

1927

From the Past

(Record of a Speech Given at the Jubilee of Red Virgin Soil)

In February 1927, a meeting was held at the Herzen House to celebrate five years of Red Virgin Soil. Besides this speech given by Voronsky, Appendix 3 (page 451) and Appendix 4 (page 453) help provide information about the difficulties Voronsky was facing at this time. Since organizational measures were being used by the Politburo to drive Oppositionists from their posts, Voronsky knew that his days as editor of Red Virgin Soil were numbered. Yet he wasn't going down without a fight. One of the main points of this speech is Lenin's endorsement of Voronsky's journal, a fact that would not deter Stalin from removing the Old Bolshevik within months.

It is interesting that the editors of Pravda and Izvestiia did not attend the jubilee. Bukharin, in particular, who was heading the ideological fight against the Opposition, was conspicuously absent. Present were Rakovsky and Radek, two leading Oppositionists; a telegram of greetings was read from Trotsky. Polonsky, editor of *Novy mir* and a sympathizer of the Opposition, chaired the meeting, while Yaroslavsky showed up to represent the Stalin faction of the party. Following the jubilee, Yaroslavsky apparently accused Voronsky of organizing not a "general party," but an Oppositional meeting. Voronsky's protest to Ordzhonikidze did not prevent his dismissal in the fall of 1927 from the journal he had founded.

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From *Mister Britling p'et chashu do dna* (Moscow: Krug, 1927), pp. 199–205.

COMRADES, ON BEHALF of the editorial board of Red Virgin Soil, let me thank you for the main address and the greetings which have been heard here; for the critical suggestions and the requests to take things into consideration; and lastly, for the information and guidance you have provided.

I must remind you that work in Red Virgin Soil is not an individual but a collective matter. Taking part in this work have been many comrades whose role is perhaps unknown to those who have spoken here. But I consider it my duty to mention them. The first organizational meeting of the editorial board of Red Virgin Soil took place in the Kremlin, in Vladimir Ilyich Lenin's apartment. In addition to him, those participating in the meeting were: Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, Aleksei Maksimovich Peshkov (Gorky) and myself. Vladimir Ilyich came to this meeting during the interval between two other sessions. I gave a brief report about the need to publish a thick journal of literary, artistic, scientific and polemical material. Vladimir Ilyich agreed with my ideas. Then it was noted that the journal would be published by Glavpolitprosvet, that I would be the main editor, and that Aleksei Maksimovich would edit the literary department of this journal. During the discussion of the question about the journal, a conversation took place between Gorky and Lenin which I firmly committed to memory. Gorky had brought with him a packet of books which he had published together with Grzhebin in Berlin and in cooperation with the Soviet government. Vladimir Ilyich quickly looked through the books, approved of a book about steam engines, and then picked up an anthology of ancient Indian fairy tales. He leafed through the book and turned to Gorky (who was standing near Vladimir Ilyich):

"It seems to me," he said, "that this is premature."

Gorky replied: "They are very good tales."

Vladimir Ilyich commented: "Money is being spent on them."

Gorky objected to Vladimir Ilyich: "But they are very inexpensive."

"Yes, but we pay gold currency for them. And this year we are going to have a famine."

It seemed to me at that time that two truths had collided: one seemed to be saying: "Man shall not live by bread alone," and the other was answering: "But if we don't have any bread...." And afterwards, when I stood at the junction between the literary word and the practical work of the Communist Party and Soviet government, I repeatedly remembered these two truths. And it always seemed to me that the second truth, Vladimir Ilyich's truth, was stronger than

the first.

Vladimir Ilyich's participation in *Red Virgin Soil* was not limited to this first organizational meeting. Subsequently, for the first issue of *Red Virgin Soil* he gave his article about the tax-in-kind, laying the basis for the New Economic Policy. He helped me with advice and suggestions. I remember that once he sent me a new book by Hobson about imperialism with a chapter marked which, in his opinion, should be translated and published in one of the next issues of the journal. It was published. I won't hide the fact that there was one time when he took me somewhat to task for publishing Sukhanov's memoirs about the February Revolution and for Bazarov's article about Spengler. I told him that Sukhanov was not a regular collaborator of *Red Virgin Soil*, that Bazarov's article had been printed as a discussion article, and that the next issue would contain Comrade Piatakov's reply to this article. He calmed down, but noted that, in his opinion, Spengler was not interesting and that it wasn't worthwhile devoting attention to him in Soviet Russia. I used Vladimir Ilyich's name in our practical work as much as I could. I would come to our Soviet establishments, and when I encountered difficulties, which was very often, I would let everyone know in no uncertain terms that Vladimir Ilyich was greatly interested in *Red Virgin Soil*, and this helped me. I cannot give my greetings to Comrade Lenin—you can't greet the dead—but I propose that we honor his memory by standing. (All stand.)

As I already have said, Maksim Gorky undertook the editing of the literary part of *Red Virgin Soil*. He edited the first issues until the autumn, when he traveled abroad. He put me in touch with the circle of the Serapion Brothers, and noted at that time that, in his opinion, there were talented young writers in this circle. For the first issue he gave me Vsevolod Ivanov's *Partisans*, a novel which, in my opinion, even then determined the artistic physiognomy of the journal.

I must confess that, as I undertook the editing and publishing of *Red Virgin Soil*, I had a very vague and weak conception of the technical side. Earlier in Ivanovo-Voznesensk I had edited *Workers' Land*, but I had never worked in journals. Once I visited Aleksei Maksimovich on editorial matters. I told him that the first issue was being typeset and that things were going well. Gorky asked me:

“How many sheets will be in the issue?”

I thought that by sheets people meant two pages of the journal. According

to my rough calculations, the journal would have three hundred twenty pages. So I answered Gorky's question:

“One hundred sixty sheets.”

Gorky looked at me in such a way that I hastened to finish the conversation and rush out of his apartment. At Gosizdat [the State Publishing House] they explained to me what is meant by a sheet in a journal [sixteen pages of printed text]. For a week I was afraid to show my face at Aleksei Maksimovich's.

In the fall of 1921 Gorky traveled abroad, but he continued to maintain constant contact with the journal's editorial board not only by sending his fictional works, but by giving his advice and suggestions in letters. He maintains these ties even now, and I must remind you that Aleksei Maksimovich is still formally considered the editor of the literary section of the journal. I propose to send him a telegram of greetings in the name of this meeting. (The proposal is accepted.)

The first issues of the journal were printed during months of famine. Significant support was given at that time by Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya, Nikolai Leonidovich Meshcheriakov, Ivan Ivanovich Skvortsov, and later Otto Iulevich Shmidt. Nevertheless the journal's situation was not good. Royalties for an author's page were then set at 60,000 rubles (in today's currency this would mean 2 rubles 60 kopecks). It goes without saying that I couldn't publish a journal for such money, so I had to add rations for my coworkers. In this I was helped by Comrade Enukidze. I remember one incident: I had come to the VTsIK (All-Russian Central Executive Committee).¹ Comrade Enukidze had gone somewhere, his deputy Comrade Zalutsky was filling in, and I asked him to assign produce from the dining area of the Sovnarkom² and VTsIK to Comrade Gorky for coworkers at the journal. I made a list and Comrade Zalutsky signed it. I went downstairs to the office where I was met by a Latvian. He looked at the list, shook his head disapprovingly and said:

“Why is so much being given to one man? We cannot,” he added, “give out a pood of sugar, a pood of butter, etc.”³

I said that the paper had been signed by Comrade Zalutsky. The comrade replied:

1. Important executive body for the Russian republic from 1917 to 1936; elected by the Congress of Soviets. Trans.

2. The Council of People's Commissars; from 1917 to 1946; the highest executive body in Soviet government. Trans.

“I don’t care. What does Gorky need so much food for?”

I answered without thinking:

“Gorky is sick.”

“If he’s sick, then we’ll give him food according to the hospital list. We have a special ration for sick people.”

I had to call Comrade Zalutsky, but for all that the head of the office cut back significantly on the things he gave me. Nevertheless I loaded up two sacks of produce and took them to the First House of the Soviets. By morning the frozen meat had thawed and a pink puddle had formed on the floor. As I looked at it with dumbfounded horror, I thought how all this would end and what problems would arise at the office of the First House of the Soviets because I had ruined the parquet floor. One of the coworkers from Glavpolitprosvet helped me by taking some of the produce to his apartment and distributing the food according to Comrade Gorky’s suggestions.

The second issue of Red Virgin Soil (this was the summer of 1921) had become completely bogged down at the print shop. I received information that the typesetters were refusing to set manuscripts. So I went to the Secretariat of the Central Committee, where I was received by Comrade Yaroslavsky. I asked him for a few million rubles and in reply to his question about what I needed the money for, I answered:

“For bribes. In order to fatten up some typesetters.”

Comrade Yaroslavsky looked alarmed and said:

“Such conversations are inconceivable in the Secretariat of the Central Committee.”

Then I corrected myself. I said that I needed money not for bribes, but to pay a bonus to the workers. Comrade Yaroslavsky gloomily signed a paper for me. I received the money. And this was just when the famine was beginning. That’s how we had to put out the first issues of Red Virgin Soil.

I should note the extraordinarily conscientious attitude of the work force and technical personnel of Red Virgin Soil with regard to their work; the same goes for the typesetters, layout staff, printers and others.

I would like to move on now to the artists and collaborators of Red Virgin Soil. In the course of working for five years and continuously coming into contact with them, I have become convinced of several things which I feel

3. A pood equals about 36 pounds (16.38 kg). Trans.

I should report to this gathering. I have become convinced most of all that I have been dealing with a special world, that in the artists' makeup there are peculiarities to which we, politicians and polemicists, must pay attention in order not to make mistakes. I have become convinced that the world of the artist is a world not of abstract concepts, but of concrete conceptions and images; that any declaration or political article will reach him only if the thoughts or concepts expressed in the article or declaration are reincarnated in his consciousness in concrete images. I had known this earlier, but I became practically convinced of it precisely during my work at Red Virgin Soil. I have further become convinced that today's artist has a hard time living and working. It is hard for him because, first of all, he is dealing with a new form of daily life which has not developed very much, with a way of life which has still not crystallized but is in the process of coming into being. The situation of the contemporary artist in this sense is incomparably harder than the situation of an older writer who has been surrounded by stable living conditions. I also have become convinced that the new mass reader who is rising up out of the depths of the working class and peasantry has not yet managed or been able to form his aesthetic emotions, and if the writer often does not know his reader, then it is precisely because the reader still does not yet know himself. It is also hard for the modern writer because his material situation still often remains unstable. The social command, about which so much has been written and said, is often understood in an extraordinarily vulgar way, and Marxism, as it is applied to problems of art, is almost always vulgarized.

It would be wrong if I did not note at this meeting that, besides its friends, Red Virgin Soil has many opponents as well. You already know about these opponents. It seems to me that in the future Red Virgin Soil must wage a struggle for the culture of the written word, for literary continuity, and it must struggle against communist-conceit, clichés, vulgarization, etc. This does not mean, however, that Red Virgin Soil cannot have a common platform for joint work with its literary opponents. At the present time, and with the collaboration of the higher organs of Soviet power and of the party, a federation of Soviet writers is being organized; representatives of the most prominent writers' groupings have already joined it. The idea is extraordinarily fruitful, and Red Virgin Soil proposes that in practical business matters it is possible to find a common language, although not, of course, without great effort.

Comrades, in the realm of art more than anywhere else, doubts, searching

and errors are admissible. All this is legitimate and admissible, but in today's Soviet art one thing is inadmissible: in our country there is a struggle between the socialist and capitalist elements of the economy; our socialist state industry is growing, but the new "land-grabber" is also growing; he is growing both in the city and the countryside. We communists are confident that the socialist elements will triumph, but we cannot close our eyes to the existing dangers. These dangers are increasing because we are located in a hostile economic and political encirclement. Doubts, searching and errors in art, I repeat, are admissible and inevitable. But in one regard Soviet writers must make a clear and firm accounting of themselves: who are they with, with those who are building life on new socialist foundations, or with the new "land-grabber?" In this question there must be no vacillation, and I am sure that the young Soviet literature in the process of its development will become not only a merciless beacon casting light on our reality, but a fighting weapon that terrifies our enemies, as well as a beautiful embellishment and great object of pride for the Republic of Soviets. This is what we will achieve.