INTRODUCTION

Much of the Western scholarship on the literary and cultural figure Maksim Gor’kii has concentrated either on his later period under Stalin or on his earlier days with the Znanie (Knowledge) school. Historians and literature specialists have especially analyzed Gor’kii’s return to Russia after the New Economic Policy ended in 1928 and his relationship with Stalin and the Communist Party. At the historic First Congress of Soviet Writers in the summer of 1934 Gor’kii introduced a literary style known as “Socialist Realism.” Gor’kii and other cultural figures saw this literary style as “creating a new reality.”

Some historians have castigated Gor’kii for praising Stalin and the transformational qualities of the GPU camps in the 1930s. Alexander Nekrich and Mikhail Heller have argued that Gor’kii helped Stalin and the regime spiritually “enslave the Soviet people” during the course of the 1930s. Quoting Gor’kii’s speeches from that period, they contend that he deemed the GPU an important cultural force in Soviet society.

Other specialists have analyzed in depth the young Gor’kii and his school of neo-realism. They have carefully examined the Sreda (Wednesday) circle and the Znanie (Knowledge) school, especially between approximately 1899 and 1905. In fin-de-siecle Russia, modernist writers led by Valerii Briusov and neo-realists led by Gor’kii intensified their rivalry and debate on the role of literature in society. The modernists, who helped spawn a significant “Silver Age” in Russian culture, held that literature and poetry should not emphasize traditional Russian themes of politics and society. On the other hand, young neo-realist accused the

2. Mikhail Heller and Alexander M. Nekrich, Utopia in Power (New York: Summit Books, 1986), pp. 275-76. They argue that Gor’kii and other writers who helped form the first Soviet Writers Union took pride in such Stalinist projects as the building of the Balic-White Sea Canal. Heller and Nekrich see the works written on these Stalinist construction projects as evidence of a type of “literary glorification” of labor camps.
modernists of disregarding actual problems in Russian society which needed to be amplified in contemporary Russian literature and other artistic forms.¹

In the early 1900s, the neo-realists consolidated their forces into two literary groups, the Sreda circle and the Znanie school. Both groups sought the revitalization of the Russian realist tradition. Members of these groups included the writers and artists Bunin, Belousov, Chaliapin and, of course, Gor’kii.² Recent analysis by historians has attempted to place these circles (and kruzhki in general) within the context of the growth of a diversified middle class in late Tsarist Russia. Mary Louise Loe, in her recent work on the Sreda circle, has argued that various social groups (such as students, writers and activists) sought both “personal support and greater self-awareness within the closed structure of the circle.”³

Loe’s work has highlighted how these neo-realists had very weak family support networks and, unlike other Russian intellectuals, lacked a sense of social status. They reported the problems of the provincial lower and middle strata, and they did not romanticize the narod (people) as did other members of Russia’s urban intellectual elite.⁴ Loe emphasizes that Gor’kii, unlike some of his colleagues, believed that Russian intellectuals should transform Russia and its people and that he was very critical of those who shunned this mission. Because of this perspective, Gor’kii was criticized by radicals and conservatives alike for advocating a type of “Nietzschean transformationalist” program for Russia’s cultural development.⁵ He was also reproached for his low impression of the cultural state of the Russian commoner.

Recent historiography has certainly enriched our understanding of Maksim Gor’kii and his critical role in various movements at the turn of the century and under Stalin in the 1930s. Yet little has been written to refine our understanding of Gor’kii’s role during a critical period in revolu---

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4. Ibid., p. 13.
6. Ibid., p. 294.