviet regime was still the only power that could
energize muzhiks and inspire them to create a new man and new reality as a result of its
revolutionary experiment. He had hope and persistence to produce a novel life in the Soviet
Union, to achieve his mission – and ultimately find the recipe for happiness for all. In the end, he
died a disillusioned prophet, but his widescale educational projects, whether they were
revolutionary or not, influenced several generations of Russian intelligentsia. The power of his
imagination not only altered his life, but the life of others.

In the first chapter, I will argue that since his childhood Gorky experienced much
violence and cruelty in his family and surroundings as well as compassion of Russian
intelligentsia. These experiences set different dichotomies in his mind – cruelty vs kindness,
activity vs passivity. He concluded that only by self-educating, reading, and working, Russian
muzhiks could overcome their own violence, laziness, and cruelty. For Gorky, the writer and
philosopher, these years became formative because his childhood observations and his emotional
reactions to human cruelty served as a basis for his later works and public activity.

In the second chapter, I will show how Gorky vacillated between radical, revolutionary
means and educational, enlightening tools to change Russian reality. The first Russian revolution
in 1905 became a watershed event that radicalized his thinking. Yet, an artist and humanist in
Gorky inspired him to open a school for the Russian proletariat on Capri to foster an educational effort. I will argue that both the 1905 revolution and World War I intensified his prejudice against the muzhiks and amplified his belief in the power of culture.

In the third chapter, I will argue that Gorky agreed to cooperate with the Bolsheviks to rescue culture and persuaded himself that only the Bolsheviks could cope with muzhiks’ cruelty. I will differentiate between Gorky’s approval of violence against the muzhik and his disapproval of violence against the intellectual. Neither in 1918 nor in 1928 the state thought that distinction was useful. Yet, Lenin’s pragmatism and Stalin’s paranoia had far-reaching consequences.

In the fourth chapter, I will argue that in Fascist Italy Gorky became disillusioned with the European politics, growing Nazism and Fascism, and became more drawn to the Soviet reality. Gorky made a pact with the Soviet government based on his grand delusion in order to continue writing his works for a Russian-speaking audience, preserve Russian and European cultures at a time when Fascism spread in Europe, and, most importantly, build a new, creative, hardworking, and educated common people. He was continuing his crusade to recast a Man.

In the fifth chapter, I will argue that Gorky overestimated his abilities and thought that he could streamline and soften the violent means used by the Bolsheviks in building a new country. In the end, he got caught in the unfair play of creating a novel state based on violence, in which critics of the system did not survive. Samuel Johnson famously said that “Hell is paved with good intentions!” Gorky intended well, but grand delusion seldom meets expectations. In the Soviet Union, Gorky’s preservation projects saved Russian culture, but not millions of people who perished in Stalin’s labor camps.
This hellish trace overweighs his literary and cultural preservation legacies today. Yet, it is unfair. There were many writers and artists who surrendered to the regime, trying to work with the Soviet government, hoping for a better future. They became broken just as Gorky was. There is a larger question that is wrapped inside this complex puzzle. How does one resist an authoritarian regime? Is it possible? Once the revolutionary, violent force grabbed the wheel of power with many people surrendering their freedom, it is extremely difficult to alter the course of history.

Yet, living at the whim of history, Gorky tried to save as many representatives of intelligentsia as he could. His effort to save numerous royal palaces, libraries, works of art, all in all Russian culture, also deserve a new wave of deep gratitude. Gorky’s literary legacy, particularly his plays, still teach us to appreciate the beautiful and sublime without venerating and fawning on money. Gorky’s belief in human imagination and man’s abilities to create a good, purposeful life for oneself remains a matter of admiration and inspiration. Man has always occupied the center of Gorky’s universe and literary legacy and he treated him in the most romantic and supernatural way: “… I have a powerful sense of my earth within the universe as its center,” he wrote, “and man on it as the chief and most genuine miracle of the earth.”

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Chapter 1

Petit Bourgeois and Muzhiki in Gorky’s Work

Our fundamental enemies are stupidity and cruelty. It is high time we develop an aversion to murder, a feeling of disgust towards it.

M. Gorky

What a great thing it is to be a writer; it is particularly wonderful to be a writer in Russia because life is so bad.

M. Gorky

Our motto should be not only forward, but also higher! A petit bourgeois can go forward, when it is profitable and safe, or pleasurable and inexpensive. But he cannot go higher; he is too heavy, son of a bitch!

M. Gorky

At home in the evening, I finished reading Gorky. All imaginary, unnatural, enormous heroic feelings, and hypocrisy. But the talent is big.

Leo Tolstoy

Literature is a sacred thing.

M. Gorky

In a letter to his wife Ekaterina, Gorky wrote in 1896: “May heavenly thunders strike me down—I am a very incomprehensible and anxious person—Oh God, how many contradictions I contain…” Although Gorky often referred to his contradictory nature, he never dwelt on his consistencies. Perhaps because of Gorky’s preoccupation with his own ambiguities, scholars also explain his changing position in relation to the Soviet authorities by leaning on his contradictory nature.

45 Maxim Gor’kii, “Gor’kii to Leonid Andreev, 26 or 27 September, 1901” in Polnoe sobranie sochinenii: pis’ma (PSSP) (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo nauka, 1997), vol. 2, p. 170.
47 Leo Tolstoy, Dnevnik (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1985), vol. 22, p. 45.
48 Maxim Gor’kii, “Andreevu, 10 September, 1901” PSSP, vol. 2, p. 95.
Yet Gorky maintained a surprising consistency in three vital respects: he distrusted the Russian *muzhiki* and petit bourgeoisie (*meshchane*) deeply because of their greed, cruelty, and violence; he wanted to heal Russia from its pessimism caused by poverty and misery, and he worshipped Man and culture. Gorky’s metaphysical view of life consists of these three ideas and are fundamental to understanding Gorky’s support of the Soviet experiment. In his letters and literary works, he suggests that Russia’s despondent way of life gave rise to violence and cruelty in its people; Russia’s open spaces cultivated the peasants’ striving for unlimited freedom that in the end was more destructive than useful.\(^{50}\)

Have these consistencies been discussed by Gorky scholars? They have paid some attention to Gorky’s hatred of *meshchane* and peasants. Boris Bialik, Natalia Primochkina, Lidiia Spiridonova, Gorky’s biographers – Dmitry Bykov, Pavel Basinskii, and Tovah Yedlin – mentioned his hatred of peasants in passing and observed that Gorky’s childhood experiences with violence shaped his worldview.\(^{51}\) Unlike them, I analyze these formative influences in relation to Gorky’s consistent and overpowering mission to recast Man in order to make him better and heal Russia from pessimism as well as find a recipe for human happiness. This mission in turn shaped Gorky’s desire to become a writer. His childhood experiences gave rise to two preoccupations in his life – literature on the one hand and public and political activism on the other.

Literary scholars such as Pavel Basinskii noted that two passions shaped Gorky’s life: literature and revolution. My research suggests, by contrast, that radical revolutionary activity

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\(^{50}\) Maxim Gor’kii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo literatury, 1962).

was not exactly a driving force in Gorky’s life. It was just the means to achieve his main goal—to make human existence better. What always moved him were literature and the desire to resist violence in the most benign ways, such as gradual social, educational reforms, as well as in the most destructive ways—revolutionary activity—depending on historical circumstances. On a basic psychological level, any appearance of violence generated two different reactions in Gorky: either he became shy and longed for an escape with a book, or he became defensive and attacked his tormenters. In his imagination, two people lived within him—a monk and a romantic hero from the French novels of the eighteenth century. This response to violence described two living human beings in Gorky: a genteel representative of the intelligentsia and a fighter who would use any means to counter violence. In the upcoming revolutionary struggle, these two responses would shape Gorky’s educational and radical activities.

Born in 1868 and coming of age at the end of the nineteenth century, Gorky was deeply influenced by a sense of an inexorable, profound change reflected in the global reappraisal of values. In philosophy and sociology, Marxism, Hegel’s prophecy about the end of history, and Nietzsche’s claim that God was dead generated a lethal blend that blew up traditional values. Nietzschean ideas made a difference by providing intellectual ammunition for a prolonged conflict over culture, society, and politics. A renewal of literary creativity in search of artistic synthesis characterized the Silver Age writers. The loss of “obsolete” realism and a search for a new faith gave rise to symbolism, acmeism, futurism, while neo-romanticism and neo-realism sought a new creative method. A resurgence of romanticism at the beginning of the twentieth

52 Pavel Basinskii i Lev Danilkin, “Mat i matritsa: Perezagruzka Gor’kogo” Rossiiskaia Gazeta, March 27, 2018.
53 Maxim Gor’kii, V liudiakh, in Sobranie sochinenii v vosemnadtsati tomakh (SS) (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1962), vol. 9, p. 409.
century took place both in Europe and Russia. Childe Harold’s aristocratic cape turned into a muzhik’s democratic shirt. Literary critic Eugene Melchior de Vogue noted in 1892 that “a romantic lion remained the same as he were, despite other literary embellishments – a young animal, selfish, and unrestrained.”

Maxim Gorky in Russia, Rudyard Kipling in England, Gabriel D’Annuzio in Italy, and Gerhart Hauptmann in Germany came out of Nietzsche’s overcoat. Like his European fellow artists, Gorky belonged to a category of writers who sang praises to the active individual and devoted himself to the struggle for social justice and the reorganization of life on a more rational and sensible basis. He was also drawn to ideas of self-improvement, freeing a person from constraining moral and ethical norms, and, most importantly, by the idea of individual reeducation and the birth of a “new man.” In other words, Gorky’s thoughts tried to amalgamate two extremes – Marxism and Nietzscheanism—by using two different means of achieving a profound change, radical and educational. To the young Gorky, Nietzsche meant faith in the individual while Marx meant the social revolution that would pave the way to man’s liberation. As Bernice Rosenthal points out, Gorky vacillated between the two ideas. “Gorky had not opted for one or the other. Marxism, he said in 1898, ‘belittles man,’ yet ‘the meaning of life is in man.’”

Although Nietzsche’s writings contain a cornucopia of ideas, Gorky was not a subtle or sophisticated thinker. He was looking for quick answers and solutions, and in Zarathustra’s superman he found the hero that he was looking for. In his letter to Fedor Batiushkov, his editor, Gorky admitted his debt to Nietzsche although he presented the philosopher’s views as his own: “I think that the meaning of life is in man, that ‘the true epitome is man’ as Zarathustra says; I believe that man is something that must be overcome,

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and I believe, I do believe—he will be overcome!” The impact of Gorky’s works would not have been so explosive had he not combined Nietzsche’s teachings with his own ideas and attitudes and offered a naked, vivid, and dramatic portrayal of Russia. But most importantly, young Gorky embraced Marxism and Nietzscheanism because they offered quick solutions to dilemmas, problems, and beliefs formed during his childhood. Gorky himself had to overcome his personal circumstances in order to rise from “the depths.”

In this chapter, I argue that Gorky’s three consistent ideas – his pathological hatred of peasants and the petit bourgeoisie, Russia’s pessimism, and his worship of Man and culture, all came about as a result of Gorky’s childhood experiences, which his readings of philosophical studies and later historical circumstances reinforced. As Viktor Shklovsky rightly put it, Gorky was an equal to his original name, Aleksei Peshkov, who repeatedly talked about his biography and thus became the “main material for his literary works” and for his theory. To fully comprehend his development as a writer and a thinker, one has to turn to his earlier works and the monumental trilogy, Childhood, Into the People, and My Universities.

**Autobiography as Document**

There are very few documents or witness accounts left about Gorky’s early life. Writers and critics such as Ivan Bunin and Kornei Chukovskii questioned Gorky’s humble beginnings in their articles and diaries. And the only descriptions of his early life exist in the form of his autobiography. At the beginning of 1913, while Gorky was still living on Capri, he received a proposal from Ivan Sytin, the publisher of the newspaper *Russkoe slovo* (*The Russian Word*), to

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59 Maxim Gor’kii, SS, vol. 9.
write a series of articles. Gorky offered several sketches based on his childhood reminiscences. This series was published under the title *Childhood* from 1913 to 1914 and continued into 1915 under the title *Into the People*. The separate articles were then combined into the first two parts of Gorky’s autobiography, which became his masterpiece. The third part, *My Universities*, was written later, in 1923—after the revolution.

The necessity of compressing his recollections sufficiently to meet the needs of a newspaper had a positive effect on Gorky’s writing. It forced him to avoid long stretches of philosophizing and to restrict himself to his main area of strength as a writer. Gorky also had complete narrative control over the themes that had concerned him in his earlier works. As Irwin Weil suggests, “The indignation of the first-person against the ‘abominations’ of Russian life is stated objectively and effectively through the very sort of episodes that have necessarily conditioned the reactions of the narrator.”61 Because of the autobiographical genre, the reader does not feel any “disjunction between ideology and psychology as he sometimes does in reading in previous novels.”62

This trilogy became the classical autobiographical text in the Russian literary canon. For the purposes of the dissertation these recollections become important material that documents Gorky’s own view of his development. In essence, Gorky himself left a record of what childhood episodes had the most impact on him. Gorky’s biographers used these texts to unpack his development as a writer and a human being.63 This dissertation adds a third dimension: these

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62 Irwin Weil, *Gor’kii*, p. 69.
recollections serve to explain how Gorky’s childhood experiences affected his vision not only as a writer but also as a public servant.

Gorky’s Humble Beginnings and Education

Born in 1868 in Nizhny Novgorod in a family of an upholsterer, Gorky became an orphan when he turned 11. His grandparents became his only close relatives. Yet, when his maternal grandfather, Vasily Kashirin, who was an owner of a dye shop, went bankrupt, he asked Gorky to support himself the day after he turned eleven, making the young boy feel helpless at a very early age. It is clear from his autobiography and numerous letters that at the core of Gorky’s conscience was the tragic loss of his father, who nursed Gorky to health during cholera, but died himself as a result of his care for his son. Gorky’s mother, who married her husband against her father’s wishes, began to resent her little son for “taking the life” of her beloved. The boy was devoid of his mother’s love even when she was alive, but he also understood early on how helpless and financially dependent his mother was despite her courage and fighting spirit. His maternal grandfather never accepted Gorky as one of his own. Virtually abandoned by his willful mother to his despotic grandfather, the young Alexei felt that Akulina, his paternal grandmother, was the only person who truly loved him, but she often lost herself in a state of drunkenness. These circumstances prompted him to voice his loneliness many times and write in 1896: “To be lonely is terrible pain and suffering,” and he certainly learned what loneliness meant early.64 His immediate family neither expressed any interest in him nor taught him how to develop interest in himself. Only random representatives of the intelligentsia showed acts of great compassion and directed Gorky’s attention towards books and reading.

Between 1878 and 1892, Gorky worked odd jobs as a shoemaker’s servant, a draughtsman’s understudy, and as an assistant to a cook and a baker. He split wood and sang in a small opera company, sold apples and attempted to commit suicide, guarded a railway station where he was responsible for managing brooms and tarpaulin, worked as an attorney’s clerk, travelled on foot across Russia, and labored in salt-mines and at railway workshops. “During his wanderings,” notes Marseleza Semashkina, “Gorky learned about the life of provincial county towns in the south of Russia in all its variety: the patriarchal way of life of a socially different population – the intelligentsia, merchants, workers, tramps…”65 The list of odd jobs is impressively long and diverse. Why did he fail to keep any of them? The answer is simple: he did not want to. First, Gorky was famous for his impertinence and could not stand violence and abuse at work. He threw himself at his stepfather with a dagger when the latter attacked his mother. He defended innocent, helpless, poor children and women by confronting their tormenters and he could not stand when employers mistreated innocuous and defenseless people. “I sometimes had an irresistible desire to beat the abuser,” confessed Gorky, “and rushed into a fight so impulsively that even today I recall these attacks of despair born from helplessness with a lot of shame and misery.”66

Gorky was profoundly honest and never compromised himself even when he realized that the consequences of his insubordination could cost him a job: he was asked to leave a ship he worked on because he did not want to aid in stealing dishes, he was thrown out of an icon shop because he refused to spy on his coworker, and was kicked out of a draughtsman’s house for his “loyalty to books” as well as putting bluntly what he thought of the draughtsman family’s

66 Maxim Gor’kii, Vi ludiakh, SS, vol. 9, p. 409
ignorance and stupidity. Having been deceived by his peers and having seen much cruelty from his co-workers, he lost interest in any kind of job involving physical labor. “Few Russian writers,” wrote Dmitry Bykov, “hated routine jobs devoid of greater meaning with more passion than Gorky; perhaps, only Varlam Shalamov, who called any physical job a man’s curse, comes close to Aleksei Maksimovich.”\(^{67}\) Second, Gorky had no patience for filth and complaints. “I was squeamish about accidents, peoples’ diseases and complaints, anything cruel, like blood, violence, even verbal abuse, they all disgusted me no end, turning quickly into a cold fury; I could fight like an animal only to feel bitterly ashamed afterwards.”\(^{68}\)

He was a free thinker who could not gain a foothold until he found his calling that brought much satisfaction and provided for a happy and good life. Unlike others who failed to find peace in a tramp’s way of life, he kept testing standards and reasonable limits. Gorky repeatedly asked himself: “Is my whole life going to be like this? Shall I live like all these people without finding or seeing anything better?”\(^{69}\) In other words, as a man born with great literary talent he would hate any job for which he had no calling.\(^{70}\) So he kept searching and often wrote about his numerous professions: “it was boring…tedious … hopeless.”\(^{71}\)

What is striking is that he did not engage in writing until he reached his early twenties. Having had only one and a half years of education in elementary school, Gorky self-taught his way through life. He belonged to the “polu-intelligentsia” that he later supported by publishing anthologies of works by proletarian writers.\(^{72}\) As Evgeny Zamiatin astutely noted, Gorky never

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\(^{67}\) Dmitry Bykov, *Gor’kii* (Moscow: Molodaya gvardiia, 2016), p. 63.

\(^{68}\) Maxim Gor’kii, *V ludiakh, PSS* (1962), vol. 9, p. 358

\(^{69}\) Maxim Gor’kii, *V ludiakh, PSS*, vol. 9, p. 358.


\(^{71}\) Maxim Gor’kii, *V ludiakh*, p. 401.

stopped learning. With his insatiable appetite for reading, he devoured books and journals even at the risk of being punished by an employer who considered reading a sin. Despite beatings and punishments for reading books, Gorky persevered.

In his autobiography, *My Universities*, he recollects his “anxious curiosity and a desire to learn everything as soon as possible.” While other people dreamt about “possessing trifles,” Gorky needed only books. He advised his wife, Ekaterina: “Please collect books. Value them—they are our best friends.” Whether it was steamer chef Smuryi who provided Gorky with books and encouraged him to acquire an education, or a city lawyer for whom Gorky worked, he received support and guidance from people who realized the value of reading. “Read books; they will teach you everything you need,” taught Smuryi young Gorky. “Do not abuse alcohol. Alcoholism is sorrow. Vodka is the Devil’s Damn Business. If I had money, I would have forced you to get educated. An uneducated man is like an ox, it wags its tail just the same, whether it goes to plough the fields or to the slaughterhouse.” Gorky received this kind of support from members of the Russian intelligentsia throughout his life. Later, Vladimir Korolenko and Anton Chekhov would aid his career in every way they could. “Members of the Russian intelligentsia were more or less united in a commitment to the ‘cultural development’ of the people,” wrote Joan Neuberger, “and the cultural unity of the nation.”

Gorky’s passion for books and reading laid the path for his self-identification in the social and cultural reality of Imperial Russia. By the late 1890s, intelligentsia were already becoming

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74 Maxim Gor’kii, *Vludiakh*, PSS, vol. 9, p. 385.
75 Maxim Gor’kii, *Moi universitety*, PSS, vol. 10, p. 35.
77 Maxim Gor’kii, “E. P. Volzhinoi, 21 mai 1896, Samara,” PSSP, vol. 1, p. 140.
concerned with the ethical ideal of universal personhood—"the particular notion of an interior and autonomous self-endowed with a universal humanity." Gorky’s readings have nurtured the view that every person is endowed with dignity and natural autonomy, not because of any particular status, situation, or role, but simply by virtue of being human. Books gave Gorky ideas, but his social interactions with students and the literary intelligentsia in Kazan and Samara, enhanced his self-respect and nourished his desire for autonomy. Social interactions with intelligentsia and students that produced in workers both admiration and resentment was typical of the cultural milieu in nineteenth-century Imperial Russia. It is no surprise that Gorky developed a complex relationship with intelligentsia: he both worshipped and resented it.

While Gorky’s surroundings were dismal, literary protagonists inspired him. By reading voraciously and dreaming about a different kind of life, he searched for solace and inspiration. Reading became a form of escape and a coping mechanism that helped Gorky to avoid the path of those who worked with him at the salt mines, bakeries, artels, and railway stations. When he began writing, he decided to devote his life to Russian culture and his personal letters reflect his intention to love art and respect creative freedom. Inspired by Russia’s culture and history, Gorky encouraged his wife to familiarize herself “with the country’s life, in which [he] intend[ed] to become more than a cultural cog.” Already in 1896, Gorky envisioned himself as an instrumental force in Russia’s cultural formation. “Gorky developed well the pathos of

82 Maxim Gor’kii, “A. L. Volunskomu, nachalo sentiabria 1897, Manujlovka,” *PSSP*, vol. 1, p. 229.
conservation,” wrote Victor Shklovsky, “quantitative preservation of the entire culture... He
[was] a writer until the very end.”

In Tiflis, he met Alexander Kaliuzhnyi, a political exile who was the first to appreciate
Gorky’s unique storyteller’s gift and who encouraged him to write. On September 12, 1892
under a pseudonym, Gorky’s first short story “Makar Chudra” became an instant success. It
demonstrated a great talent based on a prodigious memory and storytelling gift. With this short
story, one of the strangest prose writers of the Silver Age appeared in Russia who chose to
capture life’s suffering, cruelty, and nastiness in his literary works. Neither Tolstoy nor
Chekhov were so preoccupied and interested in the lower depths as Gorky was. Between 1892
and 1903 he wrote plays, satirical essays, and articles for newspapers. By 1899, Gorky made it
into Semen Vengerov’s Critical-Biographical Dictionary of Russian Writers (Kritiko-
biograficheskii slovar russkikh pisatelei) and into the Gallery of Russian Writers edited by Ilya
Ignatov. Vengerov was the first to publish Gorky’s short autobiography, which encouraged
public interest in his adventurous life. According to Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Gorky’s
play “The Lower Depths” inspired the Moscow Art Theatre actors when they first read it, but no
one could even suppose that it would be such an overwhelming and worldwide success. “Gorky
marked our 1902-1903 season because we staged two of his plays,” wrote Nemirovich-
Danchenko, “the other two, Tolstoy’s ‘Power of Darkness’ and Ibsen’s ‘Pillars of Society’ did
not eclipse him at all.” In 1903, the New World journal commented on Gorky’s success:
“Astonishing! The son of a low-class upholsterer, who became an orphan when he turned 4.

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84 Viktor Shklovsky, Udachi i porazheniia Maksima Gor’kogo (Moscow, 1926), p. 7.
85 Dmitry Bykov, Byl li Gor’kii (Moscow: Astrel, 2008), p. 45.
86 Dmitry Bykov, Gor’kii (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia), p. 23.
87 Semen Vengerov, ed. Kritiko-biograficheskii slovar russkikh pisatelei (St. Petersburg: Semenovskaiia tipografiia
88 V. Nemirovich-Danchenko, “Iz knigi iz proshlogo,” in Sovremenniki o Gor’kom (Gor’kii: Volgo-viatskoe kn.
izdatel’stvo, 1988), p. 151
brought up by his grandmother and grandfather … had little education, abandoned by his mother, abused by his grandfather, he endured many privations, but what an amazing turn of events.”

When Gorky began earning substantial sums of money, he directed his energy not only towards writing, but also towards actively participating in the public life of Nizhni Novgorod and Russia proper. With much enthusiasm, he embarked on establishing the Society of Nizhni Novgorod Lovers of Art, for which he wrote the charter. To support the Nizhni Novgorod Society to Help Women in Need as well as the People’s Theater in Nizhni Novgorod, Gorky published a collection of short stories to which he asked Ivan Bunin, Anton Chekhov, Nikolai Teleshov, and Leonid Andreev to contribute. In order to promote the fund for building a dormitory for the children of public school teachers, Gorky worked on another collection of essays. He appealed to the town residents to help with organizing a skating-rink for the children of the poor, asking for skates, straps, and money to be sent to him. Often one could meet Gorky strolling around Nizhni Novgorod, carrying books under his arm. Gorky wrote often that only reading, which inculcated in him a deep respect for culture and education, saved him from the material and spiritual poverty of the “lower depths.” Throughout his life, he would never betray his faith in education and reading.

By the late 1890s, he was already donating numerous books on philosophy, political economy, history, the natural sciences, and fiction to the public library in Nizhni Novgorod as did Anton Chekhov, whom Gorky deeply respected and admired. To this day, the collection boasts 400 volumes with Gorky’s notes in them. He expanded his philanthropic and public

89 “Maksim Gor’kii,” Novyi Mir 106 (1903).
90 Maxim Gor’kii, “Gor’kii to A. P. Chekhov, 11 or 12 February, 1900,” PSSP, vol. 2, p. 19.
91 Maxim Gor’kii, “Gor’kii to L. N. Andreev, Middle of September, 1902,” PSSP, vol. 3, p. 100.
92 Nikolai Teleshov, “From Notes of a Writer,” in Gor’kii and His Contemporaries (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1989), p. 36.
93 Nikolai Teleshov, “From Notes of a Writer,” p. 36.
94 Commentary, in Gor’kii, PSS, vol 3, p. 258.
work beyond Nizhnii Novgorod when he spearheaded efforts to create a new public library in Arzamas by donating hundreds of volumes to its collection. To support students and promote primary education, Gorky read his play “The Lower Depths” at the Moscow Art Theatre before 40 guests who bought relatively expensive tickets—25 rubles each—to benefit theater students. In 1903, Gorky arranged for a charity concert to benefit the Society for Primary Education and the People’s House in Nizhny Novgorod at which Fedor Shaliapin sang. At Gorky’s behest, Savva Morozov donated 60 decorations from the Moscow Art Theatre to the theater of Nizhnii Novgorod. Gorky’s energy and appetite for cultural projects proved irrepressible. Even though Gorky incessantly criticized Russia’s reality, he was full of enthusiasm for his cultural projects, which acted “like patches for the cracks of the soul that thirsts for life.” Gorky was the product of the provincial culture of Nizhnii Novgorod (1871-1884) and a carrier of the “provincial idea” as a combination of economic self-government and a crusade to raise awareness and self-consciousness in order to “perform the tasks of providing” education and culture “that previously were supposed to be the domain of the landlords.” As a result, Gorky’s spiritual drive to enlighten others never ebbed.

As a writer, Gorky succeeded beyond anyone’s expectations. Neither Tolstoy, nor Dostoevsky had risen to fame as quickly. What other writers tried to achieve for years, Gorky managed to accomplish at the very beginning of his literary career. His first short story, “Makar Chudra,” which turned out to be an instant literary success, was published under the pseudonym

95 Maxim Gor’kii, “Gor’kii to A. M. Khrabrov, 2 or 5 July, 1902,” PSSP, vol. 3, p. 46
98 Maxim Gor’kii, “A. P. Chekhovu, 11 or 12 February, 1900,” PSSP, vol 2, p. 19.
Maksim Gorky in 1892. His short stories sold instantly. This overwhelming success surprised him as much as it astonished others. Konstantin Stanislavsky noted in his memoirs that success took Gorky aback. He observed once how Gorky came on stage to take a bow after a play still holding a cigarette in his mouth. Gorky became extremely shy, repeating to himself and everyone around him: “That, my friends, is a success, truly it is, upon my word! They are applauding!” Overnight success made Gorky the hero of the day. Young writers began to emulate not only Gorky’s writing style, but also his way of dress. Literary critics raved about Gorky’s writing and found echoes of Nietzsche’s love of freedom and Ibsen’s individualism in it. Under Gorky’s influence, even painters such as Vladimir Makovsky turned their attention to tramps.

A crowd of gazing admirers, especially females, followed Gorky everywhere now. At first he felt obliged to talk to them and, with his shoulders hunched, plucking his hair, touching his moustache, and constantly running fingers through his long straight hair, he would try to explain that he felt embarrassed because they kept looking at him as if he were a ballerina or a singer. Stanislavsky noted that Gorky’s comical embarrassment and unusual manner of speaking when he felt shy only further intrigued and attracted admirers. He had charm, beauty and grace, and a certain air of freedom and lack of constraint. “My visual memory,” wrote Stanislavsky, “retained his graceful pose when, standing on the jetty in Yalta, he was seeing me off and waiting for the steamship to leave. Leaning casually against the bundles of goods, he gazed pensively into the distance and it seemed that at any moment he might soar away in pursuit of his

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100 Previous Gor’kii biographers, Dillon, Kaun, Bykov, and Basinskii also emphasized that Gor’kii’s literary success was unexpected and immediate.
dream.”

During one of her lectures in the Soviet Union, Moura Budberg, Gorky’s last great love, also noted that Gorky possessed a graceful and light gait with which she fell in love. So in addition to the popularity of his literary works and characters, his personal qualities such as his charm, delightful shyness, graceful walk, a dazzling smile added to his lightning success and impressed his audience in a powerful way. No other Russian writer from “the depths” had a similar effect on Russian audiences. Gorky’s looks, style, and energy played as vital a role in his overwhelming popularity as the power of his characters. No one among the established masters of Russian prose earned similar public adoration. Gorky became unique in the Russian literary tradition because he was the first Russian celebrity in the true sense of the word.

By 1903, famous European journalists and literary critics, such as E. J. Dillon and Melchior Vogüé, as well as Russian critics such as Evgeny Soloviev, Vasily Kedrov, and Mikhail Moskal, evaluated Gorky’s works, wrote biographical sketches, lectured about Gorky, and debated the causes of his success. By 1906, dozens of books explored Gorky’s literary output. His incredible popularity eclipsed other writers’ fame, particularly in 1902 when Gorky was elected an honorary Academician of Literature. Because he was under police surveillance, Tsar Nicholas II annulled the honor, which precipitated Anton Chekhov and Vladimir Korolenko to leave the Academy of Sciences in protest. There is no such thing as bad publicity, however, and the Tsar’s controversial decision only increased Gorky’s fame.

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103 Konstantin Stanislavsky, Moia zhizn’ v iskusstve, p. 359.
104 AG (Arkhiv Gorkogo), f. MB, op. 80, d. 795, l. 2.
105 Donald Fanger, “Introduction,” Gor’kii’s Tolstoy and Other Reminiscences: Key Writings by and about Maxim Gor’kii (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008), p. 11.
106 Evgeny Solov’iev, Kniga o Maksime Gor’kom i A. P. Chekhove (St. Petersburg, 1900), Kriticheskie stat’i o protzvedeniakh Gor’kogo (1900), V. Botsianovskii, Maksim Gor’kii: kritiko-biograficheskii etiyud (St. Petersburg, tipografia Suvorina, 1903).
Critics fail to agree on why Gorky became so popular, but it most likely had to do with the increase in mass readership in Russia, which the steady trend of industrialization favored as it required a more literate population. Second, the increasingly literate public searched for entertainment through reading. Gorky’s intriguing personality and mysterious background combined with his vision of better life and a new strong individual, provided much intrigue and excitement. He not only became Russia’s first literary celebrity, but also a self-made writer who caught everyone’s attention. Some believed that the secret of his popularity lay in his instant appeal to almost all representatives on the late imperial political spectrum. Russian Marxists, Populists, and liberals found in Gorky a champion of the individual and a writer who recreated well the reality of the proletariat, the tramps, and the peasantry. Contemporary critics, particularly the Populists, pointed out strong parallels between Nietzsche and Gorky. N. K. Mikhailovsky directly questioned whether Gorky had read Nietzsche and made a reference to the teachings of Gorky’s tramps and of Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra, while Marxist critics such as V. A. Posse accepted and promulgated Gorky’s image as an original writer and only later admitted Nietzsche’s influence on him. Posse acknowledged Gorky’s enthusiasm for Nietzsche when he first met the Russian writer in the 1890s. Marxist critics did not want to acknowledge that Gorky agreed with a philosopher who attacked egalitarianism and socialism—from Gorky’s first publication they tried to bring him into their camp and silently hoped that he would soon cast off these unpopular views.

109 Donald Fanger, “Introduction,” Gor’kii’s Tolstoy and Other Reminiscences: Key Writings by and about Maxim Gor’kii (New Haven: Yale UP, 2008), p. 11.
110 Zhizn i sochineniia Maksima Gor’kogo (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia A. S. Suvorina, 1904), pp. 40-60.
111 N. K. Mikhailovsky, “Literatura i zhizn’: eshche o Maksime Gor’kom i ego geroiakh,” Russkoe bogatsvo, no. 10 (1898), p. 84.
112 V. A. Posse, Moi zhiznennyi put’ (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1929), p. 151.
Among all of Gorky’s characters, the tramps’ teachings best echoed Zarathustra’s lessons. Tramps appealed to him the most because of their flamboyant individualism, although he denied many literary critics’ generalization that the tramp constituted the center of his works.113 “I have never asked anyone to become a tramp. I… loved and love people who act, who are active, who value and adorn life a little, with anything, even with a dream of a good life.”114 In other words, Gorky became fascinated with tramps because he wished to portray “unusual or new men” who rebelled against society’s rules, but who had never achieved self-fulfillment. “They nonetheless,” notes Mary Louise Loe, “are portrayed as the strongest men in Russia because they at least have had the courage to follow their own desires.”115 He contrasted tramps with representatives of the lower and lower middle classes, whom he despised and who had often treated him unjustly in his youth. Examples of unfairness and cruelty pepper Gorky’s autobiography *In the World*, which describes his employers scolding, underpaying, and beating him. He grew to believe that private property was not only a sin, but the root of human sins in general.116

But there was another social class in Russia for whom Gorky felt an unchanging and deep distrust, it was the peasants—the *muzhiki*. Gorky viewed the *muzhik* as a lazy and loathsome being that retarded Russia’s development by wasting his life and failing to progress. For him, a Russian *muzhik* always represented evil. His position differed radically from the Populist view that idealized the peasant and the power of the land. Unlike the Populists, Gorky despised the peasants’ attachment to the land. While Populists saw the peasantry as a revolutionary class led

113 Some literary critics such as F. D. Batrushkov and A. Volynskii (A. L. Flekser) called Gor’kii a “singer of the tramps” (pevets bosiachestva).
by the “outstanding representatives of the intelligentsia” and perceived the village commune as
the embryo of socialism, Gorky’s personal experience with the peasants and the Populist
movement exposed this as a delusion. In the village of Krasnoyidovo, peasants set the house
where Gorky lived on fire and he was almost burnt alive. After the failure of his own “going to
the people” experiment in the 1880s, he concluded that only the proletariat had the power to set a
revolutionary example.

Muzhiki and Money

By century’s end, the collapse of the “going to the people” movement led many members
of the Russian intelligentsia into “pathological pessimism” about the Russian muzhik, so Gorky
was not alone in his disillusionment. “For those who had gone to the village with high hopes of
rapprochement and renewal,” writes Cathy Frierson, “the rural paradise bit by bit began to turn
into rural Hell; the result: weariness, coolness, disillusionment … over the muzhik.” Maxim
Gorky added to this complicated debate, by creating a dark portrait of the peasant Gavrila in his
short story “Chelkash” published in 1895 in Russian Wealth (Russkoe bogatstvo). Gorky’s work
predated Anton Chekhov’s famously pessimistic take on “who was the Russian muzhik” in his
short story “Muzhiki” by two years. Unlike Chekhov, who did not express his outright contempt
for peasants and emphasized the force of poverty in determining their unfortunate fate, Gorky
underscored the peasants’ alleged cruelty and their irrepressible passion for property. Gorky
strongly believed that, first and foremost, the peasant’s “fanatical” passion for possessions was in
his blood, and second, that the social culture and circumstances only reinforced his greed.

117 Franco Venturi, Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth Century
118 Cathy Frierson, Peasant Icons: Representations of Rural People in Late Nineteenth-Century Russia (New York:
order to accumulate money, the peasants were ready to commit the worst crimes. The power of money was the only power that they recognized. Gorky despised his own dependency on money, which forced him to compose articles and feuilletons in order to make ends meet. In 1896, he wrote to his wife: “Damnation to money and those conditions in life which force man to depend on the ruble—a dirty and foul paper.”

Condemning the power of money in his short story “Chelkash,” Gorky juxtaposes two distinct world views: the tramp Grisha Chelkash relishes his freedom, while the Gavrila, in his neat clothes, is enslaved by his dream of owning land. While everyone knows Chelkash to be a cunning thief and alcoholic, they do not despise him because of his independent spirit. It manifests itself in his fascination with the sea: “He was a thief and a cynic who loved the sea: his nervous and boiling nature, greedy for impressions, always fell for this dark width, boundless and magnificent.” On the other hand, Gavrila, with his vulnerable blue eyes, dislikes roaming and becomes Chelkash’s partner in a smuggling operation to make a few rubles that will allow him to buy a plot of land. Gorky masterfully juxtaposes two different kinds of greed: for impressions and for property. After the robbery, the greedy Gavrila almost kills the freedom loving and dignified Chelkash over the splitting of stolen booty. The story ends with freedom’s uneasy triumph over self-imposed enslavement. Gorky emphasizes the tramp’s independence and opposes it to the enslaved peasant’s weakness. “‘Chelkash’ contains the central contrast between strong and weak wills,” points out Irwin Weil, “which appears so consistently throughout Gorky’s work and which preoccupied the author in so many areas of activity, both

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122 Gor’kii, “Chelkash,” PSS, vol. 1, p. 117.
literary and political.” Gorky points out that despite his wayward life, Chelkash still possesses self-respect and human feelings. Nikolai Mikhailovsky, Russia’s prominent Populist, interpreted the story as humiliating the Russian *muzhik* and never forgave Gorky’s condemnation of the Populist ideal—the positive power of the land. But Gorky simply never saw anything positive or lyrical in the peasants’ attachment to it. In his eyes, the Russian *muzhik* was a cruel, pitiful, and weak being enslaved by his greed and passion for ownership.

Another Gorky character, the Caucasian Gypsy Makar Chudra, attempts to convince the intellectual that his need to sacrifice himself for the peasants is absurd because they are weak, servile, and vicious men whose fear of God and greed for land prevent them from understanding liberty. Peasants are slaves. “Do you mean to say he was born to dig the earth and die without having managed to dig a grave for himself?” asks Makar Chudra. “Does he know what freedom is? Has he any idea of the vast and glorious steppe? Does the music of the steppe gladden his heart? He’s a slave, from the moment he is born, a slave all his life long, and that’s all!” In the 1890s, Gorky was convinced that peasants had no other purpose in life but to be slaves.

Gorky aimed to shock with his depictions of peasant greed in his early short stories. He even developed a consistent plot device wherein he would introduce readers to a peasant character and then stun them with a finale that exposed greed-driven peasant cruelty. Neither Chekhov, nor Tolstoy achieved a comparable level of virtuosity with unexpected endings that left no hope. Published in 1896 in *Nizhegorodskii listok*, “The Thief” describes a seven-year-old

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126 Ibid., p. 15.
boy who must steal different goods in order to provide for his family abandoned by an alcoholic father. Barefoot and dressed in a dirty shirt with holes, the little boy steals a cake of soap at the bazaar. The seller catches him by grabbing both of his legs and forcing him to hit his chin against the pavement. The seller then begins devising different kinds of punishment for the boy. This helpless, frightened child starts crying, imploring the mužhik to let him go, telling him about his family and explaining that stealing is about survival, not choice. The seller keeps on scaring this seven-year-old with prison and when he becomes bored with torturing the boy, he lets him go. Gorky points out that neither empathy, nor kindness matter to the peasant and his ending proves that the greedy and indifferent nature of the mužhik would always prevail. Taken by this “show of kindness,” the boy comes back in a few minutes to ask the seller for one kopeck, but the seller turns him in to the police.

In his early plays and short stories, Gorky accused not only peasants, but also the petit bourgeoisie of greed. Deep-seated craving for power over people and hunger for profit are common to all Gorky images of Russian, European, and American “owners of the land,” merchants, bankers, and factory owners. Writing about capitalism in Russia, Gorky underscored that “there are so many people these days, but very few Men among them.”127 Analyzing capitalism’s inception and development in Russia, he wrote: “Bourgeois civilization and culture are based on the never-ending vicious battle of the minority of the well-fed neighbors (ближних) against the overwhelming majority of the starving neighbors.”128 It is impossible to love one’s neighbor if one has to steal from him, thought Gorky, and, if one’s neighbor resists, to kill him. Vassa Zheleznova, one of Gorky’s vibrant characters, an iron lady-merchant, asks her husband Sergei Petrovich, an alcoholic and a lecher, to take poison to avoid public prosecution for the

She does it without hesitation. This kind of inner coldness and determination, Gorky thought, was characteristic of the merchant class. When money and reputation were at stake, all Christian values based on salvation and compassion became secondary and any “violent” means to rescue the situation became acceptable.

Gorky usually shows the clash of generations within merchant families and nowhere is it more vivid than in his play “The Petty Bourgeois” and his novella *Foma Gordeev*. An older, ruthless generation that built its wealth by exploiting others fails to understand their sons who rebel, violate social codes, and break established patterns not for selfish reasons but because they want a more meaningful and egalitarian life. *Foma Gordeev* was used to the different ways his father humiliated his workers. When his father slaps one of the sailors on a ship without any reason, he tells his young son: “They are inexpensive.” And when *Foma* asks for a piece of advice from his Godfather, he receives the following message: “you must either chew everyone, or you would roll in mud.”

Gorky shows that the merchants think of themselves as the masters of the world where everything belongs to them. But *Foma Gordeev* feels suffocated in the merchant’s milieu and compares himself to an owl that symbolizes a tormented soul. At the end of the novel, *Foma* who started out not believing in education, books, and culture, but had the good intention to save the world from bad people and alcoholism, tells the merchants who have gathered to celebrate their achievements: “I saw a lot and became blind. I am lost because of my own fragility, not your strength.”

*Foma* feels confined by the merchants’ world where the accumulation of wealth defines the meaning of life. The power of money limits Man’s freedom and *Foma* is swallowed by the merchants’ society where he cannot fulfill himself. The novella’s

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130 Maxim Gor’kii, *Foma Gordeev* in *SS*, vol. 7, p. 29.
131 Maxim Gor’kii, *Foma Gordeev* in *PSS*, vol. 12, p. 115.
protagonist tries to understand life’s meaning and to solve its puzzles but does not comprehend why he feels so confined by modernity. Gorky tries to solve the problem of youth’s confinement in the modern world by creating a portrait of a new Man of action.

In contrast to Foma, Nil, an adopted son of wealthy merchant Vasilii Vasilievich Bessemenov from the play, “The Petty Bourgeois,” is full of energy, embraces life, works as a train driver, and is not afraid to declare his rights. “Father, do not scream! Your truth is too ‘narrow’ for us; we have grown out of it as people grow out of dresses,” he says to Vasilii, “It is too tight… what moved you -- your order of life -- is not for us.” Bessemenov believes that education harms his children because they get confused, become dissatisfied with their lives, start to entertain new ideas, and promote their own truth. Now his educated children claim their independence and rights. “In this house, I am also the master,” points out Nil, “I have been working for ten years now and have given you my entire salary. I invested in everything that surrounds you. The one who works is the master!” Nil refuses to be treated as someone else’s property and to buttress his father’s rotten lifestyle in “a house that is worse than a prison.” With his love of life, inner freedom, and independence, Nil considers merchants utterly flawed. “Don’t you live?” Nil asks Bessemenov’s daughter, “You hang around your life always complaining and moaning due to an unclear reason…”. By the end of the play, money drives Bessemenov insane and he starts to emotionally abuse his closest friends and children, prompting one of the main characters, Teterov, a freeloader, to say: “Life is ruined…..it does not correspond to the height of decent human beings….не по росту порядочных людей сделана жизнь…)

The petty bourgeois narrowed it, shortened it, made it tight…and I am evidence for the fact that a

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133 Ibid., p. 40.
134 Ibid., p. 56.
135 Ibid., p. 34.
human being has no place to live, has nothing to live on, and has no purpose in life…” During
the last scene, Teterev asks Bessemenov: “Were you ever kind? What was the purpose of your
life?” But these are not the questions that merchants in Gorky’s world entertain. Their greed and
thirst for power shape their emotional reactions and destinies, making them insensitive to the
human condition. Gorky condemns the merchants’ attachment to private property and a life of
shameless profiteering and exploitation, and instead extolls young, new Men who are socially
conscious and make themselves independent by finding jobs.

*Apathy and Indifference Among the Muzhiki*

In addition to peasant greed, Gorky also criticized their apathy, indifference, and
debilitating melancholy. In his short story “The Spouses Orlov,” published in 1897 in *Russian
Thought (Russkaia Mysl’)*, he describes a couple who lead a pointless life devoid of any interests.
Grishka Orlov, a strong and handsome *muzhik* and shoemaker, does not see any purpose in his
life—his work bores him to death, so he beats his wife and drinks himself into a stupor every
night. And even when Grishka finds some satisfaction from his work in the wooden barracks, he
loses his precarious grasp on himself the moment he experiences a coworker’s jealousy. A wave
of melancholy overtakes him again, his drinking bout begins, and he loses himself in alcohol.
Gorky strongly believed that the *muzhiki* could not sustain a stable interest in any project they
undertook. That is why all attempts to engage them in radical movements were pointless.

Peasants were the most unreliable, cunning, and impulsive people he observed in Russia.

Like Grishka Orlov, Ardalion, a bricklayer with whom Gorky worked at an artel, puzzled
Gorky by suddenly losing a grip on his life. At first, Ardalion astonished everyone with his
passion for work and a stonemason’s skill only to withdraw from life and take to drinking hard.

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136 Maxim Gor’kii, “Petit,” p. 42.
Osip, another character from the story, tells Gorky that he came across many people like Ardalion, who would work and live well, but then drastically alter their course “as if they had been released from jail” and he added “one must beware of vodka… but without it, it is boring to live! You take one shot and it is as if you start walking on a different earth…”¹³⁷ For Gorky, the Russian *muzhiki* were prone to falling into the abyss of boredom, in which only drinking vodka made sense. Gorky noticed that the *muzhiki* in the artel often complained about life: “Life is bad; we need to live better!”¹³⁸ Gorky pointed out that this desire to live better did not oblige people to do anything. They never changed their lifestyles or their attitudes towards each other. And this passivity frustrated him.

To escape melancholy, the main character of the short story “Yearning,” Tikhon Pavlovich, leaves his wife for a few days, picks up the prostitute Annushka, and pays for a four-day party that leaves him empty but without misery. He returns to life to be on a “chain again.” Gorky points out the necessity of these escapes from reality that overwhelms his characters with melancholy and a yearning for something they do not have—endless freedom without discipline.

Dmitrii Likhachev once noted that because of Russia’s open spaces and its size, Russians acquired a special word to describe unlimited freedom or freedom without discipline—*volia.*¹³⁹ In Russian folk songs, bards used an endearing term for it, *voliushka.* And writers used it to describe the thirst to remove the pressures of life, to become free in an unlimited way, and be one with Russia’s open spaces. Russia’s vastness offered an escape from dismal reality, but it also caused irresponsibility and the inability to manage one’s life. Limitless freedom brought about

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¹³⁷ Maxim Gor’kii, *Vliudiakh, PSS*, vol. 15, p. 498.
¹³⁸ Maxim Gor’kii, *Vliudiakh, PSS*, vol. 15, pp. 445-46.
¹³⁹ Daniel Field suggests in his classic study of Russian peasantry that peasants could not achieve *volia* even after the emancipation reforms. They worked within the myth of the tsar that they employed in forms and only in those forms that corresponded to their interests. A peasant who worked free of the myth of the tsar had no resorts at all—except to cease being a peasant. Daniel Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976).
misery and a sense of helplessness, hopelessness, and ultimate despair. Grishka Orlov, Ardalion, and Tikhon cannot cope with their lives without someone anchoring them in the present moment. Women usually played this role in Russian society. Gorky explored his male characters as weak, ignorant, and devoid of self-reflection and he underscored that they survived only by using or manipulating others. Gorky based his fictional protagonists on their “originals” whom he observed during his travels across Russia. The idea to alter society in order to recast man was born during these travels. The main pathos of Gorky’s novellas is therefore to create a sharp feeling of life’s hardships and disillusionment with the social order that generates a rebellious spirit among the young representatives of the merchanty. When Foma Gordeev realizes the meaninglessness of wealth accumulation, he surrenders to misery. Like him, Tikhon Pavlovich, a miller in the short story “Melancholy,” and the merchant from the short story “Delusion,” suffer from sadness, but fail to liberate themselves from it completely in debauchery. In all of them, a man confined and suffocated by surrounding reality suffers.

How true were Gorky’s depictions of peasants and merchants? In recent years, Western historians of imperial Russia have argued that the dismal portrayal of the Russian peasantry by Russian social-democrats and representatives of the intelligentsia were directly linked to a modernizing mindset that ignored many significant features of the Russian countryside. “The view of peasants as hapless victims of gentry pressure or capitalist progress—or of both together,” writes Esther Kingston-Mann, “has been challenged by contemporary research indicating that peasants and their communities were in fact surprisingly resilient.”140 In his writings, Gorky comments exclusively about the peasants’ character, not the post-emancipation changes. Given Gorky’s personal experiences with the peasants and their violent culture, his

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vision of the Russian peasantry as mindless inhabitants of a prerational and prehistoric, natural economy or, in Marxist terms, as “idiots of rural life” coincided with Lenin’s. But these views were not exclusively Marxist. Kingston-Mann argues that progressively minded officials were quite content with the Marxist argument that peasants could only become productive or rational after they were liberated from the constraints imposed by backward village communities.\footnote{Kingston-Mann further argues that in nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Russia, a culture of “modernization” emerged which crossed ideological boundaries and decisively shaped debates, strategies, and policies for rural development. \textit{In Search}, p. 4.} Gorky believed in this idea until his death. But in his mind, only the Bolsheviks and forced collectivization based on peasantophobic assumptions could liberate the peasants from their ignorance and cruelty.

\textit{Cruelty}

While indifference and laziness frustrated Gorky, he despised peasants most strongly for their alleged cruelty. “Cruelty is what astounded and tormented me my entire life,” he wrote in his well-known essay, “About the Russian Peasantry.” “From where do the roots of human cruelty spring?” he asked. “I thought for a long time about this and I understood and understand nothing.”\footnote{Maxim Gor’kii, “O russkom krest’ianstve,” \url{http://soluschristus.ru/talks/istoriya/gor_kij_o_russkom_krest_yanstve/} accessed on March 21, 2019} Gorky often portrayed the \textit{muzhiki} as either indifferent to human suffering or complicit in it for the sake of sheer entertainment. In his autobiographical short story “On the Salt Deposits,” published in 1895, Gorky described how his co-workers gave him a wheelbarrow with broken handles for the sake of “fun” as he tore the skin off his hands when he grabbed the handles. The excruciating pain made him scream at the “amused” \textit{muzhiks}: “What did you do this for? What did I do to you to deserve this? Am I not a man just like all of you?”\footnote{Maxim Gor’kii, “Na soli,” \textit{PSS}, vol. 1, p. 371.} They mocked him in response and this banal cruelty shocked Gorky. He experienced and witnessed
violence more often than other young men during their formative years. While working on a ship during the summer, he saw how passengers were tormenting a soldier and he could not understand why on earth they enjoyed this offensive and pitiful behavior. “What was so funny and joyful in all of this?” 144

Cruelty towards women also infuriated Gorky. Portraits of women as victims of physical and psychological violence pepper his narratives. The image of his mother suffering at the hands of Gorky’s stepfather stands out in his memoir, Childhood. Gorky’s indignation at this injustice made him threaten his stepfather with a knife. He came to the rescue of Natasha, the laundress, when Ardalion beat her, and in one of the most dramatic episodes in his life, he attempted to salvage a woman condemned to public punishment for her unfaithfulness to her husband. The husband, Gajchenko, was doing it in a vicious and public way by whipping her naked body in front of numerous witnesses who were delighted to observe this torture. When Gorky tried to stop him, the muzhiki beat him brutally for this show of “sympathy” and resistance to violence that was a local tradition in Kherson Province—to the delight and joy of many people who were present there. Later in life Gorky noted that he saw “aimless, meaningless cruelty that men amused themselves with, not expecting any profit from it.” 145 Gorky was not the only one who condemned cruelty. Dostoevsky also pointed out that human beings were more capable of exquisite torture than animals. In The Brothers Karamazov, he wrote: “People talk sometimes of a bestial cruelty, but that's a great injustice and insult to the beasts; a beast can never be so cruel as a man, so artistically cruel. The tiger only tears and gnaws, that's all he can do. He would never think of nailing people by the ears, even if he were able to do it.” 146 While Dostoevsky

144 Maxim Gor’kii, Viudiakh, PSS, vol. 15, p. 306.
145 Ibid., p. 355.
wrote about humankind in general, Gorky considered “bestial cruelty” to be a particular trait of a Russian muzhik, which shaped further his views and attitude to the peasants during the Russian revolutions.

Gorky’s strong feelings about cruelty came from personal experience. Describing the years spent in his grandfather’s house and his wanderings, Gorky wrote to his wife Ekaterina Volzhina: “I saw nothing but cruelty from other people.”\textsuperscript{147} Cruelty left a deep mark on Gorky’s psyche and shaped his philosophical, political, and aesthetic beliefs.\textsuperscript{148} One of the characters in his well-known play, “Children of the Sun,” the plumber Yegor, beats his wife every day because he thinks that she is the devil: “She is not a person. She is the devil. I will beat my wife…I will mutilate her until she becomes like grass in front of the wind...”.\textsuperscript{149} When Yegor’s landowner, a the scientist Protasov, explains to him that unlike animals, men have conscience which should prevent them from beating others, Yegor denies the wrongdoing by saying that he knew nothing but beatings in his childhood and his wife deserves them. By the end of the play, the plumber starts to attack Protasov himself, prompting the latter to call Yegor “an animal.”

Gorky’s grandfather’s world resembled Yegor’s habitat and suffocated Gorky. The house consisted of small, darkened rooms bustling with irritated people.\textsuperscript{150} He loathed the yard with its myriad motley and wet rags drying and countless tubs filled with multi-colored water for soaking. For the rest of his life, Gorky thought of this house as a place where adults forgave little children only after they physically punished them, releasing their anger and aggression. Gorky himself hardly ever experienced or saw any acts of kindness from his grandfather and his uncles,

\textsuperscript{147} Maxim Gor’kii, “E. P. Volzhinoi, 28 maia 1896, N. Novgorod,” \textit{PSSP}, vol. 1, p. 111.
\textsuperscript{148} N. N. Primochkina, “Antinomiia ‘vostok-zapad’ v mirovozzrenii i tvorchestve Gorkogo,” in \textit{Konsepsiia mira i cheloveka v tvorchestve M. Gor’kogo} (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2009), p. 43.
\textsuperscript{149} Maxim Gor’kii, “Children of the Sun,” \textit{SS}, vol. 16, p. 238.
\textsuperscript{150} Maxim Gor’kii, \textit{Detstvo PSS}, vol. 15, p. 20.
Yakov and Mikhail. Competing with each other as well as their sister, his uncles were ready to commit the worst of crimes in order to get ahead. Before Gorky was born, two brothers planned to drown his father who was more successful than they were. The half-blind craftsman Grigory suffered from Yakov and Mikhail regularly. For sheer entertainment, they heated his scissors’ handles or stuck a nail sharp end up into his chair.151 However, what Yakov and Mikhail did to Tsyganok, a young craftsman who loved little Maksim and was a “tireless and selfless dancer” shook Gorky to the core.152 Tsyganok was a skillful worker for whose attention both uncles competed and whose good graces neither of them wanted to lose. Both brothers dreamt about having him work in their shops. Ironically, the uncles killed this young man by having him carry a colossal cross.153 The image of Jesus Christ carrying the cross comes to mind. Many artists and writers captured these terrifying moments of Jesus Christ’s suffering. Some artists, such as El Greco, painted the carrying of the cross as a metaphor for embracing faith out of a deep love of God; Titian, on the other hand, depicted Christ as a martyr who suffered under the weight of the cross for the sake of humanity. Gorky’s image of Tsyganok comes close to Titian’s vision of the Christ’s suffering. And although this young man, like many other kids whom Gorky observed, became a martyr, his suffering was not for the sake of humanity. It was senseless and forced and in his literary works and public service Gorky searched for a way to eliminate such suffering.

Deaths and daily beatings in his grandfather’s house left a deep imprint on Gorky. He uses poignant metaphors while describing his stay with the grandfather and uncles: life with his relatives gave rise to “a tumor in his heart and head.” In his own words: “Everything that I saw in this house was dragged through me like a winter sledge along a street and oppressed and

151 Maxim Gor’kii, Detstvo, PSS, vol. 15, p. 34.
152 Maxim Gor’kii, Detstvo, SS, vol. 9, p. 32.
153 Ibid., pp. 39-40
destroyed me.”\textsuperscript{154} Even though he sometimes found the house and its tenants “interesting” and “amusing,” he could not escape moments when “an irresistible melancholy” suffocated him. Gorky felt as if something heavy filled him and he “lived in this state for a long time as if in a deep, dark pit, having lost his eyesight, hearing and all feelings, being blind and half dead.”\textsuperscript{155} The first years spent in his grandfather’s house exposed Gorky to constant cruelty and convinced him that the average Russian lived in similar “tight, suffocating circle of terrifying impressions” and that “the dark life of this irrepressible tribe brims over with violence.”\textsuperscript{156} The word tribe (plemia) emerges as a semantic link between Gorky’s family and the Russian people. Gorky’s grandfather calls his sons “a wild tribe,” “animals,” “dogs,” and “wolves,” so Gorky’s imagination painted him as a ferret.\textsuperscript{157} Nevertheless, his grandfather persuaded Gorky to get a decent trade:

\begin{quote}
Stop this nonsense! Birds were never of any use to peoples’ careers; ever! I know that for sure! Choose something else and develop your mind in that direction. A man does not live for nothing; being God’s seed, he should produce a good ear! A man is very much like a ruble, if invested wisely, it converts into three rubles! Do you think life is easy? Far from it! A man lives in the dark, thus everyone should carry a light for himself. A man has only ten fingers on his hands, but he wants to grab more than he can. Lack of power should be supplemented by guile; those too small and feeble are no good for hell or heaven! While living among people, always remember you are all alone - listen to people, but never believe anyone; never trust your eyes, they can deceive you. Don’t talk too much - cities and houses were built with cash and building tools rather than idle talk. After all you are not a Bashkir or a Kalmyk, whose only assets are lice and sheep.\textsuperscript{158}
\end{quote}

Essentially, Gorky’s grandfather inspired him to get a real trade instead of experimenting with random jobs, but he also tried to instill a deep sense of animosity and distrust towards

\textsuperscript{154} Maxim Gor’kii, Detstvo in PSS, vol. 15, p. 64.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., p. 98.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., p. 20.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., pp. 58-60.
\textsuperscript{158} Maxim Gor’kii, Detstvo, in SS, vol. 9, p. 253.
others. “Men are each other’s fierce enemies,”¹⁵⁹ he tells Gorky who saw proof of these teachings every day.

Gorky also witnessed the brutality of the streets, where children imitated adults by beating or mocking each other mercilessly. As he later confessed, bruises and scratches did not offend him, but the violence of the street games invariably angered him. “I could not stand,” Gorky writes, “when guys played by setting dogs and cocks against each other, tortured cats, raced, and mocked the drunken poor.”¹⁶⁰

But his most terrifying run-in with the muzhiks occurred in the village of Krasnovidovo, where he tried to “civilize” and educate them while working at a goods shop. The pupils turned out to be too suspicious of the teacher—a tendency that nearly all Populists experienced when they came to the villages to enlighten the peasants. The muzhiks tried to rough up Gorky on several occasions but failed because he turned out to be stronger. Only once they hit him with a stick, so that Gorky started to hobble. But these squabbles paled in comparison with Gorky’s the near-death experience in the village.

According to Yevgeny Zamiatin, being almost burned alive in the village Krasnovidovo in a blaze set by the peasants gave Gorky a horrible psychological shock and shaped forever his distrust of the muzhik.¹⁶¹ Worse yet, the peasants had the cheek to accuse Gorky of setting the hut on fire himself in order to steal the goods that he and his co-traveler, Romas, were selling. Gorky was so angry that he just wanted to beat the hell out of those “savage faces.”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁹ Maxim Gor’kii, Detstvo, SS, vol. 9, p. 252.
¹⁶⁰ Maxim Gor’kii, Detstvo, PSS, vol. 15, pp. 94.
¹⁶² Maxim Gor’kii, V liudiakh, PSS, vol. 16, p. 128.
This accident in 1888 formed Gorky’s opinion about the Russian peasants for the rest of his life. In his autobiography, Gorky emphasized that peasant violence was meaningless in part because the *muzhiks* failed to find any sense in life and cared little for the real state of things. They complained about the future but had no desire to improve the present. “Reality did not concern them. They peeped into the future as if dreaming, without any desire to see the poverty and ugliness of the present.” When the floor in the craftsmen’s house rotted through, no one was willing to fix it, but everyone complained about it, adding that “No one feels sorry for the people—neither God, nor we.” Gorky saw that the desire to improve their lot was alien to the Russian peasants. Instead of taking control into their hands, they blamed others for their misfortunes. The combination of irresponsibility and apathy resulted in a life full of misery and devoid of hope. During his wanderings, he grew to believe that no one in the world could make life devoid of any meaning the way Russians could. Dmitrii Likhachev also noted that Russians suffer from their own gullibility that is expressed sometimes in a form of extreme emotional trust or facile plans and decisions. Instead of acting on their fears and dreams, Russians often assume a lot and put their faith in forces beyond their control, or on the supernatural. In a sense, Likhachev argued, Russians do not trust themselves to accomplish their own dreams and tasks. They live day by day, relying on the law of averages and avoid making long-term goals. This Russian tendency to shirk responsibility for their own life alarmed the young Gorky. He refused to accept such fatalism and disagreed with anyone who believed in the meaninglessness of life and the uselessness of labor. Even as a young man working in an artel,

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164 Maxim Gor’kii, *V liudiakh, PSS*, vol. 16, p. 433.
165 Maxim Gor’kii, *Moi universitety, PSS*, vol. 16, p. 446.
166 Ibid., pp. 445-446.
167 Ibid., p. 47.
he attempted to convince people that there was always hope for a more sensible way of life if one worked hard and took control of one’s life.\textsuperscript{169}

Another source of discontent for Gorky was people’s tolerance for life’s unfairness. Since childhood Gorky could not understand his fellow Russians’ endless ability to tolerate humiliation or violence. He used to test himself and see how long he could exercise his patience, but it never lasted. For Gorky, patience was a trait characteristic of animals or plants, which do not possess a conscience.

Patience was not one of my best virtues and if I ever displayed any trait of it, more befitting cattle, trees or stones, I did this rather more for testing my essential strength and endurance on this earth. While trying to demonstrate their physical strength and stamina in front of the adults, teenagers often attempt to lift weights which are too heavy for their immature bones and muscles... I did that too, literally and otherwise, physically and mentally that is, and only by sheer luck I avoided being severely injured or get crippled for life. That is because nothing destroys a man so badly as his tolerance and surrender to force of circumstances.\textsuperscript{170}

Gorky never digressed from this principle or surrendered to circumstances until the October Revolution took place in 1917. That is when he decided that “doing the best under the circumstances” was not the same as “surrendering to the historical forces of the time.” That was self-denial, a psychological gimmick to cope with inexorable reality, but there was also some truth in it. He found a way to continue working in order to preserve Russian culture. The choice was clear: either to live abroad as an exile or work with the Bolsheviks in order to save what he valued most in his life – Russian culture and art. He saved Russian culture but “destroyed himself badly” in the process.

For Gorky, goodness, sense, and decency existed outside reality and to achieve them, one had to know how to dream and have passion for life. As a result, he accepted fantasizing as a

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{169} Maxim Gor’kii, \textit{Moi universitety}, SS, vol. 16, p. 37.  \\
\textsuperscript{170} Maxim Gor’kii, \textit{Detstvo}, SS, vol. 16, p. 357.
\end{flushleft}
motivation for creating a better life. He believed that if man “did not know how to dream while living—nothing would have remained of him.”

Dreaming became a coping mechanism to survive his grim quotidian reality. “I advise [you] not to think but to dream. For no matter how hard you think, you would hardly be able to undo a single knot tied by life in your path. The mind does not untie such knots, only hands, but for this you need to have a strong heart and be passionate about life.”

He obtained this life-saving and indispensable skill by reading books that stimulated his imagination. Inspired by books, Gorky’s romanticism prevented him from turning off his destined path—a life in art. “There is little that is good about the world! The best is art, and in art the best and the noblest is the art of imagining what is good.”

Gorky was a passionate, driven man who experienced total bliss from writing, creating, and influencing others. In his satirical piece, “Several Days in the Life of a Provincial Editor,” he imagines himself as a man of letters responsible for shaping his audience’s minds and influencing public opinion: “[Y]ou may even dream that people would listen to you …. follow your advice and would treat each other in a more noble and attentive way…”

From the first moments as an editor and an aspiring writer, Gorky viewed himself as a socially responsible activist and artist and took his vocation seriously. Unlike Thomas Mann, who was only seven years younger than Gorky, he never tried to prove to anyone how seriously he took his writing. Up until the Great War, Thomas Mann tried to convince his public that he

173 Maxim Gor’kii, Moi universitety, PSS, vol. 16, p. 15.
was a serious writer, a moralist, and that his vocation was not emasculating or frivolous.\textsuperscript{176} Perhaps this kind of self-validation was unnecessary for Russian writers.

Historically, Russian writers commented on society and politics prominently and extensively.\textsuperscript{177} The origin of the author’s social role in Russia dates back to poet and author Alexander Pushkin who despite his aristocratic origins became the first literary figure to embrace writing as a profession. Writing in support of the Decembrists’ ideals of freedom, he combined social commentary with his art and established himself as a vital voice in Russian society. All the great Russian writers aspired to combine the roles of an artist, activist, and moralist. Nikolai Gogol intended his novel \textit{Dead Souls} to be the first book in a trilogy that would "restore Russia's soul," but upon realizing that he could not accomplish his goal through literature, he instead turned to direct moral exhortations in his articles and correspondence. Leo Tolstoy made direct moral appeals to the Russian public both as an artist and as an individual and sponsored several pacifist sects. Anton Chekhov, whom Gorky revered, also played a seminal role in Russian society. Unlike other Russian writers, he never filled his works with moral sermons, but built schools and hospitals for the needy and continually treated poor patients on his country estate of Melikhovo. In his hometown of Taganrog, he supplied books for public libraries and endowed institutions that provided basic education for the poor. In his choice of cultural projects, Gorky imitated Chekhov and followed his path. Chekhov upheld and wrote about the inner, personal freedom that he regarded as much more important than social and political freedom. “Trying to squeeze out the slave from himself,” he was a moral compass for the Russian public.\textsuperscript{178} Thus,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{177} For more see Kahn, Andrew, Lipovetsky Mark, and Irina Reyfman, \textit{A History of Russian Literature} (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018).
  \item \textsuperscript{178} A. Chekhov, “To A. Suvorin,” \textit{Polnoe sobranie sochinenii} (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia litteratura), vol. 26, p 127.
\end{itemize}
Gorky was born into a tradition of writers who took public roles seriously. In Russia, the concept of *obshchestvennost'* came into existence at the end of the eighteenth century and referred to the part of the educated population concerned with public duties, common deeds, and public opinion. The term later came to supply a common identity to people of different estates and professions and varying political views who committed themselves to social reforms.\(^{179}\) Public service added another dimension to Gorky’s identity in imperial Russia.

First and foremost, he became a journalist to make money and rise above his circumstances: Gorky published around 600 articles a year, which is almost 50 articles a month. Within a period of fourteen months Gorky wrote close to thirty stories and poems, 416 daily commentaries in *Ocherki i nabroski*, 185 feuilletons, and several articles. Only after, his literary success, he began to concentrate exclusively on creative writing. But at no point of his life did he think of art or writing as emasculating or insignificant. “Life is dark,” wrote Gorky, “and I took up creative writing thinking that there were worse occupations…”\(^{180}\) As a point of comparison, Mann who grew up in an affluent upper-middle class family, thought of himself as a bohemian idler while fighting his inner chaos and laziness day in and day out. He promulgated a sense of order his entire life although he hated schooling and education.\(^{181}\) Gorky, on the other hand, came from “the depths,” and for him education and art were paths to happiness and the good life. Culture, writing, and self-education brought financial success, stability, and meaning to his life. The place of literature and letters was critical and central to Gorky’s understanding of culture based on the intelligentsia’s ethos and non-commercial high culture. Although Gorky would


eventually become a revolutionary in his cultural outlook and views on the nature of culture and education, he will ironically remain a traditionalist within the revolutionary movement.

Gorky used his position as a journalist and editor to “reach the Russian people and to criticize the life of the Russian provincial city.” With the general upward trend of the Russian economy in the last decade of the nineteenth century, the number of newspapers and periodicals grew. Gorky began his career as a journalist in Samara where he wrote a daily column for *Samarskaya Gazeta* (The Samara Gazette) which was edited by a journalist exiled from St. Petersburg, B. N. Asheshov. Writing under the mysterious pen name “Iegudiel Khlamida,” Gorky criticized the exploitation of the workers, the arbitrariness of the authorities, corruption, and the dullness of the everyday life of the citizens of Samara. He fought the battle of the poor by using his column to openly oppose the eviction of workers from one of the districts, which would have sent them into the slums. At another time he criticized the treatment of the workers by the mills’ owners. Yedlin suggests that even Korolenko asked Gorky to modify his criticism.

*Education as Panacea*

Paradoxically, it was Gorky’s grandfather who spoke to him about the value of education: “We need to be taught, we need to sharpen our brains.” This idea touched a chord with Gorky. And later other people reinforced it by emphasizing the role of books and education in improving one’s life. Several years after his conversation with his grandfather, Smuryj, a non-

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184 A. Kaun, the first Western biographer of Maxim Gor’kii, there is a legend according to which “Iegudiel Khlamida was an apocryphal priest, the only one of the twelve priests at the trial of Jesus to pronounce him not guilty.” A. Kaun, *Maxim Gor’kii and His Russia* (New York: Jonathan Cape, 1931), p. 19.
186 Yedlin, *Maxim Gor’kii*, p. 16.
187 Maxim Gor’kii, *Detstvo* in PSS, vol. 15, p. 74.
commissioned officer and a cook on a ship, reinforced this idea when he told Gorky that the “difference between people comes down to stupidity. One is intelligent, another is not so clever, and the third is a complete fool. To become more intelligent, one needs to read the right books.... One has to read all books; then you will find the right ones.”\(^{188}\) Later his stepfather buttressed Gorky’s beliefs in education one more time: “A school educates well if one has character. And only educated men can set life in motion.”\(^{189}\) Gorky took this lesson to heart. An orphan, he did not believe in lucky coincidences and realized that no help would come from outside. As a result, Gorky developed a willful stubbornness: he felt stronger and more intelligent as his life circumstances became more and more difficult. In his own words: “I understood very early that man’s opposition to his surroundings creates him.”\(^{190}\) Although his first publication in 1892 was successful, his initial attempt at publishing a collection of works failed. In order to fix his financial situation, Gorky wanted to publish a collection of stories. He also knew that his future and career depended on this publication. S. N. Kazachkov, the owner of Nizhegorodskii Listok Publishing House, did not want to take this risk, but St. Petersburg’s Dorovatovsky and Charushnikov Publishing House came out with two volumes of Gorky’s works in 1898 to great acclaim.\(^{191}\) The initial printing was sold out almost instantly; further editions followed in swift succession, as did a third volume containing more short stories. “The impact of this event was truly momentous,” notes Barry Scherr, “Almost immediately, Gorky emerged from provincial obscurity to occupy the spotlight of national celebrity.”\(^{192}\) Again Gorky’s perseverance and impertinence paid off and bolstered his fame.

\(^{188}\) Maxim Gor’kii, *V liudiakh, PSS*, vol. 16, p. 293.
\(^{189}\) Maxim Gor’kii, *V liudiakh, PSSP*, vol. 15, p. 471.
\(^{190}\) Maxim Gor’kii, *V liudiakh, PSSP*, vol. 15, p. 12.
Gorky’s own dreams to enter Kazan University were shattered and even the career of a village schoolteacher was out of reach because of poverty and his initial difficulty in mastering Russian grammar. Only a strong desire to reach for something better kept him afloat.193 “Gorky’s conscious individualism, writes Yedlin, “and his interest in men able to fight their environment dated back to the Kazan’ period. It was this latent interest that would later draw him to Lenin.”194 Gorky pushed himself to rise above violence by taking initiative, by acting, by working endlessly to build a better life for himself. That is why he never liked people who complained more than they worked or who lost hope and despaired while they were pursuing their dreams. Vladislav Khodasevich emphasized that Gorky’s philanthropy was special because he always helped everyone who approached him. Stepan Skitalets also noted that “All day, from morning to evening, people of every kind arrived in Gorky’s small and modest apartment, coming with requests for help not only with official business but also in private, personal matters. I know that he provided out of his own resources, then rather modest, money to support poor students and help workers in need.”195

However, the more a supplicant complained and lost courage, the more Gorky grew indifferent towards him. “Gorky could not stand despondency and demanded hope from a man no matter what,” wrote Khodasevich, “and this act showed his distinctive, unyielding egoism: in exchange for his participation and help, he demanded the right for himself to dream about this man’s better future. If this person cut short these dreams, Gorky became angry and helped reluctantly, without concealing his disappointment.”196 But he helped no matter what. While

193 V. Rudnev, Gor’kii revoliutsioner (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Nauka, 1929), p. 5.
194 Yedlin, Maxim Gor’kii, p. 6.
visiting Gorky in Arzamas, Nemirovich-Danchenko noticed that Gorky would give money to every beggar who stopped by his open window: “He would give money to poor people as simply, calmly, and without hesitation, as if he were wiping dust or cleaning dishes.”

Grinevitskaya, who worked with him in Nizhnii Novgorod, noted that Gorky was indifferent to money and would “hand it out left and right.” Essentially, Gorky fostered in people the passion for dreaming and imagining a better future for themselves.

Intelligentsia, Culture, and the Concept of Man

When Gorky chose to become a writer, he inadvertently entered the circle of the Russian intelligentsia. Feeling privileged and socially responsible for promoting talented young writers “from the people,” members of the intelligentsia at first assisted him in different ways. Korolenko found Gorky a job in Samara and promoted him in literary circles. Chekhov read his work and gave a myriad of recommendations. Both Korolenko and Chekhov participated in numerous social projects that Gorky initiated, from donating books to libraries to raising money for different philanthropic educational causes. In many ways, Gorky advocated key aspects of the intelligentsia’s ethos. His commitment to enlightening others, his aversion to money and acquisitiveness, and his devotion to culture, self-realization, and self-improvement were key intelligentsia attributes. Although Gorky’s relations with the intelligentsia were contradictory, he shared with them the idea of culture centered on the European Enlightenment’s values.

The Enlightenment project focused on individual self-realization. At the beginning of the twentieth century, writers and philosophers applied two different approaches to thinking about

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198 A. D. Grinevitskaya, Gor’kii, p. 137.

Man and his realization. Some strongly supported the Marxist idea about man’s dependence on economic factors, while others emphasized Nietzsche’s idea about the new human who lived according to his own rules and laws, not submitting to society. Gorky dedicated his writings to exploring the idea of the New Man who overcame himself or who did not fail to find inner resources to conquer one’s own demons.\textsuperscript{200} Nietzsche provided an image of a heroic male who was both a courageous warrior and a moral leader. His superman would lead others not by self-sacrifice, love of one’s neighbor, or pity, but by overcoming, asceticism, and struggle. As Mary Louise Loe argued: “Nietzsche offered Gorky… specific reasons for rejecting the current ideologies of the Russian left, and for condemning the weakness, flabbiness, and effeminacy of male intellectuals.”\textsuperscript{201} Gorky was not an intellectual himself and at the beginning of his writing career he neither fully understood intellectuals nor respected them. He found them weak, passive, effeminate, and virtually schizophrenic in their ascetic denial of their physical needs.

Even though Gorky entered their circle, he never felt he belonged and experienced a love-and-hate relationship with the Russian intelligentsia. “Although I spend some time in intelligentsia circles, I repeat my friend’s Skitalets’ prayer: ‘No, I am not with you! You call me your own in vain and in a hypocritical way. I hate all of you deeply and passionately. You are toads in a rotten swamp.’”\textsuperscript{202} On the one hand, he admired them, aspired to be like them, on the other, he always felt inferior when he was among them\textsuperscript{203}.\textsuperscript{204} In his letter to Pyotr Piatnitskii, he

\textsuperscript{200} Peter Fritzsche and Jochen Hellbeck suggest that if Chernyshevsky and Lenin emphasized rationality and historicity, Gor’kii endowed the New Man with heroism and collectivism. See P. Fritzsche and J Hellbeck “The New Man in Stalinist Russia and Nazi Germany,” in Beyond Totalitarianism ed by Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009).


\textsuperscript{202} Gor’kii to L. V. Sredin, 31 January, 1901, in Maxim Gor’kii, PSS (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo nauka, 1997), vol 2, p. 103.

\textsuperscript{203} On the issue of complex relationships between workers and intelligentsia see Reginald Zelnik, “Workers and Intelligentsia,” pp. 16-17.

\textsuperscript{204} Lidia Spiridonova, A. M. Gor’kii: Dialog s istoriej (Moscow: Nasledie, 1994), p. 127.
wrote: “However, I believe Andreev is cut from a true writer’s cloth, who apart from being talented, as I am, has high intelligence, which has never been my innate quality.” In other words, he was not born into the intelligentsia milieu, but due to copious reading and a prodigious memory, he had acquired a vast knowledge of literary traditions. Chukovskii underscored that Gorky possessed massive but neither rigorous, nor systematized knowledge. Yet he was a gifted artist and Chekhov saw a talented young writer who could depict reality in a profoundly moving way.

Gorky considered the writing of the Russian intelligentsia to be full of bloodless, sour, and musty words unworthy of emulation. In his letter to Mariya Yartseva, the daughter of painter G. F. Yartseva, Gorky urged her not to write with the intelligentsia’s words: “Please know that you are a little girl; your entire life is in front of you! Do not remember the words of others—especially the intelligentsia’s words—these words are sour, musty, and bloodless. Do not write anything on the clean pages of your heart with someone else’s words—never!” Although Gorky wrote this in a sardonic and sarcastic way by using hyperbole, this passage is indicative of his anxious relationship with Russian intelligentsia. To make matters worse, Gorky observed the Russian intelligentsia’s deep alienation from the masses and recognized that their relationship was a problematic one, far more problematic than that between European intellectuals and the masses.

Like Nietzsche Gorky condemned intellectuals for cultivating only one aspect of themselves to the neglect of others. Since childhood, he was fascinated with man’s physical strength. Having lived and worked among laborers and tradesmen, Gorky appreciated difficult

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208 For Gor’kii’s descriptions of intellectuals, see Moi universitety, pp. 16-17, 147, pp. 155-56.
physical labor and the daily testing of a man’s cunning, intelligence, and strength, which he observed among the dock laborers and bargemen of the Volga. Like Gorky’s grandfather, these men were cruel, rude, and greedy, but they were also extreme individualists who loved to flaunt their masculinity and courage in the vicious and competitive world of trade. Gorky deeply respected them for their warrior traits, while recognizing that they did not have the moral characteristics of leadership that the intelligentsia possessed. His contradictory view and attitude towards the intelligentsia followed him through his entire life. On the one hand, he believed that the Russian intelligentsia was incapable of producing significant social change. On the other, he thought that only they possessed the moral qualities to become Russia’s supermen.209

_Gorky’s Concept of Man in the 1900s_

In the 1890s and early 1900s, Gorky based his definition of Man on three key concepts – self-realization, a strong spirit and character to make a change, and inner freedom. In his letter to Repin in 1899, he wrote:

I do not know anything better, more complex and interesting than Man. He is everything. He even created God. Art is only one high manifestation of his creative spirit and that is why it is only a part of Man. I am sure that Man can improve himself infinitely and his life and performance will develop with him as well from century to century. I believe in the infinity of life and I understand life as a movement towards the enhancement of spirit. But I see that now man’s development has gone askew: we develop our minds but ignore our emotions. I think that it is harmful for us. We need for intellect and instinct to blend in harmony and then all of us and everything that surrounds us will seem brighter, lighter and happier.210

Answering the question what he values in man the most, Gorky wrote: “[I]t is freedom. Man needs freedom very much and to think freely he needs even more than freedom to move. To be utterly independent and not to obey anyone is sheer happiness, isn’t it? To own one’s soul and

209 Maxim Gor’kii, _Moi universitety_, SS, Vol. 9, pp. 155-156.
not to accept trash insolently scattered there – is good, isn’t it?” In the same letter, Gorky also suggests the idea that would become crucial for him later. He compares Man to God. “God creates a nightingale … he is a great creator and an artist… everywhere is his love of life – an intense striving to create a better, cleverer, and brighter thing. Man .. in art .. should be more creative, more beautiful, and stronger than God.”

Gorky claims that Man can and must become equal to God—an idea that will be central to his literary work for the rest of his life. But his affirmation of the intrinsic value of the free individual who refuses and despises the petit bourgeois lifestyle dominates Gorky’s early writings with his short stories about tramps and peasants giving rise to his concept of a socially conscious Man. His strong and impudent tramps resent power and money and value freedom.

Paradoxically, Gorky respected individualism in a man of action, but later he came to define human culture as a collective product. In his early writings, under the influence of Nietzsche, his artist is still an individualist. Only later, after the Revolution of 1905, did he modify his view and become convinced that collective creativity gave rise to cultural values.

**Russian Peasants**

Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, Ivan Bunin, and Gleb Uspenskii all contemplated the plight and character of the Russian peasants. But Gorky’s highly negative view of the peasantry stood out among these influential opinions. It comes as no surprise that Gorky, a self-made man of action, criticized Leo Tolstoy for promulgating the idea of “inertia and inactivity” (*bezdeyatelnosti i nedelaniya*) and “non-resistance to evil,” which he thought produced passive and indolent men who looked for any reason to avoid work. Tolstoy also did not share Gorky’s categorical view of peasants as greedy, cruel, and passive, and did not take a liking to the young

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211 Ibid., pp. 377-378.
writer-celebrity. Gorky noted in his recollections of Tolstoy: “His interest in me is purely ethnographical. In his eyes I belong to a species not familiar to him — no more than that.”

Gorky was just an episode in Tolstoy’s life while the old wise man was the entire universe for Gorky, and in his words one senses much disappointment. Tolstoy also could not understand why Gorky wrote primarily about the most difficult aspects of life and focused on human abominations. As a reader he could not believe or trust Gorky’s heroic exclamations and feelings and surmised that he was evil: “Gorky is an evil man. He looks like a seminarian, who has taken monastic vows by force, and this set him against all humanity. He has the soul of a secret agent who has come from somewhere to the foreign land of Canaan, where he is searching around and taking notice of everything to report his findings to his own God. And this God of his is a freak.”

Pavel Basinskii, one of Gorky’s biographers, suggests in his latest book that Tolstoy was jealous of Gorky, particularly when he wrote that Gorky created “unnatural and hypocritical” prose, and yet noted that Gorky’s “talent was great.” “At home in the evening, I finished reading Gorky. All imaginary, unnatural, enormous heroic feelings and hypocrisy.” Admittedly, he adds: “But the talent is great.” Perhaps, for all the hypocrisy that Tolstoy saw in Gorky, he recognized his talent to create powerful prose. Some critics such as S. A. Vengerov pointed out in 1915 that he had heard of Maxim Gorky in 1897, at which time he “was told that Gorky was a man of talent, albeit he was unbalanced.” This observation is true because Gorky as a young man tried desperately at times to orient himself in politics, in literature, and in life itself, following first the Populists and then exploring Marxism and trying to unite the two.

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213 Dmitry Bykov, Gor’kii, (Moscow: ZHZL, year ), p. 45.
216 Leo Tolstoy, Dnevniki, p. 71.
movements. In literature, he mixed romantic and heroic feelings with realistic portrayals of the Russian peasantry and merchanty. In real life, he tried to rely on father figures, such as Korolenko and Tolstoy, and yet he was also determined fiercely to strike out on his own and later even to serve as a “father” to others, always active and on the move.

Gorky thought that the only significant social change would come from the striving actions of individual men and disagreed with Tolstoy’s interpretation of earthly life as a trifle. He became convinced that Tolstoy’s beliefs were the result of the “unhealthy ferment of the old Russian blood poisoned by Mongolian fanaticism.”

Gorky thought that it was easy to convince a Russian man that his life was “a trifle because he was a sluggard and liked nothing more than to rest in idleness.”

Unlike Tolstoy and Gleb Uspenskii, Gorky never analyzed the gap that existed between the peasants and the intelligentsia. In his recollections of Tolstoy, Gorky failed to give the count any credit for breaking new ground by exploring the role of the landowner in a peasant’s life. Tolstoy’s nineteen-year-old Prince Nekhliudov in “A Landowner’s Morning” published in 1856, embarks on correcting things on his estate by “caring for the happiness of these 700 people.” He is convinced that “the chief evil lies in the most pitiable and disastrous condition of the muzhiks.” But Nekhliudov faces an impassable barrier: the muzhiks do not want schools for their children, refuse to use the new hospital, and do not accept the aid offered to them. In this story, Tolstoy demonstrates the gulf that existed between the intelligentsia and the peasant. Other Russian writers, such as Gleb Uspenskii, described this abyss in “scientific terms” and came to perceive the peasants as a separate phenomenon with a distinct psychology, values, and a morality that

219 Maxim Gor’kii, “Leo Tolstoy,” pp. 82-83.
differed drastically from the one that the intelligentsia ascribed to them. Uspenskii thought that the attachment to the land defined the peasants’ existence:

> Tear the peasant from the land, from those cares which it imposes on him, from those interests by which it moves the peasant, get him to forget “the peasantry”—and that people ceases to exist, as does its world view, as does the warmth it exudes. There remains only the empty apparatus of an empty human organism… ‘My mother, the raw earth, loves me.’ And ‘loves’ is the word: she has taken [the muzhik] entirely into her hands… But in return he is not responsible for a thing, not for a single step he takes. Once she acts as his mistress, the earth commands, and he is answerable for nothing.”

While Uspenskii suggested that the peasants lose their identity if separated from the land, Gorky did not see anything positive in the peasants’ love for the earth. He never shared with the other representatives of the Russian intelligentsia their proclivity to idealize the peasants and could not understand why peasant wisdom fascinated Tolstoy. For example, Tolstoy’s Platon Karataev from *War and Peace* (1869-1870) has a lot to teach Pierre Bezukhov about the meaning of the simple life without the burden of materialism, ideas, and choice. For Pierre, he is “the ineffable, full and eternal embodiment of the spirit of simplicity and truth… the personification of everything Russian, good and full.” Unlike Gorky’s muzhiks who interact with the world in violent terms, to Karataev everyone is “my brother,” “friend,” “dear man,” “my good friend.” Tolstoy views Karataev “in terms of his whole organic society, the individual expressing the laws of his species unconsciously.” Tolstoy who searched for the highest national and human truths in the peasant was convinced that Gorky failed to understand the muzhiks, the way they spoke and behaved. Addressing Gorky, Tolstoy once said: “I am more a muzhik than you are and I understand and feel the muzhiks much better.”

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Gorky’s prosaic image of the peasant. However, Chekhov and Bunin reaffirmed Gorky’s ideas and created similar, dispirited portraits in their works. In Chekhov’s “Peasants” (Muzhiki) published in 1897, the protagonist who is sick returns to his native village with his family only to be resented by his relatives for bringing more mouths to feed. The peasants of the post-Emancipation period constantly complain about how good life was under the landlords. When the protagonist dies, his widowed wife leaves the village, contemplating the peasants’ lifestyle:

In the course of the summer and winter there had been hours and days when it had seemed that these people lived worse than cattle, when it had been terrible to live with them; they were coarse, not honest; filthy, not sober; they lived in discord, quarreling constantly, because they did not respect but feared and suspected one another. Who keeps the tavern and makes people drunkards? A peasant. Who embezzles and drinks up the communal school and church funds? A peasant. Who has stolen from his neighbor, committed arson, given false testimony in court for a bottle of vodka? Who at the zemstvo and other meetings is the first to declaim against the peasants? A peasant. Yes, to live with them was terrible, yet all the same they were people.224

Chekhov portrays a destitute and degrading life in the village where nobody had any empathy toward another. Bunin’s view of the village is the darkest in Russian literature. Tikhon and his brother Kuzma, who aspires to be an intellectual, realize that their lives are terrible in their ordinariness. The entire village lives according to a senseless, hermetic routine. Tikhon, who is shrewd and powerful and whose great-grandfather was a serf, runs his own establishment in the village Durnovo. Hated by everybody, he is childless, bored, and lonely. His life is completely devoid of meaning. As Donald Fanger noted, “Bunin’s work, no more ideological than Chekhov’s ‘Peasants,’ is simply a long, unblinking look at a banal and sordid picture.”225

Gorky thought that Bunin’s novella was “not about the muzhik, not about the people, but about

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the strict question: Is Russia to be or not to be?” If one were to contemplate Bunin’s short story as a comment on peasants at all, it is probably that “the peasant is fundamentally uninteresting,” Fanger argued. In other words, neither Gorky, nor Chekhov, nor Bunin idealized the muzhik, but rather thought of him as a banal and sometimes even dangerous creature. During the revolutionary days of 1917, Bunin referred to his novella frequently in his journal. “I thought about my ‘Village.’ How correct everything is there. I need to write an introduction to it: to a future historian—believe me, I portrayed the typical.”

The important thing is that Gorky’s literary images of peasants had far-reaching consequences, shaped generations of Soviet and post-Soviet intellectuals, and, most importantly, were used to justify collectivization in the late 1920s. Gorky exhibited a strange combination of Russophobia and Russophilia at the same time. He hated and distrusted the Russian peasants, yet he worshipped Russian culture which he thought the Russian aristocrats created. Gorky adored hereditary aristocrats. In his letters to B. V. Beru in 1895, Gorky wrote that he envied him because Beru saw “real” aristocrats, “people with refined tastes and sensibilities, with sophisticated manners, well-dressed, well-spoken, who understand art and treasure it, who do not look for the old in the new and not only want to live, but also know how to live. Do you see such people? I think that you do and I am happy for you; I am envious of you…I really would like to see them, for I get tired of living with those who think as if they cut wood, who try to hide their original ‘I’ somewhere in their heels, who do not have their own thoughts and words, those who charge themselves with strange powder that loses its strength with time.”

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228 Ivan Bunin, Okayannye dni (St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 2012), p. 57.
Gorky admired Tolstoy for his aristocratic “true” blood: “And suddenly, out of a peasant beard, out of a democratic, wrinkled blouse, an old, Russian landlord emerges—a fabulous aristocrat… It was pleasant to see this human being of ‘clean’ blood; it was nice to observe his nobility and gracefulness of a gesture, a proud reserve of his speech…”.

This worship of true aristocrats and Russian culture always existed in tension with Gorky’s view of the Russian peasants. Simple Russian people were the source of future havoc and a threat for Russian culture and its “true” carriers. Thus, Gorky was a Russophobe in relation to the muzhiki, but a Russophile in relation to the Russian nobility and the intelligentsia. The year 1917 first empowered and then threatened the latter group, and Gorky became the first to warn about its possible demise.

What are we to conclude about the driving forces of Gorky’s worldview, imagination, and thought in the 1900s? His childhood experiences with the violence and cruelty of his family members generated his deep, unending desire to rise above his life circumstances and to find himself on the crossroads of centuries. Since childhood, Gorky could not stand any kind of violence and dishonesty. His heroism and larger-than-life achievements sprang forth from a deep sense of kindness and humanity. Yet, he always searched for the best way to change Russia’s dismal reality. His wanderings across Russia bolstered his desire to be independent and free and acquire a profession that would in his own words, “make his life better.” Writing and devotion to culture brought meaning to his life. Reading and dreaming developed his imagination while discipline and independence lay the foundation for his success as a writer. Gorky was a self-made artist, the first Russian celebrity, and a prominent public figure who sincerely worshipped and lived in art. His encounters with tramps and peasants led him to believe that the Russian

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muzhiks were too indolent, cruel, and passive. Their greed and attachment to land limited their worldview and made them prejudiced, judgmental, indifferent, apathetic, and cruel. However, the key element in his idea of Man was freedom and that Man was equal to God. The 1905 revolution, however, would modify Gorky’s definition of Man and culture.

As for his political allegiances, Gorky encountered both Populists and Marxists during his wanderings and years in the provinces. He was also involved actively enough with these groups to be identified as politically ‘unreliable’ from an early age. His experiences with the “To the People” movement diminished his zeal “to recast” Russian peasants into new Men by making them literate. The memory of Krasnovidovo reminded him that it was downright dangerous and made Gorky suspicious of Populism for its faith in the Russian peasantry. As for the Marxists, it seems likely that their insistence upon the ‘laws’ governing social development, together with the consequent diminution of the role of the individual in human history, was ill-designed to appeal to the mind of this essentially romantic young man who entertained Nietzschean ideas and was ready to change the world. But what was the precise nature of Gorky’s involvement with radical groups at this time? In his letter to Repin in 1899, Gorky denied that he belonged to any political group: “I do not belong anywhere as yet, not to any of our ‘parties.’ I am glad of that, for it is freedom.”231 And later he remarked in his letter to Chekhov that he thought “that all political parties of theirs [had] little to do with real life.”232 Both statements show his maturity and obvious skepticism – he used quotation marks around the word “parties”—and show Gorky’s distaste for oppositional politics already in 1899. But at the same time, his use of the word ‘yet’ is even more revealing. Already in 1899, he did not exclude the possibility that he

232 “To A. P. Chekhov, [about 13 January 1899]” in Maxim Gor’kii: Selected Letters, p. 34
would have to make a political choice at some point. The main issue here, of course, is that the conflict between the individual and society remained unresolved by the political parties and would occupy Gorky his entire life.
Chapter 2

“My Weapon is My Thought”: Bloody Sunday, the Capri School, and the Great War

Why do I talk about these abominable things? So that you know, my dear men, that they are not gone, they are still there. The trouble is that we all live dirty, ugly lives. I love people and would never want to torment them, but I object to hiding away the naked truth behind the nice empty lies. We must learn how to live. To live! We must pour into life all that is good and human in our hearts and minds.

M. Gorky

My weapon is my thought, and a strong belief in the freedom of thought, in its immortality and the eternal growth of its creativity—an inexhaustible source of my power!

M. Gorky

Gorky’s rise to fame coincided with the beginnings of a new period of social and political unrest which eventually culminated in Russia’s first revolution. With his prominent Volga accent and graceful style of walking, his romantic past as a ‘vagabond’ who had walked the highways and byways of the Empire, and his reputation as a political oppositionist who suffered for his beliefs, he was perceived as the very embodiment of the rising spirit of protest in the land. With his thought as his weapon, Gorky set out to disagree with the government and fight for the poor. Gorky’s spiritual power was in his position of defiance. As literary critic Mikhail Menshikov noted, Gorky preferred the “insanity of the courageous” to the “wisdom of the docile.” His conscience craved struggle and dissonance. To Dostoevsky’s “Tolerate it, vain man!” Gorky responded with “‘Man’, this word, sounds respectful!”

233 Maxim Gor’kii, Into the People, SS, vol. 9, p. 357.
236 Pavel Basinskii, Gor’kii (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2006), p. 89.
The early 1900s were years of creative ascent in Russia with new achievements in both the literary and public spheres. While in the late 1890s, Gorky contemplated the plight of Russia and its people in a pessimistic tone in his letters and literary works, his attitudes changed by the early 1900s. As he learned to live with his success and as political unrest grew, he acquired a tone of optimism that with time became more pronounced. There is real elation in his 1901 letters: “Come what may, a revolution is happening in Russia. It is not the sort where people fight in the streets and chop off the heads of kings, but another sort, which is more serious. We are witnessing the breakdown of the philosophical and ethical basis on which the well-being of the petty bourgeoisie is founded.” The rise of revolutionary sentiment in Russia at last enabled Gorky to feel that he had discovered his purpose in life. “How important, how marvelous,” he writes in 1904, “to have a sense of oneself!” It is fair to assume that although Gorky had a long history of revolutionary activism, the beginning of the century witnessed a substantial change in his involvement in radical affairs. The government reacted to it in a stringent and predictable way. He was arrested for signing petitions against the government’s action during the Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan demonstration, exiled to Arzamas, later released, participated in the revolution of 1905, and was imprisoned and then released again. In 1906, after the defeat of the Moscow armed insurrection, he left for America and Italy to garner support for the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party.

During the first exile (1906-1913), Gorky analyzed the revolutionary experience of 1905, experimented with ‘God-building’ and founded the Capri school, which taught a mix of Marxist fundamentals and proletarian culture. Both Gorky’s support of ‘God-building’ and the school based on this philosophy inspired Lenin’s indignation and resulted in small quarrels and

divisions. Gorky was immensely worried about these disagreements and tried to soften them without surrendering his positions, which was impossible. By 1914, Gorky was determined to keep a moderate distance from all political parties, although his sympathies remained with the Left. He became particularly interested in the International League’s promotion of unity across cultures and classes. The Great War, however, destroyed his hopes of building a planetary culture based on European values and this is precisely why his educational projects became even more important to him. This move represented an escape. As the events of 1905 clearly demonstrated, Gorky belonged to the members of the intelligentsia who failed to understand the far-reaching consequences of their own summons to an armed uprising. He also became entangled by the social-democratic circles, and his talent, financial capital, and connections were used when revolutionaries needed them. In the end, Gorky’s decision to keep a distance from the political parties represented a conscious decision to figure out what he needed to do next.

This chapter argues that Gorky always vacillated in his choice of means to produce drastic social and structural changes in society. Although the first Russian revolution in 1905 became a watershed event that radicalized his thinking and spurred on his political activism, the artist and humanist in Gorky inspired him to undertake a more civilized path, without “blood,” and to open a school for Russian proletarians on Capri to open and shape their minds. Both the

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239 Gor’kii’s scholars such as Tovah Yedlin, Lidiia Spiridonova, Pavel Basinskii and V. S. Barakhov also signaled out the 1905 revolution as a watershed event in Gor’kii’s self-identification as a revolutionary, but my argument is slightly different from theirs because Gor’kii’s own childhood recollections and the archival research showed that he always vacillated between rationalizing radical actions in order to effect a change and reforming society by educating and enlightening others. After the 1905 revolution, as many Gor’kii’s scholars noted, he leaned towards a radical action, but on Capri he saw clearly the dangers of fanatical beliefs. My research shows that Gor’kii was a highly independent and strong individual struggled with this dilemma since childhood. See Tovah Yedlin, Maxim Gor’kii: A Political Biography (Westport: Praeger, 1999); V. S. Barakhov, Drama Maksima Gor’kogo (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2004); Lidiia Spiridonova, Nastoiaschchii Gor’kii: Mify i realnost (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2013); Pavel Basinskii Gor’kii (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 2006).
1905 revolution and the Great War further intensified his prejudice against the *muzhiks* and amplified his belief in the power of culture.

*The Revolution of 1905*

In his letter to Leonid Andreev in August 1900, Gorky defined his new position in the intellectual life of his country by redefining the task of writing in a way which put his previous experience into focus and proved to be crucial not only for his own work as an author but also for his public stance. “It is one thing to write, and another thing altogether to be a literary man,” he wrote Leonid Andreev.\(^{240}\) These words speak to his conviction that the profession of writing carried with it obligations that extended far beyond the mere production of words. A literary man, *literator* in Russian, a frequent word in his vocabulary, signified an activity whereby literary composition has to be combined with a conscious sense of the duty to the cause of social and political change and the commitment to provide the democratic movement with a positive personal example. To achieve this goal, Gorky used his public activism by launching social and educational projects and getting involved with radical groups. In his letter to Piatnitsky in 1902, Gorky did not write idly about how instructive the prospect of being killed by the police in front of the revolutionary proletariat could have been. Melodramatic though this prospect might sound, it was not altogether unlikely. Over the following years, Gorky became entangled in political situations that put him in significant personal danger. Essentially, he aimed to use public and revolutionary activism to achieve social changes in Russia. For example, for his involvement with radical groups in Tiflis several years before, he was arrested in Nizhnii Novgorod in 1898 only to be released to great fame that made him the focus of dissident opinion and activity in the city. The reports by the police in Nizhnii Novgorod show that he was in constant contact with a

\(^{240}\) Maxim Gor’kii, “Leonidu Andreevu, August 1900,” *PSSP*, vol. 2, p. 83.
myriad of revolutionary groups, playing the role of an iconoclast. Simultaneously he put his public activism into practice by enlightening others. He organized libraries, covered poor students’ educational expenses, and responded to the letters of young writers out of social responsibility. As a literary man, he genuinely believed in making the lives of others better. In the 1890s and early 1900s, Gorky was like a sponge, absorbing and making sense of different ways to change society and help people rise above their circumstances. Populism and Marxism were just two methods, ideas that would lead to a different—better future. Although he participated in illegal Marxist gatherings or Populist trips into the countryside, Gorky was also interested in the zemstvos and would have cooperated in bringing social change through them. He was ready to assist liberals in government reform if these changes were all-inclusive—social, economic, and political. The social-democrats tried to spare him unnecessary police attention. As Anton Voitkevich, who worked for the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party pointed out, members of the Bolshevik faction avoided getting Gorky involved in illegal activities because the “average period of underground work for the party was short and lasted only a year or less. There were cases when revolutionaries had been discovered right after they started…Besides conspiratorial considerations, Gorky’s fame prevented us from working with him because we ran a risk of getting exposed easily…”.

But real political “fame” came to Gorky in 1901 after he witnessed a major demonstration on March 4 outside the Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan on Nevskii Prospekt, the main street of St. Petersburg. This was the first demonstration to protest the draconian measures taken by the government in the wake of student disturbances in Kiev University the previous

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242 Pavel Basinsky, Gor’kii (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2006), p. 186.
year, which resulted in the conscription into the army of 183 students who participated in these events. But if this punishment was harsh, the subsequent demonstration on March 4 in Petersburg provoked an even more fearful display of government brutality. The demonstrators were charged by armed Cossacks and mounted police who left several dead and many injured. Because he signed an open letter of protest against the government’s action, Gorky was placed under arrest in Nizhnii Novgorod and exiled to Arzamas, but his departure generated another student protest, so the authorities changed his travel arrangements, thereby trying to forestall the possibility of further demonstrations during this journey south. These signs of popular support made Gorky realize his value to the revolutionary movement because of his national (and even international) prominence. That year, Lenin also began to call Gorky a writer of the workers’ movement. The irony was that Gorky did not know workers or factory life well and focused exclusively on tramps, thieves, and the destitute.

After Gorky served his period of exile in Arzamas (May-August 1902), he returned to Nizhnii, but his literary work brought him often to St. Petersburg and Moscow. From now on, he was thus very much at the center of things both in the provinces and the capitals.

In 1904, he participated in a ceremonial meeting of the St. Petersburg Legal Society that commemorated the 40th anniversary of the first introduction of the judicial statutes. While discussing Russia’s future, Vladimir Korolenko, Innokentii Annenskii, and Genrikh Falbork, placed high hopes on the Union of the Zemstvos and even proposed to endorse the resolution of its congress that had recently taken place. Gorky turned out to be the most “radical” among the participants. Although he was open to attend meetings organized by different parties, when Gorky turned to discussing demonstrations, he advocated the use of “one’s teeth” and weapons.

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244 Maxim Gor’kii, “Pismo Posse,” SS, vol. 28, pp. 195-9
245 RGIA, f. 1405, op. 105, d. 10809, l. 12.
“Demonstrations had to become more resolute and radical, otherwise they lose all meaning,” he argued. The meeting endorsed the latest Union of the Zemstvos Congress resolution and demanded an immediate end of the Russo-Japanese War without any claim for additional Japanese territory. The same day Gorky went to a Social-Democratic meeting, which was devoted to the organization of future demonstrations, but he remained silent the entire time. It is interesting that among his liberal friends who did not share his radical views, Gorky played up his radicalism, whereas at the SD meeting where a student called for the use of bombs and weapons against the police, Gorky did not utter a word. Perhaps he had nothing to add to the student’s fiery speech, or perhaps he enjoyed playing the outsider. Or possibly, his behavior speaks for his fear of this young man’s radicalism, so he did not openly support it. As usual Gorky’s reaction was mixed.

_Gorky and the Revolution of 1905_

Despite Gorky’s “radical” claims, on the eve of Bloody Sunday in 1905 he went to see Count Sergei Witte, chairman of the Council of Ministers, in order to prevent bloodshed, since he knew that the workers would march unarmed. This earnest endeavor, however, proved in vain. The deaths of innocent people on January 9, 1905, shocked Gorky. The revolution began with an event of quite horrific violence, Bloody Sunday, which started out as a mass procession of some 150,000 workers to the Winter Palace with the aim of presenting a petition to the Tsar requesting political reform. Although the government had been informed that this was to be a peaceful demonstration, the order was issued for the procession to be met with a display of force. Troops opened fire without warning on the unarmed men, women, and children in the crowd,

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246 RGIA, f. 1405, op. 105, d. 10809, l. 12.
247 RGIA, f. 1405, op. 105, d. 10809, l. 14.
248 RGIA, f. 1405, op. 105, d. 10809, l. 15.
causing deaths and injuries. Gorky witnessed this massacre and years later, he described his state of mind through Klim Samgin’s impressions. Having witnessed the massacre, Samgin “walked as if he was in a dream, nearly without consciousness, feeling only one thing: he would never forget what he saw, but to remember it was also impossible. Impossible.”

249 After Bloody Sunday, Gorky wanted neither to remain silent, nor write or subsidize papers. Leonid Andreev started to distrust Gorky’s judgment, noticing that he became fanatically straightforward and was turning radical. “History can be painted anew only with blood,” wrote Gorky to Andreev after the massacre. He further explained to his friend that a revolution was inevitable:

Do not despair my friend! It is not worth it! Two hundred black eyes will not paint Russian history over in a brighter color; for that, blood is needed, much blood……. Do not cry unnecessarily! All goes the way it should. Life was built on cruelty and force. For its reconstruction, it demands cold calculated cruelty—that is all! They kill? It is necessary to do so! Otherwise what will you do? Will you go to Count Tolstoy and wait with him?  

251 As in his childhood when he sensed danger, Gorky either behaved like a monk or a romantic hero. In 1905, Gorky’s response to the bloody events in the streets of St. Petersburg was that of a romantic hero who attacked in order to defend himself. Erich Fromm, a German sociopsychologist argues that very often human beings rationalize their acts of violence and in 1905 Gorky had to explain his involvement with radical groups by portraying it as defense.  

252 In his view, after Bloody Sunday, the revolution became inevitable. In a letter to his wife, Ekaterina Peshkova, Gorky declared that it had already started: "My friend, the Russian revolution has begun, on which I offer you my sincere and profound congratulations. The deaths should not put you out of countenance; history is repainted in new

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250 Gor’kii, \textit{SS} (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1960), vol. 28, p. 383.
252 Erich Fromm, \textit{Begtsvo ot svobody} (Moscow: ACT, 2016), p. 211.
colors only with blood.” Gorky’s deeds began to match his words. He wrote a radical, strong-worded declaration, but did not mail it to the Ministry of the Interior because he wanted approval of a few of his liberal friends, such as lawyer Evgenii Kedrin and the historian Nikolai Kareev, who ended up resenting the fact that Gorky included their names in his letter. Neither of them signed it. Gorky’s first radical “deed” ended with imprisonment at the Peter and Paul Fortress. His liberal friends also found themselves behind bars. On January 10, 1905, the police arrested Gorky on suspicions that he belonged to a conspiratorial committee, which he denied. Kedrin also vehemently repudiated membership in an anti-government organization, adding that he would have never signed the document composed by Gorky: “It is unthinkable that one could overthrow the government either through workers’ strikes or student riots. I could not imagine that any clearly thinking individual could find himself in a committee which would aim to overthrow the autocracy.”

Although Gorky admitted that he had radical thoughts, he denied that he had any connection to the revolutionary parties. Gorky’s arrest caused much unrest and outcry in Russia and abroad. The workers from the St. Petersburg factories, the Obukhov works, and the Semianikovskii shipyards protested his imprisonment. Demonstrations took place in a Kiev theater during a performance of Dachniki when agitators demanded that Gorky be granted freedom, shouting “Freedom for Gorky, the fighter for liberty!” The Russian Literary Fund Society approached the newly appointed governor-general of St. Petersburg for support, but to no avail. The Ministry of Interior and the Police Department viewed Gorky as a radical

254 RGIA, f. 1280, op. 1, d. 929, p. 16.
255 I. Novich, Gor’kii v epokhu pervoi russkoi revoliutsii (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1960), pp. 95-96.
revolutionary who had committed a crime against the state.\textsuperscript{257} What the tsarist government did not expect was the overwhelming foreign campaign for Gorky’s release, which showed how extensive Gorky’s popularity and status were abroad. Already in 1905, the European and American public acknowledged him as a writer and public figure with an international reputation. In Germany, 269 prominent scientists and men of letters signed a letter from the editorial board of the \textit{Berliner Tageblatt} to the Russian Minister of Interior. In France, Anatole France, Henri Poincare, Aristide Briand, and artists August Rodin and Claude Monet sent Gorky a letter of support. The Writers’ Club in New York wired Nicholas II, asking him to free Gorky. The Ministry of Interior received a petition from prominent British journalist W. T. Stead who inquired whether it was possible for a journalist to visit Gorky at the Peter and Paul Fortress in order to “write the truth about Gorky, which might be distorted by the foreign press.”\textsuperscript{258} He never received permission to see him. But the world-wide campaign in Gorky’s defense bore fruit—the negative publicity was bad for the tsarist government. “The publicity, as well as the mounting revolutionary mood,” writes Tovah Yedlin, “compelled the authorities to release Gorky from prison.”\textsuperscript{259} The government released him on bail but did not close the case against him.

January 9 became a turning point in Gorky’s life. Before Bloody Sunday, he sought to instigate change in society by cooperating with different political parties, although he considered unarmed demonstrations meaningless. He expressed his “radicalism” exclusively on paper and vocally. After Bloody Sunday, Gorky became active in revolutionary activity. He not only lost his illusions about gradual reforms coming from the top, but, most importantly, he became disillusioned with the intelligentsia. In his words: “The first day of the Russian revolution was

\textsuperscript{257} RGIA, f. 1280, op. 1, d. 929, l. 15.
\textsuperscript{258} RGIA, f. 472, op. 43 (403/2718), d. 18, l. 41. There is no mention of Mr. Stead’s and Mr. Long’s first names in the documents.
\textsuperscript{259} Yedlin, \textit{Maxim Gor’kii}, p. 51.
the day of the moral collapse of the Russian intelligentsia; this is my impression on the basis of their speeches and actions.” Maxim Gor’kii, “Letter to L. Andreev,” SSS, vol. 28, p. 347.

His disillusionment with the intelligentsia manifested itself in the play *Children of the Sun*, written during his imprisonment at the Peter and Paul Fortress. The theme of the uncouth Russian peasant’s unpredictability dominated and echoed the events of Bloody Sunday with its carnage and slaughter. The play ends with worker Egor and his comrades bursting into his employer’s house bent on a drunken pogrom. During the entire play, Egor, who has skillful fingers, is violent, rude, and inadequate, beats his wife regularly, and provokes everyone, while the starry-eyed owner of the house, the scientist Protasov, puts up with Egor’s open boorishness. Gorky portrays the Russian intelligentsia as aimless cowards. Protasov is so immersed in his experiments that he does not notice how his wife is having an affair with his close friend, while a merchant’s wife has fallen in love with him. *Children of the Sun* explored the extent of the Russian intelligentsia cluelessness about the essence of the Russian people. Maxim Gor’kii, “Deti solntsa” in *P’iesy* (Leningrad: gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo isskustvo, 1936).

Gorky portrays the Russian intelligentsia as an ostrich with its head hidden in the sand without sensing the approaching storm. The events of Bloody Sunday made Gorky realize that the intelligentsia was an unreliable and inadequate partner in making any change possible in Russia. Consequently, he placed all his hopes on the proletariat, with whom he associated himself for a long time, and once he was out of prison, he threw himself into supporting the workers.

Maria Andreeva, an Imperial celebrity actress who worked closely with the Bolsheviks, and Gorky began organizing concerts, proceeds from which went to support workers and the poor. A police agent who was present at the concert on July 30, 1905, in Terioki, mentioned in his report that it was sold out even before the concert posters went up. Moreover, when the

261 Maxim Gor’kii, “Deti solntsa” in *P’iesy* (Leningrad: gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo isskustvo, 1936)
262 RGIA, f. 21, op. 2, d. 1941a, l. 95.
actual concert began, 700 people came in through a back entrance. Overall, the organizers collected around 3000 rubles, which they planned to give to the Literary Fund, but the endowment was a cover-up. Instead, all the money went to workers who were on strike at the Putilov Factory, the rest of the money went to revolutionary causes. The performances did not match the planned pieces on the program. Andreeva, for example, recited a story by an unknown writer and ended with a call to arms: “We still need to fight and we will again become targets for gun barrels whose shells will tear our worn-out bodies and our scarlet blood will wash this ungrateful mother earth, which produced such tyrants. Fight and don’t lose heart! May the memory of the people’s martyrs live forever!” The audience burst into applause as soon as she finished. Gorky read a short story in which he compared a human being to an oak tree growing and acquiring the strength to withstand storms. “A human being who has reached a certain stature in a political sense,” said Gorky, “should always move forward without looking back and fearing neither storms, nor bad weather.” The police agent pointed out that there were many Jews in the audience and during the performance a lady’s crutch was carried out with a sign “to benefit revolutionaries and social-democrats.” As the transcript shows, Andreeva’s performance and words were more blunt, pointed, and “radical” than Gorky’s. She had an enormous influence on him at this stage of their lives and the Bolsheviks who began courting Gorky knew this well and operated through her.

Already in March of 1905 Gorky reacted strongly to Leo Tolstoy’s article “Leo Tolstoy – about Russia’s Crisis.” In his article Tolstoy condemned the Tsarist government and spoke against forceful change of the social order. Essentially, Tolstoy thought that revolution was not

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263 RGIA, f. 21, op. 2, d. 1941a, l. 96.
264 RGIA, f. 21, op. 2, d. 1941a, l. 96.
265 RGIA, f. 21, op. 2, d. 1941a, l. 96.
an answer to Russia’s social problems. He pointed out that any revolution altered a society’s perceptions of the authorities, so the Russian people had to decide how to define their relationship with the Tsar. Tolstoy issued a warning that the democratic representative governments of the American and western European kind only appeared to be progressive. Although these governments put an end to poplar excesses and prevented tyrants from coming to power, promulgated freedom of the press, and prevented religious violence, people failed to become freer, more moral or prosperous in these countries, which shows how little Tolstoy knew about Western politics and life.²⁶⁷ Tolstoy admonished the Russian people to turn to agriculture, slow down modernization and industrialization, and remember God’s lessons. Gorky was furious. He accused Tolstoy of misleading the Russian and Western audience and not knowing how the simple people lived in Russia. “You do not know how ordinary working people live in our country, you don’t know their spiritual world, their desires and wishes, you stopped listening to their voices a long time ago.”²⁶⁸ Although Gorky respected Tolstoy, his letter revealed a deeply emotional outcry against a wise man of letters who had completely lost touch with workers’ and peasants’ reality. Moreover, Gorky claimed that the state treated writers who refused to stand up for the people as tools:

For a state, we are bricks that they use to build walls and towers, reinforcing its evil power over us. Separating writers from people skillfully, the state makes everyone powerless in their struggle with its heartless mechanism. Not a single rational human being can be calm as long as ordinary people are slaves or blind animals because they will see the light, become free, and take revenge for coercion and inattention to them… The state is killing the individual to resurrect the animal in him and with this animal power to strengthen its control over us; it fights against the mind hostile to coercion. The welfare of the country lies in the people’s freedom; only its power can attain victory over the state’s dark power. Please understand that there isn’t another country where honorable and rational

²⁶⁷ Leo Tolstoy, O znachenii, pp. 16-17.
²⁶⁸ Maxim Gor’kii, “Pís’mo Lvu Tolstomu,” in Leo Tolstoy, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 90 tomakh (Moscow: Khudozhvennaia liteartura, 1954), vol. 36, p. 86.
people felt as lonely and isolated as in ours. Fight for the victory of freedom and fairness and in this victory, you will find beauty. May your life be a heroic poem!''

Gorky never sent Tolstoy this letter. But in 1905 even in his emotionally charged state of mind Gorky understood Russia’s political dynamics. He had no illusions that he was also just a “brick” in a complicated social and cultural structure, which buttressed state power. Years later, when he sang praises to a new Soviet man, he cultivated the illusion that his role as a “brick” had come to an end, that he had become one of the “builders” of a new world. It is also clear from this letter that he foresaw what neglect of working-class problems could lead to and that the state was doing everything to separate the intelligentsia from the ordinary people. The letter is also telling in another respect: for someone who never lived abroad to write to Tolstoy that in Russia people were far more isolated than anywhere else was insolent. Further developments only and reinforced Gorky’s fears that insurrection and “revenge” were inevitable.

Although the October Manifesto established a limited constitutional regime, granted civic rights, and established a Duma, Gorky thought that without economic and social reforms, it would not have far-reaching consequences and alleviate the misfortunes of ordinary Russians. He was not alone in this attitude. Both the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks decided to further their revolutionary cause in the following months. “The events of December 1905 in Moscow were the only part of the revolution,” wrote Catherine Evtuhov, “that was primarily orchestrated by the Social Democrats. A mutiny by soldiers in Rostov… encouraged the Bolsheviks’ Moscow Committee to declare a strike that was intended … to expand into a full-scale street insurrection. What followed was the most violent episode of the year—the Moscow uprising.”

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269 Ibid., p. 87.
Committee, the main organization of Bolsheviks in the city, was the driving force behind the uprising.\textsuperscript{271} And for the first time in his life, Gorky became active in the actual making of an insurrection. “Never again was he to be so actively involved in the work of revolution as he was at this time,” wrote Tovah Yedlin. “He believed intensely in the ultimate victory of the revolution.”\textsuperscript{272} Gorky’s apartment in Moscow became a meeting place for Party members: “When we came to his flat, we found ourselves at home there. Exhausted by the intense effort, we would walk by on foot in cold weather for more than a kilometer, to settle things, rest, and get some food. The table was set the entire day, a hot samovar was always ready and everyone could go into the dining-room to eat…”\textsuperscript{273} But the apartment also served as an arms depot. The insurgents lacked ammunition, so Gorky’s residence became a laboratory. Petr Zalomov, who was the organizer of the military units among the insurgents recollected: “Gorky in 1905 was in the center of preparation for the armed uprising. Thanks to his influence and connections he collected hundreds of thousands of rubles for the cause.”\textsuperscript{274} Anton Voitkevich remembered receiving 10,000 rubles in Gorky’s apartment from furniture factory owner Schmitt to purchase weapons.\textsuperscript{275}

Barricaded and in flames, Moscow turned into a raging battlefield. As Ronald Suny points out, “the tsar’s concessions broke the unity of the opposition and gave him some breathing space to use his army to bring a harsh order back to the country.”\textsuperscript{276} The uprising, however, made Gorky confident in the power of the people who rose spontaneously in response to the

\textsuperscript{272} Yedlin, \textit{Maxim Gor’kii}, p. 58.
\textsuperscript{274} Petr Zalomov became the prototype of Petr Vlasov, one of the protagonists of the Gor’kii novel, \textit{Mother}. P. Zalomov, “Burevestnik revoliutsii,” \textit{Maksim Gor’kii v vospominaniakh sovremennikov} (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literature, 1981), vol. 1, p. 169.
\textsuperscript{275} Anton Voitkevich, “Iz vstrech s Gor’kim,” p. 80.
\textsuperscript{276} Ronald Grigor Suny, \textit{The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 34.
government’s actions. Gorky never viewed the uprising as instigated by the Social Democrats. In fact, he argued against this assumption in his article “On the Moscow Events,” published immediately after the collapse of the uprising. Gorky noted: “Many may think that it was active members of the parties who started erecting the barricades; this is of course is very flattering but not entirely true. It was the ordinary citizen, the man without any party affiliation whatsoever who started building them and this is the crux of the matter.”

He accused the Moscow Governor-General Fedor Dubasov for violating the October Manifesto and using the army to suppress the demonstrators who were practicing their newly acquired rights. Gorky concluded that “Dubasov’s wise deeds” proved only that a militant uprising in Russia was indeed possible. Gorky came out of the uprising thinking that a broader revolution was inevitable and that the workers and peasants could free themselves if they made a conscious effort to do so. But he also became even more disillusioned with the liberal intelligentsia. Abraham Ascher suggests that the December Uprising ended the cooperation between the liberals and revolutionaries because the former were utterly shocked by the brutality of the revolutionary methods and by the government’s violent response to it.

“As a result of [the Moscow uprising],” writes Ascher, “the liberal movement, which until October had played a decisive role in undermining the autocracy, became politically more cautious and increasingly distanced itself from the radical left.” As Gorky’s letters and speeches show, Gorky thought that these violent methods were necessary and he firmly stood on the side of the revolutionaries. It comes as no surprise then that

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277 Maxim Gor’kii, Sobranie sochinenii, vol. 28, p. 373.
Gorky failed to notice that the revolutionary left was waiting for Dubasov’s provocation and “even deliberately invited it.”

In the aftermath of the armed insurrection, he had to leave Moscow because the police, which had been monitoring his revolutionary work for some time, could arrest him at any moment. The Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party arranged his trip to the United States. Gorky was to remain abroad for the next seven years. His political activities between 1900 and 1905 marked a turn towards a political radicalism that would make him persona non grata in his native land.

**Gorky in the US and on Capri**

In the US, Gorky assumed the role of a political activist and propagandist for the Russian revolution for the first and last time in his political career. He went to New York with one purpose in mind—to discredit the tsarist government and to find financial support for the Bolshevik cause and a future revolution. Despite his highly inflammatory articles, which announced the beginning of a revolution in Russia, and a lineup of meetings beginning with a gala dinner and ending with an invitation to the White House, his mission failed. While as “proletarian” artist, Gorky succeeded in creating the image of “Mother” that inspired generations of revolutionaries, Gorky the revolutionary failed at fulfilling his mission as an emissary.

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282 Nikolai Burenin, a leading Bolshevik party member who accompanied Gor’kii during his trip to America still thought that Gor’kii’s trip to America was a success because he created literary masterpieces there such as *Mother*. Gor’kii’s literary output in the US was as productive as artistically impressive. See Nikolai Burenin, “S Gor’kim v Amerike,” in *M. Gor’kii v epokhu revoliutsii*, p. 100.
283 After Gor’kii’s departure, President Theodore Roosevelt made a rather mocking statement about Gor’kii to writer Upton Sinclair: “The abortiveness of the late revolution in Russia sprang precisely from the fact that too much of the leadership was of the Gor’kii type, and therefore the kind of leadership which can never lead anybody anywhere save into a Serbonian bog.” Cited from Upton Sinclair, *My Lifetime in Letters* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1960), pp. 11-12.
The Russian Embassy branded Gorky a dangerous “socialist revolutionary” and a morally low person who deserted the mother of his children and came to the US with his common law wife. The Russian authorities bet on American puritanism and did not miss the mark. When photographs of his wife and children appeared in the newspapers, meetings in official circles fell through and Gorky was even forced to leave the hotel in which he was staying and cancel reservations. This negative turn of events colored his writings about the US. Gorky, who revered European culture and despised the US for its alleged spiritual emptiness and lack of culture, portrayed America as a capitalist hell with New York as an octopus-like city that devoured its inhabitants.  

As scholars have noted, Gorky’s personal letters contained more optimism and interest in America: “[New York] is such an amazing fantasy of stone, glass, and iron, a fantasy constructed by crazy giants, monsters longing after beauty, stormy souls full of wild energy. All these Berlins, Parises, and other ‘big’ cities are trifles in comparison with New York.”  

Or in another letter, he noted: “America, in spite of all, is a wonderful country; it is a volcano of human energy.” The American workers with their energy, enthusiasm, and the desire to achieve impressed Gorky the most. “What they do here,” he wrote Konstantin Piatnitskii, “how they work, how much energy, ignorance, self-satisfaction… I am marveling and cursing at the same time!”  

The scandal and the highly industrialized American life exacerbated his resentment of economic disparities and inequalities under the capitalist system. In a telling letter to Ekaterina Peshkova on his way from the US to Italy, he confessed that the United States made

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284 Gor’kii’s preconception was formed not exclusively by ideology. As Fedorova argues in her brilliant study, his resentment of America “took on a shape that cannot be understood in isolation from the literary movements of the time, both Russian and European, especially expressionism and urbanist poetry.” For more see, Milla Fedorova Yankees in Petrograd, pp. 40-41.  
286 Maxim Gor’kii, SS, vol. 23, pp. 392-393.  
287 Maxim Gor’kii, Aleksei Maksimovich Gor’kii: Arkhiv IV (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury 1955), pp. 202-203.
him a genuine revolutionary. Before he was just a reformer!²⁸⁸ How could Gorky perceive himself as a reformer during the revolution of 1905? What reformer advocates for an armed uprising and violence? His letter and future reaction to the October revolution shows that he did not fully realize the far-reaching consequences of what he was advocating in 1905. Gorky, who ordinarily condemned violence, encouraged and appealed to these feral and low feelings. It is true that Gorky’s public projects were for the most part educational up until 1905. Yes, he participated in illegal gatherings and readings, but again he was open to different influences and was primarily moved by his own projects and ideas based on making books and education accessible to as many young people as he possibly could. Yet his pronouncements on the eve of 1905 and during the revolution attest to his “radicalization.” His view of himself as a “reformer” during this time is evidence of his disengagement with reality, his misapprehension of what ramifications his actions would have.

**Admiration of Italy**

Gorky always admired European culture, but his knowledge of it derived solely from books. His first Italian exile from 1906 until 1913 gave him the opportunity to learn more about Europe and its people from his own experiences of Italians, with whom he fell in love immediately. In 1924, Gorky wrote: “No one loved Italy the way I loved the country because no one owes Italy as much as I do, and everything I wrote is nothing but a hymn to Italy.”²⁸⁹ Italy brought Gorky to life and filled him with creative energy and a positive view of life. He enjoyed the Italian sun, the smiles, the fireworks, and fishing. “We live well here on Capri—marvelously and superbly,” Gorky wrote to Ivan Ladyzhnikov. “It is not hot, it is quiet and charmingly

²⁸⁹ Maxim Gor’kii, quoted in “Maxim Gor’kii i Italiia” by S. M. Demkina in *Maxim Gor’kii i Italiia* (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2013), p. 6.
beautiful. We swim, go fishing, and overall live wonderfully, so that I started to gain weight.”\textsuperscript{290}

In another letter to Evgenii Chirikov, he again sang praises to his source of sheer happiness—Italy: “I live on an island, around me, as if I am on a ship, is the sea; sometimes I go out into this sea on a boat and beat sharks with a paddle. Italy is a superb country and the people here are lovely.”\textsuperscript{291}

No small matter was the fact that Gorky arrived in Italy after a complicated trip to the United States and deep political disappointments in Russia—the failed revolution of 1905 and a personal tragedy, the death of his daughter Katiusha. For Gorky, Italy became a place of great consolation and a source of inspiration. During the first incredibly saturated day in Naples, Gorky managed to see a lot and sincerely marvel at everything. “Marvelous, surprising, Italy exceeded all my expectations,” he confessed to Italian newspaper correspondents. This first happy emotional memory stayed with him until he died. “The wonderful island of Capri, with its salutary climate and delightful nature charmed the writer. By settling there, he felt himself physically stronger and spiritually renewed. Everything was conducive to writing,” noted S. Demkina.\textsuperscript{292}

Lidia Bykovtseva, who wrote the most authoritative study of Gorky’s life in Italy to date, points out that both the aesthetic beauty of the island, the ancient roots of Italian culture, and its mild climate were conducive to Gorky’s creative process. Indeed, the Italian interludes turned out to be the most productive and creative periods of time in Gorky’s life. There he wrote his trilogy—\textit{Childhood}, \textit{Going into the People}, \textit{My Universities}—and novels such as \textit{Foma Gordeev}, \textit{Confession}, \textit{The Life of Klim Samgin}. and \textit{Fairy Tales about Italy}, to name just a few.

\textsuperscript{290} Quoted in L. Bykovtseva, \textit{Gor’kii v Italii} (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1979), p. 54.
\textsuperscript{291} Quoted in L. Bykovtseva, \textit{Gor’kii v Italii} (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1979), p. 54.
\textsuperscript{292} S. M. Demkina, “Maxim Gor’kii i Italii,” in \textit{Maxim Gor’kii i Italii} (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2013), pp. 6-7.
More importantly, this exile stimulated a comparison of Russia to Italy and sharpened Gorky’s sense of his homeland. “Foreign beauty not only failed to overshadow a faraway native land,” wrote Bykovtseva, “but also helped to feel [Russia] in its entirety and power, to capture it with utmost visual and national faithfulness and accuracy, to awaken deep feelings of love and touch one’s heart.”

Bykovtseva points out rightly that Gorky felt a certain nostalgia during his Italian interlude and drew images of the Russian winter and spring with special love and care, assigning every picture deep meaning: “Snow is falling thickly and abundantly, in heavy flakes, blocking the streets nearly as high as the roofs.” But these nostalgic recollections also contained sadness and criticism. The Russian winters and springs were grayer and colder and the Russian people—passive and devoid of the luster and unpretentious joy of Italians.

On Capri, Gorky followed the development of Russian cultural life avidly and again compared it to the Italian state of affairs. New literary trends in Russian poetry such as Symbolism, Akmeism, and particularly Egofuturism frustrated Gorky, who claimed that their ideas sprang from the “cold calculation of nihilists,” whose main desire was to impress others and become famous. He failed to understand the symbolists’ preoccupation with living on the cusp of a new era and their rejection of socially conscious moralizing realism. The Egofuturists’ aspiration to launch a new culture on the basis of individualism and their condemnation of old ethics and aesthetics found no sympathy with Gorky. Writing from Capri, he observed in July 1913 how banal and shallow cultural life had become in Russia. When he received a literary-artistic calendar, Gorky was outraged by its editors’ superficiality and lack of

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293 L. Bykovtseva, Gor’kii v Italii (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1979), p. 58
professionalism. This calendar prompted him to write: “[H]ow many shameless and brazen creatures have been cultivated in Russia—what a horror!”

In Italy, on the other hand, Gorky observed a different attitude towards culture and cultural relations. Southern Italians showed “a clever and multifaceted attention” and grew more interested in Russia as the trade in wood, bread, and coal increased between the two countries and stimulated interest in Russia. Gorky organized a Russian-Italian library that Italians embraced zealously. Government ministries, the Italian Parliament, and various scientific societies provided the library with multivolume and expensive editions of books that the Russian government could not match. Gorky noticed this discrepancy. He worked on two volumes, *Russians about Italy* in Italian and *Italians about Russia* in Russian, and noted regretfully, “While in Russia they are playing pranks and kicking up a row, here in Italy, a huge cultural work is going on continuously.”

Neither the cultural news from Russia nor its tourists impressed Gorky. Russian middle-class tourists came across as apathetic. “As I observe this public, I regretfully note that a Russian man has changed greatly for the worse.” Gorky was livid that every tourist group contained a spy and that the socially active were few and far between. Russian tourists were mostly modest and lacked education and presence. They not only listened to dull and incompetent guides, but worse, they admired the latter’s trite and ignorant comments about how mediocre Raphael was. For someone who had educated himself and still thirsted for knowledge about Italian cultural history, this was unpalatable.

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296 Maxim Gor’kii, “V. G. Korolenko 24 June (7 July) 1913, Kapri,” in *Pis’ma* (Moscow: Nauka, 2007), 11, p. 263, p. 15.
297 Maxim Gor’kii, “V. G. Korolenko 24 June (7 July) 1913, Kapri,” in *Pis’ma* (Moscow: Nauka, 2007), 11, p. 15.
298 Maxim Gor’kii, “V. G. Korolenko 24 June (7 July) 1913, Kapri,” in *Pis’ma* (Moscow: Nauka, 2007), 11, p. 263, p. 15.
When Gorky arrived in Italy, he was greeted as a symbol of the revolution.\textsuperscript{299} He gave speeches and interviews in which he underscored the value of the revolution of 1905 and appraised it as a moral victory of the proletariat. Gorky also threw himself into creating the Capri school for underground party workers particularly after he attended the Fifth Party Congress in 1907 and witnessed the wrangling in the Party for the first time. The “semi-schism,” dubbed as such by Lunacharskii, although some historians render it as a “major development in the history of the revolutionary movement and Russian Marxism,” occurred during the Fifth Party Congress because the left wing of the Bolshevik party gave more weight to the role of consciousness and culture than Lenin’s Plekhanovian orthodoxy.”\textsuperscript{300} Gorky went to the British capital as the special guest of the Bolsheviks, having received an invitation from Lenin, which was delivered in person to Capri by Lenin’s representative, Desnitsky. The congress allowed Gorky the opportunity both to become better acquainted with Lenin and to observe his main political opponents within the Social Democratic movement, the Mensheviks led by veteran campaigners Plekhanov and Axelrod. Gorky’s reaction to the wrangling as always was decidedly mixed, but he was not inspired by the prospect of witnessing further confrontations of the same sort.

\textit{Gorky and Lenin: Marxism and ‘God-building’}

Although Gorky liked the Bolshevik leader personally and had been particularly charmed by his kind attentions at the time of the London Congress, the writer had a tense relationship with him. They would experience many disappointments in their controversial but open relationship. Neither Gorky, nor Lenin shied away from criticizing each other although both preferred to do it either in person or in letters, not in public. Lenin needed Gorky not only because of his

\textsuperscript{299} Bykovtseva, \textit{Gor’kii v Italii}, p. 14.

willingness to spend part of his impressive income on Bolshevik projects and publishing ventures, but also because of Gorky’s powerful literary talent and strong identification and faith in the working class.

Lenin valued Gorky as a writer, but doubted his devotion to the Bolshevik cause and distrusted him. Although Gorky subsidized and wrote for several Bolshevik newspapers, such as *New Life, Forward,* and *Proletariat,* he also simultaneously edited articles by members of the Kadet Party and contributed his own essays to the liberal press. In the late 1890s, Gorky had a negative view of Marxism and openly expressed it in his correspondence. In his letter to Alexander Skabichevskii, a Russian literary critic and historian, Gorky complained that he felt uncomfortable taking 50 rubles from the editors of the *New Word,* the liberal journal. “I have not taken and I will not accept the advance from the new editorial staff of the *New Word.* I have already said that I would feel uncomfortable and hurt when I will appear on the cover of the magazine next to Struve and Tugan. I am not a Marxist and I will never ever become one because I consider it shameful to profess Russian or German Marxism.”

E. N. Nikitin notes that “Gorky’s path to Marxism was long and complicated.” Once in the 1900s, during a Marxist meeting in Nizhni Novgorod, Gorky told E. D. Kuskova: “Come on, stop ‘suckling on Marx.’ Listen to nightingales. They are more useful for our souls.” Gorky read Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* in the 1890s, but he never commented or discussed Marx in his correspondence. He seriously studied and read Marx only after Lenin’s death, but he recommended the *Communist Manifesto* to his son as part of his political science education.

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301 RGASPI f. 7, op.1, d. 161, l. 2.
302 E. N. Nikitin, “Gor’kii i ideia kollektivizma,” in *Kontseptsiiia mira i cheloveka v tvorchestve M. Gor’kogo* (Moscow: IMLI Ran, 2009), p. 189.
the early 1900s, Gorky overcame his negative attitude towards Marxism, but he never became an orthodox Marxist, as many scholars have concluded.\textsuperscript{305} He began submitting articles and attending illegal meetings in the offices of the journal \textit{Life} in the late 1890s. The police even reported that revolutionary life in Nizhnii Novgorod went dormant when he was not there. Moreover, the authorities accused Gorky and his fellow writers, Stepan Skitalets and Evgenii Chirikov, of propagandizing the workers of Sormovo. When Gorky moved to St. Petersburg, he increased his participation in the meetings with the workers because of his new ‘civil’ wife, Maria Andreeva, an actress who supported the Bolshevik Party. When in 1903 Gorky admitted to Korolenko that Marxism was becoming more attractive to him, Korolenko responded to this confession: “It’s a muddle to me. Socialism without idealism—I can’t understand that. And I don’t believe that consciousness of common material interests is enough to build an ethical system on—we can’t get on without ethics.”\textsuperscript{306} Gorky did not comment on Korolenko’s questioning of Marxism, although he never reconciled his social ideals with materialism and individualism. “His road to Marxism, like his road to populism,” noted Tovah Yedlin, “was practical and emotional rather than scientific.”\textsuperscript{307} For him, Marxism was another way of liberating the suffering masses, but political reforms alone would not have satisfied him.

By 1906 Gorky was closely involved with a group of thinkers who soon became the cause of a major controversy within the Social Democratic movement. Known as the ‘God-builders’, this group included several prominent Bolsheviks, of whom Aleksandr Bogdanov and Anatolii Lunacharskii were the most important. Both men had written theoretical works in which

\textsuperscript{305} For more information see Tovah Yedlin, \textit{Maxim Gor’kii: a Political Biography} (Westport: Praeger, 1999), V. S. Barakhov \textit{Drama Maksima Gor’kogo} (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2004), Pavel Basinskii, \textit{Gor’kii} (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 2006), Dmitry Bykov \textit{Byl li Gorii} (Moscow: Astrel, 2008), Lidia Spiridonova \textit{Gor’kii: Dialog s istoriei} (Moscow: Nasledie, 1994).
\textsuperscript{306} Maxim Gor’kii, “V. G. Korolenko” in \textit{Literaturnye portrety} (Moscow: Soviet writer, 2008), p. 56.
\textsuperscript{307} Yedlin, \textit{Maxim Gor’kii}, p. 29.
they argued for a fusion of Marxist ideas with a collective religious spirit, a combination they believed would best express the spirit of socialist revolution in Russia. Such views appealed to Gorky, who found in the works of Lunacharskii, Bogdanov, and their associate Bazarov an elaboration of notions about God towards which he already moved independently from the late 1890s onwards. Undoubtedly, his enthusiasm for ‘God-building’ during the early years is hard to exaggerate. Bogdanov was among the writer’s earliest visitors on Capri, as was Lunacharsky, and the three men obviously spent many hours discussing their views on socialism and religion. By the end of 1907, Gorky’s involvement with these two men had become something of an obsession. Gorky justified Bogdanov’s influence to Ekaterina Peshkova in a letter: “It would be good if you were to study Bogdanov’s article carefully. I’m ready to repeat a hundred times that he is the most original and sound philosopher of today and that great fame awaits him. Then there are the articles by Bazarov and Lunacharsky too.”

Bogdanov led the Vpered group, which from the outset embraced the primacy of the cultural transformation in the making of the revolution. As Katerina Clark points out, "Marx and Lenin saw a socioeconomic revolution as a precondition of any spiritual revolution; most non-Marxist anti-capitalists (and some Bolshevik intellectuals) insisted that this sequence had to be played in reverse.”

Gorky chose to be on Bogdanov’s side. “If [Bogdanov] should succeed,” he wrote, “we will witness the defeat of the remnants of bourgeois metaphysics, the disintegration of the ‘bourgeois soul’ and the birth of a socialist soul.” It is unclear what Gorky means by the “bourgeois” versus “socialist” soul. He had little knowledge of either Marxist political economy or Bogdanov’s theories, but he could relate to Bogdanov’s ideas about

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308 Maxim Gor’kii, “Ekaterine Peshkovoi, fevral’ 1908,” in PSSP, vol. 6, l. 71.
309 Clark, Petersburg, p. 21.
310 Maxim Gor’kii, Pis’ma k pisateliam i I. P. Ladyzhnikovu: Arkhiv VII (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury 1959). p. 148.
proletarian culture. “The bond between Gorky and Bogdanov,” observes Tovah Yedlin, “was based on the belief in and concern for proletarian culture and in the hope of reviving the revolutionary activity in Russia.”311 Bogdanov and Lunacharskii maintained that a new proletarian culture would be created, which would spread new art, science, and philosophy among the masses. This idea clearly appealed to Gorky, although it is unclear whether he agreed with Bogdanov’s thesis that the bourgeois culture that had shaped art, science, and philosophy had really become a thing of the past and that to accept it meant to “preserve the past within us.”312

‘God-building’ provided Gorky with his own personal faith, but he also imagined it as an instrument by which the Russian revolution might properly be achieved. It gave him a goal and a way to release the utopian zeal which was to characterize Gorky’s activities throughout 1908 and 1909. After the revolution of 1905, Gorky concluded that only revolution could achieve his main goal to make life better in Russia through socialism. For Gorky, God-building buttressed his personal convictions and provided the means to carry out radical change successfully.

Even though Gorky traveled to the USA in 1906, he never stopped co-editing and co-publishing (with Konstantin Piatnitskii) for the Znanie almanacs. At the time Gorky, tried to turn this publishing outlet into a mouthpiece for the God-builders. Although he received many Russian newspapers and magazines in Italy, he could not quite grasp that censorship in Russia had been tightened considerably after 1905 and publishing literary or philosophical works that contained any hint of revolutionary propaganda was a liability. Gorky, on the other hand, was greatly perturbed by the rising popularity of Russian modernism that combined elements of new

311 Yedlin, Maxim Gor’kii, p. 85.
currents in religion and philosophy. There were also other trends, such as historical romances, detective stories, and even mild pornography, that eclipsed the civic literature that Gorky promoted. As Pavel Basinskii suggested, Gorky agonized over these novel tendencies. In his eyes, Russian literature was in danger of losing its moral authority as a force for political and social change and he was particularly worried that *Znanie* authors failed to share his fears.\footnote{Pavel Basinskii, *Gor’kii* (Moscow: Molodaya Gvardiia, 2006), p. 296.} He thought that his colleagues were deserting him because they had been seduced from the true path of democratic literature by these decadent ideas. His *Znanie* associates also held equally firmly to the view that Gorky himself had allowed his revolutionary sympathies to run away with him to the detriment of his literary judgement. “Many Russian writers,” wrote Gorky, “contemplate the vanity of all earthly things and the insignificance of man. And they talk of corpses, graveyards, toothache, and headaches, of the tactlessness of the socialists and other such things which lower the temperature of the air, and of body and soul.”\footnote{Maxim Gor’kii, “Pis’mo Ladyzhnikovu,” *PSSP*, vol. 4, p. 65.} Despite Gorky’s playful tone, his concern was real and prompted him to act. After Gorky talked to his co-publisher Piatnitskii, they decided to get Leonid Andreev involved in co-editing material. When Andreev arrived on Capri, Gorky essentially gave him carte blanche to promise honoraria and invite other writers to contribute their new works to *Znanie*. But when Andreev, whom Gorky called his “only friend,” asked Alexander Blok and Fedor Sologub to contribute to an upcoming issue and assured them of high allowances, Gorky became livid. He started to dictate his preferences to his co-workers because he was convinced of his rightness. As Leonid Andreev put it in his letter to Alexander Serafimovich from Capri: “Life here is not so good. The only real person is Gorky and even he is not quite right somehow. He has become extremely narrow, and his brains are well and truly
messed up.” Andreev was right. Gorky was not prepared to leave editorial affairs completely in his hands. Once he found out about Blok and Sologub, he infringed on Andreev’s independence of action. As for Andreev, he stepped down by handing back the job of editor to Gorky and went on to edit Shipovnik magazine that competed with the Znanie almanacs. Basinskii points out that simultaneously Ivan Bunin, Evgenii Chirikov, Alexander Kuprin, Vikentii Veresaev, Alexander Serafimovich, David Aizman, and Semen Yushkevich left Znanie to edit other literary magazines. Gorky lost promising talent and his almanacs became dull and void of their intellectual vigor. Gorky realized quickly that he had lost precious talent and in one of his letters noted that he now spent much time reading talentless “revolutionary” writings. But did he compromise? Did he attempt to alter the situation and meet these young aspiring writers half-way? He did not. Instead he rejected Andreev’s novellas Darkness, Tsar-Hunger, and A Man’s Life. Moreover, when Andreev brought his play, A Student’s Love, to Znanie, Piatnitskii sent Gorky a telegram and the latter responded in a rude way, rejecting the material. Nevertheless, Piatnitskii published the play, but it was done because he needed to fill space in an upcoming almanac, and it had been done against Gorky’s will. This incident only shows that for all of Gorky’s lofty ideas about socialism and human happiness, which were genuine, he could manifest his own strong convictions in an authoritarian way. Leo Tolstoy, sensed this and noticed Gorky’s arrogance and authoritarianism, which simultaneously intrigued and repelled the sage of Yasnaia poliana. Even though Tolstoy wrote that he disliked Gorky’s writings, he nevertheless complimented his talent as great.

316 Maxim Gor’kii, “Pis’mo Ladyzhnikovu,” PSSP, vol. 6, p. 89.
317 L. Tolstoy, Dnevники, p. 136.
On Capri Gorky not only wrote and edited almanacs, but also thought about different ways to fulfill his lifelong goal. Matters became more complex because Lenin had identified ‘God-building’ as a dangerous heresy as early as 1904, which did not prevent Gorky from concealing his full support of Bogdanov’s and Lunacharsky’s ideas. Perhaps Gorky understood that Lenin was also determined not to lose his support because his international fame and financial and social abilities could still be useful to the Bolshevik cause. Having understood Gorky’s value to the workers’ movement, Lenin called Gorky “a writer who bound himself tightly with Russia’s workers’ movement,” “a major representative of proletarian art,” “a writer who gave his heart to the workers’ movement, or who takes proletarian causes to heart.” Lenin also, surprisingly enough, appreciated his writing—*Moi universitety* was his favorite novella—the only time he visited the theatre was to see *The Lowest Depths*. Nadezhda Krupskaia noted in her memoirs that Lenin understood Gorky’s depictions of poverty and “the depths.” “Gorky described life as it was in all its concrete details; he saw it through the eyes of a man who hated exploitation, poverty of thought, oppression, and vulgarity; he saw it through the eyes of a revolutionary.” Krupskaia points out one important detail—that Gorky wore the spectacles of a revolutionary and this was, indeed, true for the period of 1905-1910. Later, wrangling around the Capri school made him think twice about political intrigues and games that the Bolsheviks were playing. Yet, in 1908, Gorky still hoped that Lenin would compromise, particularly when he decided to visit Gorky on Capri. But all discussions between Bogdanov, Lunacharskii, and Lenin ended badly, prompting Gorky to write: “The argument which has blown up between Lenin-Plekhanov, on the one hand, and Bogdanov-Bazarov, on the other, is important and

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319 Nadezhda Krupskaia, “Lenin i Gor’kii,” in *Sovremenniki*, p. 29.
profound. Although they disagree over questions of tactics, the first two believe in historical fatalism; the other promulgate a philosophy of activism. It is clear to me on which side is the greater truth.”321 Despite the disagreements, Gorky was determined to open his school for Russian workers. Financed by both Gorky and Andreeva, with additional support from Shaliapin and Amfiteatrov, the Capri school was to offer introductory courses on philosophy, literature and culture, and political economy—all taught from a Marxist perspective. Major figures from the Russian Social Democratic Party, such as Plekhanov, Kautsky, and Trotsky, were invited to give lectures. In the end, however, the Capri school was boycotted by all but the God-builders themselves. The signs were ominous, but in the beginning, things went reasonably well. Gorky prepared for the lectures. The workers who came to the island seemed to him to be real “new men,” for whom an instrumental role in a quick and inevitable revolutionary rise was in store. Gorky participated in the development of the decisions of the school council. However, Lenin was doing everything he could to undermine the authority of the Capri School, and his efforts were finally rewarded in November, when the venture collapsed after a walk-out by the students, some of whom went on to an alternative school set up by Lenin himself in Longjumeau, on the outskirts of Paris.

These events had a devastating effect on Gorky. The Capri school had offered him the perfect outlet for his socialist and revolutionary causes. He was practically bringing the socialist future closer. But now he was obliged to accept the failure of a venture in which he had invested so much of his personal faith and energy. Dismayed by this setback and appalled by Lenin’s ruthless tactics, Gorky let his relationship with Lunacharskii and Bogdanov disintegrate as well, as it failed to survive the pressure of the Capri school fiasco. Gorky complained to Elena

321 Maxim Gor’kii, “Pis’mo Malinovskoi,” PSSP, vol. 6, p. 70.
Malinovskaya that he was unwilling to play politics and was tired of “various people” who were distracting him from his work with their “trivialities.”

Although Gorky’s efforts to educate the future proletariat proved fruitless, as Michael David-Fox suggests, the Capri school had a long-lasting effect on the education of communist cadres in the Soviet Union. “A degree of cross-fertilization occurred, that distinctively Vperedist innovations passed into and informed Bolshevik traditions even as party education and cultural agendas remained at a nascent stage,” he notes, “party education, since it in many ways transcended factional lines, was flexible enough to accommodate both ambitions for cultural revolution and the pressing political tasks of providing a crash program for loyal cadres.”

Gorky also learned a lesson. While he never forsook ‘god-building’ as a personal philosophy of revolution, he later dropped the term from his vocabulary to avoid further confrontations with the Bolshevik center. In a letter from January 1913, Gorky acknowledged Lenin’s leadership and rightful position as the arbiter of Party ideology and disassociated himself from the “half-mystical” Forward group.

By the end of his first sojourn in Italy, Gorky also became disturbed by the evidence that the revolutionary movement in Russia was all but a spent force as the country entered a new period of economic growth. Russia became Gorky’s central preoccupation in 1913 when he was writing his article “About Karamazovshchina.” Gorky communicated this concern in terms of the differences between West and East, activity and passivity, and the issue began to occupy him even more when he returned to his native land at the end of 1913.

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322 Maxim Gor’kii, “To Elena Malinovskaya, November 1910” PSSP (Moscow: Nauka, 1998), vol. 9, p. 238.
323 David-Fox, Revolution of the Mind, p. 29.
324 Maxim Gor’kii, “Gor’kii to Lenin, January 12, 1913” in Perepiska Gor’kogo v dvukh tomakh (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1986) vol. 2, p. 35.
“About Karamazovshchina”

Gorky’s own pursuit of knowledge, his extraordinary and rapid rise in the literary and theatrical fields made him realize that if one chooses an active way of life and works hard enough, the most amazing dreams and goals materialize. Therefore, it is no wonder that Gorky, as a self-educated writer who could work fourteen to sixteen hours a day, took his public role seriously and thought that his most important task was to make Russians recognize their full potential. On the eve of the Great War, Gorky was concerned not only about alcohol consumption in Russia, but also about the willingness and desire of Russians to work towards freeing themselves of mysticism and their slave’s mentality. Gorky’s two articles “About Karamazovshchina,” written and sent to Russia from Capri in September/October of 1913, speak volumes about these concerns and demonstrate his views on Russian culture, Russian men, and the role of the writer as someone responsible for society’s psychological health. The Russian intelligentsia’s reaction to this article was no less fascinating than its contents because it illustrated the new dynamics of public debate in Russia and predicted already Gorky’s future role in political and social life. It also shows how different political parties began using Gorky’s public stance to their own advantage.

The idea for the first article came to Gorky as he learned that Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, the director of the Moscow Art Theatre, was staging a play based on Fedor Dostoevsky’s Devils. For Gorky, who deeply disliked Dostoevsky’s thought and opposed his “perverted feelings,” this was unacceptable. Gorky thought that Dostoevsky understood well and described with great pleasure “two diseases formed in a Russian man by [Russia’s] ugly history.

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325 A. A. Smirnov recollected that Gor’kii worked all day in the editorial office and wrote during the night. He usually slept two to three hours a day. See A. A. Smirnov, “Maksim Gor’kii v Samare” in Sovremenniki o Gor’kom ed. S.I. Sukhikh (Volgograd: Volgo-viatskoe Izdatel’stvo, 1988), pp. 130-131.
and its arduous and grueling life: sadistic violence of an all-around disappointed nihilist and its opposite—masochism of an oppressed, fearful man who is capable of enjoying his sufferings, not without fiendish pleasure, showing them off in front of everybody and himself.” He held Dostoevsky responsible for creating distorted Russian souls and exclusively negative characters without admitting that Russians were also capable of kindness and goodness. Ironically, it will be hard to count many positive protagonists in Gorky’s own works, although one might argue that even in his novels *Childhood* and *Into the People* where he describes a violent and dull life, there is still a hymn to the beauty of living. No matter how hard or violent life is, Gorky’s characters proclaim that the desire to live and be alive is priceless and great. Alas, Gorky did not find this kind of “spiritual health,” vigor, or belief in the “creative strength of the mind and will” in Dostoevsky. Therefore, he strongly felt that in 1913 a theatrical expression of characters such as Karamazov, Rogozhin, Myshkin, and Stavrogin might have reinforced the growing social pessimism in Russia.

The actors and theater managers reacted quickly to Gorky’s protest by holding a meeting and later publishing a collective letter, in which they expressed regret that Gorky could see in Dostoevsky nothing but sadism, hysteria, and epilepsy. The literary critics, public figures, and intelligentsia joined the debate, publishing articles with sensational titles such as “Scandal around *The Devils*,” “Gorky against Dostoevsky,” “Gorky accuses Dostoevsky.” But some critics could not help introducing political tones into their appraisals, which shows that even before the revolution the Russian intelligentsia viewed Gorky as a propagandist of the Social-Democratic Party. Mikhail Artsybashev wrote that Gorky was protesting against Dostoevsky because “as a

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326 Maxim Gor‘kii “O karamazovshchine,” Rso, no. 219 (September 22, 1913), p. 3.
327 See Maxim Gor‘kii’s *Childhood, Into the People, Foma Gordeev, My Universities*, and even *Mother in PSS* (Moscow: Nauka, 1976), vols. 15, 4, 16, 8.
328 Maxim Gor‘kii “O karamazovshchine,” Rso, no. 219 (September 22, 1913): 3.
social-democrat,” he was only concerned about “his healthy nerves and a full stomach.”

Feyodor Sologub suggested that Gorky began to play the role of a policeman, who, if he had a chance, would have burnt Dostoevsky at the stake. Calling Gorky’s article an “impertinent attack against the titan of Russian thought,” the editorial of Birzhevye vedomosti drew attention to the political character of Gorky’s position—essentially suggesting that he supported the Social-Democratic Party line. Thus, Aleksandr Kuprin noted in his essay: “Gorky interfered in the Moscow Art Theater production of The Devils because he belonged to the social-democratic party for a long time.”

And Ieronim Yasinsky, a Russian poet, literary critic, and novelist, went as far as to note that Gorky was writing from fear of becoming excluded from the Social-Democratic Party.

Gorky could not remain silent and responded to these attacks with a second article in which he elaborated that he was not against Dostoevsky but against staging the Dostoevsky novels. “I am convinced that reading Dostoevsky’s books and seeing his characters on the stage created by the talented actors of the Moscow State Theater are two different things. In Dostoevsky’s books, an attentive reader will understand the clearly reactionary tendencies.”

Gorky became concerned that the actors would depict all too vividly the Russian proclivity for violence and masochism, while the audience would fail to question this depiction.

In the last section of the article, Gorky divided literature into the “useful” and “harmful” types, concluding that Russia needs “a sermon about vigor; it needs spiritual health and deeds instead of self-contemplation; it needs to return to the source of its energy—democracy, people,

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329 M. Artsybashev, “Gor’kii protiv Dostoevskogo,” Utro Rossii, no. 221, (September 26, 1913).
330 A. Kuprin, “O vypade g. Gor’kogo protiv Dostoevskogo,” Birzhevye vedomosti, no. 13792, no. 13793 (October 8, 9 1913): 2-5.
331 Maxim Gor’kii “Eshche o karamazovshchine,” Rso, no. 248 (October 27, 1913): 3.
public, and science.”\footnote{Maxim Gor’kii, “Eshche o karamazovshchine,” \textit{Rso}, no. 248 (October 27, 1913): 3.} While some critics thought that this was simply opinion, some considered it to be censorship. Undoubtedly, his critics were right that Gorky’s polemical articles hinted at censorship and when the new Soviet canon was formed in the early 1930s, “Dostoevsky’s plays” were “blackballed” per Gorky’s recommendation.\footnote{Katerina Clark, \textit{Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 288.} However, Gorky, also, saw himself, first and foremost, as a writer responsible for society’s spiritual health. He intended his own works had to serve as an example that motivated people to act, to live to their fullest potential, to resist and change the drudgery of life.

Gorky was not the only writer who entertained such beliefs. By 1913, the tradition of writers devoted to social issues reemerged in Russia and resurrected Vissarion Belinsky as their pioneer for his belief that it was natural for literature to fulfill its aesthetic and social functions simultaneously and without detriment to either. Gorky also followed in Belinsky’s footsteps, but he drew more attention to the psychological sphere: “Huge work on internal reorganization not only in a social-political but in a psychological way is ahead of us. We must revise carefully everything that we inherited from our chaotic past, and after we choose the most valuable and useful, we will throw out the harmful or take it to the archives. More than anyone else, we need spiritual health, vigor, faith in the creative powers of the mind and will.”\footnote{Maxim Gor’kii, “Eshche o karamazovshchine,” \textit{Rso}, no. 248 (October 27, 1913): 3.} These divisions into “useful” and “harmful” prompted Kornei Chukovskii, Russia’s well-known literary critic, translator, and writer, to suggest that Gorky’s philosophical ideas always acquired white or black colors and divided the world into halves.\footnote{Kornei Chukovskii, \textit{Dve dushi Maksima Gor’kogo} (Moscow: Russkii put’, 2010), p. 55.} Gorky’s polemical attitude towards Russian culture and his prescriptions on how to cure it sprang from his deep devotion to Russia and his worries.
about its historical destiny. In many ways, he “embodied the soul of the Russian people and expressed their thoughts and expectations on the eve of the revolution.” Since his childhood and youth, he strove to become a guide and educator of the oppressed, helpless, and ignorant.

His public stance, however, exposed his literary work and criticism to various interpretations and appropriations to meet the needs of others, so that literary and social debates turned political. In late Imperial Russia, the most natural public forum to debate political perspectives were newspapers and the “thick” journals. “By the mid-nineteenth century in Russia,” wrote Anton Fedyashin, “literary or ‘thick’ journals had become the main instruments through which society explored and contextualized itself.” Public figures often used literary discussions to make social and political points. As the heated discussion of Gorky’s “About Karamazovshchina” shows, the Bolshevik Party’s local leaders did not shy away from using Gorky’s dispute with the Russian creative intelligentsia as a pretext to publish their own propaganda material. A. Vitimskii, for example, described this dispute as a collision of the proletarian world (against reactionaries, anti-Semitism, and the ignobility of the human soul) and “another” world that was ready to embrace reactionaries and anti-Semitism, “ready to sell its nobility of soul to anyone who wishes to become a buyer.” His main piece of advice was simple: workers should learn from this dispute that “ignoble longings hide behind the fluffy phrases about the sanctity and purity of art.” By introducing a class dimension to this debate, Vitimskii politicized what was essentially a literary dispute.

336 N. N. Primochkina, “Antinomiia vostok-zapad v mirovozzrenii i tvorchestve Gor’kogo,” Konseptsiiia mira i cheloveka v tvorchestve M. Gor’kogo (Moscow: IMLI Ran, 2009), p. 63.
338 A. Vitimskii, “Pokhod protiv Gor’kogo,” Za pravdu, no. 3 (October 4, 1913); “A. Vitimskii” is a pseudonym of Mikhail Stepanovich Olminskii, a literary critic, historian, and publicist. He also actively participated in the revolutionary movement.
339 A. Vitimskii, “Pokhod protiv Gor’kogo.”
In October, November, and early December, the editors of the newspaper *Za pravdu* regularly organized and published workers’ letters in defense of Gorky. One claimed: “We are joining Gorky in his protest and express the hope that the Russian theater will serve the aims of Russian society and will not introduce spiritual discord into it.” A few days later, a letter to Maxim Gorky appeared signed by a group of “your readers”: “We are adding our voice to your honest and sincere protest against staging Dostoevsky’s *Devils* at the Moscow Art Theater…. We believe that everyone… will agree with you.” Student-workers who took Ligovskie evening classes criticized Gorky’s opponents: “It is a disgrace to preach obscurantism and serve reactionaries under the disguise of serving art.”

The premier of the play *Nikolai Stavrogin* enjoyed a modest success. According to Konstantin Stanislavsky, the actors performed well, but the play was not meant for a mass audience and did not enjoy huge success. Stanislavsky admitted that clever people talked about the impossibility of staging a novel, so Gorky was not alone in his assessment. The dispute, however, demonstrated that even before the revolution, the Russian intelligentsia saw in Gorky’s literary criticism a social-democratic stance. No wonder then that when Gorky met Russian teachers vacationing on Capri in 1913, one of them inquired whether he had cured himself of “socialism’s disease.” Gorky’s public prominence led to a struggle to claim him as a supporter before it became clear which socio-political camp he embraced.

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340 “Po povodu karamazovshchiny,” *Za pravdu*, no. 4 (7 October, 1913)
341 “Pismo Maksimu Gor’komu,” *Za pravdu*, no. 36 (November 15, 1913).
342 “Otkrytoe pismo M. Gor’komu,” *Za pravdu*, no. 23 (October 30, 1913).
Lenin and Gorky’s God

Even though Lenin called criticism of Gorky “howling for Dostoevsky,” he was also outraged by Gorky’s two polemical articles, which created a further gap between them. Lenin criticized Gorky’s fascination with god-building. “And so, it seems you are against ‘god-seeking’ only ‘for a while’!! It seems that you are against god-seeking only to replace it with god-building!! Is it not terrible … God-seeking differs from god-building, or god-creating, or god-constructionism, not any more than a yellow devil differs from a blue one… Any religious ideology, any idea of godkin, is an inexpressibly loathsome thing.”

Although in his response Gorky explained that he did not “understand” how the words “for a while” had “slipped in,” he did not give up his ideas of God and ‘god-building.’ For Gorky, God was “a complex of ideas formed by the tribe, the nation, humanity, which awake and organize social feelings, and aim to link the individual to society, and to bridle zoological individualism.” Gorky, unlike Lenin, failed to become a materialist. He did not believe in the existence of God but growing up in a religious family and being a keen observer of Russian society, he insisted that religious beliefs are inherent and therefore necessary. In a letter to Leonid Andreev, he noted: “There is no God, Leonid; there is a dream about Him; there is an external, unsatisfied striving in one way or another to explain life to oneself. God is a convenient explanation of all that happens around, and that is all.” Already in 1900, in his correspondence with Tolstoy, Gorky wrote that even “a great book is only a dead, dark shadow of a word and a hint at the real truth, but man is a container of a living God. I understand God as an untamable

345 V. I. Lenin, Polnoe sobranie sochinenii (Moscow: Politizdat, 1960), vol. 48, pp. 226-229. God-seeking was part of the Silver Age idealist movement that Gor’kii rejected. Unlike God – seekers Gor’kii defined religious feeling as an awareness of a harmonious link that joins man to the universe and as an aspiration for synthesis, inherent in every individual.
346 Maxim Gor’kii, “V. I. Lenino,” PSSP (Moscow: Nauka, 2007) vol. 11, p. 94.
striving for self-perfection, real truth, and justice. That is why a bad person is better than a good book.”

This generous vision left man the opportunity to improve himself. It implied that a book, no matter how well written, could never compare to real life. The statement also indicated that Gorky “believed” in a better life. His closest friends and colleagues observed this tendency in him of “believing” as an atheist. Andreev famously remarked: “You speak like an atheist but think like a believer.”

In the early 1900s, in his letters to Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, Vladimir Posse, and Leonid Andreev, Gorky emphasized both people’s inherent need for God and their propensity to create him in their image. “Only a man exists, the rest is just an opinion,” noted Gorky. “You say that “a conscious being is nature’s misunderstanding. Let it be, but it still exists, then it is a real fact and since only a conscious being thinks, it freely creates life as it wishes. Man created God resembling himself. Life creates as it wishes.” In a letter to Andreev, he wrote: “We will create for ourselves a God, a great one, a wonderful and joyful one.” This thinking echoes Feuerbach’s philosophy that differed from Marxism and Leninism in its emphasis on people’s innate need in religious beliefs. At the same time, Gorky rejected any organized religion or religious societies, for he strongly believed that only scoundrels who could not survive without religion ran these groups. “Gorky accepted the idea of the necessity of religious experience,” writes Tovah Yedlin, “but he sought it outside organized religion and later went to the extent of trying to create his own.” Even though Gorky was the first to coin the term god-building, it was Lunacharskii who became the prophet of this new religion. In his philosophical work,

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353 Tovah Yedlin, Maxim Gor’kii: A Political Biography (Westport: Praeger, 1999), p. 28.
Religion and Socialism, he presented socialism as the fifth religion. Inspired by Feuerbach, he argued that Marxism was too mechanically deterministic and that it alone would not inspire the masses. Lunacharskii understood the term religion to mean a link either between human beings as individuals, or between human beings and nations in their respective pasts and futures. Gorky expressed similar views in April of 1907 when he filled out a questionnaire sent by the French journal Mercure de France. He wrote that he was opposed to the existing religions of Moses, Christ, and Mohammed, and defined religious feeling as an awareness of a harmonious link that joins man to the universe and as an aspiration for synthesis inherent in every individual.

Essentially, Gorky espoused these views in his novel Confession published in 1908 wherein the people became both the “god” and “god-builders.” It also argued that the established church distorted religious faith whose deep roots were in the people. The god-builder was the people that collectively possessed mystical power. Both Gorky and Lunacharskii championed the view that the new religion would worship the collective socialist ideal in its deification of humanity.

Gorky’s critics were harsh. Non-Marxist writers claimed that “god-building” proved Gorky’s fundamental and perverted religiosity. Moskovskii ezhenedelnik noted: “He had pinned on himself the label of social democracy and of a practical revolutionary and felt himself for a while to be a party worker. But a label can be pasted only to the skin and not the soul.” After reading Gorky’s Confession, Georgii Plekhanov, the founder of Russia’s social-democratic movement, sharply criticized him for his limited knowledge of socialist theory and for promoting religious socialism. Plekhanov questioned Gorky’s assumption that religion or “God” was the link connecting different representatives of the proletariat. “That a conscious proletariat carrying

out its historical mission will demonstrate its ‘general mood and will’ numerous times is clear without any further explanations. But it in no way follows that its ‘general mood’ and its ‘general will’ will have a religious character.”

Plekhanov ended his article with a verdict that Gorky, who “affected Russian readers’ hearts with such power,” did not understand well the historical conditions under which modern Russian progressive men were capable of heroic acts. “In a theoretical respect Gorky is far behind his time, or better to say, he has not yet caught up with it.”

Lenin was also outraged by the new religion, but he attacked Anatoly Lunacharskii and Alexander Bogdanov, whom he held responsible for influencing Gorky. Plekhanov, however, pointed out that Gorky’s soul and mind had made this “impact” possible, implying that Gorky made his choice freely. Lenin was careful not to mention Gorky’s name because he needed Gorky’s money, connections, and literary contributions for the newspaper Proletariat. However, after Lenin read Gorky’s Confession, the two had a falling out and stopped their correspondence for a year.

Russia and the Great War

After Gorky’s return from Italy, nothing seemed the same in Russia, even the change in seasons. That Russian spring was sad, powerless, and thin was not news to him, but he felt it more keenly now. It was his “darling,” melancholy, Russian spring. “I have not seen for such a long time how birches’ buds come out…, how larks sing and also other melodies as well as Russian springs’ sighs—elusive melodies—but they awaken in my soul something forgotten long ago. The North is sad, after all!”

But if Gorky used lyrical epithets in his descriptions of

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357 Maxim Gor’kii, “M. A. Peshkovu, 3 or 4 (16 or 17) May, 1914, Mustamiaki,” PSSP, vol. 11, p. 95.
the Russian seasons, he did not have tender words for his portrayals of “how things” are in Russia. “It is hard to live in Russia, my dear son, very hard!” he confessed to Maksim. “Everything is a bit wild, unusual/unwonted; I forgot a lot and now, to my sadness, I am surprised; everything is too cruel, too absurd. My acquaintances have changed unrecognizably, all have become abnormally haughty (самолюбивы), taking offence because of trifles, all have become very old, are not interested in anything, and want nothing.”

Northern Russia juxtaposed to southern Italy in Gorky’s imagination turned out be the loser (or simply lost). Happy and tireless Italian peasants, workers, and fishermen who showered Gorky with their smiles seemed even more attractive, while his Russian friends and acquaintances bored and disappointed him. “I lead a lonely life although many different people come to see me supposedly due to business, but in essence to gossip…. This is highly joyless. Everything is done very slowly, as if in a sleep, quite clumsily. Sometimes I feel so wretched. It is simply awful! I work hard, wrote the second part of *Childhood.*”

Russian passivity and slow motion frustrated Gorky. He was ecstatic to learn that Maksim was falling in love with Italy during his vacation in Alassio. “I am so glad that you feel pulled by Italy, that you like it; this is very good, Maksim. Truly, I am being cured in the smoke of the forest fires and with such pleasure recollect Capri, Alassio, Naples, Florence—you cannot imagine this!”

On the eve of the war, on the other hand, Gorky noticed how the Russian “democratic” movement had changed during the eight years of his absence and that democracy in Russia was growing and people were becoming more conscious of real change. “You cannot imagine how interesting and serious ordinary people have become in Russia.” At the same time, Gorky

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360 Maxim Gor’kii, “M. A. Peshkovu,”*PSSP,* vol. 11, p. 114.
observed that real unity among the social democrats was only on paper. Plekhanov began publishing the newspaper *Unity* (Yedinstvo) that encouraged workers to unify. It primarily expressed the views of both those Mensheviki and Bolsheviki who championed reconciliation. Lenin disliked the newspaper and thought that Plekhanov was unsure about his ultimate aims: *Unity*, in his view, failed to address workers’ issues. Plekhanov’s creation did not impress Gorky either. He noted that “it came out only once a week and who was uniting on the day of its publication was bursting at the seams during the following six days.” Gorky did not believe in this project just as he no longer wanted to be associated exclusively with the left. The divisions among the social democrats on Capri taught him a lesson: Gorky wished to steer a more moderate line. Although he still aligned himself with the left, he was determined nevertheless to retain a certain independence from all political parties. The Capri fiasco and the discord with Lenin also caused Gorky to abstain from politics and he embraced popular enlightenment projects even more zealously than before. He became especially devoted to the enlightening and publishing projects aimed at workers and peasants. Gorky emerged from the Capri period convinced that Russia needed education and enlightenment most of all, that it was necessary to bring up national consciousness and social instinct in the Russian people and to arouse the aspiration for creative work. Nikolai Valentinov, a Russian socialist, journalist, and philosopher, who saw Gorky frequently in 1914, observed that Gorky constantly used the words “to know” and “enlighten” and emphasized that knowledge played an instrumental role in life. “Gorky’s program, around which he intended to gather groups of the intelligentsia, particularly the writers,” wrote Valentinov, was educational rather than Marxist. Growing skeptical attitudes towards the intelligentsia disturbed Gorky. “A skeptical attitude and criticism developed greatly

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in relation to the ‘intelligentsia,’” he observed, “this promises a good deal of bad things in the future.” Perhaps witnessing these trends made Gorky even more determined to work with the intelligentsia and to cooperate closely with the publisher Ivan Sytin. As a result, in 1914 they published together the first volume of stories by Russian proletarian writers in 1914. These collected volumes became Gorky’s preferred literary format because he valued the cooperative work of colleagues. Only in 1914 Gorky was working on the Capri, Siberian, Jewish, Armenian, Georgian, Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Finnish collections.

Lenin, on the other hand, hoped that Gorky upon his return from Italy would once again serve as the Party’s loyal aide in the battle with the tsarist government. But to Lenin’s chagrin, Gorky remained attached to his ‘God-building’ ideas and dedicated to his educational projects. Worse, it soon emerged that the two men had fundamentally different views on the major question of the day—Russia’s involvement in the Great War. Lenin’s position was typically uncompromising. Condemning the European conflict as a manifestation of bourgeois imperialism, he argued that the best thing would be for Russia to lose the war, thereby hastening the onset of a socialist revolution that would quickly sweep across the entire continent. No wonder then that Lenin was infuriated when he discovered that Gorky had put his signature to a ‘patriotic’ open letter together with such dubious personalities as Petr Struve, the leader of the liberal Kadet Party. Even though the writer soon dissociated himself from those who supported the war effort, his position was still a long way from the militant defeatism that Lenin and his followers championed.

The rise of nationalism and patriotism during the war greatly aggravated Gorky. It was more evident in Moscow than anywhere else because the city represented the center of the

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national-liberal ideology that would set forward another reactionary period. He noticed that there were conversations about the spiritual merger of “Great Russia” with “Sacred Russia,” about the mystical beginnings of nationalism, Third Rome Messianism, and about Russia as the carrier of true culture that was saving Europe from the chains of false civilization. In September 1914, Ekaterina Peshkova inquired in her letter about the riots in Russia that many foreign newspapers described. Gorky answered that it was total nonsense. Life in Russia was calm since the war absorbed everyone—life changed little on the outside and altered drastically inside since everyone embraced loyalty. Gorky resented these trends and disagreed vehemently with the persecution and tormenting of Germans in the press. Historians noted how the authorities erected mental blockades against the culture of the enemy. “The renaming of Petrograd and of city streets and the anti-German riots reflected and fueled hatred or fear of enemy influence,” summed up Richard Stites, “Even music by German composers long dead—Mozart, Beethoven—was prohibited in certain concert halls. It became illegal for the German language to be spoken in public places. Dachshund dogs were sometimes killed on the streets.”

When Gorky found out that on September 20, 1914, German shellfire damaged and destroyed important parts of the Notre-Dame de Reims, he was devastated. The scaffolding around the north tower caught fire, spreading the blaze to all parts of the carpentry superstructure. The lead of the roofs melted and poured through the stone gargoyles, destroying in turn the bishop's palace. Gorky’s belief in a “planetary culture” based on the “high and bright idea of people’s brotherhood,” which he believed was taking possession of European minds and was a harbinger of better things to come, was crushed. Gorky dreamed about creating a World

government that would unite the cultural forces of the planet. He was furious that the war was ruthlessly destroying Europe’s cultural achievements along with European values, people, and life. How could sophisticated, cultured Europeans not only allow, but instigate such horror? A great admirer of Gibbon, Gorky wrote:

Literature, art, everything that is eternal and great, which adorned and ennobled life, suddenly has been crossed out of it, turned out to be useless, is being destroyed. It never happened before. Napoleon stole but did not demolish. Alaric was so astounded by Rome’s beauty that he did not extinguish it. Gibbon refuted the lie that Khaliph Omar destroyed the Alexandria Library. Tamerlane did not touch the mosques of Samarkand. Conversely, he erected new ones and repaired the old ones.

I am sick at heart. While working, I am thinking: what for? For the next one hundred years, this war will envelope the world with the armor of iron malice and hatred of everybody towards everybody. It will give rise to craving for revenge among the defeated and produce victors’ disdain; it even now inspires thoughts about the necessity of extinguishing an entire nation. The feeling of hatred towards the Germans is growing and the most terrible thing is that it is fair. ‘Comrades,’ social democrats, from Berlin are boasting that one third of the German army consists of social democrats, that there are entire battalions of comrades. Comrades from Paris, Rome, London, and Brussels know about this. Comrade Jean will mutilate comrade Hans—how will they meet afterwards? How will they be able to talk about the internationalism of the interests of democracy? International socialism is dead. We are entering an epoch of National Socialism. Property has defeated the idea. All of this is so significant, so terrifying that it is hard to find words to express even a hundredth part of the heavy feelings that are best expressed in the words—world catastrophe, collapse of European culture.

One might reasonably suggest that by 1916 Gorky was deeply disappointed in European values that he had idealized his entire life. Still on Capri, Gorky showed some interest in the International League organized by Sinclair, Demel, and Ostvald. This organization was supposed to unite all nations and classes in the name of peace and social justice. It was then that Gorky tried to establish connections with foreign writers. The war destroyed his aspirations to create a planetary cultural network based on common European values. “Only three years ago

368 Maxim Gor’kii, “M. F. Andreevoi 9 (22) September 1914, Mustamiaki,” PSSP, vol. 11, p. 126.
people seriously discussed possible planetary culture, the necessity to organize world reason, so that there was confidence in the endurance of principles, ideas, international solidarity of the best representatives of humanity,” he wrote “And now! Scientists are growing savage just like simple cannon-fodder. Historical monuments get destroyed senselessly and shamelessly.”369 Later in this heart-wrenching letter to Ekaterina Peshkova, Gorky adds: “Such awful melancholy envelopes me sometimes that I simply do not know what to do with myself.”370 Beginning with the idea of creating a new world and ending with plans for a planetary cultural network, Gorky always contemplated and imagined the world in its wholistic richness. He was an ambitious thinker and dreamer who pursued large-scale plans. The Great War not only destroyed his plans about establishing a global network, but also undermined his faith in the possibility of creating his new version of Man. With his strong artistic insight, he witnessed and sensed how gradually the world was going down the path of increasing aggression, dominance, madness, and insensitivity.

At the same time, in his letters dated October 1914, he tried desperately to sketch how the war produced not only negative but positive results. Being a strong optimist, he was looking for positive trends even when nothing encouraging was apparent. Yet Gorky thought that the war had one positive aspect. It proved that a common planetary culture was impossible but in a scientifically factual way. “Only the culture of internationalism based on facts and studying can be our future. Any other ideology of culture is an ideology based on dogma and suggestion. Our path is away from speculation and metaphysics towards experiment, towards observation.”371

371 Ibid., p. 134.
At the end of January of 1915, Gorky noticed that people started to understand the emotional chaos caused by the war, for the public began to slowly criticize government policies and wished to make out what was going on. Gorky became optimistic again and began hatching plans for a newspaper to unite the democratic bloc, yet he always underscored how much people in Russia liked to sleep and how dreadfully long it took them to wake up.372

Anxious about the war, but not helpless, Gorky embarked on a new, colossal project—organizing a monthly journal *Letopis* with V. Bazarov, Nikolai Sukhanov, A. N. Tikhonov, and Iurii Steklov. He wanted to mobilize other Russian writers who lived abroad to contribute stories about other countries.373 It was particularly important because the regular flow of cultural products and people virtually stopped during the war.374 To his disappointment, the war divided the thinking public and the intelligentsia into two camps: internationalists and nationalists. While the proletariat fought, the war united the European business elite under the sign of nationalism. This development seemed natural and logical to Gorky since there was ample possibility to rob Russia as much as one wished. “The war will undoubtedly increase nationalistic moods and the ruling elites’ thoughts, but we can expect that it will decrease the national chauvinism of democracies,” he wrote. “We must do everything for nationalism’s temperature to fall to normal levels, which is requisite for a healthy democracy, and for the subject of nationalism to give way to international ideas and moods. All of this is not a task for a provincial newspaper.”375

Gorky intended the new publication to unite as many intellectuals and writers as possible to produce one “entity” that “would feed the provinces and [the whole of] Russia ideas capable to organize public consciousness to follow Western-European thought and oppose Eastern

373 Maxim Gor’kii, “M. N. Pokrovskomu okolo 20 October 1915, Petrograd,” *PSSP*, vol. 11, p. 203.
thought. The aim of the journal *Letopis* was to supersede the chaos of emotions with rational thinking that would in turn have a sobering effect on Russia. This is how Gorky described the situation in Russia in 1915: “Today’s bloody events awoke and are awaking too many dark feelings, and it seems to me that it is time to try to put into this dismal storm a moderate beginning of the rational and critical attitude towards reality. People live with fear; because of fear, there is hatred towards each other; they are gradually becoming feral; people are losing respect towards each other, towards Western European cultural ideas; cries to turn to the East, Asia, are heard more often in Russia; from deeds to contemplation; from studying to fantasy, from science to religion and mysticism.”376 And in his letter to Adriaan Roland Holst, a Dutch poet, whom he asked to contribute to the journal, he summed up: “A group of internationalists and I plan to publish a monthly literary-political journal with the goal to fighting for the interests of international, planetary culture against nationalism, chauvinism, imperialism, and against the current trend of becoming feral.”377 Gorky realized the full difficulty of his position—“there are few of us and we live under political and moral oppression unfamiliar to citizens of Western Europe, but we know that we will find friends and coworkers who will believe us and join us.”378

In his attempt to solicit articles from European intellectuals, Gorky reached out to Bernard Shaw, whom he considered above the chaos of passions stirred by war, which, Gorky maintained, was exterminating millions of the most active and creative people of the planet.379

It was extremely cold in Petrograd as the supplies of wood were coming to an end, so that people had nothing to fire their stoves. The war was changing everyone around Gorky. The Russian intelligentsia was gradually losing interest in literature and culture. “We are fighting in

this war and getting feral little by little…”\textsuperscript{380} The daily concerns and horrors of war took control of their lives. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries that had produced numerous works of art and scientific achievements also gave rise to imperialist policies that were destroying Gorky’s reverent belief in culture. “The twentieth century, my darling. Culture, my friend!” He was shocked at how quickly the war altered people and at how many underage cold and hungry prostitutes peppered the streets. He talked to some of them, gave them money, and then from them in tears. “Oh, the devil take it, how difficult life has become! And clever people are still saying stupid things and it seems that they will not stop soon!”\textsuperscript{381}

During the war, patriotic feelings found various expressions in Russia’s variegated society. As Hubertus Jahn observed: “The visual and performing arts and the cinema created a variety of patriotic ‘image worlds’ and expressed them with all the richness characteristic of a rapidly transforming culture.”\textsuperscript{382} Russian patriotism frustrated Gorky although he had no means to know due to the disruption of cultural exchange and access to foreign newspapers that Europeans went through a similar spike in patriotism and nationalism.\textsuperscript{383} “The patriotism that you are writing about is alien and hostile to me,” wrote Gorky.\textsuperscript{384} “We are sitting in dirt, blood, lies up to our ears and are still boasting that we are a strong nation. We are boasting while we are getting beaten.”\textsuperscript{385} D. N. Semenovskii, a journalist and satirist, who visited Gorky in August-September 1915 in Mustamiaki, recollected that Gorky talked constantly about the achievements of modern technology and about what powerful means a mind was capable of creating for

\textsuperscript{381} Maxim Gor’kii, “E. P. Peshkovoii 30 November 1915, Petrograd,” PSSP, vol. 11, p.223.
\textsuperscript{382} Hubertus F. Jahn, Patriotic Culture in Russia during World War I (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 171.
\textsuperscript{383} For more on this see David Welch, Germany, Propaganda and Total War, 1914-1918: The Sins of Omission (London: the Athlone Press) and David Monger, Patriotism and Propaganda in First World War Britain (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012).
slaughtering people. He believed that imperialist power in the hands of brigands had directed the creative energy of the mind towards the destruction of life. “Oh, how tired I am of this accursed carnage, how it troubles and angers me and the further, the more so.”

Moved by a humanistic concern for what was happening to Russia and the Russians as a result of the war, Gorky was perturbed by such things as the rise of anti-Semitism. First, he founded The Russian Society for Studying the Life of Jews (“Русское общество для изучения жизни евреев”) as a result of the news promulgated by the Tsarist government that an overwhelming number of Jews were spying along the front lines. Mass arrests and military executions of Jews followed. Several attorneys from St. Petersburg set off for Poland and the Baltics in order to gather materials that would refute the charges. They intended to declare from the Duma’s podium that these anti-Semitic rumors were false. Gorky, who was the first to publish a collection of Jewish writers, could not help responding to this provocation. Together with Fedor Sologub, Leonid Andreev, and several other intellectuals, he initiated another organization—The Society to Fight Anti-Semitism—and worked on creating a special questionnaire of which three versions were created, but Gorky’s draft was too harsh and would have hardly avoided war-time censorship. Gorky often reacted in an overly emotional way to counter injustice. That is why everyone went with Sologub’s version. The appeal to the Russian citizens began with a deep appreciation of the Jews’ participation in the cultural life of Russian society. The authors reminded their audience that during the Great War, Jews were fighting shoulder to shoulder with the Russians. Sologub, Gorky, and Andreev felt ashamed that this

386 Quoted in commentary to the letter “Ekaterine Peskhovoi,” PSSP, vol. 11, p.431.
388 For more on spying during World War I and rise of anti-Semitism in Russia in 1914-1916 see William C. Fuller, The Foe Within: Fantasies of Treason and the End of Imperial Russia (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).
389 Maxim Gor’kii, “Commentary to his letter to L. Andreev #225,” PSSP, vol. 11, pp. 393-394
“zoological hatred towards the Jews does not stop, conversely,… that the nightmare of the World carnage, arousing animal-like feelings, was clearly conducive to the development of anti-Semitism in the Russian people.”

It is unclear what effect this questionnaire had on the Russian audience, but it shows that Gorky always promoted tolerance even during the hard days of the War. Answering the Swedish Svenska Dagbladet questionnaire, Gorky wrote that the war would negatively affect the cultural development of humanity and appealed to the cultural unification of the European people.

Conclusion

Maksim Gorky admired Italy and European culture. His experience during the revolution of 1905 and the consequent experiment with the Capri school and ‘God-building’ convinced him that the only way to make a change in society was through education. He confessed that he lacked the education for serious revolutionary work. It is an undeniable fact that most of Gorky’s projects launched in the late 1890s had an enlightening nature and value. But he failed to develop a systematic approach to his ideas for social change, although he understood that reforms were necessary. After 1905 he did not believe that reforms would be possible from the top. The failure of the revolution in 1905 and his disillusionment with the intelligentsia made him idealize the proletariat. Without deep understanding of the ramifications of his actions, Gorky had called on workers and peasants take arms in 1905, but by 1914 he reevaluated his position and embraced education and publishing, devoting much time to cultural projects that contributed to raising new awareness of life which prepared the public for the appearance of a New Man who was confident in his present and future.

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390 Maxim Gor’kii, “Commentary to his letter to L. Andreev #225,” PSSP, vol. 11, p. 394.
Three tensions are noticeable in Gorky’s evolving stance. Although he did not break with the Social Democratic party, he chose a moderate party line in order to avoid conflict. He spoke out for spiritual health, but at the same time exhibited authoritarianism in his treatment of Dostoevsky’s play or his fellow writers. Third, Gorky always vacillated between educational and radical means to bring about a social change. One thing was consistent—his belief in recasting a Man to build an ideal society.
Chapter 3

Timely Thoughts on an Untimely Revolution

“And I especially suspect and distrust a Russian man in power—a recent slave, he turns into an unruly despot as soon as he gets an opportunity to become a master of one’s neighbor.”

M. Gorky392

“This Party Has Only One Member—Myself”

M. Gorky393

“I live within emotional contradiction with myself and I do not see any other way out except my cultural work.”

M. Gorky394

Unfortunately, violence is in itself delightful to most really vigorous revolutionaries, and they feel no interest in the problem of avoiding it as far as possible. Hatred of enemies is easier and more intense than love of friends. But from men who are more anxious to injure opponents than to benefit the world at large no great good is to be expected.

Bertrand Russell395

When Gorky arrived at St. Petersburg’s Warsaw Station on the very last day of 1913, he could not foresee that the next eight years would test his humanity and humanism, his sensitivity and strength, his sense of responsibility and self-respect. But revolutions are like earthquakes and fires that cast doubt on the human ability to remain human. Once the October Revolution endangered Russian culture and the Russian intelligentsia, Gorky realized the extent of his contribution to bringing the Bolsheviks to power. Ironically, Gorky was one of the most vocal critics of the Bolshevik regime, confronting it openly in his newspaper, Novaia Zhizn’—the

393 Maxim Gor’kii, “To E. Peshkovoi,” PSSP, vol. 13, p. 49.
articles were later published as *Untimely Thoughts*. When the Bolsheviks closed Gorky’s last platform for open criticism, he made a pact with them.

He explained why to Bertrand Russell who came to Soviet Russia to learn more about the Bolshevik experiment and to “testify to the solidarity of British Labour with Russian Communism.” Russell quickly understood that the Bolsheviks used him for “propaganda purposes,” and managed to meet with both ordinary people and political leaders. Later he published a scathing and perspicacious critique of the Bolshevik regime entitled *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* in which he described in detail his meetings with Lenin, Trotsky, and Gorky, whom the February and October revolutions brought onto the world stage of politics. The only meeting of the three that made a lasting and positive impression on Russell was his visit with Gorky.

Unlike the other members of the distinguished British delegation, Russell lost all enthusiasm for the revolution after the trip. He quickly understood that after the Great War the Bolsheviks “created hope” for people devoid of hope both in Europe and Russia. But although hopes which inspired Communism were, in the main, as admirable as those “instilled by the Sermon on the Mount,” they were held fanatically and “as likely to do much harm.” After his meetings with the Bolshevik leaders and time in Soviet Russia, Russell noted that “cruelty lurks in our instincts, and fanaticism is a camouflage for cruelty. Fanatics are seldom genuinely humane, and those who sincerely dread cruelty will be slow to adopt a fanatical creed.” He saw the seeds of fanaticism and cruelty in Lenin’s eyes when they met for the first time. Although Lenin came across as someone void of any feelings of self-importance, Russell

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observed that Lenin was “dictatorial, calm, incapable of fear, extraordinarily devoid of self-seeking, an embodied theory.” Russell pointed out that the “materialist conception of history” was “his life-blood.” All in all, Lenin resembled “a professor in his desire to have the theory understood and in his fury with those who misunderstand or disagree, as also in his love of expounding.” Russell got the impression that Lenin despised “a great many people” and was “an intellectual aristocrat.” However, the Bolshevik leader failed to impress the British philosopher with his knowledge of the capitalist world.

Trotsky made a more positive impression on Russell “from the point of view of intelligence and personality, though not of character.” He seemed to possess “lightning intelligence and magnetic personality,” and “gay good humor.” In Russell’s view, Trotsky was “very good-looking, with admirable wavy hair” and he even felt that this dashing Bolshevik leader “would be irresistible to women.” In other words, Trotsky’s play-acting caught Russell’s eye: “I thought … that his vanity was even greater than his love of power--the sort of vanity that one associates with an artist or actor. The comparison with Napoleon was forced upon one.”

While Trotsky as well as Lenin lost his opportunity to impress the British intellectual, Gorky made the most amazing impression on him: “An extraordinary contrast to both these men was Gorky, with whom I had a brief interview in Petrograd. He was in bed, apparently very ill and obviously heart-broken.” Gorky begged Russell to always emphasize Russia’s sufferings and misfortunes in his future writings. He confessed to Russell that he supported the Bolshevik government not because he thought it was faultless, but because the alternatives were even worse. Russell thought that if he were in Gorky’s place, he probably would do the same. “One

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400 Russell, The Practice, p. 25.
402 Russell, The Practice, p. 27.
felt in him a love of the Russian people which makes their present martyrdom almost unbearable and prevents the fanatical faith by which the pure Marxians are upheld. I felt him the most lovable, and to me the most sympathetic, of all the Russians I saw. All the intellectuals whom I met--a class who have suffered terribly--expressed their gratitude to him for what he has done on their behalf.”

Russell observed that the Bolsheviks preserved precious Imperial art and book collections because of Gorky’s colossal efforts and convictions. Due to a lack of funds, however, the Bolsheviks did not spend much money on creating art during these revolutionary times. More importantly, he wondered if the regulatory atmosphere was one in which art could flourish since art is anarchic and resistant to organization. He concluded that Gorky had done all that one could do to preserve the intellectual and artistic life of Russia. “I feared,” he wrote, “that he was dying, and that, perhaps, it was dying too. But he recovered, and I hope it will recover also.”

This testimony is important for several reasons. Russell, who from the outset saw the dangers of the Bolshevik regime, had no reasons to embellish his account of Gorky, while Gorky should have been more careful in talking to him if he was too concerned about playing into the Bolsheviks’ hands. Yet, he was not. He openly said that the Bolshevik government was not faultless, but he also understood how important Russell’s view would be abroad and implored him to explain the Russian experiment by mollifying it with a mention of Russia’s continuous sufferings. Russell realized then that Gorky played an instrumental role in saving Russia’s intellectual wealth, but he also recognized that Gorky was working with the Bolshevik government because he thought that he had no other choice. Russell, a profound sceptic, empathized with Gorky’s position and thought that he would have acted similarly if he were in similar historical circumstances. One might reasonably suggest that for Gorky, the choice of

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emigrating or staying aloof or rejecting the Bolsheviks was equal to abandoning one’s child who turned out badly because of the parents’ mistakes. He felt complete responsibility for bringing the Bolsheviks to power. The product of his relationship with the Bolsheviks was Lenin’s Russia, so he saved Russian cultural and intellectual wealth but sacrificed himself in the process. In this chapter, I argue that Gorky made a conscious decision to cooperate with the Bolsheviks because he thought that only they could prevent Russia from falling into complete anarchy and “civilize” the Russian muzhik. More importantly, he worked with them to preserve the cultural legacy of Russia. I will differentiate between Gorky’s approval of violence against the muzhik and his disapproval of violence against the intellectual. But neither in 1918, nor in 1928, did the state find that distinction useful.

Gorky’s Moderation before the Revolution

Once Gorky returned to Russia, he relished the opportunity to participate in Russia’s cultural life directly. In the 1900s, after his exile to Arzamas, he attended two or three performances or exhibitions a day in both St. Petersburg or Moscow, and he experienced the same hunger for Russian culture and intellectual life in 1915-1916. His apartment on Kronverskii Prospekt became a cultural salon for the St. Petersburg elite. Rachmaninov and Scriabin performed there, Bunin and Kuprin read their works, Chaliapin and Andreeva sang. Gorky was in the thick of Russia’s culture: “Never before have I felt so necessary to Russian life,” he wrote to Malyshev.405

Gorky also felt “needed” because every day he received numerous letters, asking him for help and advice. The Great War turned people’s lives upside down and shook their belief systems. For many in Russia and Europe it was a dark alley. People’s hopes for a bright future,
happiness, beauty, and peace got smashed by the ruthless and devastating war machine. Themes about lost love, life, death, and a doomed fate dominated not only symbolist journals, but also daily newspapers. “You are writing that horror is taking over and I am living in an awful state of expecting a catastrophe,” wrote Gorky to Konstantin Timiriazev in 1916. “The chaos of emotions overwhelms a vibrant state and it is as if reason left this life. And there is an endless number of nasty anecdotes that neither surprise nor make people laugh.”406 It seemed as if there were nothing to hold on to morally. There was no meaning or direction in life to follow. Gorky felt this loss keenly. “Never has such a great number of people turned to me for moral help with questions: how to live or what to live on?” wrote Gorky to Zinaida Vasilieva. “This is horrible. Be healthy. Hold on to life more tightly.”407 In a letter to his son—perhaps his most important reader—Gorky expressed deep sorrow and indignation that even he had to yield to circumstances and propagate tolerance and endurance: “It is hard to live with all of this, difficult, and at times even frightening. Has your mobilization started? My dear friend, I can only imagine how badly it affects you…. Never in my life have I asked anyone to endure; conversely, I have screamed and persuaded people all my life to resist and stop suffering! And now I must tell my son, a person whom I love the most and have grown to respect—to endure! If only you knew how difficult it is for me to tell you, my son, to endure!”408

The Great War pushed Gorky to refocus his attention from revolutionary work to educational activities. Devoid of a happy childhood, Gorky intended to ameliorate this experience for other children. Gorky began to think seriously about a younger generation during the Great War. He felt responsible for not providing them with a better future. This comes off in

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407 Maxim Gor’kii, “Z. V. Vasilevoi, 14 marta 1916,” PSSP, vol. 12, p. 34.
his letter to his son, but also manifests itself in his major effort to begin publishing a book series about great men. In his letter to H. G. Wells, Gorky noted that his novel about Mr. Britling was superb: “Undoubtedly, it is the best, the most daring, truthful, and humane book written in Europe during the course of this accursed war… during these days of universal violence and barbarity, your book is a great, truly humane work.”

Gorky strongly believed that children were “the most essential thing on earth,” but “Russian children, more than any others, needed to learn about the world, its great men, and their work to achieve happiness. We must cleanse kids’ hearts from the bloody rust of this horrible and mad war, we must restore in children’s hearts a faith in humanity and respect for it; we must reawaken social romanticism…”

Wells was not the only European writer Gorky approached. He asked Romain Rolland to write about Beethoven, Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen, and Columbus. H. G. Wells was supposed to write a biography of Edison, and he himself intended to put pen to paper about Giuseppe Garibaldi. He asked Wells for a recommendation of writers who could write biographies of Charles Dickens, George Gordon Byron, and Percy Bysshe Shelley.

If we analyze Gorky’s approach to publishing a series about great men, we will notice his consistent tendency to establish large-scale projects that give rise to an international network of intelligentsia. By writing about great men who contributed to World Culture and by asking representatives of national cultural elites to write about seminal artists, Gorky aimed to create a network of friends that anticipated and far exceeded the current “money-making” virtual network of Facebook in cultural value. Only in case of Facebook, a limited few derive the most benefits, while in the case of the ‘great men series,’ several generations of Russians and Europeans stood to profit.

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409 Maxim Gor’kii, ““H. G. Wells seredina dekabria 1916” PSSP, vol. 12, pp. 92-93.
held the idea of a gradual consolidation of the intelligentsia close to his heart,” L. N. Smirnova noted.  

One might reasonably suggest that behind the idea to publish books about the great men of history was an acute sense of responsibility for the next generation and the hope of continuing the imperial project from which he himself benefited greatly. The first series about the great figures of history came into existence at Florentii Pavlenkov’s publishing house in 1890 and ended in 1924. In 1933, Gorky resumed the series. He believed that adults were to blame for the Great War. “Who is to blame? We are all guilty of this crime, each and every one of us.” When Gorky was a child, Alexander Duma’s *The Three Musketeers* made a huge impression on him. Similarly, he hoped that these books would have a lasting effect on young and impressionable minds. He felt impelled to tell children “about great men’s lives, about those who loved noble deeds, and aspired to achieve their lofty goals.” While uniting the intelligentsia of the world on a project for children, Gorky was certain that people not only could be friends, but also become brothers. “I am still confident that there will be days when people live without causing each other pain and violating the laws of mutual freedom.”

Another reason for publishing a series about great men had to do with Russians’ alleged proclivity to be lazy and inactive. “Gorky’s negative judgements about the Russian people were tools of social pedagogy, but his main wish was to push Oblomov’s Russia towards decisive actions to get rid of a bad and heavy legacy.” Gorky decided to fight Russian laziness in its

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412 L. N. Smirnova, “Evrazijstvo v vospriiatii i osmyslenii Gor’kogo,” in *Konseptsiia mira i cheloveka v tvorchestve M. Gor’kogo* (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2009), p. 110.
413 Pavlenkov was one of Russia’s educators and publishers.
415 Maxim Gor’kii, “Nansenu seredina dekabria 1916,” *PSSP*, vol. 12, p. 95.
infancy and teach children to dream and work hard. “For the most part, people in Russia count on St. Nikolai… They are not doing anything themselves,” Gorky wrote in 1916. “A bit more intelligent people suppose that history, not St. Nikolai, will play a huge role in their lives. But history for them is also some kind of a miracle-worker that operates independently from the human mind and will. So, it turns out that they actually do nothing as well. All in all, it is boring although alarming. But we have gotten used to it. The main thing is to do nothing, so as not to make mistakes, for in Russia people make mistakes better and more often than anywhere else.”

Did Gorky include himself in this category of Russians who made mistakes?

One might suggest that he did. If Gorky’s editorial activities in the years up to 1917 reflect his continuing commitment to the cause of democratic and revolutionary literature, it is evident that in 1915 his conception of democracy was rather less narrow than it had been before, especially during the early part of his stay on Capri. Perhaps his experience with Znanie had taught him to be more tolerant of diversity. The fact that he was prepared to publish works by writers as different as Mayakovsky, Esenin, and the young Isaak Babel speaks for his more pluralistic frame of mind at the time and his tolerance of diversity. Of course, Gorky still could not understand modernism and had his own blind spots, especially with works of non-fiction. Chukovskii lamented the fact that Gorky could not quite see the value of Alexander Blok’s literary criticism. Blok, with his inherently sophisticated and complex manner of writing, found it impossible to produce a critical article capable of satisfying Gorky’s demand that writing be comprehensible to a broader larger audience. In all his selections, Gorky emphasized man’s ability to work hard towards his goals. The idea of self-improvement, of rising above

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418 Maxim Gor’kii, ““M. N. Pokrovskomu 25 oktiabria 1916,” PSSP, vol. 12, p. 84.
419 Kornei Chukovskii, Dnevniki, (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 2009) vol. 1, p. 53.
one’s circumstances by working long and productive hours in order to bring about positive social changes had never undergone any changes in his philosophy and works. Moreover, it was during turbulent times that Gorky wanted to remind people of their ability to think and achieve even more: “It is time we tried to inject into this dismal storm the moderating element of a rational and critical attitude towards reality,” Gorky wrote K. A. Timiriazev, “People are living in fear, and because of that fear there is hatred of one another and savagery is on the increase, while respect for man and interest in the ideas of Western European culture are in constant decline.”  

Gorky was also concerned about the rise of individualism and irrational reactions to political events. In his letter to academician Timiriazev, he wrote:

The Russian proletariat is living with desperate contradictions. For example, many of the socialist-inclined public work in co-operatives, but these co-operatives are presently developing in such a form that they promote the growth of individualism and an instinct for private property. Isn’t that so? But still, it is quite possible that spirits will rise after the war. However, it is necessary for these rising spirits to be conscious, and not spontaneous. Very little will be gained if the peasants just start burning the country estates again. The proletarian is obliged to instill his social consciousness in the peasant masses.

These thoughts are important in two respects. In 1915, Gorky was becoming concerned about the rise of individualism and a drive for private property that he considered dangerous. While he believed that man must realize his individual potential, he also thought that man should contribute to the broader society and not focus on himself completely. Gorky also differentiated between the emotional reaction contained in the word “spirit” which he called spontaneous, and a more rational evaluation of events expressed by the word “conscious.” Of course, peasants reacted spontaneously and emotionally to everything unknown and Gorky was afraid of these volatile expressions of emotions. He hoped for a more rational, moderate, prepared, educated

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420 Maxim Gor’kii, “K. A. Timiriazevu 16 oktiabria 1915,” *PSSP*, vol. 11, p. 45.
421 Ibid., p. 45.
approach to life that in his view only the proletariat could know and thereby serve as an example for peasants in Russia.

In politics, too, the indications were that Gorky wished to steer a more moderate course. Although he remained very much aligned with the left, he was determined nonetheless to retain a certain independence from all political parties. Gorky’s relationship with Lenin did not improve, as the latter hoped. Lenin valued highly not only Gorky’s ability to “see and write” as an artist, but also his organizational skills and his earlier support for the Bolshevik cause. But events took a different turn. First, Gorky still buttressed the ideas of “God-building,” and second, the two men had fundamentally different views on the major question of the day—Russia’s involvement in the Great War. The Bolshevik position was typically uncompromising: they hastened the onset of a socialist revolution in the world and therefore argued that the most beneficial thing for Russia would be to lose the war. Lenin was furious when he found out that Gorky had put his signature to a ‘patriotic’ open letter together with such suspicious leaders of the liberal Kadet Party, such as Struve. 422 Even though the writer disassociated himself from those who supported the war effort, his position was still a long way from the militant defeatism promoted by Lenin and his followers. But Gorky was indeed among the minority in Russia and the world who did not support the war. “When Russians learned they were at war with Germany,” wrote Melissa Stockdale, “an enormous surge of patriotism swept the country.” 423 And these patriotic manifestations of national unity impressed contemporaries deeply. During one of the dinner gatherings at Repin’s house, Gorky spoke extensively about the horrors of war and was attacked

422 Even John Reed in his Ten Days that Shook the World mentioned that Maxim Gor’kii along with Kerensky was considered “Right Wing” during the revolutionary days. See J. Reed, Ten Days that Shook the World (New York: Penguin, 2007), p. 38.
verbally by one of the guests and accused of unpatriotic feelings. Repin was very concerned about Gorky, but the writer said that he was used to such attacks. Moreover, Gorky received more than 200 letters with death threats and accusations of treason. The Russian population closed ranks. As Melissa Stockdale notes, “Besides uniting the population in hatred and fear of the enemy, wartime patriotic culture offered compelling positive images and narratives. Russians were people of steadfast service and sacrifice; a nation united without distinction of class, faith, ethnicity, or region; and a people of compassionate generosity.” Anti-Semitism also rose as a result of this national upsurge. Moved by the humanistic concern for what was happening to Russia and the Russians, Gorky was perturbed by such things as the rise of anti-Semitism and the suffering of children: “Anti-Semitism is being propagandized with a view to smashing the opposition on the Jewish question. This propaganda is being conducted most successfully. I am ashamed to be alive … and to meet Jews on the street…” Like his fellow socialist H. G. Wells, whose anti-war novel *Mr. Britling Sees It Through* he greatly admired, Gorky stood for the principle of pacifism. But what about Gorky’s socialism? Did he fully support it by 1917?

*Gorky’s Socialism*

One might reasonably suggest that Gorky always thought as an artist, even when he contemplated political and philosophical concepts. And Lenin and Stalin were aware of this. Despite Lenin’s frustration with Gorky’s lack of support of his version of Marxism, he knew in 1915 that the Bolsheviks needed Gorky far more than Gorky needed them. In addition, Lenin was afraid of Gorky. “Gorky as a sponsor and a great writer satisfied Lenin, but as an ideologue,

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426 Maxim Gor’kii, “S. V. Malyashev, 10 maia 1915,” *PSSP*, vol. 11, p. 32.
and a party ideologue at that, he was very dangerous because he was a true leader.”427 So their argument about true nature of socialism continued. After Lenin’s death, Gorky wrote: “In 1917-1918, my relationship with Lenin was far from what I wanted it to be, but it could not be otherwise. He was a politician. He possessed a clear vision that is necessary for anyone who is at the wheel of such a large and heavy ship that represents “heavy,” peasant Russia.”428 Full of grief in 1924, Gorky glossed over his disagreements with Lenin. At the core of the exchanges was a philosophical disagreement that dated back to their arguments in 1908-1909. Gorky never fully and openly supported the Bolsheviks as he did in 1905 or on Capri. Even in 1918 and 1919, he decided to compromise and cooperate with the Bolshevik regime because the “alternatives were worse.” As the passage shows, Gorky explained his compromise with the Bolsheviks by assigning Lenin the role of a captain who could deal with the unruly, violent, and backward peasant Russia. What was the key philosophical disagreement between Gorky and Lenin?

After the revolution of 1905, disagreements within the Bolshevik Party came down to the philosophical questions and tactics during the period of crisis. Lenin positioned himself as an Orthodox Marxist who defended the dogmas of dialectical and historical materialism. Bogdanov and his followers tried to substantiate the principles of socialism by using the philosophy of “critical experience” known as empiriocriticism. By 1908, the factionalism with the Bolsheviks had become irreconcilable. Most Bolshevik leaders either supported Bogdanov or were undecided between him and Lenin, so the latter concentrated on undermining Bogdanov’s reputation as a philosopher. In 1909, he published a scathing book of criticism entitled Materialism and Empiriocriticism assaulting Bogdanov’s position and accusing him of

427 Pavel Basinskii, Gor’kii (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2006), p. 332.
preserving religion in the form of philosophical idealism. Lenin accused Bogdanov of an attempt to substitute the objective regularities of public development with “social energy” and biological laws. He viewed even a partial renunciation of materialism as opportunism and a betrayal of the proletarian cause.

But philosophical disagreements were not the only sources of discord. Bogdanov and Lenin differed in their tactical approaches to generating social change. Lenin was against any participation in the State Duma, so any policy of compromise and appeasement were unpalatable to him. They also differed in the way they approached cultivating revolutionary conscience in the masses as well as in their treatment of the slogan “the end justifies the means.” For Bogdanov, violence was not an option. Both also fought for the leadership position in the Social-Democratic Party and the right to handle its financial affairs. Two divergent views on socialism were at war: materialist socialism based on Marxism, class struggle, and the dictatorship of the proletariat on the one hand and a second type of socialism—partly idealistic and based on collectivism at home and an international union of all workers abroad.

As the romantic creator of the myth about a free, strong, and proud man and a fair society, Gorky found Bogdanov’s view more appealing. He did not quite understand the nuances of these philosophical debates and leaned more towards Bogdanov because his own views—the search for a new faith, the creation of new socialist “beings,” the propagation of collectivism and an active lifestyle—resembled Bogdanov’s ideas. In his letters, one could always find a trace of this dream about a perfect, socialist state with active, hard-working, goal-oriented, educated men and women who work as one large team on improving life. Gorky was convinced that socialism

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would bring about the golden age of spiritual life and will give rise to total harmony between the world and the human being. In 1906 speech that he gave in New York, he talked about the great spirit of idealism that generates “a change in the world based on new ideas of equality and fairness” and called socialism a religion of the masses.\(^{430}\) In his letters to Bogdanov from 1909, Gorky suggested that Lenin wrote *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* not to discover the “real truth,” but to prove that he was “the best Marxist!” “There is an enraged publicist, not a philosopher here: he stands in front of me as a clearly defined individualist, who defends his habits of thinking… A hopeless person. Most probably, he will be even more narrow and worse in practice…”\(^{431}\)

Gorky agreed with Bogdanov that only people with a high level of culture could create socialism. His colossal work as an educator was based on his struggle to create cadres that could solve complicated problems and build a new world as soon as possible.\(^{432}\)

After the quarrel on Capri, Gorky broke off communications with both Lenin and Bogdanov and developed a distaste for squabbles and political parties in general, but it is important to remember that he did not reject the idea of socialism. With all his disappointments and disillusionment with the Bolsheviks, he would never venture away from his own understanding of socialism. In January 1910, he wrote to Amfiteatrov:

> Bolshevism is dear to me to the extent that it is the work of monists, just as socialism is dear and important precisely because it’s the only way by which a man can arrive as quickly as possible at the fullest and deepest consciousness of his *personal human worth*. I do not see any other path. All the other paths lead away from the world, this one alone leads *towards* the world. There comes a time when a man must say to himself: I am the creator of the world. Then and only

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\(^{430}\) Maxim Gor’kii, *Iz literaturnogo nasledstva: Gor’kii i evreiskii vopros* (Jerusalem: Jerusalem University, 1988), p. 115.

\(^{431}\) Maxim Gor’kii, “Gor’kii—N. B. Malinovsky I Bogdanov, nachalo iiunia st. st. 1909, Kapri” in *Neizdannaiia perepiska* (Moscow: Nasledie, 1998), p. 56.

\(^{432}\) Lidiia Spiridonova, *Nastoiaschchii Gor’kii*, p. 144.
then can the new man and the new history be born. Keep your hands off my socialism.\textsuperscript{433}

Gorky underscored that “his” understanding of socialism differed from Bogdanov’s, Lenin’s, Plekhanov’s, Trotsky’s, and, lastly, Stalin’s. This essentially humanistic rendition of socialism would later complicate Gorky’s attitude towards Bolshevik policies in 1917.

\textit{Leadership Crisis and February Revolution}

Although Gorky had disagreements with Lenin, he also realized that Russia had fewer and fewer leaders who were capable of making a radical change in the country. Leaders who could have undertaken this change were either abroad or were dying. In his letter to Korolenko, Gorky is disappointed greatly with people’s indifference to societal problems. Gorky did not notice any boiling of conscience and opinions. Where Gorky looked for passion, fervor, and fanaticism, he found gossip, anger, and an “abhorrent peeping after each other.”\textsuperscript{434} He noticed that “everyone reasoned in cold blood and indifferently about life as if it were someone else’s experience.”\textsuperscript{435} Gorky was amazed at some factory owners and merchants who were complaining in 1915 that Russia was falling apart. He was convinced that they should have been ashamed to talk in this way because history was passing the future of Russia into their hands. “We are powerless and we are not organized” was the dominant mantra among Russia’s intelligentsia and aristocracy, which frustrated Gorky. That is why he thought that Lenin with his great enthusiasm to change life could be a perfect candidate to spearhead reforms. In his letter, Gorky also mentioned that Korolenko believed that “the aristocrat as a cultural phenomenon was much more

\textsuperscript{434} Maxim Gor’kii, “V. G. Korolenko 21 i 22 oktiabria, 1916.” \textit{PSSP}, vol. 12, p. 82.
\textsuperscript{435} Maxim Gor’kii, “V. G. Korolenko 21 i 22 oktiabria, 1916,” \textit{PSSP}, vol. 12, p. 82.
valuable than a merchant.” This thought, however, reflects Gorky’s view of the aristocracy more than Korolenko’s. When Korolenko received this letter, he put a question mark next to this suggestion for he always criticized the aristocracy’s domination, while merchants’ values were foreign to him as well. Gorky admired Russian noblemen. Bunin recollected in emigration how Gorky spoke enthusiastically about “true artists.” “Do you understand,” he asked Bunin, “that you are a true writer because culture is in your blood, the high art of Russian literature is in your DNA. But we simple folk need to study culture all the time, worship it with the mighty power of our soul, and only then we can write something extraordinary for our new reader.” By 1915, however, even Gorky concluded that Russia’s nobility had spent itself and was dying off.

When Ivan Tolstoy, the vice-president of the Academy of Fine Arts, Petrograd’s mayor (gorodskoi golova), and the Chair of the Society Devoted to Studying the Life of Jews, died at the end of May 1916, Gorky wrote: “What a nice person he was – a true aristocrat – he was noble and spiritually beautiful. We had a wonderful relationship from the very beginning and two or three times we had heart-to-heart talks easily and freely. Good people die in Russia early.” In Gorky’s view, the number of potential, well-brought up, educated and cultured leaders of aristocratic origin was dwindling. That is why despite disagreements with Lenin, Gorky became convinced that he was the only leader who could reawaken the social consciousness in people. Gorky lamented the loss of many Russian intellectuals. In September of 1916, he regretted deeply that Lenin was abroad, not in Russia, which needed clever and “wonderful” people like him. Gorky felt shortage in serious people pungently. Already in

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438 Maxim Gor’kii, “E. P. Peshkovoi, 26 maia 1916,” PSSP, 12, p. 49.
1916, he thought of the trend in talent leaving the country as a catastrophe. Old people were dying and “the number of cultured, socially oriented and well-brought up persons was dwindling… now I have to orient myself toward decency, personal courage, almost putting aside contradictions in the way we understand the world. But there are fewer and fewer decent and honest people as well. The poisonous gas of moral decomposition, cultural devolution… opened up before the soul.”

Gorky was devastated that his “spiritual motherland” was coming to an end. Russia was turning into a “hungry steppe” even before the February Revolution. Gorky began to sound the alarm about the lack of leadership in Russia long before the Tauride Palace became the seat of “dual powerlessness.” As Eric Hobsbawm underscored, instead of a liberal and constitutional Western-oriented Russia ready and willing to fight the Germans, what emerged was a revolutionary vacuum, “a powerless provisional government on one side, and, on the other, a multitude of grassroots ‘councils’ (Soviets) springing up spontaneously everywhere like mushrooms after the rains. These actually held power, or at least veto-power, locally, but they had no idea what to do with it or what could or ought be done.”

In his quest to identify inspirational leaders, Gorky helped Lenin to publish *Imperialism as the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. He also asked the Bolshevik historian Mikhail Pokrovskii to edit the series “States in Western Europe before and after the War,” which became popular. Pokrovskii had to find authors who could cover concrete subjects and regions, but immediately a question arose about a general introduction that would explain the main theme of the series – imperialism. It was clear to him? that Lenin was the only person who could write intelligently on the subject. On behalf of Gorky, Pokrovskii asked Lenin to write a five-page brochure, while

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Grigori Zinoviev undertook the contract negotiations. Lenin seized the opportunity immediately and sat down to write. When he finished in July 1916, he sent the brochure to Pokrovskii having agreed in advance that he could not publish it under Lenin’s name and the original title. In his letter to Pokrovskii dated 29 September 1916, Gorky praised Lenin for his “superb brochure that he intended to publish in all its entirety, but as a separate book not as a part of series.” Neither Gorky, nor Lenin, however, expected a severe reaction from the publishing house, Parus. The editorial committee, which included N. N. Sukhanov, Iu. M. Steklov, and A. N. Tikhonov, asked Lenin to shorten the manuscript to three pages by cutting out parts with acrid comments about K. Kautsky and L. Martov. When Gorky requested these changes, Lenin was furious and wrote to his sister: “… the publisher (and this is Gorky! Oh, calf!) is displeased with harsh criticism… of whom do you think? … Kautsky?” Later Lenin had no choice but to comply with the editors’ demands. Pokrovskii modified the manuscript by cutting pages containing acrimonious comments against Kautsky’s, Martov’s, and Nakhimson’s political views, but he kept the notes about Kautsky’s departure from Marxist positions and Lenin’s genealogy of the Russian “social-chauvinism” of Aleksandr Potresov, Akakii Chekhenkeli, and Semen Maslov. This incident happened in December 1916. Was Gorky on the side of the committee? It is clear that he did not object to it too much, which caused Lenin’s fury. Gorky seems to have sought a moderate line trying to find a balanced position. However, in the fall of 1915, Lenin’s sister, Anna Elizarova-Ulianova met with Gorky and wrote the following note to

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her brother referring to the author exclusively as a “publisher,” most probably to avoid exposing Gorky to the censors:

The new publisher made a wonderful impression on me. He asked me to give you his regards and told me that he loves you very much although you quarreled at some point. He works for the journal *Letopis* and the publishing house *Parus* and has the following goals: fight for internationalism and struggle against Russia’s Asian traits (aziatchina). Then a bit embarrassed, he announced that he continued to deem the radical-democratic party to be necessary. He would not join it; he would only provide it assistance. The publisher meets with workers. There was a meeting for 20 people during which he got through the resolution about the necessity of the seizure of power and revolutionary struggle …but some Menshevik turned everything around, threw out politics and limited the [document] to economic [change]. With great indignation my interlocutor told me about this. Overall, he is against the Mensheviks. He collected material about anti-Semitism for you….445

It is clear from this letter that in 1915, Gorky expressed his support of the revolutionary seizure of power although he talked about it hesitatingly. Could it be that he was not honest with Lenin’s sister? Could it be that he told her what she expected to hear from him? Or could it be that by 1915, after Gorky spent two years in Russia, he witnessed how the Great War had eroded people’s courage and hope for a prosperous future and, as a result, they became even more apathetic and sluggish—a development to which he refused to acquiesce. He again began to think that only a radical change could improve the conditions of the powerless and penniless working class and save Russia from downfall. Gorky was convinced that Asiatic influences on Russian culture generated the country’s Russia’s torpor and inertia in relation to social reforms.

Gorky explored the topic in his article “The Two Souls of the Russian People,” which appeared in the first issue of *Letopis* at the end of 1915. Some scholars like Berry Sharr and Lidiia Spiridonova consider it to be the key article that defines Gorky’s reaction to the events of

1917. Gorky cast his argument in the form of a simple opposition. Russia, he suggested, was torn between two poles—the “European,” characterized by mind, reason, progress, and an active attitude to life, on the one hand, and the “Asiatic,” which is violent, brutal, dogmatic, lazy, and passive and one that characterized the Russian peasantry above all. Although Gorky was a staunch supporter of European values and his deep sympathies were on the side of the European, he feared that a war might lead to the victory of Russia’s ‘Asiatic soul.’ In his letter to Romain Rolland he wrote: “Nowhere else do people speak so much about love as in Russia, and nowhere else so people love so little. I am afraid that Russia is more eastern than China. We are as rich in mysticism as we are poor in energy. …I know my country well. All in all, we need to bring up people who love to work and hate to be idle; it is necessary to awaken respect towards the intellect, man, and the world.”

Gorky was anxious that the “Eastern” tendencies towards idleness and violence would one day dominate Russia. It was this same anxiety which was uppermost in his mind when the Russian monarchy fell in February 1917. So while many people—including his own son, Maksim—embraced the collapse of the old regime, Gorky was decidedly skeptical and thought that “others spoke a language that he could not understand.”

“What is happening here threatens us greatly,” wrote Gorky in March of 1917. “We made a political revolution and must consolidate our conquests—this… is our task for the moment. I am a social democrat, but … the time for social reforms has not come yet. The new power received ruins instead of a state into its hands; for the time being it must accept trust and help from every power of the country.”

Gorky’s reaction to the February Revolution was therefore mixed.

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On the one hand, he was deeply frightened by the violence and thought that Russia was not ready for a revolution. Petrograd’s artistic intelligentsia grew anxious because numerous historical monuments and art treasures sustained damage. Gorky organized the first meeting of writers, actors, and painters at his apartment on Kronverskii Prospect. He made a passionate speech that all artists were to protect museums and libraries from bandit-like embezzlement. He insisted that Russia’s cultural legacy should be preserved for the proletariat. This meeting resulted in a special committee which included Gorky, A. N. Benua, M. B. Dobuzhinskii, K. S. Petrov-Vodkin, N. K. Rerikh, I. A. Fomin, and F. I. Shaliapin – all outstanding representatives of Russia’s cultural elite. The committee established contacts with the Provisional Government’s ministers, the State Duma and the Soviet of the Workers and Soldiers’ deputies. In the meantime, political adventurism grew and political observers began to use epithets like “scoundrels” in relation to Russia’s government.

Petrograd in February frightened Gorky. While people in Moscow embraced the February revolution cheeringly and enthusiastically, viewing it as a bloodless occurrence, the inhabitants of Petrograd were frightened by the lack of control and order among the soldiers, particularly in the garrisons. Gorky was especially concerned about the Petrograd garrison. Some of the officers had been shot, some replaced with former soldiers through elections, and some officers simply disappeared. The soldiers’ committees, whose orders no one followed, controlled the remaining garrison officers and soldiers. The Provisional Government failed to reorganize the army. Gorky’s apprehension was not groundless because armed and hungry soldiers, left to their own devices, were bivouacking in the capital’s dark streets around campfires and then scavenging for

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food and looting to compensate for their unpaid salaries. When they went back to the villages, they had to provide for their families and their household.

Zinaida Gippius who kept a diary during the February days of 1917, described inebriated soldiers prowling around yards and flats and firing at the windows. When soldiers came to her apartment to search for weapons, she noted: “We are sitting in the dining-room—someone rings the doorbell. Three ‘half-soldiers’ -- boys. Incredibly drunk. With guns and revolvers. Came to take away weapons. They look kind, however.”450 She also noted a conversation between two officers about how the soldiers understood the meaning of freedom: “There were 1600 soldiers in the regiment, then 300, and yesterday there were only 30. The rest are ‘free citizens.’ Where are they? They are roaming around and plundering shops.”451 This volatile situation brought much unpredictability and uncertainty and people began to avoid the city streets at night. Gorky also grew increasingly apprehensive of the muzhik-soldiers in March 1917. “I am very afraid of the soldiers from the local garrison and even more of the Russian muzhik,” he wrote on March 1, “If he does not restore the monarchy, then he will create anarchy… All in all, we are living through a very difficult and terrifying moment. I do not know and do not see how we will sort out the chaos of the ruins we inherited.”452 Gorky wrote to his son: “The events taking place may appear grandiose, even moving at times, but their meaning is not so profound and sublime as everyone imagines.”453 And a week later he was warning Maksim that, the fall of the Romanovs notwithstanding, “a counter-revolution is possible.” He expressed a similar fear again a week later, “I am a pessimist and even a misanthrope. From my point of view, most of the Russian population are angry and stupid pigs. They prevail in Moscow, and it will not surprise me if they

451 Ibid., p. 113.
‘starved out’ the revolution in this city by taking apart the railroad to St. Petersburg. Undoubtedly, the nastiest and the most frightening—a philistine counter-revolution is developing quickly there.”454 The emotional charge in Gorky’s writing increased with the chaos of the revolution.

On the other hand, Gorky tried to find something positive in this radical turn of events. In his letters to Romain Rolland or H. G. Wells, he wrote that any revolution is a sign of progressive movement and change. Russia would represent a source of something new and less reactionary. Finally, Russia might have a chance to become a democratic state and a turning point in Russian national psychology: “We need to help man to break the chains of individualism and nationalism that oppress him; we need to propagandize what is common to all.”455 Gorky held on to the hope of uniting the representatives of Europe’s cultural elite in order ‘to heal’ societal problems and build a democratic state. In a letter dated March 18, Gorky hoped that Wells would be happy about the birth of Russia’s new democratic state: “We will not be a source of reaction for all of Europe anymore.”456

Thus far it is important to summarize the following thought and event patterns in Gorky’s life in the 1900s. Whether in Nizhni Novgorod or Arzamas, New York or Capri, Gorky was consistent in several ways. First, he always exhibited a mixed reaction to revolutionary events and political parties. He supported monarchists and social-democrats and tried to avoid taking sides after the Revolution of 1905 and the Capri school debacle. Second, Gorky always looked for what united the international and Russian intelligentsia, rather than what divided them. He preferred to emphasize the similarities and chose a creative role, rather than a destructive one.

“My task is to unite the entire intelligentsia on the basis of cultural work,” he wrote to Aleksei Nikolaevich Bakhu in April of 1918.”\textsuperscript{457} In practice, Gorky often became too emotionally charged and expressed his views too forcefully, so his “creative” role could turn into a destructive one. The arguments around the Letopis’ almanac are a case in point. Third, Gorky’s aims were not ideological. He spent all his energy on thinking and writing about an abstract concept of “Man” and his fulfilment through society without loss of freedom. Gorky did not embrace any political platform until 1924 when he began to study Marxism more seriously. But even in the 1900s his theory turned out to be different from practice. In practice, he spent much energy on supplying Bolsheviks with money for weapons to defend their radical aims. Once again, he rationalized these actions by thinking that there was no other way to bring a change. Yet, at the same time, he emphasized moral and humanistic values and cultural education to change a Man who in turn would reform Russia’s life. In other words, his theory was not well thought-out. His love of humankind conflicted with his idea of a superhero who could defend humanity. The problem was that the second action could only happen by using violent means. Two driving forces of any historical and human development, violence and love that is the basis of any peaceful and gradual change were in direct conflict in his mind. Fourth, in theory, Gorky was always against violence. In practice, he supported violent means in matters of defense. Violence, however, always breeds violence. Fifth, time after time, Gorky became the source for rumors and mythology. The Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and Kadets all wanted Gorky to support their party line and when he expressed his leanings towards one or the other, they made him a source for rumors.

\textsuperscript{457} Maxim Gor’kii, “A. N. Bakhu, 10 aprelia, 1918,” PSSP, vol. 12, pp. 188-189.
In March of 1917, the newspaper *Russkoe slovo* declared that Gorky was one of the main organizers of a Republican party, which was untrue. Other newspapers also published the ‘fake news’ that Gorky established radical-democratic parties. The writer complained to his wife Ekaterina that “different, sweet people place my name everywhere where it is profitable for them to see it.”

Nothing much changed once Gorky entered the center of the political and revolutionary world in 1917. “I have not participated in the affairs of the radical democratic party for a long time,” Gorky confessed to his wife, Ekaterina Peshkova, “but even when I took part in them, I naturally limited myself. I restricted myself greatly. Now I am organizing a party, but I have no idea what to call it. This party has only one member—myself. I do not think that it will grow to even three people.” Gorky tried to stay an impartial observer, although it was difficult to maintain this position.

*Gorky and the Press*

Gorky’s views on the revolution were not confined to his private letters, however. He published extensively and also became the subject of articles, feeling pressure from many sides. In May 1917, he wrote that he was persecuted and trampled down by different party factions as if he were a wolf. The newspaper *Rech*, for example, accused Gorky of inconsistency because he stopped working for the *Luch* and switched to working with *Novaia zhizn’* that was widely considered a social-democratic newspaper. Gorky dealt with numerous representatives of the Kadet Party as one of the members of the Free Association for the Development of the Positive Sciences, and they were displeased with Gorky’s work for *Novaia zhizn’*. “The attitude towards *Novaya zhizn’* is so awful, that it almost destroyed the Free Association for the Positive Sciences.

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that I launched.”\textsuperscript{460}Daniil Pasmanik, a member of the Central Committee of the Kadet Party, accused Gorky of appropriating bourgeois money allocated to him for publishing the progressive newspaper \textit{Luch} and using the funds instead for the Bolshevik newspaper \textit{Novaiia zhisn’}, which “hounded the very same bourgeoisie”.\textsuperscript{461} Gorky was furious. “If people are ready to believe that I am a dishonest person, I sincerely feel sorry for them. And if Pasmanik were a decent man, he should have asked me if I received money for the newspaper \textit{Luch} and when—before or after the revolution—funds were contributed to the newspaper \textit{Novaiia zhisn’}?\textsuperscript{462} Later Gorky had to assure the Bolsheviks and explain to the public that he was not using the funds given to him by the Russian bourgeoisie to publish \textit{Novaiia zhisn’}. The Bolsheviks in turn accused Gorky of “selling himself” to the imperialists, factory owners, and fat bankers. Why did Pasmanik write this article? It was most likely part of the struggle over Gorky in the form of revenge for his decision to leave \textit{Luch} and move to the social-democratic \textit{Novaiia zhisn’}, and represented a PR campaign for the Russian republicans.

Gorky was undoubtedly larger than life, open-minded and able to cooperate with many different parties. And this was precisely why politicians distrusted and considered him unreliable. But as a true artist, Gorky was also politically naïve, as Lenin and later Stalin understood very well, and far more concerned about Russia’s present and future than his political allegiances. He demanded deeds and real—even radical steps—to end the war and alter the socio-economic situation in Russia. Political intrigue frustrated him. The Kadet Party moved slowly and failed to demonstrate any willingness to stand up to the Tsarist government. In Gorky’s view, they were impeding the progressive development of Russia. He observed people

\textsuperscript{460} Maxim Gor’kii, “K. A. Timiriazevu, 1 maia, 1917,” \textit{PSSP}, vol. 12, p. 140.


\textsuperscript{462} Maxim Gor’kii, “E. B. Babskomu, okolo 15 maia, 1917,” \textit{PSSP}, vol. 12, p. 142.
who were sluggish, dormant, inert. That is why in 1914 and 1916, Lenin, in his view, became the only hope for a radical social change. It was Lenin who was the most active, effective, and radical reformer—someone capable of galvanizing the lethargic masses. Gorky approached Russia’s problems creatively as an artist would. It was clear that Russia needed reforms, but as Gorky learned in 1905, fanaticism and radicalism only brought havoc into people’s lives. Here lies the irony: he wanted Lenin to energize the listless and inert crowds, but he also clearly realized that Lenin’s return might generate a storm. Gorky also understood that different political parties were using his name in order to reap political benefits.

“Please read Rech, they are writing about me daily and ‘wonderfully.’ They will drive me into a coffin and will write an article: ‘The Victim of Bolshevism.’” Gorky was, indeed, keenly aware that politicians were making a symbol out of him and were playing games behind his back.

April-July 1917

Having just returned from emigration at the beginning of April, Lenin presented the April Theses to his party colleagues, which essentially was a Bolshevik program for carrying out a transition from a bourgeois-democratic revolution to a proletarian one. More pointedly, it meant that the Soviets would consolidate all power and refuse to support the Provisional Government. In essence, the April Theses declared that it was high time to end the diarchy that had led Russia into a political crisis. Despite the initial negative reaction among the Bolsheviks themselves, the Seventh RSDLP Conference in April approved Lenin’s theses and they became the basis of the

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party’s political program. These policies, however, aroused indignation among the Russian Kadets and Mensheviks, who launched a campaign against it.

Some workers in Petrograd began to support Lenin’s cause and joined an anti-government demonstration under Bolshevik slogans in April. The Mensheviks tried to prevent the political crisis from spilling into the open by calling to refrain from any actions until the next meeting of the Soviets. Gorky was furious. In his letter to his wife, on June 14, 1917, he expressed outrage and apprehension about what was happening in Russia. “I am thinking about leaving for two or three weeks. Probably to the Volga River. My soul is tired (устал душевно)—of destruction, but physically I am holding up. However, my anxiety intensifies every day, for I think that Lenin’s insane politics will spawn a civil war soon. He is completely isolated, but his slogans are very popular among the masses of thoughtless and irresponsible workers and among some soldiers.”

Gorky found Lenin’s advocacy for all power “to the people,” his push for no support for the Provisional Government, the idea of transforming the bourgeois revolution into a socialist one, as well as the call to confiscate all landowners’ land and end of the War not only unfeasible, but downright dangerous. “[In 1917] power was being challenged, subverted, and seized daily by people in the streets and especially in factories, work, shops, barracks, and villages,” wrote Mark Steinberg, “The struggles between political parties at the center of most accounts of the revolution, was only a facet of this larger struggle for power.” In the same letter, he lamented that unlike people in America, England, and France, who represented strength and knew how to organize “for life and death” quickly and easily, the Russian people were good for nothing. “I do not want to talk about it—how bad things are here. There is cowardice and

466 Mark Steinberg, “Introduction to Untimely Thoughts” in Untimely Thoughts by Gor’kii (Yale: Yale UP, 1968), p. xi.
indolence and all other mean feelings against which I fought my entire life, and which might destroy Russia one day.”

Gorky again bemoaned the Russian people’s alleged collective powerlessness, cruelty, and laziness.

During this turbulent time, Gorky again accused the late Tolstoy of having been directly responsible for Russia’s inertness, since he had promoted nonresistance and the acceptance of Russian passivity. Gorky thought that while everyone was accusing Lenin of Russia’s chaos in the summer of 1917, the true culprit was Tolstoy who had propagated his “passive anarchism.” For Gorky, Tolstoy’s theory of nonviolent acceptance meant a refusal to actively fight autocracy and change Russia’s dismal reality.

“In the end,” he wrote, “I am afraid, that being a pacifist and hater of war, I will begin to yell soon—‘Let the offensive begin!’ For activity is necessary; we need an active and lively attitude towards life.”

Herein lies Gorky’s sensible and accurate appraisal of the political reality in June of 1917: although he became disillusioned and disappointed with the way the Provisional Government and the soviets were making small steps to ameliorate the proletariat’s living conditions, he also supported the military offensive that began on June 18, thinking that it would awaken and organize society. Gorky pointed out on many occasions that more active and prudent politicians were needed to prevent Russia from disintegrating and he saw that the Provisional Government members lacked audacity and boldness to take matters into their hands. They hesitated too much. The June offensive was supposed to help the Provisional Government and the soviets to organize Russia. Lenin’s theses, however, made Gorky suspicious of Lenin’s tactics because his hubris could plunge Russia into a

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468 Ibid., p. 150.
469 Ibid., p. 150.
civil war—a prediction Gorky made before any signs of civil war became apparent, Gorky was also the first to accurately predict the dire cost the Russian people would pay for it.\textsuperscript{470}

The soviets organized a massive demonstration on June 18, 1917, on the Field of Mars. However, contrary to the organizers’ plans to hold a political demonstration to express their support of the Provisional Government, the 500,000 people held up pro-Bolshevik slogans such as “Down With the Ten Ministers-Capitalists!”; “It Is Time to End the War!”; “All Power to the soviets!” Some historians believe that this demonstration pointed out the division between the popular mood and the Provisional Government’s policies as well as the soviets’ leadership. Gorky viewed it differently. He blamed the Bolsheviks for their impudence and ignorance. The demonstration on June 18 showed “the impotence of the loyal elements. Only the ‘Bolsheviks’ demonstrated, whom I am gradually starting to despise and hate. What truly Russian idiots they are! Most slogans demanded the resignation of ten Bourgeois-Ministers! But there are only eight of them!”\textsuperscript{471} Gorky accused the Bolsheviks of appealing to the lowest feelings and branded a new term: “Emotional Bolshevism that appeals to the lowest instincts of masses killed itself… now a Bolshevik is anyone who talks about a counter-revolution.”\textsuperscript{472}

June and July 1917 proved a trying time for Gorky. He observed that he lived in emotional contradiction with himself and found respite only in cultural work. During the most politically tense situations, cultural projects grew to become an outlet for mounting anxiety and an escape from his bleak reality. “I live with an emotional contradiction with myself and I do not see any other way out except my cultural work.”\textsuperscript{473} Gorky, who underscored his pacifism during

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\item \textsuperscript{470} N. N. Primochkina, “Revoliutsiia glazami Gorkogo-khudozhnika,” in Gor’kii, Shmelev, Teffi, i drugie ed. by E. P. Matevosian, N. N. Primochkina, and S. M. Demkina (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2015), p.60.
\item \textsuperscript{471} Maxim Gor’kii, “E. P. Peshkovoi, 20 iiunia, 1917,” PSSP, vol. 12, p. 151.
\item \textsuperscript{472} Maxim Gor’kii, “E. P. Peshkovoi, okolo 10 iiulia, 1917,” PSSP, vol. 12, p. 156.
\item \textsuperscript{473} Maxim Gor’kii, “E. P. Peshkovoi, 20 iiunia, 1917,” PSSP, vol. 12, p. 151.
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the Great War, began to promote the June military offensive prepared by the Defense Minister Alexander Kerensky. Kornilov’s Eighth Army broke through the front, seized the towns of Kalush and Galich, and took tens of thousands of prisoners. However, the offensive halted due to the disintegration of the army, which turned out to be irreversible for the exhausted country.\footnote{474Ibid., p. 151.}

Gorky’s letters show how his attitudes and appraisals of the political situation and Russia’s main political actors changed during this turbulent time. As a writer and thinker, Gorky tried hard to make sense of the chaos that was not subject to any rational assessment.

By July 4, 1917, Gorky became more sympathetic towards the Bolsheviks. He observed that things became more entangled and that Russia could not get around “the civil strife” that “promised to be ferocious.”\footnote{475Maxim Gor’kii, “E. P. Peshkovoi, 4 iulia, 1917,” \textit{PSSP}, vol. 12, p. 154.} Demonstrations lasted through the nights and “violent anger blazed.”\footnote{476Ibid., p. 154.} In the meantime, counterrevolutionary forces were regrouping, while the revolutionaries were giving “laconic speeches.” The events in July infuriated Gorky even further and, moreover, they terrified him. He underscored repeatedly that there were too many political chatterboxes, but few reasonable and cultured people. “Oh, how difficult it is to live in Russia! How stupid all of us are and how fantastically silly we are!”\footnote{477Maxim Gor’kii, “E. P. Peshkovoi, 4 iulia, 1917,” \textit{PSSP}, vol. 12, p. 154.} This reference to Russian stupidity and lack of culture underlay his interpretation of the July events.

The press and representatives from distinct parties widely discussed whether Bolsheviks were culpable as the initiators of the military clashes and carried responsibility for the July events. Gorky thought that it was a mistake to think that only Bolsheviks and the German agents were to blame for the awful July entanglement. Everyone, including Kadets and Petrograd’s
inhabitants had their share of blame. He did not try to justify Bolsheviks’ actions -- “nothing could justify them.” But simultaneously he thought that not only Germans, but also “cultured” Kadets strung the Bolsheviks along.

“Emotional Bolshevism, which appealed to lowest instincts, dealt a lethal blow to itself, from which it would not recuperate. But, England’s, France’s, and Germany’s democracies would view the crushing of Bolshevism as a defeat of the entire revolution, and it is desperately bad, for it would decrease the revolutionary mood in the West and would prolong the war infinitely. This is the worst.”

Now the Bolsheviks found themselves in a quandary. “I am afraid that Lenin found himself in a loathsome situation,” wrote Gorky, “he, of course, had nothing to do with it, but his closest comrades, seemed to be real scoundrels and crooks. All of them were arrested [by which Gorky meant Trotsky and Kamenev].” “The July Days were a disaster for the Bolsheviks,” noted Sheila Fitzpatrick. “Clearly Lenin and the Bolshevik Central Committee had been caught off balance. They had talked insurrection, in a general way, but not planned it.”

Not only did the July uprising end in an apparent crushing defeat for the Bolsheviks, but as Alexander Rabinowitch wrote, “even most moderate socialists turned against them. Lenin was forced into hiding, many Bolshevik leaders were jailed, the growth of the party temporarily stalled, and preparations for a left socialist congress were shelved.”

Gorky expected that the bourgeois press would attack and even call for the closing of Novaia Zhizn’. And he was right. On July 2, the government shut down the newspaper, but it continued to be published under the new title of Free Life until September 8. By comparison,

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when the Bolsheviks shut down *Novaia Zhizn* after coming to power, it was never reincarnated. They had learned their lessons. In July 1917, counterrevolution turned into a fact. Gorky expected the Kadets to lead the counterrevolution and he did not hesitate in choosing his means of fighting them. As it turns out, both the Kadets and the Bolsheviks used any means to achieve their ends and it was the Bolsheviks who betrayed the February Revolution and manipulated the different factions within the soviets. When it was beneficial to them, they worked with the Mensheviks, when it was not, they discarded them. Lenin was a master at manipulation.\(^{481}\)

However, it was the July mobs that petrified Gorky the most:

> But the most important and the worst is the narrow-minded, ordinary inhabitant, or the worker and the soldier who acted on July 3\(^{rd}\) and 4\(^{th}\). This is a brainless and cowardly scoundrel who does not have a drop or shadow of self-respect, who does not understand, why he/she came out into the street, what he or she needs, who is leading him and where? If you could only see how entire companies of soldiers threw down their rifles and banners at the first shot and banged their heads against the windows of the stores and doors, climbing into any crack! And this is a revolutionary army! A revolutionary free people! The masses did not realize at all why they crawled out into the streets. And in general, it was a nightmare. The motives behind the mutiny are unknown even to their leaders. But were there any leaders? I doubt it. Yes, Trotsky, Lunacharskii, and others babbled something, but they were prattling, submitting themselves to the mood of the masses created by a whole set of conditions and under the impact of other dark forces. It is impossible to deny the work of these forces, no matter how awful it is. Insane scoundrels shot the Cossacks and soldiers—this is a fact. Who are they? Hardly anyone will find out, for they were killed. But it was clear that these were people who doomed themselves to be destroyed. What for? I do not understand.\(^{482}\)

The February Revolution brought nothing but misery and misfortune to the Russians: political actors became more manipulative. Some tried to survive, some to maintain power at all costs, and others were out to gain political power by using any means possible. The Bolsheviks belonged to the latter group. During these cursed days, Gorky’s sympathies lay on the side of the

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Social-Democrats for the most part, although he was not consistent. Rather he worked with all parties if he thought that it would benefit Russia. For Gorky, it was clear in July 1917 that the war should end, the rights gained by the revolution preserved, and the appeals to Russia’s anarchic feelings should cease. He observed firsthand how the February Revolution spawned havoc and chaos. Lies and exaggerations became the norm. The press published completely unreliable information. Every day brought conflicting news, while appraisals of political figures and parties changed depending on the situation. Political tensions generated mercurial interpretations and feelings of unpredictability that caused nothing but anxiety. Lack of clarity, truth, and daily troubles as well as the violence in the streets made objective, dispassionate, and balanced analysis impossible. People could have been easily swayed and made believe that Gorky was a fanatic and a Bolshevik by reading articles about him. But it was the violent power of the mob that frightened Gorky out of his wits. That is why he never supported appeals to the lowest feelings of the masses and presaged that such calls to directionless action would have far-reaching and disastrous consequences. The press also played a huge role in igniting these passions, as the story with Vladimir Burtsev’s articles demonstrated.

On July 7, Burtsev published his article “Either We, or the Germans, or Those Who Are with Them?” in several newspapers, such as Rech’, Petrogradskii listok, Petrogradskaiia gazeta, and Russkaia volia. Burtsev suggested that the February Revolution did much for the cause of freedom, which the Russians achieved in a democratic fashion, but the Germans used the revolution to destroy the Russian state. Furthermore, the Germans would not have been successful at all if the Bolsheviks had not aided them. “‘When Lenin and his cronies cried ‘Down with the war! Down with the Provisional Government! Down with the Allies!’ when they were disorganizing our army and poisoning the life of Petrograd, they were fulfilling the most
sacred wishes of Wilhelm II,” Burtsev wrote. “During these days, the Germans secured a victory that the likes of which they have not achieved at the front until now. In this systematic help to the Germans in the current war, we are accusing the Bolshevik Party and its leaders: Lenin, Trotsky, Kamenev, Zinoviev, Kollontai… Gorky.” Although Gorky’s case, Burtsev wrote that it was painful for him to include the dear name of a great artist in this list, but Gorky inspired many with his “defeatist” newspaper *Novaia zhizn’* and supported the provocateurs who worked on humiliating and ruining Russia. Burtsev demanded that the Provisional Government launch an investigation into the work of Lenin and his circle. In his second article, Burtsev answered the discussion generated by his first publication. He argued that although Gorky remained one of Russia’s best writers, as a political figure and the man who established the defeatist journal *Novaia zhizn’*, he also carried full responsibility for supporting Lenin’s policy that aimed to ruin Russia. Gorky did not need anyone to defend him. He did it himself in a personal letter to Burtsev, which delineated Gorky’s reading of what was happening in Russia and his role in the chaotic process that led to the Empire’s destruction.

First, Gorky thought that Burtsev’s slander catered to ignorant crowds frustrated by the state’s adventurism and frightened to death by the chaos in the streets. Gorky began receiving letters with references to him as a Judah, a traitor, the main German spy, and a provocateur.”

Gorky assured Burtsev that the so-called “defeatist” *Novaia zhizn’* would not cease to exist and would not change its editorial policies. “Only a crazy or dishonest person could claim that *Novaia zhizn’* serves Germany’s interests.” Gorky thought that his newspaper served the much higher interest of international democracy, socialism, and culture. “*Novaia zhizn’* always

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disagreed sharply with all attempts from the right and the left to awaken the dark instincts of the masses. It considers the war to be the world’s misfortune, a catastrophe of European culture, a calamity caused by the greed of capitalists from all countries. […] I am telling you again, Burtsev, that only a crazy and dishonest man can accuse me of betraying my country.”

And in one of his emotional and sincere statements, Gorky defined his relationship with the Russian people and Russia: “My people is my motherland. I have served them for a quarter of a century now, and it is not for you, a pathetic man, to judge and accuse me.”

The threatening letters to Gorky that Burtsev’s first article inspired contained nooses, images of axes, execution blocks, and hundreds of curse words. All these images came via the mail during the twenty-fifth anniversary year of Gorky’s serving Russian culture. “It kills and oppresses me.”

In a letter to Valery Briusov, Gorky wrote: “I am not too upset by the persecution organized against me by people gone “feral from fear”’. During 1905-1906, some accused me of accepting Japanese money and of stealing 3 million rubles from Savva Morozov. But here is what is distressing: what kind of a country is this where everyone lies and can be bought and where this does not surprise anyone, but only annoys? The fact that this does not surprise anyone is the foul essence, the offensive essence for all of us.”

Gorky was concerned in late July that the newspapers were lying more easily and more frequently than ever before. Although he did not have any warm feelings for Trotsky and Lunacharskii, he was perturbed by the press reports that they were hiding from the Provisional Government during the July days while although both were giving speeches and waiting calmly to be arrested, while the newspapers depicted them as cowards and criminals. Gorky never

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486 Ibid., p. 158.
487 Ibid., p. 158.
thought that things would get so bad. “How few gifted people we have, how extremely small the number of clever and sensible workers is.” In August 1917, Gorky noticed that his hair had become grayer.

On 13 August 1917, the newspaper Zhive slovo reported the “fake news” again that A. V. Amfiteatrov ended his long friendship with Gorky because the “great Maxim” sold his soul to the Bolsheviks. Amfiteatrov wrote to Gorky that none of this was true. “As you know, I do not sympathize with the Novaia Zhizn’s direction and your views of the revolutionary war, and I think it my duty to oppose such opinions, as I would stand up to any extremely harmful delusions where I can and as much as I can. But no matter how much we disagree, I always remember that you are not only a great writer, but also an honest man and a democrat…” Gorky thanked him for this letter and reassured Amfiteatrov that he sincerely respected and appreciated him, adding that “different opinions should not separate honest people.” This seemingly trivial and insignificant episode speaks volumes about Gorky’s tolerance and respect for different opinions. Neither Trotsky, nor Lunacharskii appealed to Gorky in July 1917, but he still called them “the good people” of Russia. Gorky respected people’s desire to work for the benefit of their country’s democratic future. He did not judge but criticized. The revolution divided people and reduced their level of patience with each other and this intolerance progressed and turned into violence. While in 1915 and 1916 Gorky urged the Russian people to become more active and socially conscious, to try to change the state of things, by 1917, he observed how quickly radical changes were generating cracks in society, which first bred intolerance and then produced extreme violence. The February Revolution brought democratic changes, but it did not end the

War. Gorky’s views on the conflict were ambivalent: he supported the Kerensky’s offensive in July because he thought that it would awaken the people. But then again every awakening brought out more and more violence in the streets. His colleagues and friends could not fathom how Gorky was so oblivious of this development. And in the long run, the White émigrés never forgave him this blindness. And even though Gorky saved many of them, they could not come to terms with his acceptance of radicalism during the inter-revolutionary period.

*The October Revolution and *Novaia zhizn*

Once the October Revolution took place, Gorky sounded the alarm. “During the first days of the revolution, Gorky’s reaction resembled the reaction of the Russian intelligentsia who were convinced that one could not change Russia by force.”493 For Gorky, *Novaia zhizn* became the outlet for a series of articles that eventually appeared as *Untimely Thoughts*. Gorky presented his readers with an extended political commentary on the events of the revolutionary year. Their tone was predominantly gloomy. Thus, the first of the series, entitled “Revolution and Culture,” bemoaned the backwardness that Gorky saw as the legacy of the Russian monarchy, and warned that the revolution had not yet done anything to correct that state of affairs or to enrich the country spiritually. “Murder and violence are tools of despotism,” he wrote. “One needs to understand that the worst enemy of freedom and human rights is within us; it is our stupidity and cruelty amid the turmoil of dark, chaotic feelings generated in our souls by the shameful yoke of monarchy, its cynical brutality.”494 As the year progressed, Gorky became more pessimistic still. Instead of ushering in a new age of culture and science, he believed that the revolution threatened to reduce the entire country to anarchy, which he associated with “Asia” and the “peasant.” As he put it in a letter in 1919: “The revolution degenerated into a battle between

493 Lidiia Spiridonova, *Nastoiaschchii Gor’kii*, p. 132.
Gorky began to think that the entire Russian population was suffering from cynical cruelty and stupidity. “The real Russian culture is a foul mix of every kind of ignorance and disgusting egotism, that of corrupt laziness and carelessness.” Gorky struggled with his faith in Russia, Russians, and his universal concept of ‘Man’ in general. He vacillated between deep disappointment with Russian culture and reasonable assessments of the unfolding events and men’s role in them. “Perhaps there is much anger in my love for the Russian people; perhaps, but I love my unhappy people in my own way and without measure.” This inner struggle between love and anger affected his political views and positions. Gorky’s reaction was always mixed. In his most rational state of mind, he did not view events in black and white, but appraised them in grey, never preferring one political position over another. Rather, his thoughts always referred to Russia and the new ‘Man’ who would create a better future for himself and society. “I have never admired men who become petrified and fossilized under the pressure of the faith they profess…I will say further that I regard myself as a heretic in every group and party. In my political views there are many contradictions which I cannot and do not want to resolve. I feel that in order to maintain some equilibrium and peace of mind, I would have to kill that part of my soul which passionately…loves the living, sinful and…pitiful Russian man.”

Gorky defined *Novaia zhizn*’ as a right-wing newspaper. And the Bolsheviks seemed to agree since they thought that the “general policy of the paper” presented many problems. Indeed, once the Bolsheviks themselves had begun to make their presence felt on the domestic political scene, the writer was quick to identify their party with the very tendencies he most

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495 Maxim Gor’kii, “To E. P. Peshkova,” *PSSP*, vol. 13, p. 257.
496 Maxim Gor’kii, *Nesvoevremennoe*, p. 19.
497 Maxim Gor’kii, “V. A. Ukladnikovu, 20 iulia, 1917,” *PSSP*, vol. 12, p. 159
498 Maxim Gor’kii, “O polemike,” *Novaia zhizn* no. 6 (April 25 (May 8) 1917).
feared. In his eyes, the Bolshevik leaders – especially Lenin and Trotsky – were dangerous “adventurers” and “fanatics,” people who appealed to the worst instincts of the mob in order to promote their own ideological cause. He repeatedly compared the Bolsheviks to misguided scientists who were conducting an insane experiment on the Russian people. It was in these terms that he condemned the so-called ‘July Days,’ Lenin’s first (and unsuccessful) effort to foment revolution. When the Bolshevik coup finally did take place in October, Gorky, knowing what happened in 1905, wrote: “Culture is in danger!” And to his wife: “Things are bad for Russia, bad.”

The writer continued his attack against the Bolsheviks into the new year of 1918. In January, Gorky wrote: “We are living here like the Bolsheviks’ prisoners…Our life is not joyful and extremely frustrating, but what can we do? Nothing. ‘But he that shall endure unto the end, shall be saved also.’ We suffered through the Romanov autocracy; perhaps, we will endure Ulianov as well. Life has become a continuous anecdote—extremely dark. We cannot laugh. But Novaia zhizn’ will be killed, most likely.

Gorky was prophetic in many respects. In a few weeks, Novaia zhizn’ was permanently closed. “Everything is getting destroyed little by little,” wrote Gorky, “but there is no one to repair it. Political parties? There are no parties; there are groups of not very clever, but extremely proud people, who cannot get along.” These were difficult days for Gorky. He advised Maxim and Ekaterina to stay in Moscow and not to leave the city, “not to be caught in the middle of a battle between the representatives of these groups.” For the first time, he wrote: “I do not want to

work, and anyway, I want nothing right now. I am experiencing an apathy quite uncharacteristic of myself.”

Criticizing the Bolsheviks became a form of activity for Gorky. First, he condemned the activities of the new security agency, the Cheka, with its policy of spreading the ‘Red Terror’ throughout the land. He equally criticized the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, under the terms of which the country’s new leaders unilaterally withdrew from the war against Germany. But he was particularly outspoken when in January Lenin grudgingly approved elections to the Constituent Assembly only to dismiss it later because the delegates refused to endorse Soviet power. The dismissal increased distrust and hostile attitudes towards Bolshevik authorities, particularly in intelligentsia circles, so the Bolsheviks turned to punitive administrative methods of managing the country and controlling people. For Gorky, the dismissal of the Constituent Assembly was a huge blow. He made an analogy between Bloody Sunday and the events of January 6, 1918:

The total extermination of the oppositionally minded (несогласномыслящих)—is an old, tested method of domestic Tsarist politics of the Russian governments. From Ivan the Terrible until Nicholas II. Why would Vladimir Lenin reject such a proven, oversimplified method? He does not refuse it, declaring honestly, that he will stop at nothing in order to root out enemies. But I think that as a result of these declarations, we will get a prolonged and brutal battle of the entire democracy and the best part of the working class against the zoological anarchy, which the leaders at Smolnyi bring up so actively. This is how the oversimplified translations of anarchic-Communist slogans into the language of the natives threaten Russia…

Zinaida Gippius also noted in her diary that every day someone got shot in her district of the city. By February 1918, the Cheka gained the right to execute those suspected of spying.

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and counterrevolutionary activities on the spot.\textsuperscript{505} Hunger and economic ruin aggravated the relationship between the new authorities and the urban population. Gippius’ notes testify to incredible desperation and the feeling of hopelessness:

My soul is silent; it endured so much, got calluses, lost faith, and forgot how to hope. But we need to hope, otherwise there will be death. Total hunger. The markets are empty. We could not get a pound of bread today. When there was butter, it was about 1000-1200 rubles per pound. I am not writing about what we eat and how much it costs—I am not writing about it…. Shaking, I am writing during the last light of a murky day. The cold room clouds my thoughts. Endless noise is ringing in my ears. It is hard. Bread costs 300 rubles per pound. There is nothing to sell anymore. It is much nobler not to write any longer…People are so pathetic and frightening. A man is like a raven to another man with hungry and predatory eyes. Feral dogs, ravens, and people are fighting over carrion equally in the streets.\textsuperscript{506}

Arrests and imprisonment of the aristocracy and members of the intelligentsia outraged Gorky. He noticed how workers and ordinary inhabitants began hating the revolution more and more.

But Lenin was insensible and propagated more terror. “For Lenin himself continually insisted on intensified terror against the judgement of many of his subordinates,” wrote Robert Conquest, “…as early as June 1918, he intervened against the Petrograd party’s error in restraining elements who wished for mass terror: ‘this is unheard of! The energy and mass nature of the terror must be encouraged’.”\textsuperscript{507} In a letter to Mariia Andreeva, Gorky’s civil wife, Lenin explained his position: “We cannot but arrest Kadets to prevent conspiracy. All of them are capable of helping conspirators. It is such a crime not to arrest them. It is better for dozens or hundreds of representatives of the intelligentsia to spend days or weeks in prison than 10,000 to


be killed. True, it is much better.” \textsuperscript{508} Gorky condemned this act of violence on numerous occasions, writing: “Our fundamental enemies are stupidity and cruelty. It is high time we develop an aversion to murder, a feeling of disgust towards it.” \textsuperscript{509} He was convinced that the memory of autocratic violence played an instrumental role in this sadistic attitude towards the many representatives of Russian culture. “Could it be that the memory of our wretched past, that of hundreds and thousands being shot down in the streets, provokes an executioner's attitude towards violent death in us? Having been outwardly liberated from slavery, we inwardly still remain slaves. Yet again, our most merciless enemy is our past. We should grow more mature and wiser.” \textsuperscript{510}

In \textit{Novaia zhizn‘}, Gorky systematically printed articles condemning the Bolshevik slogan “Plunder the stolen goods.” Gorky wrote numerous times about the rise in criminality caused not only by the food crisis, but also by Lenin’s slogans that many people understood literally. On January 23, 1918, Lenin gave a speech for the agitators who were leaving for the provinces:

> The outside war has finished or is ending. This is a done deal. Now we witness the beginning of the civil war. The bourgeoisie, having hidden stolen goods into trunks, thinks calmly: ‘Never mind. We will sit it out.’ People need to get this ‘snatcher’(xanana) and make him return the stolen goods. You must do this on the ground. You should not let them hide, so that total collapse does not ruin us. The police must not make the bourgeoisie do it—the policemen get killed and buried—people themselves should do this and there is no other means to fight these snatchers. An old Bolshevik who explained the essence of Bolshevism to a Cossack was right. To a Cossack’s question whether it is true that the Bolsheviks steal, the old man answered: ‘Yes, we plunder the stolen goods.’ \textsuperscript{511}

This slogan had a huge resonance. Gorky complained that people began robbing others in the streets. Thus, on March 5, 1918, Gorky mentioned that P. I. Stuchka, the People’s Commissar

\textsuperscript{509} Maxim Gor’kii, \textit{Nesvoevremennye mysli}, p. 30.
\textsuperscript{510} Maxim Gor’kii, \textit{Nesvoevremennye mysli}, p. 30.
\textsuperscript{511} V. I. Lenin, \textit{Polnoe sobranie sochinenii} (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoj literatury) vol. 35, p. 327.
of Justice and M. S. Uritskii (Boretskii), the head of the Petrograd Cheka since March, were assaulted, robbed, and even “undressed” in the streets. “In this way,” noted Gorky sarcastically, “the slogan ‘plunder the stolen goods’ is being realized.”\textsuperscript{512} Again and again, Gorky warned about the dangers and horrors of the seizure of power by a disorganized crowds of robbers, thieves, adventurers, and contract killers. He predicted the onset of the moral battle that would destroy the whole point of the revolution.\textsuperscript{513}

Yet even during this time of troubles Gorky did not despair completely: “My health is on the verge of collapse, but I do not lose the good spirits. What am I hoping for? I do not know, but I keep on hoping. In the end, reason wins.”\textsuperscript{514} Gorky tried to be an optimist even when apathy, despair, hunger, and death ruled the day. Some might call him naïve, but his blind belief in reason and the human intellect, as well as his devotion to Russian culture pulled him through many disappointments. Yet, his voice sounded more and more pessimistic.

As for the Bolsheviks themselves, Gorky’s continual barbs were the source of considerable annoyance. They responded first by attacking him mercilessly in their own newspaper, \textit{Pravda}. Trotsky even compared the writer’s attitude to that of a frightened “museum curator.” There is a drop of truth in this statement. Gorky fought for many museum collections and libraries. “The revolution took away neither luxury, nor money—it impinged upon material culture as such: what was the rationale behind the burning of estates? Who became richer?” noted Bykov. “The enthusiasm for reorganizing did not excite Gorky because it was not enthusiasm for building—it was just a party with a low-grade thrill of destruction. And he knew its price since he witnessed executions and pogroms on many occasions.”\textsuperscript{515} Instead of seeing

\textsuperscript{513} Maxim Gor’kii, \textit{Nesvoevremennye mysli}, p. 46.
\textsuperscript{515} Dmitry Bykov, \textit{Gorkii} (Moscow: Molodaya gvardiia, 2016), p. 190.
something extraordinary in the October Revolution, Gorky focused on the most primitive and
dquotidian atrocities and savagery. And he knew brutality well, so he had no illusions about it.
Revolutions deeply shook his faith in Man.

In March of 1918, Gorky noted that as soon as the autocratic, monarchical regime
collapsed in Russia, Sacred Russia began to fall apart like “a dried up and rotten barrel.
Everything is rotten and especially the people. It is obvious now that the stern and severe
Varangians would restore order in Russia.”516 Here is where Gorky himself started to think that
order can be restored only by severe measures. While he was fighting with the authorities about
the former Minister of Finances, Mikhail Bernatskii’s release, he noticed that local
representatives of Soviet power were helpless. He mentioned the rumor that Lenin supported a
general political amnesty, but since no one in his close circle supported this idea, Gorky called
them charlatans and idiots. In the meantime, numerous people lost their lives in the streets every
night. Pillage and slaughter became the quotidian reality. And to top it all off, newspapers
published reams of misinformation and lies.517 Gorky was furious and expressed his feelings in
numerous letters to his son and wife.

Gorky complained that the churches got sold, the quartermaster’s resources got plundered
and stolen, the authorities took bribes, and people were robbed daily. Gorky’s colleagues, the
publishers Zinovii Grzhebin and Ivan Ladyzhnikov became victims of the rise of criminality as
well. Gorky recognized in the ubiquitous thieves ordinary Russian people who “were used to
living by hit or miss. And the fact that these were ordinary people was the most awful thing.”518
Alexander Benua was particularly concerned about how the confiscated works of art made of

gold were distributed and what happened to church objects that had been nationalized but then vanished. He and his colleagues urged Lunacharskii to establish some control over the distribution of confiscated art objects.\textsuperscript{519}

Gorky also turned to the commissar of Justice, P. I. Stuchka, and inquired if the Red Cross could send its representatives to visit political prisoners. Gorky suggested that the Soviet authorities curtail the violence they had unleashed because it was alienating honest and reasonable people. The severe way in which the Soviet authorities enforced their rules frightened and disgusted Gorky. The unanimous declaration of the Red Fleet sailors that they would kill hundreds and thousands of wealthy people to avenge one of their comrades outraged Gorky:

\begin{quote}
Why did the government decide that it was necessary to include into the list of its actions and orders the menacing roar of the beauty and pride of the Russian Revolution? Does this mean that the government agrees with the method suggested by the sailors? Or is it powerless to impede this method? And, finally, perhaps they convinced the sailors themselves of this wild idea of physical retribution? But for me, as perhaps for all people who have not lost their minds completely, this threatening declaration represents a wild roar of unruly and cowardly animals, not a cry for justice.\textsuperscript{520}
\end{quote}

By the spring of 1918, the Bolsheviks’ patience with Gorky ran short and they turned to practical measures by suspending his publications on two occasions, albeit temporarily. But when it became clear that Gorky was unlikely to change his ways, the decision was taken on 16 July 1918 to close down Novaia zhizn’ permanently.

This placed Gorky in a quandary. No longer able to publicize his opposition to the Bolsheviks, he had to consider other means to influence the course of events. By now, of course, Russia had plunged into even greater chaos with the onset of civil war. And although the Bolsheviks still held power in the main cities, very few people believed that they would do so for

\textsuperscript{519} A. Benua, \textit{Moi dnevnik} (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo nauka, 1992), pp. 433-434.
\textsuperscript{520} Maxim Gor’kii, “26 marta, 1918” \textit{Nesvoevremennye myсли: stati 1917-1918} (Paris: Editions de la Seine, 1922), pp.46.
long. So when Gorky performed what was undoubtedly the most spectacular volte-face of his political career, he may well have done so in the belief that it was merely a temporary expedient. Whatever the case, he now decided that the best course of action was to cooperate with the very Bolsheviks whom he had so recently castigated on the pages of *Novaia zhizn’*. Russian intellectuals have never forgiven him this act and were quick to call him a turncoat and political opportunist. Konstantin Bal’mont famously wrote that “the petit-bourgeois Peshkov overcame the Gorky who used to be loved and admired.”

Even his teacher Korolenko disagreed with Gorky about the Bolsheviks and their policies. After his dedicated revolutionary son-in-law died in prison of typhus, Korolenko lashed out: “History will one day note that the Bolshevik Revolution deals with dedicated revolutionaries and socialists in the same way as the tsarist regime… Just when the country is most in need of intellectual and moral forces, they find themselves silenced.”

In his reply to that letter, Gorky sympathized with Korolenko’s loss, at the same time mentioning that he was aware of many other tragic occurrences under the Bolsheviks. He went on to ask Korolenko to write an appeal to Europe for assistance as Russia battled the famine that was causing great suffering in 1921. Gorky believed that Korolenko’s participation would influence the White émigrés whose hatred toward the Soviet regime could hinder the collection of food and medicine on behalf of starving Russians.

Korolenko’s response to this letter reveals the difference in their fundamental outlook. If Gorky, echoing in part the official view, believed that for all the excesses of the Bolsheviks a portion of their difficulty was caused by the hostility of their opponents, Korolenko did not accept this justification. He agreed to write the appeal but stated that Gorky was wrong about the

émigrés, among whom only the most extreme elements would be capable of standing in the way of humanitarian aid. Rather, he blamed the Russians for failing to recognize that it must be based on humaneness (человечность) and argued that “we have fallen from one kind of violence [the tsarist regime] into another.” 523 In his other letters, Korolenko wrote on similar themes. The Russian people, he noted, had for too long allowed themselves to be ruled by undistinguished governments, and lacking political sophistication they submitted to whoever first exerted force against the old order. But what was needed now was not hostility, but a turn onto a new path and the freedom of trade, press, and ideas. 524

Gorky’s dealings with the Bolsheviks between mid-1918 and 1921 have been one of the Soviet Union’s most closely guarded secrets. Only now are the documents beginning to emerge from the archives which will allow the full story to be told. Although Gorky’s letters demonstrate the tangled impulses behind his activities, pragmatism was the driving force in his dealings with the Bolsheviks. For example, in one of his letters he gives Lenin advice on how best to conduct propaganda on behalf of the Bolsheviks and then inquires about the possibility of resuming the publication of Novaia zhizn’. No wonder many called him a hypocrite, but Gorky was a sophisticated man who knew political games well and by 1917 realized that an open conflict with Lenin and his followers would not lead to anything productive. Although he was resolutely opposed to many Bolshevik policies, that attitude was tempered by other considerations. As the civil war unfolded, it would appear that he came to view the Bolsheviks as the lesser evil and—more significantly still—the only power in the land capable of offering proper resistance to the dark peasant force which he so feared. Moreover, as Eric Hobsbawm argues, they were the only

523 V. Korolenko, “Korolenko-Gor’komu, 27 iunia, 1921,” p. 164.
524 In his letters to Lunacharskii, Korolenko explained the difference between European socialism and the Bolshevik government, which he accused of ‘maximalism.’ He noted that socialism could emerge only in a free country with a government that ‘did not lie.’ Vladimir Korolenko, “Korolenko-Gor’komu, 9 avgusta 1921,” p. 166
government able and willing to hold Russia together as a state, and therefore enjoyed considerable support from otherwise politically hostile patriotic Russians, such as the officers without whom the new Red Army could not have been organized. “For these…the choice in 1917-1918 lay not between a liberal-democratic or a non-liberal Russia, but between Russia and the disintegration which was the fate of the other archaic and defeated empires, namely Austria-Hungary and Turkey. Unlike these, the Bolshevik revolution preserved most of the multinational territorial unity of the old Tsarist state at least for another seventy-four years.”

In addition, Gorky’s sentiment and sympathy towards Lenin, particularly after Fanny Kaplan’s attempted assassination, were genuine, as was his grief when he learnt of the Bolshevik leader’s death a few years later.

Gorky’s involvement in Russian political life during the first years of Bolshevik rule took two main forms: he promoted culture by preserving many artifacts and by protecting Russia’s creative and scientific intelligentsia. “After his reconciliation with Lenin … Gorky began to play such an extensive role as intelligentsia patron that he could be called with some justification a Soviet Lorenzo the Magnificent. He ran a veritable court from his Petrograd house… founded a series of new institutions that enable Petrograd intellectuals to continue working—and many literally to survive.” He worked on organizing new cultural institutions: the Bolshoi Drama Theater, the House of the Arts, the Theater of Tragedy, the Culture and Freedom Society, the Scholars’ House, and the Union of Painters. In his apartment on Kronverskii Prospect became a salon for devotees of art. As Khodasevich recollected, “there were literary critics and scientists from St. Petersburg and other places; there were workers and sailors, asking for protection from Zinoviev, an omnipotent commissar of the Northern District. Actors, painters, speculators,

525 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, p. 64.
former dignitaries, and refined ladies visited him as well.” One of his most grandiose ventures was the World Literature publishing house. Gorky set up the firm together with his colleagues from Parus—Ladyzhnikov, Tikhonov, and Z. I. Grzhebin. Its aim was nothing less than to publish Russian translations of all the foreign literary masterpieces since the middle of the eighteenth century. Although the task was obviously unrealizable in the conditions of the time, Gorky was undeterred. He worked hard to overcome many of the practical difficulties and obstacles, such as the chronic shortages of paper and few provisions for translators, and it was largely due to his unflagging efforts that World Literature managed to achieve what it did: over 250 titles were issued before the publishing house closed down in 1924. Men such as Sergei Poliakov, Boris Pasternak, Samuil Marshak, Kornei Chukovskii, and many others owe Gorky a debt of gratitude for the material support the World Literature house provided for them as translators. In the process, it also established an outstanding Russian literary translation tradition. Many young writers who attended the studios attested to the important part these meetings at the World Literature headquarters played in establishing their future careers.

Both the House of the Arts and the Scholars’ House became a temporary home for many writers and scientists, young and old. Even more important in many ways was the Scholars’ House, an institution which was established through the efforts of the Commission to Improve Scholars’ Living Conditions, another of the bodies to which Gorky devoted his energies. Here many of Petrograd’s intellectuals and scientists received the so-called ‘academic ration’ which enabled them to survive the dreadful deprivations of the civil war.

Gorky also appealed for aid during the famine in 1921 and found much sympathy in the United States where Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce, worked hard on providing the

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necessary aid for Russians who were near death from starvation. He appointed the governor of Indiana, James Goodrich, to head the American delegation to the Soviet Union, who was an unorthodox, but excellent choice.\textsuperscript{528} It was, however, Goodrich’s earliest experiences as a farmer and his knowledge of human nature that were most useful to him in analyzing the immediate crisis. After his travels in the Soviet Union, he outlined to President Warren G. Harding the terrible suffering he had seen, and Harding, in turn, decided that direct aid from the United States government was the only way that relief could reach Russia in time to prevent the famine from becoming horrific in scope.\textsuperscript{529} As a result of Gorky’s, Hoover’s and Goodrich’s efforts, 12 million dollars had been spent in aid for the following purchases: 6,945,000 bushels of corn, 1,370,652 bushels of seed wheat, 9,800 tons of corn grits, and 340,000 cases of condensed milk. By the end of January, 1922, three million bushels of grain had already been sent to the Soviet Union by thirteen steamships. Additional ships were in port loading in New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New Orleans. By May 22, 1922, fifty-eight steamships had transported cargo to meet the needs of the starving Russians. It was perhaps the largest relief effort ever undertaken by the United States government.\textsuperscript{530} Gorky’s success in attracting foreign aid—thanks to his international fame as a man of culture—preserved his value for the Bolsheviks. As Michael David-Fox pointed out, “Gorky, increasingly at odds with Lenin and the Soviet leadership over the persecution of the intelligentsia, was still the figure designated to address the outside world.”\textsuperscript{531}

\textsuperscript{529} Dane Starbuck, \textit{The Goodriches}, p. 152.
Gorky also tried to work behind the scenes in order to help many people who had somehow run into trouble with the Bolsheviks. Kornei Chukovskii recalls the time when he saw him weep with anger and frustration on learning that the scholar Sergei Oldenburg had been arrested. Gorky intervened successfully in this case, but he was not always able to work to such good effect. His failures caused him great pain, and never more so than in the cases of two famous poets—Nikolai Gumilev, who was executed for counter-revolutionary activities in August 1921, and Aleksandr Blok, who died earlier that month at the age of forty. Blok’s death was particularly devastating as Gorky managed to get him permission to leave the country, but it was too late. “A.A. Blok, an honest writer incapable of abusing or slandering the Soviet government, is dying of scurvy and asthma. It is essential that he be permitted to go to a sanatorium in Finland. He is not being allowed to go, and yet, at the same time, other writers have been allowed to go there, writers who can, and will, engage in such abuse and slander… I do not understand this strange policy: it seems suspicious and prejudiced to me…”\(^{532}\)

The deaths of Blok and Gumilev as well as Gorky’s constant quarrels with Zinoviev contributed in no small way to Gorky’s decision to leave his native land. By 1921, he had become quite worn down both by the massive amount of work he had undertaken and by the constant provocations to which he was being subjected by the Bolshevik leadership. Although Lenin himself was uncharacteristically tolerant of Gorky’s maverick behavior, Grigory Zinoviev, head of the Petrograd branch of the Party, was far less charitably disposed. In fact, Zinoviev was an implacable foe who rarely missed an opportunity to undermine the writer’s activities. He had Gorky placed under surveillance and authorized a police search of his apartment in 1920. He also approved the arrest of Gorky’s fellow members on the All-Russian Committee for Battling

\(^{532}\) Maxim Gor’kii, “To V. I. Lenin, after 12 no later 24 July 1921,” \textit{PSSP}, vol. 14, p. 38.
Hunger, which placed the writer in the unfortunate position of appearing to be some sort of agent provocateur. In Zinoviev’s letter to Gorky in 1923, he regretted the incident, but it was more for show: “This memorable incident caused us much bitterness. Reproaches from you could not leave us indifferent. But our love for you was not and could not be shaken.”

In the wake of the Kronstadt Rebellion, Gorky issued his famous call for Party unity in the face of widespread public disaffection. Under such circumstances, the unpredictable Gorky posed too great a danger. Zinoviev was also no doubt sincerely alarmed by reports of the writer’s poor health, hence his insistence that he go abroad for treatment without delay. Although Gorky was indeed very ill, his indisposition served as a most convenient excuse for his departure to Europe in October 1921. In this way the writer’s second—and considerably more ambiguous—period of ‘exile’ from Russia began.

Conclusion

Given the intense turmoil of these years and their great historical significance, Gorky’s view of Man and his belief in a better future were considerably shaken. Gorky became disillusioned profoundly with Man’s ability to exercise his reason. In the revolutions of 1917, he found too much brutality and nastiness instead of the prospect for a happy future.

In his fictional and nonfictional works, Gorky focused on portraying and condemning Russian cruelty. One of his main targets continued to be the Russian muzhik, whom Gorky viewed as a lazy and loathsome being retarding Russia’s development by wasting his energy and his life and failing to participate in any progressive movements. This led Gorky to view Russia as a polarized society with two “souls” and two beginnings—the active and Western on the one hand and the inactive and Eastern on the other. Appraising Russia by using these poles, he

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533 Grigory Zinoviev, “To Gor’kii, 6 July 1923,” in Neizdannaia perepiska, p. 206.
viewed its past, present, and future in black and white. For him, the Russian *muzhik* always represented evil. Moreover, the violence unleashed during the Great War and the Russian Revolutions intensified his prejudices against the common people. Gorky’s attitude towards the *muzhiki* had grave and lasting consequences. He not only observed, but also experienced himself much cruelty from them, as his early short stories reveal, and with time these experiences and observations grew into hatred for the entire peasant class.

Just like Bogdanov Gorky thought that only culture could “soften” and “civilize” the *muzhik* and provide the foundation for change and moral growth, and thus save Russia. During the Russian Revolutions, he zealously organized various cultural and educational projects that could preserve and disseminate Russian culture, which was supposed to not only enlighten the proletariat but, most importantly, humanize the common people. The twin beliefs that the *muzhiki* were evil and that only culture and education could influence them and alter Russia’s future were at the core of Gorky’s relationship with the Bolsheviks.

In his attempts to survive among the new political realities after 1917, these two beliefs helped Gorky justify his turn to the Bolsheviks in 1918 and again ten years later in 1928. These beliefs remained unchanged until 1935 when Gorky’s freedom to participate in the “civilizing” process became impossible and his confinement evident even to him.

Despite his stringent criticism of the way the Bolsheviks treated the Russian intelligentsia, which Gorky considered to be Russia’s brain, he began cooperating with the authorities in 1918 for two reasons. First, he thought that he needed to do this in order to prevent the Bolsheviks from destroying Russia, its culture, and its people. In his words: “Enough of sitting out in one’s own corner. We need to work with the Bolsheviks and try to influence them,
otherwise they will do God knows what!” Secondly, he thought that only “Bolshevik power” could “break” the muzhik and “overcome the Russian people’s inertia as well as arouse the energy of the masses to create new, fairer, and more reasonable forms of life.” In the late 1910s and early 1920s, Gorky was also convinced that he could save Russian culture and Russia itself. His relationship with the Bolshevik authorities, however, was uneven and Gorky was disappointed many times, particularly in 1922 when the Socialist Revolutionaries were put on trial and many Russian scientists and artists were sent abroad, and again in 1925 when his effort to acquaint the Soviet public with the best of European culture through his journal Beseda failed.

There is a difference, however, between Gorky’s approval of violence against the muzhik and his disapproval of violence against the intellectual. Neither in 1918, nor in 1928 did the state consider this distinction useful. Yet, Lenin’s pragmatism helped Gorky save many intellectuals. Stalin, on the other hand, considered both the muzhik and the intellectual equally dangerous and deserving the same treatment. Gorky’s approval of violence in the case of the muzhiki had far-reaching consequences. Violence used against one kind of an “enemy” can be easily used against another. By 1932, VOKS representatives kept citing the new task formulated by Stalin: “The USSR must create its own proletarian intelligentsia!” What they omitted was that Stalin first planned to violently end lives of the old intelligentsia.

In his early prose, Gorky typified the work of most Russians in that his philosophical premises always remained optimistic. But he and others painted quite depressing scenes of the homeless, overworked and browbeaten, of drunkenness and physical violence, of depravity and

536 AVPRF, fund 176, opis 7, delo 32, p. 8. I am thankful to Dr. Michael David-Fox for pointing out that this crusade to create the proletarian intelligentsia was a project that took place throughout the 1920s and peaked during the proletarianization policies of 1928-31. 1932 was the year, in which the Vydvizhenie actually began to be rolled back. So this was a project broader than Stalin but one radically furthered in a different way especially in 1928-31.
criminality. During the cursed days of the Russian Revolutions, Gorky’s optimism was greatly shaken as well. As Natalia Primochkina astutely noted: “Feeling that his utopian concept of Man was falling apart, facing the cruel reality of the revolution, the writer more deeply begins to study force of evil, he believes less in the rational beginnings of human life and the correctness of the world order.”

537 N. N. Primochkina, “Revoliutsiia glazami Gor’kogo,” in Gor’kii, Shmelev i drugie (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2015), p. 63.
Chapter 4

The Search for Hope: European Exile and Soviet Courtship

“Mussolini extols and welcomes war as the best expression of human abilities. Italian fascism dreams about Rome’s power over the world.”
M. Gor’ky

“Man is the most complex phenomenon out of all complex phenomena on the planet.”
M. Gor’ky

“Fascism denies culture and propagates war.”
M. Gor’ky

“When I think of Russian literature, I want to return home.”
M. Gor’ky

When Gor’ky arrived in Europe in 1921 after his “falling out” with Lenin, he consistently supported the Soviet government in his public statements and articles. Publicly there was no “falling out”—Gor’ky may have disagreed on tactics, but he fully embraced the Bolshevik state’s strategy in relation to the peasantry all the way into the 1930s. Gor’ky left Russia because of his poor health and exhaustion from the perpetual struggle with Zinoviev. Lenin was also tired of constant efforts to reconcile Gor’ky with Zinoviev. Besides, he saw Gor’ky as an asset that the Bolsheviks could use abroad while becoming concerned about Gor’ky’s relapsing into tuberculosis, so Lenin advised him to leave for Europe to improve his health. Trotsky noted:

\[539\] Maxim Gor’kii, Arkhiv Gor’kogo: perepiska s I. Gruzdevym (Moscow: Nauka, 1966), vol. 11, p. 50.
\[540\] Maxim Gor’kii, “Proletarskaia nenaist’,” Pravda, no. 263 (September 23, 1935).
\[542\] In his letter to Romain Rolland, dated November 25, 1921, Gor’kii wrote that he was very ill because of the relapse of tuberculosis. See Maxim Gor’kii, “Romenu Roolanu,” in Maxim Gor’kii i R. Rolland: perepiska (1916-1936) (Moscow: Nasledie, 1995), p. 22.
\[543\] Tovah Yedlin writes: “The poor state of his health and reasons of a personal nature contributed to the decision to leave. There was also Lenin’s prodding and constant attacks on him by the powerful Zinoviev. Gor’kii, the
“Lenin, who valued and loved Gorky, was very concerned that he would become a victim of his own connections and weaknesses and convinced him in the end to leave for Europe voluntarily.” But while in Europe, Gorky became deeply disappointed with the Russian émigré community and European politics, which in turn influenced his thinking.

Having left Bolshevik Russia on Lenin’s advice, Gorky was in a state of near total physical collapse. Together with his family and friends, he instantly made his way to Berlin via Finland. Exhausted from the constant struggle with the Bolsheviks over preservation of culture and the lives of Russia’s intellectuals, he was in dire need of rest, so his priority was to recover his health. He spent almost two and a half years at different resorts in Germany and Marienbad in Czechoslovakia, never ceasing his connection with Russia. But neither Germany, nor Czechoslovakia felt like home and, by the end of 1922, Gorky turned his gaze to Italy. The invitation from the Soviet ambassador to Italy, Vatslav Vatslovich Vorovskii, played no small role in Gorky’s choice to settle there. He wrote: “It is necessary for you, Aleksei Maksimovich, to come not only because you need to repair your health and eat well, but also because you need to rationalize your distressing experiences and work calmly. Not to mention how useful your presence will be here for establishing a favorable European view of the Soviet Union. Europeans have begun to wonder what this mysterious Soviet Russia is all about.”

Gorky was one of the best known Russian cultural figures in Europe. His stature at a time when the Soviet state was internationally weak made him an almost unique asset to the party leadership in the 1920s—a

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545 Maxim Gor’kii, Arkhiv Gor’kogo (Moscow: Nauka, 1964), vol. 10, p. 15.
time when the Bolshevik leadership it was becoming concerned with the role of the emigration in shaping international opinion about Soviet Russia.

Gorky, however, waited three years for Mussolini’s government to issue him a visa. There is a myth that this long waiting period was due to Mussolini’s decision not to allow Gorky to live on Capri, but it is untrue. Gorky himself wished to settle in the south of Italy “near the water.” This is not to deny that the Italian government was suspicious of the writer’s Bolshevik ties and feared that he might cause political mischief or instigate a revolution. It established twenty four-hour surveillance that one can follow in the file on Gorky preserved at the Central State Archives of Italy. Vorontsov’s invitation and Maksim Peshkov’s connections with the Soviet diplomatic core -- he used to work as a diplomatic courier for the Soviet authorities – laid the path for Gorky’s close relationship with the Soviet Embassy in Rome during his Italian interlude. Soviet diplomats protected Gorky, liaised on his behalf with the Fascist and Soviet governments, and generally, took care of his needs when he asked. In return, Gorky attempted to explain why the Bolsheviks were the only power that could deal with the peasants and were good for Russia’s future development. His writings made European intellectuals to appraise Russia more positively. The files in the Italian archives and Russia’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives provide ample evidence that Gorky’s relationship with the Soviet government was interdependent.

The fourth chapter will argue that in Fascist Italy Gorky became disillusioned with the Russian émigré community and European politics and became more drawn to Soviet reality. Gorky made a pact with the Soviet government based on his grand delusion that he could

influence the Bolsheviks’ reforms, preserve Russian and European cultures at a time when Fascism threatened them, and, most importantly, build a new, creative, hardworking, and educated people. He was continuing his crusade to remake the *muzhik* and to create a “better and happy” Russia. Writing for a Russian-speaking audience also played an instrumental role for him as a man of letters, whose subject and source of creative energy was always Russia.

*Tangled political loyalties and disappointments*

Despite his health problems, which Russia’s long and cold winters exacerbated, Gorky continued to work tirelessly in Europe. In marked contrast to his first period of exile, however, he was extremely cautious when it came to matters involving politics. Although his attitude towards the Bolsheviks was antagonistic, he took great care to ensure that his views remained private, deliberately avoiding foreign and émigré journalists who began to press him for interviews. “...[O]ur friends the journalists like to gnaw and bite,” he wrote to Ekaterina Peshkova, “they hunt me down in every possible way. They wait for me outside and on stairways, they click their Kodak cameras and humbly ask me to share my senile wisdom with them. This all began in Helsingfors, continued in Stockholm, and it is still going on here... Apart from the journalists, there are also the spies.”

He was equally determined that Maksim should not commit the indiscretion of broadcasting his father’s opinions when he visited Russia in November 1922. In another letter to Peshkova, he notes: “Our honorable son has unexpectedly left for Russia. You should not detain him there. And since he looks upon me as a lost sheep, tell him that he should not talk too much about me while he is there.”

This concern may well have been caused by the Soviet response to the one occasion when he did voice his protest against the

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547 Maxim Gor’kii, “Ekaterine Peshkovoi,” *Arkhiv Gor’kogo: pis’ma k E. Peshkovo* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1966), vol. 9, p. 214.

548 Ibid., p. 289.
government – the trial of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries, which Gorky rightly interpreted as a sign of a new resolve on the part of the Bolshevik regime to suppress its political opponents by any available means. Gorky wrote to Aleksei Rykov warning him that if the SRs were executed, it would be a horrible crime. He tried to rationalize the consequences of the execution and use them to persuade the Bolsheviks not to proceed. Gorky argued that killing of the SRs would cause a huge blow to Russia’s reputation and would lead to a moral blockade of the country on the part of socialist Europe. He neither spared epithets when he condemned the Bolsheviks’ actions in this letter, nor shied away from asking to pass on his opinion to L. D. Trotsky and the others: “If the trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries results in murder, then it will be premeditated and vile… I hope that this will come as no surprise to you, for you know well enough that throughout the entire period of the revolution I pointed out to the Soviet regime a thousand times how senseless and criminal it is to exterminate the intelligentsia in our illiterate and uncultured country.”

*Pravda* condemned Gorky’s attack in several strongly worded articles. Even as late as December of 1922, the newspaper was prepared to publish a slanderous poem by Demian Bedny, who declared Gorky to be an old man sick beyond all hope of recovery. It would certainly appear that after this purposeful campaign, he was anxious not to antagonize the political leadership again, even when faced with the most striking evidence of further assaults on individual liberty by the Bolsheviks. No wonder then that although he was outraged to learn in November 1923 of the publication of *A Guide for the Removal of Anti-Artistic and Counter-Revolutionary Books from Libraries Serving the General Reader*, a pamphlet which openly recommended a policy of intellectual intolerance hitherto unknown in Soviet Russia, Gorky chose not to speak out on the

549 “Gor’kii/correspondence,” B. I. Nikolaevsky Collection, Hoover Institution Archives f. 3, op. 210, l. 59.
subject, despite his initial declaration to Khodasevich that he would renounce his Soviet citizenship in protest. “My first impression was such that I began to write a declaration to Moscow, renouncing my Russian citizenship. What else can I do if this atrocity turns out to be true? If only you knew… how difficult and distressing this is for me!” But he did not protest it openly even when he found out that it was not a joke. His silence meant that he tacitly agreed with the Bolsheviks’ decision to ban Plato, Kant, Schopenhauer, Vladimir Soloviev, Taine, Ruskin, Nietzsche, Leo Tolstoy, Leskov and others. This episode demonstrates once again the extent to which Gorky had learnt the lesson of pragmatism and avoidance of open confrontations at all costs. Whether he hoped to defend the reputations of these philosophers and writers will remain unknown, but the World Literature series, his brainchild, published Tolstoy’s works later when Gorky was already gone, while the “Life of Extraordinary People” series, another of Gorky’s pet projects, published biographies of nearly all the “banned” writers in the 1960s-2000s. One might speculate that Gorky’s tenacious effort to enlighten Russia paid off long after his death. It took time and when historical circumstances changed, the spirit, vision, and energy that imbued Gorky’s projects prevailed.

At the time, however, Gorky understood that he could not afford to upset the Bolsheviks. First, he was involved in practical negotiations which would have allowed him to participate – albeit indirectly – in Soviet literary life which was morphing into a battleground after the revolution. Second, Gorky became disillusioned with the Russian émigré community. No sooner had he settled in Germany than he realized how far he stood from most of his fellow countrymen, whose merciless hatred of the Soviet regime had engendered an extremism no less reprehensible in Gorky’s eyes than that of the Bolsheviks themselves. The émigré papers were full of ‘fake’

news about Gorky’s travelling plans and income. “It was with ‘envy’ and sadness,” wrote Gorky to Ekaterina Peshkova “that I read in the reputable press of our emigrants that ‘M. Gorky has sold his valuables: antique silver, miniatures.’”551 In 1921, Gorky expressed his fear to Korolenko that the Russian émigrés would hinder the collection of food and medicine on behalf of starving Russians out of their strong hatred towards the Soviet regime. Responding that Gorky was exaggerating, Korolenko failed to understand to what degree the white émigrés were driven by hatred and revenge. In Europe, the white diaspora fought tooth and nail to bring down the Soviet Union by all conceivable means. If they could do it by starving the Soviet population, the number of possible casualties would not have stopped them. Once human beings enter the mode of ‘fair’ revenge by rationalizing it as self-defense, it takes a gargantuan effort and exceptional, inborn capacity to act like a human being to return to reality and to treat others with kindness again.552 In many cases, it is not possible, but there are exceptions because it all depends on an inborn capacity to value humanity and kindness over evil, survival, and competition. If a person lost it, they would continue fighting until they exterminated their opponent.553 In the 1920s, Gorky understood this well particularly when he himself met face to face with émigré plots to destroy his reputation in Europe. He confessed his fears in his letter to Romain Rolland: “I do not dare write very much because I am disturbed by your long silence, which leads me to gloomy thoughts. I have the impression that your amicable feelings for me have changed. I have many enemies who will stop at nothing, just so long as they can turn my friends against me. Even though this is a matter of profound indifference to me, it distresses me when it happens with people like you.”554

551 Maxim Gor’kii, “To E. P. Peshkovoi 8 November 1921,” in Arkhiv Gor’kogo, vol. 9, pp. 213-215.
552 Erich Fromm, Dusha cheloveka: i eie sposobnost k dobru i zlu (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo ACT, 2012), pp. 165-166.
553 Erich Fromm, Dusha, p. 167.
The Russian émigré community could not control Gorky, but it could create a negative view of him, his art, and his life choices. In 1926, *The Observer* published an interview with Gorky that never took place. It was republished in Miliukov’s *The Latest News (Poslednie novosti)* the same year and by *Gazzetta del Popolo* in 1928. Gorky suspected that Russian émigrés manufactured this interview and then asked the Soviet ambassador Dmitry Kurskii to protest the publication in *Gazzetta del Popolo* and to sue them.\(^{555}\) Moreover, the Italian documents show that the Italian police uncovered a white émigré plot to assassinate Gorky in 1932, and the agents were surprised that this information never reached the Soviet newspapers, and only the news of Gorky’s return was reprinted from the Fascist press.\(^{556}\) Assassinations of Soviet citizens, particularly diplomats or those who were closely connected to them, became common occurrences. The white émigrés successfully carried out numerous assassination plots during this period. Between 1918 and 1934, the Soviet Union lost 14 diplomats on duty in Europe. Assassinations occurred every year, but the highest numbers were reached in 1918 (3 killings) and in 1927 (7 deaths!), in the very year Gorky lived in Europe among the white émigrés who were deeply disappointed with his unwavering support of the Soviet government. More significant is the fact that Gorky tried to influence the European perspective on the Soviet Union—to make it more favorable. The white émigré community did not take this calmly. Already in 1922, the Europeans started to change their view of the Soviet Union. “[My article about peasants] did convince some people—such as J. M. Keynes, judging by his letter to me—that the Soviet regime is a regime which has historical justification. I am told that the most decent of the emigrants say that my article has helped reconcile them with the Soviet regime, and

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\(^{555}\) Fund “USSR Embassy in Italy,” AVPRF, f. 24:43, d. 5, l. 10-13.

indeed that Bolshevism alone is capable of reviving the peasantry.”

In fact, the highest number of assassinations occurred in 1927 when European and American intellectuals began to reappraise the Soviet experiment with more interest and curiosity. The year is also significant because it marked the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution and, driven by hatred and the thirst for revenge, the White diaspora organized a special campaign to undermine the Soviet Union’s reputation abroad and even devised violent plots against its officials. “On the eve of the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution celebration abroad a bitter Anti-Soviet campaign began in Europe and it brought about a break in diplomatic relations between Great Britain and the USSR; the Soviet authorities withdrew their ambassador, Kh. Rakovskii, from France, and the Chinese police attacked the Soviet embassy in Peking.”

A successful assassination of Gorky, one of the most prominent Soviet cultural ambassadors, would have made sensational news. That Gorky did not want the story about the plot to assassinate him to reach Soviet newspapers comes as no surprise. Gorky had already been a victim of an assassination attempt on December 19, 1903. A man tried to stab Gorky, but as the knife went through Gorky’s coat, it got stuck in his cigarette case. They fought, but the assassin only scratched Gorky’s ribs and forehead and cut his left glove. “Then both of us went our own way,” wrote Gorky, “and both not feeling right.” Gorky asked this man why he did it, but the answer was incomprehensible except a threat and a promise that he would not escape the next time. Gorky took this incident calmly, did not want anyone to talk about it, and made sure that this information would not get into the hands of the journalists. “It was all so silly that I did

559 L. Spiridonova, Nastoiashchii Gor’kii, p. 174.
not even worry about it, and only while walking home, I started to sweat,” wrote Gorky to his
publisher, Konstantin Piatnitsky, “This incident […] should not be discussed. I made several
steps to prevent the news from entering discussions or appearing in the newspapers. Of course, I
did not try and do not intend to put myself under the protection of those laws that I do not
respect, and the police, with whom I definitely have negative relations.” Just as in 1903, Gorky
might have decided in Sorrento that putting him and his family under the protection of the Italian
police or letting the Soviet authorities know that his life was in danger would only complicate his
precarious living arrangements between Italy, the place where his creative energy increased
exponentially, and the Soviet Union, the source of his creative imagination and vital memories.
In order to write, he needed both Italy’s creative context and access to the Soviet embassy, but
enjoying the support of two ideologically opposed regimes necessitated a delicate balancing act,
which Gorky refused to allow the émigré community to ruin for him. While being polar
opposites, Nabokov and Gorky underscored the depressing state of the Russian diaspora during
the 1920s. But unlike Nabokov, who in his novel Mashen’ka differentiated between ‘true’
Russian aristocrats who carried their burden in a dignified way on the one hand and émigrés who
pretended to be Russian nobility and behaved dismally on the other, Gorky was suspicious of all
émigrés and their bitterness and cruelty born of personal misery of a closed circle of self-
grinding Soviet haters of the Soviet Union. “The question of cruelty is the most agonizing for
me,” wrote Gorky in 1922, “I am unable to dismiss it. Everywhere I observe meaningless
brutality—why, right here in Germany they are hounding Aleksei Tolstoy. They are probably
organizing a public scandal for him right now. Rul’ [The Rudder] and Golos write about him
with savage malice. And the man’s only crime is that of being a sincere person and a splendid

When in 1925 Konstantin Fedin, a neophyte writer, noted in his letter that he met several sorcerers in the Russian village who became extremely rich during the civil war but went broke in the 1920s, Gorky made a parallel between them and the émigrés. “What an amazing subject – a sorcerer dying of hunger! It reminded me of Pyotr Kropotkin, although he did not die of hunger. A sorcerer – it’s both amazing and tragic. Living the life of an émigré, sorcerers die of spiritual starvation. Prof(essor) Ilyin composed a ‘religion of revenge’ basing himself on the Gospel. Struve walks about upside down. Khodasevich, having moved to Paris, is also asserting in print that he is a reliable émigré. Depressing, like a cellar where the pickled cucumbers have all turned sour.”

The problem was that the émigré diaspora made Gorky’s stay in Europe both psychologically and financially difficult. After a vicious campaign against him, Gorky did not get a Nobel Prize that might have alleviated his financial burdens in 1933 and obviated his decision to return to the Soviet Union for good. He might have continued travelling back and forth, although fears for his personal safety may have eventually played a crucial role in his decision to live in the USSR.

Ironically, the very hostility of these groups to the Soviet leadership only encouraged Gorky’s pro-Soviet sympathies, especially after Lenin’s death in January 1924. Despite his many differences with the Bolshevik leader, Gorky experienced genuine and profound grief when he heard the news. “I wrote [memoirs about Lenin] in a flood of tears. I did not even grieve so much when Tolstoy died. And even as I write, my hand is trembling,” wrote Gorky to M. F. Andreeva. And, as the same letter makes abundantly clear, he was appalled by the crude and callous reaction to this news in the émigré press. “The only thing is that the vile emigration is pouring

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563 Maxim Gor’kii, “Konstantinu Fedinu” in Gor’kii and His Contemporaries, p. 286.
out its putrid poison against this man, even though it is a poison incapable of infecting healthy blood. I do not like these scheming émigrés—in fact, I despise them—but it is still terrifying when one sees how Russian people have run wild and become brutal and stupid now that they are cut off from their native land.”564 It was a significant turning-point in his attitude to Soviet Russia. It also affected his view of his own residence status in Italy. Gorky did not want to be an émigré or an expat, or, as he jokingly noted in his letter to his wife, “a lost sheep.”565 To die far away among the depressed, miserable, and bitter émigrés was not an option for him.

Gorky’s hostility towards the Russian community in Europe was gradually matched by his dissatisfaction with Europe itself. Despite the passion with which he had espoused the European idea in “The Two Souls of the Russian People” and The Untimely Thoughts articles, Gorky soon found the actual experience of living in Europe less than satisfying due to the political changes of the day. Although his first letter to his wife written in 1921 from Berlin contained a characteristically positive opinion of Finland, particularly admiration of what these “calm and stubborn Finns managed to accomplish,” the writer was soon recording his disillusionment, first with Germany, then with Czechoslovakia, and then with Italy.566 He was dismayed above all by the pervasiveness of the bourgeois attitudes he encountered in these countries, which indicated how naïve had been the hopes of a pan-European revolution at the end of the Great War. He gradually witnessed how a few wealthy individuals buttressed the Mussolini government and how the Fascist government was destroying individual liberty. Soviet diplomats worked closely with the Fascist government on establishing trade relations, but in their

565 Maxim Gor’kii, “Ekaterine Peshkovoii,” Arkhiv Gor’kogo, vol. 9, p. 289.
reports observed how Mussolini aimed at militarizing the youth and manipulating the masses and gaining total control over the economy by setting small businesses against big corporations.567

Gorky’s antagonism to post-war Europe was reflected in a new style of thinking. Instead of opposing Europe to Asia, which he did frequently at the beginning of his career, between 1915 and 1921, Gorky, like so many left-wing intellectuals of the day—started to subscribe to an ideology which set a tired and decadent Europe against the youthful energy of Bolshevik Russia. In his letter to Mikhail Slonimsky, Gorky compared Italian playwrights to young Soviet writers, praising the latter for their talent. “In general, Russian literature is held in high regard here in the West, and there are even people who understand it. Italy itself has no other than G. Papini and old man Pirandello. It’s the same all over—pretty poor stuff. Everything is ‘medium scale.’ You Russians are more interesting, more brilliant and better in every way. This is not just patriotism speaking here.”568 In fact, he even explained his gradual rapprochement with the Soviet government in precisely such terms: “I am afraid that with regard to foreigners I am beginning to experience something resembling xenophobia and that I am becoming a ‘patriot’.”569

Gorky’s growing sense of kinship with Soviet Russia was further reinforced by political considerations. The period of his residence in Sorrento coincided with the rise of Italian Fascism, whose relentless progress in consolidating power Gorky observed closely and described in his letters and articles. Under Mussolini’s regime, relations between Italy and the USSR experienced ups and downs, but steadily worsened, with inevitable consequences for Gorky, who was of course a Soviet citizen. He observed how the Fascist government’s “extraordinary measures” and

567 “Otchet D. Kuskogo. Zamnarkomindel-tov. N. N. Krestinskomyu,” AVPRF, f. 31, d. 3, l. 43
violence drove people to demonstrate or attack Mussolini. “Did you read,” wrote Gorky to Khodasevich in 1926, “how an old woman put a bullet in Mussolini’s nostril?” Gorky considered Mussolini to be a “skillful actor,” who would inevitably cause an explosion of displeasure in the country. He hoped that this “displeasure” would eventually overthrow fascism. Meanwhile, the Italian police stepped up their surveillance of the writer and his entourage, as a result of which Moura Budberg was subjected to the indignity of having her room searched in September 1925. Gorky was furious and wrote Mussolini a letter, asking for explanations: “If the Italian police considers my stay in Sorrento harmful for Italy, then would you please let me know about it directly without subjecting me and my family to unpleasantness we do not deserve. I am ready to leave your country immediately, a place I love very much.” Authorized Soviet representative P. M. Kerzhentsev received Mussolini’s assurances that similar actions would not happen again. But the Italian file on Gorky indicates that the police monitored his every move, recorded his visitors, and Intrusted his mail. The Italian Police Inspection seized a book entitled The Letters of Sacco and Vanzetti sent to “Massimo Gorky” from New York.

It is not surprising that Gorky was interested in Sacco’s and Vanzetti’s letters since life’s unfair turns were always of interest to him. He was always suspicious of the American justice system that was based on puritanical moral values and favored people with status and financial capital. Vanzetti and Sacco, both Italian immigrants to the US and anarchists who fought for immigrants’ rights, were convicted for crimes they did not commit. As details of the trial and the men’s suspected innocence became known, Sacco and Vanzetti became the center of one of the largest causes célèbres in modern history. In 1927, protests on their behalf were held in every

570 Maxim Gor’kii, “Khodasevichu,” in Novyi mir, no. 3 (1968): 43.
571 L. Bykovtseva, Gor’kii v Italii, p. 303.
572 Maxim Gor’kii, “Mussolini,” in Arkhiv Gor’kogo, vol. 9, p. 267.
major city in North America and Europe, as well as in Tokyo, Sydney, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, Montevideo, Johannesburg, and Auckland. They were executed in 1927, but pardoned 50 years later, in 1977. Gorky received the book only after the Italian political police approved it.\textsuperscript{573} Italian agents also became concerned about publications of Gorky’s novels, particularly \textit{Mother}, which was published in 1928 by Giuseppe Monanni, an anarchist under surveillance who managed to push this novel through as part of a series of books on modern culture by fascist authors.\textsuperscript{574} But the circulation was small and the novel “met with little success in Italy,” so a few copies were actually sent to Italians residing in Switzerland at their request. The political police was supremely satisfied with this development of events since Monanni also retired right after publication of the novel and did not appear to be that interested in politics or maintaining relations with other politically suspicious people. Overall, although the Italian political police put quite a few people, mostly anarchists, under surveillance, the reports indicated that their ‘suspicious’ and ‘revolutionary’ activities were not serious. Like agents themselves, who left a recipe for white bean soup among their official reports on Gorky, characters ‘under suspicion’ were too engaged in their own lives in sunny Italy, including Gorky himself, who was busy writing novels instead of organizing political movements that threatened Mussolini’s regime.\textsuperscript{575}

But as the international situation worsened in the 1920s, Gorky became alert to the growing isolation of the Soviet Union in the larger community of nations. He was particularly

\textsuperscript{574} Ibid., Rome, 16 December 1929, f. 19, d. 619, l. 3.
\textsuperscript{575} Ibid., f. 26, d. 619, l. 17.
incensed when he heard the news in 1927 that London had broken off diplomatic relations with Moscow.

**Creative Ascent**

After Gorky arrived in Germany in 1922, he embarked on organizing a new journal. He called it *Beseda* [*Conversation/Dialogue*]. The idea had come from Formalist critic and writer Viktor Shklovsky who had suggested the potential value of a publication which would accept contributions from Russian writers both inside and outside the USSR, hence facilitating a ‘dialogue’ between the two communities. Gorky and Vladislav Khodasevich were poised to edit the journal and to publish literary works as well as articles about recent developments in literature and science. For Gorky, it was a labor of love. The magazine was to play two important roles. First, it would allow young and talented writers to express themselves. Second, it was supposed to be a bridge between the Soviet Union and the Russian émigré community. Gorky sincerely believed that with this magazine he would be able to bridge the ever-widening gulf between the USSR and the émigré diaspora. But to his chagrin, he not only failed to attract many manuscripts from Soviet writers, but the promise of the Soviet authorities to make *Beseda* available in the USSR was not honored. The magazine ceased publication after six issues between 1923 and 1925. The collapse of *Beseda* led to a break in relations between Gorky and Khodasevich. It also reminded Gorky once again that his power to influence developments inside the Soviet Union was still extremely limited.

His own writing, however, flourished in Italy. Despite his poor health, the frequent moves and considerable demands on his time, he managed to create within three years of departing from Russia a magnificent body of writing. He worked at his desk from nine in the morning until two o’clock in the afternoon, then took a two hour break with a stroll to the seaside
and lunch, continued working from four until eight o’clock, had dinner, and read for three or four hours after it. “I live quietly, write a lot, do not really go or travel anywhere…” he wrote Mariia Andreeva. While in his office on Capri Tolstoy’s portrait inspired him to create, in Sorrento it was Pushkin who stimulated Gorky’s days of quiet writing. For the most part, he created autobiographical works—My Universities, the sequel to Childhood and Among People; a series of pieces originally intended for inclusion in what would have been the fourth volume of an autobiographical tetralogy; and the remarkable sketches collected as Fragments from My Diary [Zametki iz dnevnika]. He also returned to fiction, writing a myriad of excellent short stories which appeared under the rather modest title Stories of 1922-1924 [Rasskazy 1922-1924]. It was a spectacular renaissance, somewhat grudgingly acknowledged in the Soviet Union itself and largely ignored by the émigré community, many of whose members never forgave Gorky for his cooperation with the Bolsheviks after the revolution. Mikhail Prishvin, Konstantin Fedin, and Viktor Shklovskii embraced Gorky’s Stories of 1922 as something novel and unique. “This is a writer’s diary, but it is presented as a finished fictional work… what is new in Gorky’s approach is the absence of didacticism. He watches his heroes, making his work beautiful and profound.” V. G. Veshnev, however, accused Gorky of “Dostoevshchina”: “From a revolutionary petrel Gorky turned into a poet of his made-up country of freaks.” “Stories of 1922-1924 and Gorky’s Notes are his best books,” writes contemporary scholar Dmitry Bykov.

Between 1924 and 1925, Gorky also worked on The Artamonov Business, an absorbing account of life among Russian merchants. He described the three generations of the Artamonov

576 L. Bykovtseva, Gorkii, p. 306.
578 V. G. Veshnev, “Gor’koe lakomstvo,” Na literaturnom postu, no. 20 (1927).
579 Dmitry Bykov, Gor’kii, p. 214.
family with great passion contrasting them with three generations of the proletarian Morozov family. He had shared the idea for this novella, *The Artamonov Business*, with Tolstoy in 1910 who was a bit skeptical, so Gorky later discussed it with Lenin, who liked the plot but was not sure how the author would end it. Life itself suggested to Gorky how to finish it. The October Revolution presented workers with the power that could terminate the bourgeois order of life, so the Morozovs became the “true and fair” masters of their own existence. Gorky wrote the novel very quickly: in 1924 he spent four months on the first version, the second edited version took him two months, and the third and final one four months. By March 1925, Gorky was done. He trimmed his text to achieve, density, expressiveness and necessary economy of a dialogue, characters’ capacity and compactness, clarity and precision of the language.

Italy brought Gorky to life. It filled him with such powerful creative energy and optimism that immediately after *The Artamonov Business* he embarked on his most ambitious project of all—*The Life of Klim Samgin*, a massive epic of Russian life from the latter part of the nineteenth century to 1917. The work was to push both his writing skills and his powers of endurance to the limit. His letter to Stefan Zweig put it well: “I have become passionately absorbed in this painstaking and difficult work.” He wished to portray “thirty years in the life of the Russian intelligentsia,” realizing that it would be something quite “Asiatic in the variety of its hues… saturated with European influences as they were reflected in the psychology and frame of mind, which were totally Russian and rich in suffering, both real and imaginary.” For 40 years, Gorky watched how the Russian intelligentsia changed and developed during the most turbulent and vibrant years in Russian history and in his last work, he created representatives of the

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580 L. Bykovtseva, *Gor’kii*, p. 308.
582 Maxim Gor’kii, “Stefanu,” p. 429.
intelligentsia among whom the main protagonist, Klim Samgin, stands out. In the Russian literary tradition, he is an embodiment of rampant egoism and snobbery, human emptiness, moral poverty, and the hatred of common people, which lead him to lose himself and ultimately die. He juxtaposed the Russian intelligentsia with factory workers. The Bolshevik Stepan Kutuzov and his colleagues symbolize energy, will, and the intelligence of working people. On the pages of Gorky’s last novel, they walk with confidence about the victory of the first socialist revolution. It was a utopian view that would nonetheless affect several generations of Soviet citizens.

Gorky did not want to leave Italy until he finished his novel, but circumstances forced him to depart from Sorrento at the cost of time and creative energy. Samgin would remain unfinished. Although Gorky had many versions of its endings, he could not decide which denouement to adopt. L. K. Oliander, a literary scholar of Gorky, believes that a novel without an ending signifies an open text. It is for readers to decide what Samgin’s ending could have been. “In fact,” he argues, “for Gorky himself The Life of Klim Samgin remained an open text.” Gorky’s first title for the novel was “The History of an Empty Soul,” which speaks volumes of what Gorky tried to convey through the character of Samgin. Gorky saw in him a representative of the intelligentsia who did nothing, but thought that he was always right. Such people’s modus operandi is dominating other people by proving that they are right. For Gorky, as Dmitry Bykov argues, Samgin is the main enemy because he does not believe in truth and does not search for it—he believes in rightness. Therefore, Samgin could adjust to any kind of regime and survive with his “I told you so.” Gorky saw no ending because there could be none.

583 See Dmitry Bykov, Gor’kii, p. 230.
584 It is unclear whether death threats or the fact that Gor’kii’s son really wanted to leave played a bigger role in Gor’kii’s decision. The rapid spread of Fascism and Nazism were also important factors.
586 Dmitry Bykov, Gor’kii, p. 231.
And killing Samgin during the revolution was something false and artificial because such characters are usually survivors who proliferate during troubled times. Ultimately, “the lack of conceptual clarity in the novel’s ending signifies the complete destruction of the old world, its moral make up and stability. It shows the tragedy of this destruction and the impossibility of ever rebuilding it.”

Gorky’s Relationship with the Soviet Embassy in Rome

The Italian police file that I found in the Italian archives indicates that Gorky had a very close relationship with the Soviet Embassy in Rome. All his contacts with the Embassy were made through his son Maksim Peshkov, whom many scholars and writers suspect of being an NKVD agent, although no documentary proof has been found that corroborates this assumption. The documents from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs show that the young Peshkov was a diplomatic courier and a very successful one at that. Maksim spoke German, Italian, and French, so he was a logical choice for a diplomatic post. He easily borrowed money from other Soviet diplomats and wrote informal notes to them, which are still kept in the diplomatic files in Moscow. His career as a Bolshevik sports instructor never took off and his mother Ekaterina Peshkova worried that he got “too carried away” with Bolshevism, which, undoubtedly, was advantageous to the Soviet government. Gorky, on the other hand, did not find that their son got carried away. Conversely, he believed that Maksim evaluated Bolshevism’s pro and contra well. His son fought on the side of Bolsheviks in October of 1917, defending the Kremlin, and was later arrested by the Junkers. Gorky kept Maksim in Petrograd and consoled Ekaterina that

the atmosphere surrounding him was more about art than politics: “[E]veryone spoke about paintings like in the old times.”  

Yet Maksim had been a considerable worry for both of his parents during his adolescence. Some letters written in the 1920s speak directly of their anxiety for his health and allude to his problems with alcohol. Gorky was concerned because Maksim was extremely talented and essentially feckless: “Maksim has not been himself, so distracted has he become by the purchase of the car.”  

Despite his hopes that Maksim would settle down after his marriage to Nadezhda Vvedenskaia, he was to be constantly disappointed in his son, be it for his careless attitude towards Nadezhda during her first pregnancy or his frivolous obsession with motor cars. By 1928, Maksim who had some talent as a linguist, an illustrator, and caricaturist, spent nearly all his time in idleness, except for occasional secretarial chores for his father.

Although the Soviet government asked Maksim to leave his post and take care of his father in Germany and Italy, Maksim maintained a high level of involvement with the Soviet Embassy staff, visiting them often in Rome, particularly when Gorky stayed in Sorrento. There might have been a more sinister side to all this. During the civil war, Maksim had worked closely with the Bolsheviks, encountering numerous prominent figures in the Cheka. One such individual was Pyotr Kriuchkov who was apparently a police agent from the start, although he first met Gorky when he worked for the publishing house “Kniga” in Germany. Kriuchkov began dealing with Gorky in 1922, gradually making his way into Gorky’s inner circle, gaining the writer’s confidence, and finally becoming his personal secretary. His presence indicated that the dark net in which Stalin would eventually ensnare Gorky was already in place during the 1920s.

591 Maxim Gor’kii, “Ekaterine Peshkovoi, 14 oktiabria 1926,” Arkhiv Gor’kogo, vol. 9, p. 257.
Maksim’s trips to the Soviet Embassy increased around May of each year when Gorky prepared to travel to Moscow.592 One exception was 1930 when Gorky stayed in Italy, exactly a year after his visit to Solovki.

Gorky’s close ties to the Soviet Embassy indicate that he could have never survived in Italy or Europe as an émigré. The Soviet diplomats filed several complaints with the Italian Interior Ministry that Gorky failed to receive Soviet newspapers, such as Izvestiia and Pravda. It should be noted that only Gorky was allowed to receive Soviet newspapers in Fascist Italy.593 Gorky never spoke a foreign language and the Russian émigré diaspora, an invaluable support system for some, treated Gorky with hatred and malevolence.594

Most importantly, Gorky had a close relationship and corresponded with Dmitrii Ivanovich Kurskii, the Soviet ambassador to Italy who also visited Gorky in Sorrento and invited him for meetings with the international press. Gorky’s attendance came as a surprise to many journalists who were interested in what Gorky had to say about his travelling plans in the USSR and what he thought of Soviet modernization. Ludvig Shtein, the author of the book Germany, inquired if “Gorky earned as much money as a simple worker at the factory” and whether the proletarian writer had private property in the USSR. Kurskii noted in his report that Gorky had to give a lesson of “political correctness” to this German author.595 Fascinated with the pace of Soviet modernization, Gorky praised the Soviet state for its discipline and vision and Kurskii concluded that Gorky’s views seemed to play an instrumental role in dismantling the negative

592 “Minister Interno/Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza Divisione Politizia Politica Fasciocoli Personali 1927-1944, Roma May 7, 1933 Archivio Centrale Dello Stato, f. 28, d. 619, l. 54.
593 Ibid., 12 June 1932, 16 June 1930, f. 63-64, f. 5, d. 619, l. 74.
594 Natalia Primochkina explored Gor’kii’s controversial relationship with the writers abroad in the 1920s and early 1930s in her study, Gor’kii i pisatel’i russkogo zarubezhia (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2003). That the Russian emigration treated Gor’kii with hatred mentioned V. Khodasevich, L. Trotsky, I. Bunin. That there was a plot to assassinate him is still unknown.
595 “Reports, letters, diaries of an envoy,” AVPRF f. 131-466, b. 14, l. 3-6.
image of the Soviet Union. Kurskii often complained in his reports that Italian newspapers were full of misinformation about the Soviet Union and when foreign journalists met with Gorky, they received a more positive picture of the current developments in the Bolshevik state. Whether foreign correspondents changed their views of the Soviet Union is not important for the purposes of this study, but it is vital that Kurskii thought that Gorky’s presence made a difference. This means that Gorky was an invaluable asset to the Bolsheviks in the late 1920s-early 1930s.

In his reports, Kurskii noted that foreign envoys were interested in Gorky’s views. For example, the Latvian envoy, Mr. Sei, asked Kurskii to explain Gorky’s position in regards modernization in the USSR.596 Stalin, Litvinov, and Kurskii understood how invaluable Gorky’s praise and positive attitude towards the Soviet Union was meant for the better international image of their country. It is paradoxical that on the one hand, the European press printed many condescending and pejorative articles about backward Soviet state and on the other hand there was much fascination with Soviet modernization. Kurskii’s reports are full of examples of diplomatic dignitaries, such as the Polish envoy, and the Mexican and Turkish ambassadors, expressing their direct interest and admiration of the Soviet modernization process. This might have been what Kurskii wanted Stalin and Litvinov to know, but ambassadors usually report these encounters with precision. The foreign representatives, of course, intend to make an impression on their counterparts, but this also means that the international representatives had a different hidden agenda. From this perspective, Gorky’s presence and his favorable account of the Soviet Union was even more invaluable to the Soviet authorities. If he could sway public opinion, then the diplomatic core might alter its views as well and express them more openly.

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596 “Reports, letters, diaries of an envoy,” AVPRF, f. 131-466, b. 14, l. 8-10.
since behind closed doors they already expressed deep interest in the success of the educational reforms in the USSR.  

Courtship with Pressure

Although Gorky admired and loved Italy, his gaze during his sojourns in Sorrento was always directed at the Soviet Union. He was intensely interested in its economic, cultural, and literary growth. He not only subscribed to many Soviet newspapers, but also received numerous letters from workers, writers, and peasants, and felt responsible for answering all of them. At times, he would write fifty letters a day. There were many visitors from the USSR whose visa process he facilitated. Vsevolod Ivanov and his family, Samuil Marshak, the peasant Volnyi, the worker Trenev, and many others used Gorky’s recommendations when they applied for Italian visas.  

Doctor L. G. Levin and Professor V. S. Kholtsman visited Gorky, N. V. Kovalev, a botanist, spent the day at Gorky’s villa. Academicians D. N. Prianishnikov (chemist), N. I. Vavilov (botanist), O. IU. Schmidt (mathematician), Professors G. A. Schmidt, N. K, Koltsov, P. N. Bolgarev (all biologists), and chemist L. A. Bakh engaged in long conversations with Gorky about science, culture, and history. When the Soviet ship Abkaziia arrived in Sorrento with 300 workers who were awarded a trip abroad for their excellent work, Gorky went to greet them. He made a speech and cried from sheer joy to see young men who had a great future in front of them.  

Dmitry Kurskii’s wife noted in her memoir that it was difficult to talk Gorky into leaving the waterfront after the ship took off for the Soviet Union. He was touched to see young people who were interested in all aspects of life as much as he envisioned them to be.  

598 “Pisma Gorkogo,” Arkhiv Gorkogo, f. 31, d. 21, l. 4.  
They embraced Italian culture, visited museums, and Gorky shared with them his passion for the country’s ancient history by becoming their guide around Naples for a day. Gorky treated everyone to wine and spent the entire day with the first 200 Soviet sailors visiting Italy. He was interested in them as much as they were interested in him and Italian art. Gorky was studying Renaissance art at the time and his library in Moscow still contains many books on this period with his underlining and marginalia. In P. Muratov’s book *Images of Italy*, Gorky underlined the following lines: “We are struck by the sense of eternity that permeates Quattrocento art, by its mysteriously obsessive fascination with the future. It invites you to cast a look around the world, hear it calling, and reach towards its elements wholeheartedly, without reserve—at such moments man stops being a guest on earth and plants a fertile seed for the future.”

But in all these visits and letters, there was also the pressure to return. The first All-Union Congress sent him its greeting in 1925: “We hope that you will be able to return to your Motherland in the near future.” Gorky often tried to shake this pressure off by arguing that returning would not allow him to finish his work about the Russian revolution. Yet public disbelief was mounting. His son Maksim also tried to convince Gorky to return to Moscow. Mayakovsky wrote a poem that ridiculed Gorky’s unwillingness to return. Some journalists hinted at the comfort of Italian and Gorky’s beautiful villa as the main points of attraction that

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603 Quoted in “Italianskie motivy v biblioteki Gorkogo,” in *Maxim Gor’kii i Italiia* (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2013), p. 16.
604 Quoted in L. Bykovtseva, *Gor’kii*, p. 317.
precluded Gorky from returning. Those who visited Gorky realized that he did not really own anything, only rented, and in general he never had much interest in ownership.

If the rise of Fascism and the gradual turn against the USSR by many European governments help to explain why Gorky eventually bowed to the pressure being exerted upon him to return to his native land, there is plenty of evidence that he was well aware of the tyranny, both actual and potential, within the Soviet system. Although he was to write enthusiastically about the ‘heroism’ of socialist construction, he was obviously disturbed by the darker side of life in the new Russia. He certainly wanted to have nothing to do with the militant extremism of the proletarian movement (known as RAPP), and he was extremely concerned when he learned that Aleksandr Voronsky had been removed from his post as editor-in-chief of the prestigious monthly *Krasnaia nov’* (Red Virgin Soil)—one of the more ominous manifestations of the new political climate. Gorky also became increasingly concerned when one of his favorite young diplomats who was full of life, Levin, committed suicide. In his letter to Dmitrii Kurskii, Gorky expressed his deep concerns and asked for an explanation. “I am shocked by Levin’s death. I saw him very upset and he complained to me that this fool Zenkevich emotionally abused him. I demand an investigation in this case. He could not have killed himself.”605 This letter indicates that Gorky asked straightforward questions carefully and behind the scenes. It may be suggested, therefore, that Gorky’s first return trip to the USSR was the product of both utopianism and pragmatism. Moved by the desire to see the socialist dream realized and decadent Europe confounded, Gorky also hoped to use his influence to tame the excesses of Soviet totalitarianism, much as he had striven to do in the immediate post-revolutionary years.

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605 “Pisma Gorkogo,” AG, f. 31, d. 21, p. 6.
Although Gorky experienced a change of heart towards Soviet Russia as early as 1925, he made the first of his return trips there only in 1928. The delay can be attributed to two factors. As Gorky himself regularly pointed out in his letters to the sizeable number of correspondents who asked him—often quite bluntly—to explain his continued absence from socialist Russia, he had begun work on a major literary project which he knew he would be unable to complete if he were to return home.

Vaksberg’s assumption that Gorky returned to the Soviet Union only because of money is also far from the complicated truth. The hateful relations with the émigré diaspora, disillusionment with European culture and politics because of the rise of Fascism, but most importantly, Gorky’s desire to be in the Soviet Union where history was made and play a vital role in the process of civilizing the masses and “creating fairer forms of life” played as equal, if not a greater, role in his decision to return to the USSR in 1928. Already in 1925, Gorky wrote to E. D. Kuskova: “Of course, I have never said to anyone that I would never return to Russia. Why not? My attitude towards the Soviet authorities is clear: I do not see, think, or wish any other power except Soviet power for the Russian people. I will probably go to Russia in 1926 when I finish my novel.” And in 1925 in his letter to Romain Rolland, Gorky concluded that great historical events were happening in Russia, that “in a prophetic kind of way, Moscow is right, and one has to walk with it.”

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Chapter 5

The Tragic Years: Shepherding a Prophet and Building Soviet Culture

Therefore, if eventually I go deformed to my grave, on my death bed I shall pronounce with certain pride that for about forty years some good people tried to disfigure my soul, yet their stubborn efforts ended in failure.

M. Gorky\textsuperscript{608}

What is happening at present is the selection of personnel in line with the interests of certain ambitious people, and this signals the inevitability of petty, personal struggles among the cliques within the Union, struggles not at all in keeping with the organization of literature as a force which might operate in an ideologically unified manner.

M. Gorky\textsuperscript{609}

Did any part of him believe in Communism? Certainly, if the alternative was Fascism.

Julian Barnes\textsuperscript{610}

One of Gorky’s lesser known short stories, “My Companion” (1894) earned him enormous praise from two great writers of his time--Anton Chekhov and Leo Tolstoy. The story is autobiographical and prophetic. Its protagonist, the Georgian prince Shakro, turned into a beggar and a thief after losing his money. Gorky sympathized with Shakro, fed him, protected him from predatory glances, and began taking on different jobs in order to earn money for the Georgian prince while his companion avoided any kind of work under different pretexts. Gradually Gorky turned into Shakro’s servant. Gorky fully realized that he was losing control and that this “animal-like” Georgian who lived by the mantra that “the strongest have a law unto

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{608} Maxim Gor’kii, \textit{Into the People}, SS, p. 358.
\end{thebibliography}
themselves” was manipulating and laughing at him, but the writer consciously surrendered to him and lost his freedom. Despite Gorky’s attempts to explain to Shakro the advantages of mutual help, learning, and living by the law, the cruel prince maintained that a powerful man did not need to study because he could always find his own way, even if he were blind. The story ends with Shakro abandoning Gorky in Tiflis, and with this gesture breaking his promise of sharing his secure and luxurious life with his “servant.” Gorky underscores Shakro’s egoism and manipulative mind throughout the narrative, yet retains him as a companion: “This is a lifelong companion … he will be with me until death (он до гроба проводит меня...).”

Written in 1894, the short story uncannily foretold Gorky’s relationship with Joseph Stalin. By 1925, Gorky was aware that Stalin was a clever and ferocious leader, but as the newly discovered documents at the Italian State archives and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs archives in Moscow demonstrate, Gorky’s decision to return to the Soviet Union and his willingness to support the Soviet regime were conscious and took into account the development of the international situation in the early 1930s. The advance of Fascism and Nazism, the terrorist activities of the White émigrés, and Gorky’s closeness to the Soviet diplomatic community made him see Stalin’s attempts to build and protect the Soviet state from a more sympathetic perspective. As in the story with Shakro, Gorky thought that he would be able to “soften” Stalin, but in the end, he became entangled in a tangled web of loyalties: to the Soviet government and to his own vision of Russia. He even rebelled, albeit privately. Stalin, on the other hand, used Gorky as a good “servant” of the Soviet state, but he knew that Gorky’s loyalties were controversial and therefore he distrusted him. The Soviet leader put Gorky under tight surveillance, but at the same time he cultivated Gorky’s myth and created an illusion that he deeply valued Gorky’s opinion about literary and ideological issues. On the eve of Gorky’s
death, Stalin concentrated much political power in Gorky’s hands. Why did he need to manipu-
late Gorky just as he embarked on promoting the new Soviet constitution of which the writer was supportive? Like Shakro, Stalin also used Gorky, but Stalin also kept his promise and took care of his proletarian poet. According to Lidiia Spiridonova, the Soviet government spent more than one million and ten thousand rubles a year on Gorky’s family. By comparison, in 1936 an ordinary doctor earned a salary of three hundred rubles a month—Gorky’s family cost the Soviet state one hundred and thirty thousand rubles a month. Stalin needed Gorky’s international fame to legitimize Socialist Realism as mandatory for all Soviet arts. This challenges the commonly held belief that Stalin had Gorky murdered. The relationship was ultimately about cultivating a poet to fulfill Stalin’s personal aims, but Gorky and Stalin also shared the similar goal of building a new socialist Russia, a “happy state” with a new Soviet man at its center.

Yet, Gorky overestimated his abilities in thinking that he could streamline and soften the violent means by which the Bolsheviks were building a new society. During the Civil War, Gorky had advocated better conditions for the intelligentsia, which is indeed what the creative and educational intelligentsia received under Stalin, along with draconian ideological controls. Many of the “chosen,” such as Mikhail Bulgakov, Dmitry Shostakovich, Sergei Prokofiev, and Maxim Gorky, found themselves in golden cages with privileges for which they had to pay with loyal behavior and conformist art. Thus, as a result of his illusions, Gorky ended up creating a form of culture that supported a state which controlled both culture and society and used

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611 Lidiia Spiridonova, Gor’kii: novyi vzgliad (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2004), p. 71.
violence to punish disobedience or even criticism. Having fought violence his entire life, Gorky ended up assisting Stalin in building a violent ideological machine that murdered millions. This is the major contradiction and drama of his life. Although he could not stand violence and fought for the “insulted and humiliated,” Gorky ended up collaborating with the Soviet regime that enforced an ideal communist society. By 1933 living in Italy was not an option because of rising Fascism, increasing surveillance, and death threats, so both rationally and emotionally Gorky was ready to return to the USSR. The aging writer, however, was outmaneuvered by Stalin’s power hungry, calculating, manipulative, and violent mind. And therefore he most certainly went “deformed” to his grave. No matter how much he tried to remain true to himself throughout his life, loyalty to the formation of a new homo sovieticus “disfigured” the project’s literary champion. Gorky’s drama was that he could not live without the USSR, but his return meant increasing collaboration with the Soviet government and full acceptance of the methods and tactics of Stalin’s government.

Stalin and the Return to the USSR

Gorky most likely met Stalin for the first time at the Fifth Congress of RSDRP held in London in May 1907. “One could see Gorky in a tight circle of the Caucasian Bolsheviks,” wrote Nikolai Nikoriakov, “together with Mikha Tskhaya, Joseph Stalin, and Stepan Shaumian.” Both Stalin and Gorky worked for the Bolshevik newspaper Our Path whose first issue appeared on August 7, 1913. In October of 1917, however, Stalin wrote an article entitled “From My

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614 There are many Gor’kii scholars who underscore that he returned to the USSR because of the historical circumstances (rise of Fascism and Nazism) and his desire to participate in the Boshevik new project. See L. Spiridonova, Nastoiaschhii Gor’kii, Dmitrii Bykov, Gor’kii, Pavel Basinskii, Gor’kii, D. Barakhov, Drama Gor’kogo. What this dissertation adds to it is a deeper dimension. Any connection with the USSR (Gor’kii’s Rus) meant collaboration with the Soviet government. This meant fulfillment of his grand dream of building an ideal society and recasting a Man, but it also meant accepting enforcement as the right method for the achievement of these goals.

Mortal Enemies Who Surround Me,” published in *Worker’s Path*, which harshly condemned Gorky’s article “It Is Impossible to Be Silent.” Gorky asked the Central Committee to refute the rumors about an October coup d’état, which was supposed to be in the making. Stalin, indignant at Gorky’s attempt at stopping the revolution, called him a “neurasthenic” and a “renegade” who preferred to drink tea with other representatives of the intelligentsia and contemplate the revolution instead of acting on his ideas. Later Stalin claimed to forgive Gorky his transgressions, but their relationship remained complicated and contributed to the tragedy of Gorky’s final eight years.

Just how one describes that tragedy—as a case of a vain and calculating man who willingly and knowingly abetted an oppressive regime, or of an innocent dupe of Stalin and his henchmen, or a dreamer hoping to serve as a champion of moderation—will, inevitably, remain a matter for individual judgement. This is because the majority of historical documents that could contribute to our understanding either disappeared or were organized by Gorky himself. In his letters, he often indicated how many letters a day he wrote, but what the archivists found after his death does not coincide with his numbers on certain days. For example, Gorky’s extensive correspondence in Sorrento with Kamenev, Bukharin, and Yagoda has disappeared. When the Communist Party formed the committee assigned to work on Gorky’s literary and epistolary legacy, they discovered Gorky’s systematized archive upon entering his house on Malaya Nikitskaya. He made certain that the final true story would be “no one’s” version.

Over the past decade, some literary critics, philosophers, and historians have argued that Gorky was responsible for mass terror, intolerance of dissidents, and party sectarianism because

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he returned to the USSR. For example, Boris Paramonov, a Russian-American philosopher, argues that Gorky made his peace with the Bolsheviks and returned to the Soviet Union once the Bolsheviks embraced a modernizing turn in their domestic policy—industrialization and collectivization. He presents Gorky as a staunch positivist who believed in conquering and controlling nature.  

Mikhail Agurskii argues that Gorky was the actual mastermind behind collectivization. By promoting collectivization, Gorky realized the essentially Nietzschean idea of the selective elimination of social groups. His conclusions are highly dubious and rather absurd, of course, since a) collectivization returned to the policies of *prodrazverstka* during the Civil War; b) a class analysis of the peasantry and “kulaks” were built into agrarian policy in the 1920s; and c) Stalin masterminded the series of turns from the Smolensk Affair, “Siberian methods,” and the “Right deviation” that started collectivization.

In the latest edition of his book *Petrel’s Death*, Arkadii Vaksberg blames Gorky for being an agent of Soviet power and argues that vanity pulled Gorky to denounce others. After analyzing the work of the expert committee on preservation of cultural artifacts, Vaksberg accused the writer of appropriating antique treasures. He writes: “Gorky is involved in the most repulsive crimes of the Bolsheviks—the robbery of dozens and hundreds of thousands of people.” None of the three accusations reflect Gorky’s agonizingly complicated path during the 1930s.

The most certain thing that can be said about these years is that Gorky’s return to Russia was a very slow and complicated decision. On August 19, 1925, answering Ekaterina Kuskova’s question about his travelling plans, Gorky wrote: “Naturally, I have never told anyone that I

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619 “Plebei na puti k kul’ture,” Boris Paramonov, accessed on September 18, 2019, https://www.svoboda.org/a/24937934.html
would not return to Russia. Why not? My relationship with the Soviet government is clear: I do not see, think, or wish any other viable political government for the Russian people.”

Context was important. Miguel Primo de Rivera, an aristocratic military officer, was in the process of establishing a dictatorship in Spain and started persecuting progressive cultural figures. After the murder of Italian socialist Giacomo Matteotti, who accused the Fascists of electoral fraud, the Italian Fascist government faced “mounting public demonstrations of hostility” and established emergency laws forever changing the country’s placid climate. Mussolini, of course, denied his responsibility for the murder of the socialist deputy. By 1925, clouds were gathering over serene Italy and Gorky foresaw more violence and the tightening of freedoms and laws. With right-wing ideologies spreading rapidly in Europe, Soviet Communism, in Gorky’s view, became the only progressive path for humanity. In his speeches from the late 1920s and early 1930s, Gorky points to the main security issue of his time, which was a full-speed arms race in Europe. In his article “About the Red Army,” he wonders about the reasons for the military buildup:

“Dozens and hundreds of thousands of workers at European factories make guns and cannons, explosives and poisonous gases to kill each other. Who needs mutual extermination?” The answer, according to Gorky was that this benefitted “[s]everal dozens of thousands of very wealthy and irresponsible people who rule the world and abuse labor of others…. poisoning laborers with greed, envy, and hatred.” Living in Italy, Gorky understood well that the Fascist regime was primarily supported by the bourgeoisie which was interested in reaping much profit

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622 AG, Korrespondentsiia M. Gor’kogo i Ekateriny Kuskovoi, PGrl, Box 21, Folder 28, p. 1, The Gor’kii Institute of World Literature, Russia, Moscow.
625 Given Gor’kii’s Eurocentrism, his embrace of the socialist ideology as the only viable alternative to Fascism was instrumental. But what anti-Fascism alone leaves out is his vision for a new art, one that would propagandize heroic “achievements” (Nashi dostizheniia) in order to build new socialist culture.
626 Maxim Gor’kii, “Ob armii, rozhdennoi oktiabrem,” Pravda, no. 275 (November 27, 1928).
from the military buildup. In this politically and militarily volatile situation, Gorky chose to return to the country where he could exert the most influence. And in one important sense he was right: it was the Soviet people who, more than any other, defended the humanist ideal in the Second World War and defeated Nazism and Fascism.

*The Slow Return to the USSR*

Gorky made his first trip to the Soviet Union in the spring of 1928, but returned to Sorrento in the autumn to avoid the severity of the Russian winter, which he feared for health reasons. In 1929, he again followed the same pattern. The following year he made no visit to the USSR at all because of problems with his health. But in 1931 and 1932, he again spent lengthy periods in the Soviet Union before leaving Italy for good, which he did in 1933. The last entry in Gorky’s file kept in the Italian archives dates back to June 12, 1933. It is a long report from the High Commissioner of Naples to the General Director of Secret Affairs, and it is full of complaints of how impenetrable the Villa “Il Sorrito” was and how Gorky’s family mostly kept to itself and rarely ventured outside. Gorky’s son drove him everywhere, so the secret services failed to get any information through the driver they hoped to make a part of Gorky’s household. Even though they planned to establish a surveillance post in the hotel across the street upon Gorky’s return from the USSR in 1932, he never returned. The file ends with a report that is full of descriptions, but no substantive material to accuse Gorky of espionage. From the content of the file, one can conclude that the writer led a solitary life and used his time in Italy to write and digest what the October Revolution meant for him and for the Russian people who now were building a new society. It is also clear that if Gorky returned to Italy in 1933, the surveillance would have been increased and his life would have been in more danger. In the words of the Italian secret agent: “I would like to propose to the Honorable Minister the appropriate means to
track, tighten control, and monitor the Gorky family’s movements while in the meantime I am
awaiting the decision of the Ministry on the full control of the confidential correspondence
forwarded to the Gorky family to which we did not have access.”

Yet, Gorky’s repeated journeys to the Soviet Union during these years symbolize his
indecision: was he now a member of Stalin’s new society with everything that implied? Or was
he still a reluctant émigré? The research shows that the period of his divided residence and
precarious existence marks a distinct period in his life. In the years up to 1933 Gorky spoke more
often with optimism and confidence about the prospects for Stalin’s Soviet Union. By contrast,
the final years in Russia witnessed his gradual decline into depression bordering on despair. His
official speeches were heavily edited and contained more of the Bolshevik language than did his
own articles and letters.

If Gorky realized that the Soviet Union was already well down the path towards Stalin’s
personal dictatorship—and this was something that Gorky knew only too well—why did he
return there at such a dangerous time? There were many reasons—some more apparent than
others. First, there was considerable pressure from the regime itself. Stalin evidently wanted
Gorky to return home, so that he could both ensure his silence on sensitive subjects, such as
Gorky’s *Un timely Thoughts*, and at the same time harness the writer’s unique authority and talent
to the cause of his new cultural policies.

The pressure was exerted as much by indirect as by direct means. Gorky had to respond
to criticism in the newspapers or other quarters about his long stays in Italy. How could a man

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627 Minister Interno/Direzione Generale Pubblica Sicurezza Divisione Politizia Politica Fasciocoli Personali 1927-
1944, Naples, June 12, 1933, Archivio Centrale Dello Stato, f. 95, d. 619, l. 52.
628 One of the important tasks for future researchers of Gor’kii would be to compare all the drafts of Gor’kii’s
speeches with the final published versions. To accomplish this task, one has to have access to the Gor’kii archives at
IMLI, which is hard to obtain.
who considered himself a true defender of socialism continue to live in the bourgeois (Fascist) West? Gorky answered these inquiries straightforwardly: “I have never owned [a villa], I do not own one now, and of course I shall never own one in the future either… I would do far better in terms of the ‘acquisition of every comfort’—the facilities which my age, my work, and my state of health demand—were I to reside in the Soviet Union and not here. I am not having my sons [or granddaughters who are too young to go to school] in bourgeois schools.”

He suspected that it was the White émigré press that emphasized his “villa” and “bourgeois comforts” in order to compromise him in the eyes of European socialists and Soviet authorities. Gorky further explained that he would not live anywhere in the Soviet Union except Moscow, but he anticipated numerous meetings and various visits which could have interfered with his work. In Italy he lived in total isolation and alone and this allowed him to work ten or even twelve hours a day. “In Moscow,” he wrote “I would be tempted to go to the theater and take trips; whereas over here I never go to the theater, and it has been two months since I even last went into town, which is only three kilometers from my apartment.”

That Gorky tried to justify his choice of residence only shows that he was vulnerable to such arguments. From 1924, he had come to look upon the USSR as the only potential bastion of socialism, a view which inevitably hardened as Hitler and Mussolini consolidated their hold on power, adding to fears of a new world war.

Yet, Khodasevich who lived with Gorky several years and worked with him closely on the magazine Beseda, later suggested that the real choice had effectively been made by the mid-1920s and that after a brief respite in Germany and Czechoslovakia, Gorky was ready once again to adopt his favored role as the bard of the proletarian revolution.

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630 Maxim Gor’kii, “Popovu,” p. 199.
631 Maxim Gor’kii, “Popovu,” p. 199.
right. Certainly, the need to serve Russian literature and guide Russia itself towards a better future had been essential to Gorky’s make-up as a man and an artist.

Third, life in Italy was becoming increasingly difficult for him as international relations deteriorated. The archival documents demonstrate that Gorky’s life was in danger and living in Italy by 1933 was no longer a safe option.

Fourth, there was a problem with his son Maksim. Much to his father’s chagrin, he still had no proper profession and appeared destined for a rather aimless existence. Even worse, his son was developing serious health problems. Gorky tried to convey his concern about Maksim in his letters in a jocular manner to avoid worrying Maksim’s wife Nadezhda (Timosha) and his mother Ekaterina, but Maksim struggled with different kinds of addiction to tobacco and alcohol. Writing in 1928 to Nadezhda, Gorky suggested that Maksim had a problem with smoking: “Maksim is in agony: he has been forbidden to smoke. You know what a frightful amount of tobacco he used to devour, so I put the doctors on to him, although he does not know that himself.” Then in 1932 he was even more straightforward with Maksim’s mother: “I am worried about Maksim’s health—he has become too nervous and tires too quickly. His organs are all functioning normally, but his nerves play up. He has stopped drinking wine and he doesn’t smoke much; it was a hard job convincing him to give up wine and tobacco.” It is clear from this letter that Gorky was worried about Maksim’s health and increasingly relied on doctors. “But you know what it is I’m afraid of. I am trying to convince him to leave for Moscow without waiting for me, and I think I may succeed. He must get himself examined and undergo serious treatment there.” By 1932, things had evidently reached a critical moment, since Gorky began

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634 Maxim Gor’kii, “Ekaterine Peshkovoi,” in Arkhiv Gor’kogo, vol. 9, p. 283.
to refer openly to Maxim’s problems with alcohol and voiced his support for proper medical
treatment in the USSR.

There is also evidence that Gorky was experiencing increasing financial difficulties by
the end of the 1920s. His income from publishing in the West was no longer what it was and
public interest in him had also declined considerably. A return to the USSR thus offered him a
considerable financial benefit. Not only would he be guaranteed a substantial income from the
publication of his works, there were other perks as well. Although the writer’s detractors are too
eager to explain his return to Russia solely in terms of his own pursuit of luxury, it is also true
that the Soviet government deliberately dangled such lures before Gorky. In 1931 the Soviet
authorities offered Gorky the magnificent Riabushinsky mansion in Moscow as his residence.
Gorky never liked this masterpiece of Art Nouveau architecture since he never appreciated the
style: he did not care for the myriad of turns and corners, the unusual lines of the façade, the
glass roof, or the whimsical balcony-porch.635 Ideally, Gorky intended to live in a simple and
spacious apartment, but Moscow, unlike St. Petersburg, did not have as many good commercial
apartment complexes.636 Ekaterina Peshkova recollected that Gorky called this house “a
ridiculous place.”637

Later he also had the use of a dacha in Gorki, the same Moscow suburb where Lenin had
once had a retreat. And from the winter of 1933 onwards, he had a winter home at Tesseli, on the
southern shore of the Crimea, within walking distance of the building in Foros where he had
ghostwritten Chaliapin’s autobiography two decades before.

635 L. Bykovtseva, Gor’kii v Moskve (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1972), p. 56.
636 S. M. Demkina, “Memorial’nye muzei v nashei zhizni. Maxim Gor’kii i dom na Maloi Nikitskoii,” in V Dome
Gor’kogo na Maloi Nikitskoii (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2005), p. 10.
637 L. Bykovtseva, Gor’kii v Moskve, p. 54.
Although such inducements may have had more of an appeal to Gorky than he was prepared to admit, there was another side of life in the Soviet Union which was probably more seductive still. By the 1930s Gorky had come to see that only by living there was he likely to have any real possibility of influencing the country’s future, not to mention the fact that all pressures—personal, financial, and political—were pushing him in the same direction. It is difficult to know exactly when he finally decided to return. His letter to Alexander Popov suggests that he seriously considered returning to the USSR in January 1931. “All the same, I will be coming back to live in the Soviet Union; the times are such that one needs to be at home.”638 Whatever the case, he could not have suspected what awaited him on his return.

Gorky’s Private World

The periods that Gorky spent in Sorrento after his first return trip to the Soviet Union in 1928 led to profound changes in his personal life. Although things appeared to be the same on the surface—Gorky’s villa continued to be a place of pilgrimage for many of his countrymen—his Italian existence had now acquired a new quality of impermanence and transience. He became more and more preoccupied with Russian affairs and was now much more a part of Soviet life than he had ever been before.

Gorky, however, was aware that his life in Stalin’s Russia was to be altogether different from what he had known in the past. After the first trip, he complained of the cloying and restrictive attention he had received: “People noticed that I became worn out by the excesses of the ceremonial welcome, so the comrades sent me away to have a rest.”639 In his letter to Alexander Kalyuzhnyi, an old friend who had encouraged Gorky to publish his first short story, he expressed his frustration that he did not have the freedom to explore the country on his own:

“Things turned out in a strange way: I met hardly any of my old personal friends.” The Soviet authorities were already carefully managing his movements. During his first two trips, Gorky was treated as a “foreign dignitary.” “Because of his hero’s welcome, Gorky, half ironically, referred to himself at this time as a ‘foreign notable’ (znatnyi inostranets). At this fateful moment in the writer’s transformation into an architect of Stalinist culture and Socialist Realism, he acted out the role of an outsider.”

But it was only after his final return to Russia that the situation rapidly deteriorated to the point where Gorky’s freedom to travel, receive guests, and even to correspond was severely curtailed. As Gorky’s friends and acquaintances soon came to understand, the writer’s “secretary” Petr Kriuchkov controlled access to Gorky during the last years, particularly after his son Maksim passed away. Konstantin Trenev, a prominent playwright who had known Gorky since before the revolution, talks of an occasion in Tesseli in 1936: “Visiting Gorky in those times was nearly impossible… I made inquiries and it turned out that his secretary, who impeded meetings with Aleksei Maksimovich, was then in Moscow.” More moving still is a memoir by Mikhail Slonimsky, only recently published, which describes Gorky’s existence during his last year in Moscow as one of virtual house-arrest and tells of a chance meeting with the aging writer—on the staircase in his house.

Maksim’s death on May 11, 1934, was a devastating blow that further aggravated Gorky’s final years. In his sad letter to Romain Rolland, Gorky wrote: “My son’s death has been a truly heavy and idiotically offensive blow for me. The spectacle of his agony remains

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641 Michael David-Fox, Showcasing, p. 142.
642 Ibid, p. 142.
relentlessly before me. It seems that I witnessed it only yesterday; to the very end of my days I will never forget the disgraceful torture of a man by the mechanical sadism of nature. Maksim was a strong and healthy person, and his dying was painful. He was gifted.”

Gorky enumerated Maksim’s gifts: an artistic talent that resembled that of Hieronymous Bosch; a bent for technology, of which scientists took notice; and a terrific sense of humor. But at the same time, Gorky realized that his son was “weak-willed” and never developed any of his gifts. He was thirty-six when he died. Gorky could not forget how once in Arzamas, “the town where Leo Tolstoy experienced the ‘Arzamas horror’ of the meaninglessness of bourgeois existence,” there was a holiday and the locals had gone to church—there were twelve churches and two monasteries in this small town of ten thousand—and thereafter went home to stuff themselves with pies and fall asleep. A sultry silence bore down on the small town. Maksim, however, was sitting alone on a bench by the gateway to the house and sang a song: “Oh, my will, my will, You are my treasure! My will is a soaring falcon! My will is the radiant dawn!” Maksim’s yearning for freedom in a dead town stood out in Gorky’s memory. In the end, Gorky remembered that now “Arzamas has a technological institute, two nine-year schools, and is outstanding in its floriculture.”

Gorky was drawing a deeper comparison between Imperial and Soviet Arzamas. Now people had the opportunity to receive a free education and build a new life. This letter is remarkable for two reasons: Gorky turns from painful personal reminiscences to developments in scholarship, education, and the sciences. Most importantly, he writes nothing at all of the circumstances surrounding his son’s death. By that time, he probably knew that all his correspondence was checked.

646 Ibid., p. 347.
Both Gorky’s colleagues and scholars speculated over the years that Maksim did not die of natural causes. Nina Berberova relates that Genrikh Iagoda, then head of the secret police, had become attracted to Maksim’s wife Nadezhda and arranged for his associates to get Maksim drunk, after which he was left out in the cold, which so weakened his constitution that he died. As Berberova puts it, “In the matter of Maksim’s death there cannot be any doubt that he died violently.” The story is not improbable, but it has not been confirmed by proper evidence. Given Maksim’s frail health and his predilection for alcohol, it is also quite possible that he died without interference. What is undeniable, however, is that Gorky’s state of mind was permanently altered as a result. Some scholars, such as Donald Fanger, believe that Gorky died with his son, whose demise took away his creative energy and zeal for life.

**Gorky’s Publishing Projects**

Throughout the entire period of his ‘slow return’ to Soviet Russia, Gorky was constantly engaged in all manner of new publishing and editorial activities. And despite the enormous pressure of this work, he continued to devote what time he could to his own writing, although as he feared all along, progress on his magnum opus, *The Life of Klim Samgin*, began to slow. The references to the novel in his letters show that he was still completely captivated by the book, but that the intensive research it required was proving too much for him. In his letter to Rolland he expressed his great fear: “I am afraid of only one thing; that my heart will stop beating before I manage to finish the novel.” It turned out that this fear was well founded—he never completed the work.

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648 Conversation with Donald Fanger ASEEES, Boston fall 2008.
Gorky also returned to writing plays, which he had not done for a long time, although he owed his early success to this genre. In fact, in terms of his world legacy, his plays still open theatre seasons not only in Russia, but also in Germany and Great Britain. Theaters named in his honor still exist in Russia and Germany—the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin kept its name even after reunification in 1990. The secret of Gorky’s success as a dramatist was that he could create complex characters that still make audiences think today. By 1934, Gorky articulated art’s purpose as the following way: “The task of ‘significant’ art is to show people in all their complexity (which is also the business of psychologists), or else as distinctly repulsive (which is the business of critical realists), or even to arouse sympathy and respect for people (which is to romanticize them).” Surprisingly enough, he did not think of himself as “a dramatist,” yet his plays forced him to be a better, more focused, and laconic writer. “Although I do not consider myself a ‘dramatist’, I am capable of writing amusing and reasonably interesting scenes for the theater—this is the explanation of my theatrical ‘success’… [drama] requires a light, deft hand, whereas yours is heavy,” wrote Gorky to Isaak Babel, “Speaking between ourselves, good, genuine drama is an exceptionally rare thing: … only Ostrovsky’s The Storm [fits the bill].” Gorky believed that although the dramas that survive the test of time are akin to “the ‘high art’ of tragedy,” comedy should have been the basis of the modern theater world. He wrote three new plays, Dostigaev and Others (1933), Somov and Others (1930), and Egor Bulychev and Others (1932), and produced a completely new version of his 1910 drama Vassa Zheleznova. Gorky’s rekindled interest in drama coincided with a more general interest in the

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651 Accessed on September 24, 2019 https://gorki.de/
652 Maxim Gor’kii, “I. E. Babeliu, 1934” in Literaturnoe nasledstvo: Go’rkii i sovetskie pisateli. Neizdannaya perеписка (Moscow, 1963), vol. 70, pp. 43-44.
653 Maxim Gor’kii, “I. E. Babeliu, 1934,” p. 44.
development of the theater in Stalin’s Russia. Gorky was once again contributing to building theatrical culture. In letters to his assistant Alexander Tikhonov, Gorky championed a contemporary repertoire based on the “theatre’s exclusively pedagogical responsibility for the sincere, persistent, and tireless promotion of culture for the masses, a responsibility for stimulating class-conscious revolutionary emotions.” To promote properly socialist attitudes among the Soviet masses and to reveal the social causes of the family dramas and individual conflicts upon which Imperial Russian theater focused should be the chief aim of Soviet theater, Gorky believed. In a letter to Stalin, he complained about the lack of theaters in Moscow, particularly for children, but wondered why Meyerhold and Tairov had their own theaters where they shamelessly promoted their wives, the actresses Zinaida Reikh and Alisa Koonen, respectively.

In the same letter to Stalin, Gorky courageously stood up for Dmitrii Shostakovich’s talent and his opera Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District. Gorky was aware that the opera played many times to critical acclaim and the public’s applause in the Soviet Union and beyond, until Stalin heard it. Then as if a sudden storm erupted and Shostakovich’s successful ascent ceased. A Pravda article from 28 January 1936 entitled “Muddle Instead of Music” accused him of using a formalist approach and ignoring authentic Russian music traditions. A critical publication in the most authoritative party publication meant only one thing—the end of a career. Shostakovich was advised to repent publicly, which he refused to do. Gorky knew that the talented and neurotic Shostakovich would not surrender, and he did everything to stand up for him. The letter to Stalin speaks to Gorky’s integrity and courage:

I have not bothered you on this matter before, but now that we must concern ourselves with the broader unification of the European intelligentsia, these

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questions have to be posed and clarified. Last year, in your speeches and your articles in Pravda, you spoke more than once of the need to display a careful regard for the individual. These words were heard in the West; they gave us a boost and increased support for us.

But then this incident with Shostakovich blew up. Favorable reports of his opera appeared both in organs of the central press and in many regional newspapers. The opera played with great success in the theaters of Leningrad and Moscow, and it received excellent reviews abroad. Shostakovich is a young man—he is about twenty-five—a person of unquestionable talent, but very self-confident and quite highly strung. The article in Pravda hit him like a ton of bricks; the fellow was completely crushed. It goes without saying that when I speak of bricks, I don’t mean the criticism itself but rather the tone of that criticism. Yet even the criticism itself is not convincing. Why is this a ‘muddle’? Where and how is this ‘muddle’ expressed? The critics should provide a technical evaluation of Shostakovich’s music. Instead of this, all that the Pravda article provided was the opportunity for a pack of mediocrities and hacks to persecute Shostakovich in every possible way. And this is what they are doing. Shostakovich lives by what he hears; he lives in the world of sounds. He wants to organize those sounds, to create melodies out of chaos. What was expressed in Pravda cannot be described as ‘careful regard [for the individual]’, even though it is precisely such careful regard that he so richly deserves as the most gifted of all contemporary Soviet musicians.

Gorky drew a realistic portrayal of Shostakovich as a young and incredibly talented and confident composer. When the Pravda article appeared, Shostakovich told his friend Isaak Glikman: “Even if they chop my hands off, I will still continue to compose music—albeit I have to hold the pen in my teeth.” Yet, again, Gorky acted with the aim of preserving Russian talent. Whether this letter influenced Stalin in his decision to preserve Shostakovich for posterity we may never know, but Shostakovich was left alone and could compose again even though he spent his entire life anticipating that someone would knock on his door and would send him to a labor camp. What matters is Gorky’s courage to write to Stalin in 1936 when few people dared

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656 Maxim Gor’kii, “I. V. Stalinu, ne ran’she 7 marta 1936,” in Literaturnaia gazeta (March 10, 1993): 6.
658 I do not exclude a possibility that it was Gor’kii’s letter and his ability to appreciate talent that convinced Stalin to look at Shostakovich or any talent in a dimensional way, which is in space where talent transcends time and outweighs any kind of human egoistic value (vanity). Gor’kii also suggested to Stalin to appraise Shostakovich in terms of value to the state.
to speak up. “After the criticisms of Lady Macbeth… countless public debates were called where further criticism in line with Party directives was heaped on Shostakovich,” recollected Mikhail Druskin, “Fear effectively tested people’s loyalty to Shostakovich. Many friends and colleagues deserted him at his crucial time, and even those who came to his defense did not always do so as unswervingly as might be expected. Shostakovich’s friends were under pressure to recant.”659 Gorky based his defense of Shostakovich on Stalin’s hope to win over the European intelligentsia and avoided cornering him, but instead asked rhetorical questions such as “what is muddle?” He pretended not to know Stalin had walked out of the performance because he could not come to terms with the opera’s success beyond Soviet borders. In his letter, Gorky also used Rolland’s high opinion of Shostakovich to convince Stalin to stop emotionally abusing Shostakovich. Was it unjust? Did Gorky cultivate his friendship with Romain Rolland with a purpose in mind other than simply furthering the Soviet cause of the day? This is highly unlikely. If one analyzes their discussions of Buddha, Lenin, Moliere, Bulgakov, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy, one could see that the relationship was based on mutual interest first and on mutual benefit second. Romain Rolland asked Gorky to expedite Soviet visas for his close friends, and Gorky asked Rolland for his opinion of Shostakovich.660

Gorky’s Publishing Venues

For the most part, however, Gorky dedicated the last years of his life to organizing new publishing ventures. And his activities in this domain were as all-encompassing as they had been in the years from 1918 to 1921, and for much the same reason. Once again, the desire to shape the intellectual life in Russia in accordance with his own vision of the ideal future drove Gorky.

660 See Maxim Gor’kii and Romain Rolland Perepiska (1916-1936) (Moscow: Nasledie, 1996).
A complete list of all the projects with which he was involved between 1929 and 1936 would run to many pages. He formulated his goal in a letter to Stalin: the urgent need to propagandize the good things being done in Soviet Russia.\textsuperscript{661} He argued the same to Lenin in 1918, but now the result was far more spectacular because Stalin understood the power of the arts better than Lenin, who preferred ideological literature.\textsuperscript{662} “Stalin was more far-sighted than his teacher, Lenin, had been,” literary historian Pavel Basinskii argues, “and paid much attention to literature. He participated in creating the Writers’ Union and stepped aside under Gorky’s pressure, who wanted to see his own people in charge of it. Stalin always knew how to step back temporarily to return later to rule.”\textsuperscript{663} To be fair, Lenin, had no time for the arts during Russia’s raging civil war and the social chaos it brought. Gorky understood this and found in Stalin a sympathetic listener who took the writer seriously when he found him useful to fulfil his cultural goals.

Within a few years of returning, Gorky was working on dozens of enterprises. One of the most important was the journal \textit{Nashi dostizheniia} [\textit{Our Achievements} ]—the very title tells it all—of which he was the founder and editor-in-chief. He was also the inspiration behind several other new periodicals, ranging from \textit{Za rubezhom} [\textit{Abroad} ] to \textit{Kolkhoznik} [\textit{The Collective Farmer}]. Another important venture of this period was \textit{Literaturnaia ucheba} [\textit{Literary Study} ], a journal which Gorky hoped would contribute actively to the development of serious literary discussion in Soviet Russia. In every case, he paid scrupulous attention to questions of editorial policy and direction.

Many of these new projects were as massive in their own way as \textit{World Literature} had been. \textit{The History of the Civil War} [\textit{Istoriia grazhdanskoj voiny} ], involved an enormous

\textsuperscript{663} Pavel Basinskii, \textit{Strasti}, p. 396.
collective effort by scholars and writers. Its first volume took five years to produce, which Gorky explained in a letter to Kirov, a letter which, incidentally, would have reached the Leningrad Party leader only days before his assassination. As in earlier years, the Gorky’s interests also ranged into the realm of science.

In a personal letter Gorky expressed his admiration of I. A. Soliansky’s work with handicapped patients and urged him to publish his findings. Soliansky’s belief in the enormous abilities of the human brain appealed to Gorky greatly because he never gave up the utopian faith in socialism’s capability to harness the powers of nature:

I am excited and pleased by that part of your letter where you talk of the ‘capacity of the human brain,’ of the ‘maximum amount of knowledge’ which the ‘mass individual’ can accommodate, of the fact that ‘the brains of an overwhelming number of contemporary people have become depraved by the shameful culture of the capitalist economic system,’ and that ‘the fanatical racial theory must be challenged.’ Such wonderful and indisputably correct thoughts cannot help but make one excited and happy, especially when they have experimental confirmation. They must become the property of the ‘mass individual,’ since it is essential to improve his disposition. This individual needs to have a clear conception of the power of his brain, of the broad possibilities for its development. It is necessary for 160,000,000 crania to become more or less equally powerful accumulators of the mighty energy created both by organic nature and by social history in the process of their development—an energy which gradually discovers and subjugates to its will all other energies in the cosmos. I think that it is already possible to speak about cosmic energies.664

So if Gorky was correct in his belief in the human ability to create a happy life, if he himself achieved more than anyone could have ever expected, why did he fail to communicate and affect the historical course of events in Russia by sparing more human lives? In other words, why did he selectively support violence? The passage above elucidates Gorky’s flawed reasoning: he allowed the element of force to play a part in human progress—he expected creative energy to ‘subjugate’ all other forms. In real life, this thought translated into labor

camps where “the right Party energy” turned people into good Soviet citizens by using inhuman means, it translated into novels written in the “right” socialist realist style, and in a broader sense into repressions against everyone who did not subscribe to the officially established “working-class truth” or Party politics. Once Gorky justified an exclusive “good” kind of “subjugation,” there would be no end to its variations.

Entangled Loyalties

In all his publishing activities, Gorky was a loyal servant of the Stalin regime, constantly promoting a positive message about contemporary life and reinforcing the revolutionary utopianism which had always been synonymous with the Bolshevik cause. In his letters, speeches, and articles Gorky often emerges as a naïve apologist of Stalin’s regime, but Gorky’s emphasis on heroism and achievements was also a conscious position that fit his (vaguely Nietzschean) idea to inspire the masses culturally.

In his article “Our Achievements” published in 1928, he notes: “What is happening in the country of the Soviets exceeds all fantastic, fairy-tale heroic acts.” In 1932, Gorky wrote to Rolland: “We are living in a terrible time, my dear friend, and great tragedies await us, but what a joy it is to observe at the same time the pride of the young people in my country, prepared as they are for any tragedy, to observe the rapidity of their intellectual growth and of their awareness that they are responsible for life, for everything being created in the world.”

Obviously Gorky wrote from the perspective of one juxtaposing socialist Russia against the bourgeois West and Nazi Germany, but in the same letter he also praised the notorious labor camp at Solovki for its humane treatment of inmates. “The working conditions up there are difficult, of course, but one day’s work is counted as three, and people are exiled there only after

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a medical examination to prove that they have great strength and powers of endurance.” He knew that it was not true. According to Dmitrii Likhachev, who was at Solovki, Gorky was aware of the violations that took place at the labor camp from the press since several fugitives from the camp ended up telling Western journalists about the inhumane conditions and tortures. “Gorky’s mission,” wrote Likhachev, “was to calm down public opinion, which he did.”

During his visit, a fourteen-year-old boy volunteered to talk to him. They spoke in private for forty minutes and when the boy finished, Gorky was in tears. No one saw the boy again after this conversation and Likhachev wondered until the end of his days why Gorky did not take the boy with him. Did he realize that the boy’s life was in danger? Gorky saw a copy of Pravda in the hands of an inmate who held it upside down, but this did not have any effect on him either. His granddaughter believed that having understood the truth of what was going on, he could do nothing. Not wanting to confront the Soviet government openly was one thing, but defending this inhuman institution publicly was a form of complicity. As David-Fox points out: “Gorky, however, decided to use his position as returning hero from abroad not to expose prisoner suffering but to convey an exemplary, model version of the Soviet tour itself. In describing the Solovki camp as it should be, not as it was, he was shelving the rebellious persona of the bosiak and assuming the mantle of a creator of the great proletarian writer, which virtually became his honorific in the years to come.”

Gorky dispelled doubts neither about Solovki, nor about the show trials. He also considered the arrest of the prominent septuagenarian historian Sergei Platonov justified: “I met

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670 Michael David-Fox, Showcasing, p. 155.
[Platonov] in 1920. He made no secret of his monarchist convictions even then, during the years of the Civil War." Gorky also supported Stalin’s ruthless collectivization campaign. While it may be true that Gorky did not know the full cost of Stalin’s policy in terms of human lives, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that he did not turn a blind eye to human suffering and to the criminal excesses of Stalin’s dictatorship. In the cases of Nikolai Gumilev and Alexander Blok in the late 1910s, and Shostakovich in 1936, Gorky asked questions and stood up for talented Soviet cultural figures. Whether he questioned the Soviet regime’s violent policies will remain a mystery. Did he understand that he was deceived? His granddaughters and his daughter-in-law said in several interviews that he was aware of the deceit and the Potemkin villages, and he did as much as he could for political prisoners, but behind the scenes. Lidiia Spiridonova notes that it is still hard to determine whether Gorky understood that he was deceived during the trips to the labor camps because two suitcases with his notes written down during his trip were stolen from the house on Malaia Nikitskaia, but later were returned. Instead of his notes Gorky found ashes. What exactly he thought, discovered is unclear. On the other hand, this accident does not explain why he could not write about the camps truthfully from memory. Do we always need notes to remember?

So, the question remains as to why he publicly defended the labor camps, particularly the infamous White Sea Canal project? Conditions for the prisoners who worked on this project were inhuman and many died, yet a collection of articles edited by Gorky depicted it in uniformly glorious Bolshevik language as a grand achievement of the Soviet state. Even though Gorky did not visit the Canal with the infamous delegation of Soviet writers, he put his name down as the

book’s editor. Even if he did not want to confront the Soviet government publicly, why did he agree to edit this collection? One possible explanation was that he was concerned about his immediate family: his wives, his son, his daughter-in-law, and his beloved granddaughters. The danger was real. Still as Cynthia Rider rightly noted: “Gorky’s more private admission of his obedience and submission contrasts sharply with his public image as chief literary propagator of the Soviet cause but is consistent with his problematic biography.” Why would one agree to play the role of the chief authority on cultural matters and praise the regime when one is aware of the regime’s inhumanity? This is perhaps the main controversy of Gorky’s life. The problem is less his biography than his understanding of life’s meaning and purpose. Maria Andreeva, the only woman who loved him unconditionally, once described Gorky as “a most honorable and pure person with an open soul and heart, a man of great talent.” Then she added to this description: “He makes mistakes and tortures himself and others sometimes, but not because of egoism, not for himself; he thinks that it is necessary for some higher truth.” Gorky rationalized the Soviet regime’s mission and purpose by comparing it to Nazism and Fascism as a lesser evil and by assuming that one day “the higher truth” would prevail and the Soviets with their “proletarian humanism” would create a state where an individual has a chance to realize his full potential. “This revolutionary humanism gives the proletariat a historically justified right to a merciless struggle against capitalism, the right to crush and annihilate the vilest bases of the bourgeois world.” For Gorky, proletarian humanism was not a fantasy or a theory, but a

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674 Lidiia Spiridonova in her book, *Nastoiaschii Gorkii*, argues that Gor’kii never visited the Belomor Canal and therefore to accuse him of wrongdoing is unfair, yet, he edited the collection and put’ his name on it.
676 Quoted in M. A. Semashkina, “Moi dolgii i muchititelnii roman: pis’ma M. F. Andreevoi Gor’komu,” in *Gor’kii v zerkale epokhi: neizdannaiia perepiska* (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2010), p. 199.
677 Ibid., p. 200.
678 Maxim Gor’kii, “Proletarskii gumanizm,” *Pravda*, May 23, 1934.
679 Maxim Gor’kii, “Proletarskii gumanizm.”
heroic practice of the Soviet workers while Fascism represented the capitalists’ defense of their freedom to exploit labor. The humanism of the proletariat was a belief in the power of the human mind that strove for education and work and the “creation of heroes, but not Gods.” Gorky also supported revolutionary romanticism and heroism that replaced religion for the building of socialism.

As a staunch positivist, Gorky believed in the power of the human mind and education to generate good and give rise to reforms that created a just society. This illusion and unrealistic appraisal of proletarian humanism in some respect strengthened and legitimized Stalin’s control of the Soviet people, the Party, and cultural policy, as well as justified forced labor and the deaths of millions in the camps.

Furthermore, Gorky appears to have been seduced by the rhetoric of the age, which stressed the need to destroy domestic and foreign ‘enemies’ supposedly bent on undoing the great socialist revolution and the Soviet experiment. Having lived in Italy and experienced virulent attacks of the Soviet émigrés himself, Gorky knew very well that assassinations and sabotage plots were real. When Soviet sailors met with Gorky in Naples, he read to them his article, “To Humanists,” about the ‘domestic enemies’ who supposedly attempted to destroy Soviet power and restore capitalism in the USSR.680 But for the trial of the engineers, Gorky wrote and published another article entitled “To the Peasants and Workers,” accusing the suspected engineer-saboteurs and their “foreign supporters” of undermining the construction of socialism in the USSR.681 Did Gorky believe in what he wrote? Suffice it to say that there is not a single letter found that suggests Gorky’s doubts.

If Gorky served as an apologist for Stalin’s policies, however, he was far from being the venal figure that many of his detractors paint. It is illuminating to compare letters to Gorky’s friend and colleague Rolland with the ones he sent the Soviet leaders at the same time. His relationship to Stalin, particularly his correspondence with him, shows that Gorky felt none of the warmth he experienced towards Lenin. When Gorky was asked to write Stalin’s biography, he did not get beyond two pages that described Georgia in the pre-revolutionary times, although he was sent volumes of material. “The General Secretary had his own personal interest in Gorky,” writes S. V. Zaika, “creating Stalin’s cult, his immediate entourage wanted Gorky to play the role of his biographer…, but Gorky’s personal honesty and conscience got in the way. He could only write a few brief and terse lines about Georgia’s history and the peasants’ and artisans’ forced labor in Stalin’s home country.”

But who wanted Gorky to embark on the leader’s biography—Stalin or his entourage? How did Stalin view his biography? Jan Plamper, who wrote extensively on the cultural products of Stalin’s era, argues that the Soviet leader wanted his own cult and therefore destroyed the documents that failed to fit into his version of it. “The archival documents readily available were part of a deliberate effort by Stalin to place at the easy-to-reach upper layers of his archive—the semipublic ‘reliquary section,’ if you will—documents confirming his image of modesty.” For example, when Yemelian Yaroslavsky approached Stalin about writing his biography, the General Secretary answered that he was against the idea. “Maxim Gorky has a plan analogous to yours,” he noted, “but he and I have given up this affair. I think the time for Stalin’s biography has not come yet.” First of all, it is striking that in this letter Stalin who wished for his own

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commemoration in history made Gorky the initiator of this project in order to present himself as a modest leader. Plampe shows that Stalin used the idea of “modesty” to build the cult of a modest leader of a country with a collective ideology: “The modesty was affected in order to overcome the contradiction of a personality cult in a polity that claimed to be implementing a collectivist ideology, Marxism. This affected modesty amounted to a pattern of ‘flamboyant modesty’ or ‘immodest modesty.’ What is more if one digs deeper, traces appear of Stalin’s jealous control and expansion of his own cult.”

Gorky never intended to write Stalin’s biography and, in the end, he could not even find any energy to contribute to Stalin’s personality cult although he did not realize that by promulgating socialist realism and the ‘working-class truth,’ being silent about the emotional and mental abuse of innocent people, and supporting forced labor, he was already contributing to Stalin’s cult.

*Gorky’s Criticism of Stalin’s Policy*

In Gorky’s letters to Stalin the Bolshevik tonality and style are apparent: “I am sending you my report and urge you to acquaint yourself with it as soon as possible so that I can include any changes you might make,” writes Gorky to the General Secretary in 1934. However, even though the writer adopted a style appealing to Stalin’s ear by using the terms “enemy” and “bourgeois,” he developed a serious criticism of the leader’s political tactics. By 1929, Gorky became concerned by the first signs of Stalin’s assault on the Old Bolsheviks and his policy of replacing them with unqualified people of his choosing. But Gorky never approached serious subjects with Stalin by writing straightforwardly: he chose a manner of contemplating a broader context that elucidated a serious issue. Gorky first wrote that he was concerned about young people who complained to him about their “extremely pessimistic mood” and the most

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686 Maxim Gor’kii, ‘Pismo Stalinu, 2 August 1934,” in *Literurnaia gazeta*, 3 marta, 199s.
thoughtful young people suffered extremely from such skepticism because “they have been taught by the experience of the Old Bolsheviks, by their books and speeches.”

Instead of writing to Stalin that his policy of taking down the Old Bolsheviks would eventually turn into tyranny and have a devastating effect on the country and its people, Gorky contemplated the effect this policy had on the Soviet youth. “What they see now is that [the Old Bolsheviks] are being declared heretics. This cannot help but disturb them. They are unable to sense the essential contradiction between city and country as profoundly or as vividly as they should, and as it must be sensed and understood by all socialists-industrialists.”

And then Gorky switched to another topic that had no relation to the Old Bolsheviks at all. “The historical necessity of forcing the peasant to work collectively, productively, and economically with respect to the soil: this necessity is poorly understood by young people.” This jumping from one topic to another in one paragraph was not Gorky’s writing style. His letters to Vsevolod Ivanov, to Lenin, to Romain Rolland were well developed and full of heartfelt proximity, but with Stalin there was distance and a contrived way of broaching subjects.Having understood that the General Secretary should not be confronted openly, Gorky weighed every word. Another letter written in January 1930 contained Gorky’s genuine dismay on learning that he had been implicated (albeit quite unwittingly) in a case where individuals were punished for writing about him in a critical spirit. Gorky did not shy away from expressing his indignation in this case, but he wraps it again in the Bolshevik language:

There is a report in Rul’ that a certain journal in Chita has been punished for not having written in my praise. If one counts the Central Committee’s reprimand to the people in Novosibirsk, this is the second such incident… There will be a third, a tenth… I do not think it is necessary to punish those who write about me in an uncomplimentary or hostile manner. Like you, and all the other ‘old-timers,’ I

687 Maxim Gor’kii, “Pis’mo Stalinu, 2 August 1934.”
688 Maxim Gor’kii, “Pis’mo Stalinu, 2 August 1934.”
689 Maxim Gor’kii, “Pis’mo Stalinu, 2 August 1934.”
receive many hostile letters. The crazy ideas and attacks contained in these letters convince me that ever since the Party set the countryside so decisively on the track of collectivization, the social revolution has begun to assume a truly socialist character. This is an upheaval of almost geological proportions, and it is great, immeasurably great and more profound, than anything that has yet been done by the Party. A way of life which has existed for thousands for years, and the order which has created a people of a singular monstrosity, a people quite horrifying in their animal conservatism and proprietorial instinct—this order is being destroyed. There are some 20 million such people. The problem of re-educating them in the shortest possible time is an insanely difficult one. Yet it is being resolved in a practical way right now.690

Gorky reserved his most trenchant criticisms for Soviet literary developments. His activities during these years—in particular, his work on the establishment of the Union of Soviet Writers—have, of course, been the subject of many discussions, most of them unfavorable to the writer.691 Yet Gorky was no supporter of Stalinist cultural policy, particularly in the way the Writers’ Union was formed because it bore little resemblance to organization he hoped it would be and to which he was ready to commit his energies.

By the late 1920s, Gorky occupied the middle ground on cultural matters. While he was convinced that literature, like all the arts, had an important part to play both in the building of socialism and—increasingly—in the fight against Fascism, he was appalled by the extreme militance of groups like RAPP, which sought to impose a form of control over artistic life that was so rigid there would be no room for healthy debate or alternative views. A militantly ‘proletarian’ literary organization, RAPP pushed for ideological hegemony in literature. When the 1932 resolution forming the Writers’ Union was accepted, it essentially weakened the Party’s

dominance in literature in that it specifically abolished RAPP. Many assumed initially that the Writers’ Union could prove more tolerant of non-Party writers. Indeed, the main reason Gorky was prepared to work so hard for its creation was his belief that this would rid Soviet literary life of RAPP and similar threats. While living in Italy he received many letters from aspiring young writers complaining of their “literary torments.” Vsevolod Ivanov had his play An Armored Train cancelled because it was not “revolutionary enough.”692 Leonid Leonov complained to Gorky that the only subjects that writers could explore were “socialist emulation and the industrial finance counter-plan.”693 Furthermore, they were asked to use the proletariat as the source for describing a new man, yet in real life not a single worker actually understood “the truth of tomorrow.” “And so now we must search for the philosophical underpinnings thanks to which [the proletariat] stands so firm and will win,” wrote Leonov. “All meanings in the present world are coming together… determining his victory. We must write about that which does not yet exist. Ask the most honest, the most stubborn shock-worker about this—he will give no answer. For what is the truth? And, moreover, the truth of tomorrow?” Leonov and other fellow-traveler writers who did not disagree with the revolution, but who did not build their careers by propagandizing it, understood that “the truth of tomorrow” was nonsense.694 Gorky respected and supported “fellow-traveler” writers such as Vsevolod Ivanov, Boris Pilniak, Isaak Babel, and Leonid Leonov and knew that they had hard time expressing themselves, so he considered it the Writers’ Union’s mission to protect them from the militancy of Soviet literary life.

694 Ibid., p. 292. A “fellow traveler,” poput’chik, originally meant a writer in the Soviet Union who was not against the Russian Revolution of 1917 but did not actively support it as a propagandist. The term was used in this sense by Leon Trotsky in Literature and the Revolution (1925) and was not meant to be pejorative.
But he soon discovered his mistake. Individuals such as Alexander Fadeev and Fedor Panfyorov—all of whom had shown their ultra-proletarian colors during the campaigns against Babel, Bulgakov, Zamiatin, Pilniak, Pasternak and others deemed to be ‘anti-Soviet’—now rose to prominence within the new literary body. Despite Gorky’s repeated protestations, these men came to form the core of Writers’ Union, which was already threatening to embody his worst fears about the shape of things to come.

The loyalty of the Presidium to Stalin and his policies was unquestioned. However, with 37 members it was too large to act as a true executive body, and the much smaller Secretariat, of which Gorky was not a member, soon became the dominating authority within the Union. This may have been Stalin’s intention all along, since he had himself risen to power by using the Party Secretariat to gain authority over the Politburo. The union Secretariat consisted of only five men following the 1934 Congress, and it remained quite small throughout Stalin’s reign.695

Stalin did not want independently thinking, charismatic and knowledgeable writers to be at the helm of the Writers’ Union, so he pushed for the unskilled and the yes-men who would allow him to control the Union. Here was the clearest evidence of Gorky’s declining influence in Stalin’s Russia. As he became disillusioned with the Union, Gorky wrote to Stalin in August 1934 conceding to the Party leader the right to amend the draft of his report to the first Congress of the Writers’ Union, but then complained about the ‘petty personal struggles’ that were impeding the proper work of the Union. Gorky seemed to be offering Stalin full rights over his speech in exchange for Stalin’s support in curbing the personal quarrels within the Union. But Stalin was a step ahead of Gorky and was already undermining his image and reputation behind his back. In a conversation with Aleksandr Shcherbakov, the secretary of the Writers’ Union, Stalin said: “Gorky’s fascination with folklore is wrong. We need to learn more about bourgeois culture and recycle it. Gorky’s quest to become a literary leader, his muzhik’s cunning need to be

considered.”

It was a typical Stalinist strategy to popularize Gorky in the eyes of the people and to use his international fame on the one hand, and to undermine his standing with those in his immediate professional circles. By 1934, after losing his son and standing within literary circles, Gorky realized that his influence was declining. RGALI (the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art) documents reveal that Gorky was present at only one meeting in preparation of the First Congress of the Writers on August 27, 1933. He was asked to be a part of the committee that worked with young proletarian writers and children’s authors.

Gorky was extremely concerned that different literary figures patronized younger proletarian writers and pushed their own agenda. He openly complained to Stalin about Aleksandr Fadeev, whom Gorky believed to be in need of “study,” instead of being a “literary figure.” Nor did Gorky trust or believe in the sincerity of Vladislav Panfyorov’s commitment to communism and considered him “another ignorant peasant, cunning and painfully ambitious, even though a fellow of great will.”

Gorky complained to Stalin:

The communist faction in the Organizational Committee lacks authority among our writers, who can see only too readily the struggle between these various cliques. And I am obliged to say that these cliques have come about thanks to patronage: certain responsible [comrades] have certain literary figures to whom these important personages offer their support and whom they praise with a marked lack of prudence. And around each of the literary figures thus favored by the ‘authorities’ there is a clique made up of people who are even less talented. It is not even as if these people are organizing themselves around a ‘teacher’; instead, quotidian and narrowly personal motives operate here. And the ‘big names’, in their own turn, play the role of patrons, placing before our publishers the immature ‘fruits of creativity’ produced by young perch, pike, and other fish of the predatory kind.

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696 RGASPI, f. 558, d. 11, l. 114.
697 “Protokol zasedaniia orgkomiteta po podgotove pervogo SSP SSSR,” RGALI, f. 631:133, d. 1, l. 5.
698 “Protokol zasedaniia orgkomiteta po podgotove pervogo SSP SSSR,” RGALI, f. 631:133, d. 1, l. 25.
700 Ibid., p. 2.
Favoritism and growing sycophantism that resulted in the promotion of less talented young writers alarmed Gorky who did not spare words to describe the so-called patrons: “The ‘big name’ endeavors to acquire a ration card and an apartment on behalf of his admirer, to whom he refers as his ‘pupil’, even though he is not teaching him his craft and is even incapable of doing so, since he is an ignoramus himself.”\textsuperscript{701} The aging writer was concerned that patrons promoted mostly young people in their thirties who had experienced ‘hard times’ in their adolescence and youth and were now greedy for the pleasures of life as well as “in too great a hurry to enjoy themselves, and thus unwilling to work conscientiously.”\textsuperscript{702}

In the same letter to Stalin, Gorky promised that he would make corrections in his speech if the General Secretary had any comments. The archives tell us a background story. When Kaganovich read Gorky’s speech, he found it devoid of ideological substance—“everything but Marxist,” as he put it.\textsuperscript{703} After Stalin read it, he asked Kaganovich to correct the speech because Gorky did not know anything about ideology, but warned him not to let the old man know that he did not understand Marxism.\textsuperscript{704} In private conversations after the Congress, Stalin was still displeased with Gorky’s speech. He did not like that Gorky spoke pejoratively about Party-sanctioned writers, while Gorky’s ‘fellow-writers’, such as Mikhail Slonimsky, Mikhail Bulgakov, Boris Pilniak, Mikhail Zoshchenko were allowed to occupy “the Soviet leading positions.”\textsuperscript{705} Aleksandr Shcherbakov, who was hand-picked by Stalin and Kaganovich to become the secretary of the Union of Writers, was asked to develop a strategy of dealing with Gorky and reported to Stalin: “I will not surrender our positions particularly on principal issues...”

\textsuperscript{701} Ibid., p. 3.  
\textsuperscript{702} Maxim Gor’kii, “I. V. Stalinu, 2 August, 1934,” p. 2.  
\textsuperscript{703} RGALI, “S’ezd pisatelei,” f. 631, d. 1, l. 38.  
\textsuperscript{704} RGALI, “S’ezd pisatelei,” f. 631, d. 1, l. 3.  
\textsuperscript{705} RGASPI, “Voprosy literatury,” f. 558:730, d. 11, l. 15.
and in realizing Central Committee directives on all issues."  
Gorky was utterly disillusioned after the Congress and wrote to Shcherbakov a pessimistic letter, particularly concerning the possibility of open debate within the new body. He also sent a desperate letter to the entire Central Committee. When Gorky was in Italy, young proletarian writers mailed him numerous manuscripts that he diligently edited since Stalin had assigned him the role of father figure in Soviet literature. He did not mind this because he remembered how much Korolenko helped him when he was an immature writer. But he had to pay for this role with endless editing and supervising of unskilled writers. Chukovskii was astonished by the number of manuscripts Gorky went through in a week. Gorky never begrudged the role of mentor, but when these unskilled upstarts started to occupy high posts in the growing literary bureaucracy, he exploded:

Writers who cannot or do not want to study but are used to playing the part of administrators and are trying to secure managerial posts for themselves […] are Party men, but their speeches at the congress were ideologically lackluster and revealed their professional ignorance. This ignorance allows them not only to understand the need to improve their output but also inclines them against admitting this need—as was evident from the speeches of Panfyorov, Yermilov, Fadeev, Stavsky, and two or three others. However, Com. Zhdanov has informed me that these men will be put on the Union’s Board. In this way, ignorant people will be directing those who are significantly more literate than they are. It goes without saying that this will not create an atmosphere that is essential for amicable and unanimous work. Personally, I know these men as quite clever and experienced in the ‘creation’ of all kinds of internecine strife, but I absolutely do not feel them to be Communists and I do not believe in their sincerity. Therefore, I refuse to work with them, for I prize my time and do not feel I have the right to waste it on fighting the trivial ‘squabbles’ that will inevitably and immediately arise.

By the time Gorky’s letter reached the Central Committee another scandal erupted with the publication of an illiterate speech by I. M. Vareikis, one of Panfyorov’s men who worked for

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RAPP. Vareikis’ article aimed at undermining the slogan of the struggle for literary quality, and went against what Gorky propagated—the need to improve the quality of writers’ work and their professional abilities.

In other words, Gorky witnessed the real power struggle that broke out backstage at the congress. The archival documents show that Stalin did not want “Gorky’s” men to be included in the leadership of the new union, so Gorky and his proteges, as well as numerous fellow-traveler writers, lost. Ironically, however, it was the former members of RAPP, seemingly so recently routed, who were the main beneficiaries of this struggle. The Central Committee made Gorky an “honorary chairman” as a consolation prize. By November 1935, he wrote to Andrei Andreev, Secretary of the Central Committee, about the intolerable situation with the Writers’ Union characterized by “an almost complete absence among the writing fraternity of any consciousness of corporate and collective responsibility for their work, for their social behavior before the Soviet reader and also before the international reader.” Gorky complained of mismanaged and disappearing funds, unprincipled quarrels over privileges, the unjust distribution of material resources, unfulfilled plans, and institutions failing to operate effectively.

The Party is devoting considerable attention and assistance to scientific and technical workers, but less to doctors, less still to teachers, and very little indeed to writers, the ‘engineers of souls.’ The creation of the Union and the provision of a budget of ten million rubles—these are so generous, in fact, that they may even be harmful. The ‘big names’ in literature are rich. Money is often distributed without due care, taking no account of the actual needs of Union members. It is not unusual for a needy writer to be denied assistance, whilst that same writer’s sister might be given five thousand rubles. The government gave money for the construction of a dacha settlement, and 700,000 rubles of that sum has vanished like smoke in the wind. There are many instances of such generosity.\footnote{Maxim Gor’kii, “A. A. Andreevu, 7 November 1935,” Izvestiia Tsentral’nogo Komiteta KPSS 1990 (11), pp. 217-19.}
In a letter to Molotov written shortly after his exchange with Andreev, Gorky characterized the time “as the days of the spoilt, the sated, and the indifferent.”\textsuperscript{710} The aging Gorky became completely disillusioned with the new literary order and with his role as titular head of literature, because he effectively had little or no power to change anything in what had become a colossal bureaucratic institution.

But while he was appalled by the condition of Soviet literary life, Gorky was no supporter of artistic pluralism and diversity among writers either. His view of Maiakovskiy and Blok manifest the degree to which his attitude had hardened by this time. He refused to write about Maiakovskii and Blok after their deaths because as writers they were ‘alien’ to him. Gorky could never understand mysticism, pessimism, modernism, and symbolist experiments with language and music. His rigidity and judgement prevented him supporting creatively new poetic expressions. As Khodasevich noted, Gorky did not like pessimists and preferred a good lie to “a realistic depressing truth.”\textsuperscript{711} “The suicide of V. V. Maiakovskii came as no surprise to me…” wrote Gorky, “he was a man of unique sensitivity, a man of great talent, and yet he was unhappy. His revolutionary poems were a surprise to me. I never found them moving: they contain a great deal of shouting, but lack pathos. I never believed in Maiakovskii’s commitment to the revolution.”\textsuperscript{712}

Moreover, while Gorky disagreed with the pressures the Party placed on writers, he accepted that some censorship of literature was inevitable. Gorky noticed that the final act of Babel’s play \textit{Mariia} “gave the appearance of a surrender to an external demand.”\textsuperscript{713} Yet, he

\textsuperscript{712} AG, “Perepiska Gor’kogo s Gruzdevym,” fund 11, file 227, p. 8.
\textsuperscript{713} Maxim Gor’kii, “Pismo Babeliu, 1933 ili 1934,” \textit{Literaturnoe nasledstvo: Gor’kii i sovetskie pisateli, Neizdannaia perepiska}, vol. 70 (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo akademii nauk SSSR, 1963), pp. 43-4.
found Platonov’s *Chevengur* unpublishable in the Soviet Union.\footnote{Maxim Gor’kii, “Platonovu, 18 September 1929,” *Literaturnoe Nasledstvo*, vol. 70, pp. 313-14.} “Despite the undeniable merits of your work, I do not believe that it will be printed or published. It is your anarchical frame of mind—apparently an innate part of your ‘spirit’—which will prevent this from happening. Whether you intended it or not, you have imparted a lyrical-satirical tone to your interpretation of reality, and this is unacceptable to censorship.”\footnote{Maxim Gor’kii, “Platonovu, 18 September 1929,” *Literaturnoe Nasledstvo*, vol. 70, pp. 313-14.} In other words, Platonov did not interpret reality according to the “working-class truth.”

Yet Gorky believed in the ability of humanity to build a happy life in Russia. After the revolution, in the 1930s, this highest truth took the form of the firmly-prescribed working-class truth, which was in line with his own conception of what Socialist Realism was all about. But he also believed that “it stands to reason that within the limits of this ‘working-class truth’ certain contradictions are both permissible and unavoidable.”\footnote{Maxim Gor’kii, “A. S. Shcherbakovu, 19 February, 1935,” *SS*, vol. 30, pp. 381-4.} Gorky’s flawed reasoning is nowhere as clear as in these two assumptions that there is a firmly determined working class truth within which certain contradictions are permissible and unavoidable. In the end, the dilemma was well resolved by the brutally prescriptive practices of several generations of literary bureaucrats and Party leaders.

While Gorky was alive, his great prestige allowed him to resist the apparatchiks’ attempts to preempt decisions. In his memoirs Nikita Khrushchev characterizes Shcherbakov as a ‘poisonous snake’ who frustrated Gorky by imposing his will over the Union’s affairs: “Gorky wasn’t the sort of person Shcherbakov could boss around and Shcherbakov ended up being transferred at Gorky’s request.”\footnote{Nikita Khrushchev, *Krushchev Remembers*, ed. and trans. by Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), pp. 171-72.} John Garrard astutely noted that Gorky might have won the
first round, but he had already permitted the Presidium to expel members from the Union for lack of ideological vigilance. “Whatever role as inhibitor Gorky may have played,” wrote Garrard, “after his death the arrests and executions of members of the Union accelerated at an incredible rate.”718

Conclusion

It is fortunate that Gorky never lived to see what sins and atrocities were committed in the name of ‘firmly determined working-class truth’ and Socialist Realism. By 1936, he was already a very sick man with no power. Does it really matter whether he died of natural causes or someone poisoned him? Although his relationship with Stalin was complicated, it was also mutually beneficial. There was much compromise on both sides, but the two men were neither close, nor trusting of each other. Stalin needed Gorky in the years 1932-1934 because Gorky’s international fame and reputation helped legitimize Stalin’s project for restructuring literature and the arts and for making Socialist Realism mandatory for all Soviet culture. Gorky took advantage of the fact that Stalin was all-powerful and pushed many projects that became the basis of the Soviet intelligentsia’s education. But Gorky’s judgement and rigidity, and his artistic righteousness, prevented him from accepting reality as it was. His staunch belief that “Socialist Realist art has the right to exaggerate, to ‘conjecture’” justified the deceit that generated violence and caused more harm. He could not grasp that his own literary success became reality because, despite how repressive the monarchical system was in Imperial Russia, it allowed more freedom of expression than the Soviet Union did by the 1930s. Once Gorky accepted as necessary censorship, forced labor, and inhumanity towards “unreliable or depressed” people, he justified

and contributed to building a totalitarian system in the Soviet Union. In the end, as he himself predicted, “his soul, indeed, became disfigured” and his legacy remains controversial.
Conclusion: Grand Delusion or a Heroic Life?

“[I’m] like a dog: I understand everything, yet I am silent.”
M. Gorky\textsuperscript{719}

“A Poet in Russia is more than a Poet.”
Evgenii Evtushenko\textsuperscript{720}

Maksim Gorky was larger than life. His literary achievements astonished the Russian imperial cultural elite while his endless and vibrant energy, stoic discipline, and tremendous work ethic contributed greatly not only to his personal successes, but to the Bolshevik revolutionary fever. The source of his big dreams and heroic life was his limitless imagination that saved him from his family’s savagery and helped him rise above his circumstances. He wanted a literary career and by following his desire and putting much effort into it, he accomplished it. His inner drive and staunch belief in art propelled him to great heights while his colossal projects in editing, publishing, and teaching stimulated several generations of the Russian proletariat and peasantry. All these accomplishments became possible because of the environment in which he worked and lived, and with Chekhov and Korolenko taking a serious interest in a young and promising talent. In imperial Russia, Gorky engaged in public, revolutionary activities without the fatal repercussions of the Soviet era. As much as the imperial Interior Ministry system was repressive, it allowed freedom of action if we compare it to the Soviet regime.

\textsuperscript{719} Maxim Gor’kii, “Kak sobaka: vse ponimaiu, a molchu,” \textit{Literaturnaia gazeta}, 3 August 1994, p. 6.
\textsuperscript{720} To echo Evgenii Evtushenko’s words, Gorky was more than just a writer. He was a Prophet. Evgenii Evtushenko, “Poet v Rossii bol’she chem poet,” in \textit{Maloe sobranie sochinenii} (Moscow: Azbuka, 2015), p. 200.
Gorky’s personal success was at the core of his inner optimism and strength. He genuinely believed in the enormous potential of the human mind to create new life and an ideal society in which all human beings are proud, accomplished, and happy individuals with equal rights and access to education and work. In fact, he believed in it so strongly that he wanted to see this change happen by using any means possible, including force. This is a point at which his grand dream turned into a grand delusion.

In 1934, Gorky wrote to Aleksandr Shcherbakov:

> From this, a conclusion naturally follows that the figurative thinking of the artist, which draws on a broad knowledge of reality, supplemented by an intuitive urge to impart a more polished form to the material—to supplement the given with the possible and the desirable—that such thinking is also capable of ‘foresight’. In other words, Socialist Realist art has the right to exaggerate, to ‘conjecture’. The intuitive should not be understood as something ‘prophetic’, something that precedes knowledge; it is rather that this is what completes experience in those cases where experience, when organized in the form of a hypothesis or an image, lacks certain links, certain details. [italics are mine] We should familiarize our writers with the revolutionary hypotheses of science, with the hypotheses of Speransky, which have already been confirmed experimentally and now serve as ‘working-class truths.’ It would be very useful if you were to discuss this matter with Lev Nikolaevich Fedorov, the director of the All-Union Institute of Experimental Medicine, and if you were to ask him while you are at it to draw up a report on the tasks of the Institute—on the necessity for a comprehensive study of the human being. [italics are mine]

For Gorky, his vision of himself as a man who devoted his life to art was prophetic. That vision never betrayed him and that is why he argues with great certainty that it is better to lie and be deceived in case life might turn out to be less positive than human beings expect it to be. Gorky invested much energy, discipline, and industriousness in order to meet his goals, but he did it because he chose to alter his life and rise above his circumstances—no one made him change himself. Once Gorky accepted the use of radical means to recast a Man or instigate a

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change in a country, no matter how he tried later, he could not reconcile violence and his grand dreams in reality, and thus undermined his utopian project. Did Gorky fully understand this? On April 7, 1918, Gorky wrote: “A revolution is fruitful and able to renew life only when it happens first spiritually, in the minds of people, and only then physically on the streets and barricades … [otherwise] it cannot change our life but will only increase brutality and evil.” Yet, he collaborated with the Bolsheviks, rationalized the present, allowed the violent treatment of peasants, and ignored the inhuman treatment at the Solovki camp and Belomor Canal, expecting a positive change in the country. Alas, it only led to more repressions. Violence of any kind breeds more violence.

Gorky had no illusions about the falsity of his position, which resulted from his exceptionally entangled life, and the diversity of his creative and spiritual ambitions and pursuits, in fact never properly interpreted or fully comprehended. Obscured by the magnitude of Gorky's great endeavors lies interred, probably, his most remarkable vision of Man that ultimately fragmented into a lot of injured and hopelessly destroyed men.

There are three main conclusions or lessons that this dissertation makes. First, revolutions fail and bring out violence in people. Second, Gorky’s support of the Bolshevik government did not come from his loyalty to Marxist ideology. Instead, Marxist ideas became a conduit for his utopian projects. Third, although Gorky was not a politician or an ideologue, he contributed to creating Stalinist culture with his preservation projects, anti-Modernist campaign, and support of cultural institutions such as Writers’ Union.

In the early twenties, a disillusioned Gorky wrote Notes from His Diary. He felt responsible for bringing the Bolsheviks to power and needed to make sense of the revolution as

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722 Maxim Gor’kii, “April 7, 1918,” in Untimely Thoughts, p. vii.
well as his own views of Russia and its culture. At first, he called the notes The Book About Russian People As They Were and explored the abominations of Russian life. When Gorky finished these sketches, reconciling the events in his mind, he changed the title, and concluded that the Russians have incredible positive potential to affect the world that had lost its senses during the Great War.

And I am not quite sure whether I would like the [Russian people] to change. Completely devoid of nationalism, patriotism, and other spiritual diseases, I see the Russian people as fantastically talented and singular. Even fools in Russia are stupid in an original way, in their own manner, and lazy Russians are positively ingenious. I am certain that as far as their intricacies and unexpected tricks, figures of thoughts and feelings, Russians are the worthiest material for an artist. I think that when this remarkable people get rid of everything that confuses and weighs them down, when they begin to work with the full recognition of the cultural and religious meaning of labor that connects the entire world, they will achieve a heroic fairy-tale life and will teach a lesson to this exhausted world which has lost its sanity because of the war.723

This is probably one of the most positive characteristics that Gorky gives to Russians in his entire long history of writing about their culture. In these notes, Gorky described the experience and life of a passing civilization, which he defined with a capacious word, Rus’. In his view, Rus did not resemble the Russia of Peter the Great. For him, the creation of Lenin’s Russia was similar to Peter’s Russia in many ways, an observation that Gorky pointed out in the first version of his essay about Lenin. Although Gorky did not accept Lenin’s policy in many of its expressions, such as arrests of intellectuals, the violence against the Russian aristocracy, and the unleashing of the Civil War, he nevertheless came to terms with him in these notes by drawing parallels between Lenin and Peter the Great and seeing the Bolshevik leader as a radical reformer. By 1924, with the rise of Fascism, Gorky saw more positive repercussions of Lenin’s work. Gorky valued Russia rationally, while emotionally he was attached to his idea of Rus’.

723 Maxim Gor’kii, “O Bloke,” p. 246.
Emotionally he never came to terms with the violent means of forcing the change on the country, although later he endorsed it rationally. If he had not endorsed enforcement, he would never have been able to reconcile with the Bolsheviks and that would have ended in exile. This is one of the most complex predicaments that Gorky experienced—he could not live without his Rus, which he embraced emotionally but rejected rationally. In other words, he was a Westernizer by conviction and a Slavophile by artistic instinct. Rus for Gorky represented some kind of a historical disease, some pathological abnormality as an exception from the European rule and he set out to correct it. That is why it fed and attracted his artistic instinct. One could feel his distinctive aestheticism whose cultural ideal was still the European West. Enthusiasm and hope for a better future permeate the passage quoted above. The recipe for realizing one’s dreams according to Gorky was simple—hard work.

The answer to why Gorky rationalized Bolshevik violence will remain a matter of individual judgement: whether he did it in order to survive during Stalin’s reign, or to maintain his stature as the literary father of the nation, or to save Russian intelligentsia. Whatever the answer may have been, in matters of his own artistic integrity, he never wavered and therefore succeeded.
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RGALI Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva)
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