CHAPTER 16

Classical Antiquity in Children’s Literature in the Soviet Union

Elena Ermolaeva

In this article I outline the use of Classical Antiquity in Soviet children’s literature, and then I focus on one subject—books for children written by classical scholars, in particular by professor Salomo Luria (in Russian: Solomon Yakovlevich Lurie).

According to Isaiah Berlin, “[t]he October Revolution made a violent impact” on Russian culture “but did not dam the swelling tide.” Rigid censorship of authors and ideas was enforced not only for books written for adults but also for those written for children. Children’s literature served as an important tool for creating Homo sovieticus. Nevertheless, a considerable number of talented writers continued to write for children. The fate of many of them was tragic: Nikolay Oleynikov, Grigory Belykh, and others were executed; Daniil Kharms, Alexander Vvedensky, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Leonid Panteleyev, Vitaly Bianki, and others were subjected to repression. Some, like Lidia Charskaya, were ostracised, could not find work, and perished of illness and hunger; others, like Andrey Platonov, continued writing without any possibility of being published; others still, like Arkady Gaidar, were killed on the battlefields of the Second World War. Those who were officially recognised by the authorities,

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1 My thanks go to Natalie Tchernetska and Leonid Zhmud for their corrections of this article. A note on transliteration: in transliterating the Cyrillic alphabet we chose the bgn/pcgn romanisation system, developed by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names and by the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use. For purposes of simplification, we have converted ē to yo, -ëy and -yy endings to -y, and omitted apostrophes forъ and ь.


like Samuil Marshak and Korney Chukovsky, nevertheless lived and wrote in constant fear.\textsuperscript{4}

Even so, there were sharply critical works by Mikhail Bulgakov, Zoshchenko, and Platonov, as well as an anti-Stalin play—a tale for children and adults, \textit{Dra-kon [The dragon]}—written by Yevgeny Shvarts (Eugene Schwartz) in 1944. As Mark Lipovetsky wrote:

> [...] It was supposedly a satire on German Nazism, and even the most rigid and suspicious censor would not dare to claim that it was about the Soviet totalitarian regime. The Soviet regime pretended not to recognise itself in Shvarts’s parable […]. Soviet censors were no fools. Their tolerance of such works most likely involved some kind of unannounced etiquette: as long as the writer did not violate the conventional rules of the fairy-tale plot and placed his characters and events outside of the concrete world of Soviet life, he remained under the protection of fantasy.\textsuperscript{5}

As for the theme of Antiquity in children’s literature, it shared a similar fate with classical scholarship and education more broadly. For the classical tradition managed to survive during the Soviet period despite harsh repression, including the execution of scholars, the abolition of university chairs, “zombifying” ideology, “the dead hand of official bureaucracy,”\textsuperscript{6} and censorship. As Alexander Garvilov observes: “[t]his survival became possible due to the inconsistent double-faced image of a Bolshevik-Communist who aimed to destroy or, in the other case, to preserve the traditional cultural values.”\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{4} Chukovsky and Marshak were well-known to every child in Russia as authors of amusing poems. Chukovsky, nonetheless, also left the gloomiest diaries. Marshak, as noted by contemporaries, worried that some anti-Soviet hints might be detected in his works; see Nadezhda Abramson, \textit{Zhivoye slovo [The living word]}, manuscript (1985).


\textsuperscript{6} An expression of Isaiah Berlin, “The Arts in Russia under Stalin,” 55.