

The Metropol Affair

Metropol means many things to a Russian. It is, literally, a “mother of cities,” a capital; it is also the name of a Moscow hotel, noted for its modernistic façade, and of Moscow’s extensive and architecturally splendid subway. But to a number of Soviet writers, *Metropol*, a special publication, represents a brave, last-ditch effort to promote free expression. Vassily Aksyonov is one of those writers. Born in 1933, the son of a famous, persecuted author, Evgeniya Ginsberg, he belongs to a group of artists who came of age during the 1950s and early ’60s. These iconoclasts and experimenters scoffed at hollow Communist “principles” and at those who passively accepted the status quo. Fortunately, those were relatively permissive times, and novels such as Aksyonov’s 1961 *Ticket to the Stars* (which featured jazz-loving young rebels) were tolerated, if not encouraged, by Soviet officialdom. Tolerance soon gave way to a new dogmatism. Once again, the Soviet Writer’s Union (founded in 1932) insisted on literature written in conformity with the canons of “socialist realism”—a rigid aesthetic aimed at “the ideological transformation and education of workers in the spirit of socialism.” Not all artists accepted this return to dogma; the “*Metropol* Affair” is one important chapter in the story of their resistance.

by Vassily P. Aksyonov

Since the time of our great poet Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), Russian literature has sustained its own peculiar tradition: The most important events take place on the pages of the so-called “thick journals.” One cannot imagine an author attracting a respectable share of public attention without his or her work first appearing in one of our *tolstyi zhurnaly*. At times, these weighty tomes have served as battlegrounds

for rival groups of writers—for the Slavophiles and Westernizers in the 19th century, for example. At others, they have functioned as ideological barometers gauging those slight but all-important shifts in official literary policy.

Beginning immediately after the death of Stalin and lasting until around 1968, restrictions on literary production in my country were loosened somewhat. During this not

*The Metropol editors.
Back row (r. to l.):
Evgeny Popov, Victor
Erofeev, Bella
Akhmadulina, Andrei
Voznesensky, Zoia
Boguslavskaya. Front
row: Boris Messerer,
Fasil Iskander, Andrei
Bitov, Vassily Aksyonov,
and Maia Karmen
(Aksyonov's wife).*



Courtesy of Ardis Publishers.

altogether peaceful idyll — this “thaw” as we call it — the struggle between the left and right wings of post-Stalinist society found its way onto the pages of two major thick journals, *Novy Mir* (*New World*), the champion of progressive liberalization, and *October*, the defender of conservative “socialist realist” principles. Under the able guidance of Alexander Tvardovsky, *Novy Mir* seemed for a time to gain the upper hand in the debate; it certainly succeeded in publishing some of the liveliest literature then being written in the Soviet Union. Yet another journal, *Yunost* (*Youth*), began in the late 1950s to introduce the Russian public to a new generation of writers who had grown up during the dark-

est years of Stalin’s rule. It was to this generation that I myself belonged.

Indispensable as the thick journals were to our lives, they could not satisfy the desires of all the readers or all the writers all the time. For this reason, unusual collections — non-periodical “almanacs” such as *Metropol* — have on occasion come into being.

Among the most remarkable predecessors of *Metropol* were the almanacs *Moscwa* (1956), established under the aegis of the Moscow branch of the Writer’s Union, and *Tarruskie Stranitsy*, or *Papers of Tarruss* (1961), put out by a provincial publishing house but containing the work of Muscovites Konstantin Pau-

stovsky, Boris Balter, and others. Those two almanacs were born of hopes for better times. But unfortunately the party made it clear that such hopes were premature. After the publication of each of these collections, the guardians of ideological purity demonstrated, through a series of punitive actions, that they considered literary matters to be strictly within their own domain, and that they took their responsibility seriously — with an *animal seriousness* as we Russians say.

Born of a Toothache

Unlike our predecessors, we *Metropol* authors and editors were less sanguine about “new times.” By the late 1970s, the warmth of the “thaw” had become no more than a distant memory. (After the “Prague Spring” in 1968, it seemed as though winter had settled in and forgotten to leave.) “New times,” many of us thought, were beginning to resemble all too depressingly the old times of Stalin’s “terror.” Others among us — the more forward-looking pessimists — thought that the “new times” were moving much too briskly toward that fateful year, 1984.

Perhaps *because* the atmosphere was so bleak, many of us writers felt the need, a desperate need, to achieve some degree of autonomy within that most unusual of colonial empires: the Soviet literary establishment. Merely contemplating a small act of defiance, however token, we recaptured some of the optimism of our youth.

As to the actual genesis of *Metropol*, an enigmatic line from our preface provides a clue: “One could say that this almanac was born as a result of a toothache.” A figure of speech? No; the idea simply occurred to two authors (Victor Erofeev and, I must confess, me) in February 1978 while we were having our teeth filled at the Moscow Stomatological Center. That happens to be the name of our dentists’ office. Our dental factory, I should say. Imagine, if you can, a vast Kafkian space — a hall with three hundred gleaming dentists’ chairs and a huge slogan painted on a snow-white wall: “We guarantee the five-year plan of quality.” An inspired pain-killing idea!

Writing by Numbers

We two survivors of the Stomatological Center (for we did survive, teeth intact and *guaranteed*) were not sure our idea would receive much support. But in a short time we were joined by 20 others, including those *enfants terribles* of Soviet literature (*enfant terrible*, you must realize, here means a good writer, as opposed to a writer who writes by numbers, a “socialist realist”)—Andrei Bitov and Fasil Iskander. By March 1978, so many authors were offering their work to us that we had to become selective.

Unlike our predecessors at *Moskwa* and *Tarruskie Stranitsy*, we decided to make no deals with literary officials. We knew that if we went to the Writer’s Union for assistance, they

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would crush the project at the outset—or at least disfigure it beyond recognition. To remain within legal limits, we produced only 12 homemade copies of the almanac; any more would have constituted illegal book production.

Moving Bouquets

These 12 volumes, when they appeared in early January 1979, looked like pre-Gutenberg folios, each approximately the size of a gravestone. Bulky as they were, we nevertheless managed to smuggle two copies out of the country.* So when you hear people talking about the “Russian Connection,” you should keep in mind that they are talking about books, not drugs.

The next step in this literary event, set for January 1979, was to be a large brunch—champagne, caviar, and hot *kalatchi* pastries—at the Rhythm, a Moscow cafe. We had invited jazz musicians, top models (moving bouquets), and journalists from home and abroad.

After the gathering, we planned to go to Comrade Boris Stukalin, chairman of the State Committee for Publishing, and offer him a volume of our almanac. But we were going to insist on one condition: no censorship. Thus, while avoiding the Writer’s Union—that 8,000-member bureaucracy-within-a-bureaucracy—we hoped to remain within the framework of Soviet officialdom. Success in publishing even a small edition of this unusual collection, we believed, would signal a triumph in the history of Soviet literature.

But a week before the Rhythm brunch was to take place, the alarm bells began to ring on the upper deck.

*One went to Editions Gallimond in Paris and was published in French several months later; the other went to Ardis Press in Michigan.

In January 1979, the state’s ideological *apparatchiks* launched the “Metropol Affair.” Before I go into the dirty dealings of our glorious state officials, though, it is worth asking what exactly the stir was all about. What did this Trojan horse, *Metropol*, contain? And who were these voices threatening the fortress of “socialist realism”?

Well, first of all we were different from some of those more aesthetically unified innovators of the 1920s, since we were united more by ethical than by artistic principles. Our ethic was simple: opposition to the totalitarian state of mind, and commitment to overcoming it.

Something for Everyone

Aesthetically, we contained multitudes. The realistic prose of Friedrich Gorenstein could not have been more different from the modern “black” prose of Evgeny Popov and Victor Erofeev; nor could the traditionalist poetry of Inna Lisnianskaya have been more unlike the avant-garde poems of Heinrich Saggir. Two philosophical rivals found themselves side-by-side on the pages of our almanac: Victor Trosnikov, a Christian who had abandoned his scientific career to pursue revelation, and Leonid Batkin, a neo-positivist philosopher.

We ranged widely in age as well. Our youngest contributor, Peter Kozhevnikov, was 44 years the junior of Semyon Lipkin, venerable poet and translator of Oriental poetry. Though the almanac was dominated by writers born in the 1930s, we also had representatives from the generations born in the ’40s and ’50s.

Among our ranks were well-known figures, favorites of the Soviet intellectual world, including Bella Akhmadulina (who, though a poet,

contributed a sophisticated prose work, "Many Dogs and *The Dog*"), as well as less-known writers, notably Evgeny Rein, a Leningrad poet who works in the tradition of Anna Akhmatova (one of the great poets of the 1920s, the "Silver Age") but who, in over 20 years of writing, had succeeded in publishing no more than three pages in Soviet publications. We also ran a novella by Boris Vakh-tin, one of the most remarkable representatives of the Leningrad School of Prose — and an equal of Rein in terms of official neglect. That, perhaps, was our major goal; to show the rich variety of Russian literature, whether above or under ground, and to underline its distinctiveness from monotonous official Soviet literature.

We also decided to run the work of two foreigners. John Updike responded to our invitation by sending us an excerpt from his recently completed but still unpublished novel, *The Coup*, which appeared in both English and Russian. The second "foreign" guest was Andrei Voznesensky,* representing, as usual, his own state. For a while, we even considered using the following lines from one of his poems as the epigraph for our collection:

Such solitude, soaring above
The dark and silent Empire . . .
I envy you, double-headed Eagle,
You can talk to yourself
From time to time.

But then we discovered this poem was being run at the same time in an official Soviet journal under the title "Derzhavin" (an 18th-century Russian poet) and that therefore it was simply a safe historical "snapshot." (Incidentally, at the hottest moment of the "*Metropol* Affair," Voz-

*A widely known and officially "approved" Soviet poet.

nesensky took a trip to the North Pole with — who else? — the Kom-somol ski team. From the hottest spot to the coldest: a poetic parabola.)

I should add, lest it seem that we were trying to be provocative, that we were extremely moderate in our selections. We shunned work that posed too direct a challenge to the ruling powers. No, I believe authorities were far less upset by the content of the almanac than by our action, our solidarity, and our disregard for the usual official channels.

"Trench Warfare"

Unlike a typical *samizdat* (underground publication), *Metropol* was intended to be more than a stack of papers secretly circulated among the "right" readers. We wanted it to be an attractive public object — and to that end, working according to the "aesthetic of poverty," we had the almanac bound with the best "high chic" shoelaces. David Borovsky, designer-in-chief at the Taganka Theater, designed *Metropol*, while the frontispiece was the work of another theater artist, Boris Messerer.

That was *Metropol* — a collective endeavor — and none of us really expected it to provoke one of the greatest crises in the history of Soviet literature.

Still, it is not hard to imagine how the entire anti-*Metropol* campaign was put together, nor who planned it. After the first alarm was sounded by a dutiful lackey in the secret ideological service, a special division of the KGB, the matter was taken up, at least on the surface, by the first secretary of the Moscow Writer's Union, Felix Kuznetsov. This was, as one French journalist put it, "trench warfare inside the Union of Soviet Writers." Outside the union's paper,

Muscovsky Literatur (which has a very limited readership), there was little evidence of conflict—almost no indication of the endless secretarial sessions and party rallies, and of course no mention of the campaign of intimidation, blackmail, and rumor that had begun.

The editorial board members (Bitov, Iskander, Popov, Erofeev, and I) were called before the leadership of the Moscow branch of the Writer's Union and subjected to the oldest technique of colonial control: divide and conquer. I was denounced as the ringleader and mastermind of the conspiracy. That was intended to let the others off easy, as long as they went along with the party line. But the board had badly underestimated our courage and our sense of solidarity. As far as I know, it might have been the first time in Soviet history that authorities failed to find a single turncoat or coward in an "opposition" group.

100,000 Suspects

Later, we learned that *Metropol* was being used at the party rallies (those delightful Soviet variations on the Theater of the Absurd) as a sort of litmus test of Union loyalty. The *aparatchiks* tried to force Union members to condemn *Metropol*, even those who had never seen it. If a certain writer was reluctant, he or she was reminded that his or her book was soon coming up for publication, or that his or her request for a new apartment, a new car, or a trip abroad was now coming up for consideration. It was enlightening to discover who submitted to the pressure and who did not. There were more than a few surprises.

Kuznetsov himself seemed particularly preoccupied by possible leaks to foreigners. At the first ses-

sion of the board's "Star Chamber," he pursued his question in the best KGB interrogatory style: "Have any foreigners seen this almanac?" he asked. "Of course," I answered. "Do you realize, Kuznetsov, how many foreigners are to be found in Moscow on any day? About 100,000." Our interrogators appeared to be overwhelmed by the number of possible suspects.

Anti-Semitic Jews

Metropol, it was obvious, had thrown a wrench into the state bureaucracy's attempt to restore the isolation of Russian culture. The *aparatchiks* were enraged by the ease with which we *Metropol* authors had established contacts with Western intellectuals and publishers. They certainly did not enjoy the close scrutiny of the world's leading newspapers. But if our links with the "Western propaganda machine" exposed us to the charge of treason, they also proved to be our salvation—at least for a time.

Imagine the surprise of both the *Metropol* authors and the ideological watchdogs that evening in January 1979 when American publisher Carl Proffer announced over the Voice of America (VOA) that his company, Ardis, was planning to publish "this unique collection of contemporary Russian literature." The very next day, the day of our intended brunch, the Rhythm cafe was closed for "sanitary inspection." Purely coincidental, of course.

The next step in the anti-*Metropol* effort was a more public campaign of gossip- and rumor-mongering, carried out by a certain disinformation service. All *Metropol* contributors were Jews, though many, strangely enough, were anti-Semitic. It went almost without saying that they were

all homosexuals and agents of Western intelligence services. Andrei Bitoff's real name was *Von Bitoff*. And Aksyonov—that was just a pen-name for Ginsberg, who incidentally had a million dollars in a Swiss bank account and had fomented the whole affair as a publicity stunt, hardly caring that he had dragged in dozens of innocent people, even if they were all devious, self-interested Jews.

Flanking Maneuver

We were informed that the case was being handled by a special committee—for “The Investigation of Extreme Anti-State Crime.” Our case was brought up in the Politburo, by Kremlin kitchen-cabinet member Andrei Kirilenko himself. All our talks and meetings, we learned, were to be bugged and monitored by the secret service. One of the “Heroes of the Soviet Union,” the author Vladimir Karpov, demanded publicly that we be placed under martial law restrictions and that we be considered for the firing squad.*

Strangely enough, we *Metropol* authors found this to be one of the more exhilarating periods of our lives. The parties and lunches came one after another, and we even managed to arrange a reception in honor of the German novelist, Heinrich Böll, an event televised by a West German crew. We were all so close at this time that it was difficult for the Writer's Union to expel even one of us: If I were ejected, many others would resign.

So the *apparatchiks* tried a flanking maneuver, dismissing the two younger and relatively unknown writers, Popov and Erofeev. That forced me to resign in protest, while other writers among us, including a

few whom the Writer's Union wished to *preserve* for Soviet literature, threatened to go if the younger writers were not restored.

Meanwhile, Kuznetsov and company were busy trying to convince the various literary circles that there was really nothing to get worked up about. *Metropol* was just second-rate literature, pornography, a bag of modernist tricks. The hypocrites in the Writer's Union were delighted to hear this: It justified their complicity in the KGB-style persecution. Too many writers seemed to forget that this was precisely how they justified themselves during the anti-Pasternak and anti-Solzhenitsyn campaigns—“First of all, old fellow, this is bad writing.” Of course, it was a level of “bad writing” that most of them could not hope to attain.

A “Final Solution”?

At the peak of the government's campaign, a message was published by five American authors in the *New York Times* and subsequently broadcast over VOA. John Updike, Arthur Miller, Kurt Vonnegut, Edward Albee, and William Styron urged Soviet authorities to halt suppression of *Metropol* and to restore the younger writers to the Union. Moscow's literary big shots were actually a bit upset by the statement. They didn't want their “dialogue” with Western writers to be broken; that would deprive them of one of their major excuses for foreign travel. Besides they didn't want the Soviet ideal to be exposed for what it truly was—a haggard old lady, and a nasty one at that. Popov and Erofeev, it was announced, would be restored.

Of course, the *apparatchiks* were lying. Popov and Erofeev soon learned that they had been duped—they were not going to be taken back

*Karpov was recently appointed editor-in-chief of *Novy Mir*, in order, no doubt, to advance its liberal tradition.

into the Union. Shortly thereafter, Semyon Lipkin and Inna Lisnianskaya joined me by resigning.

This clumsy and indecent campaign, which lasted, all told, about two years, resulted ultimately in my departure from the Soviet Union and the loss of my citizenship. But I will not go into the details of that story—at least not now.

A journalist once asked me how we *Metropol* people managed to create such a tempest. I can only say in truth that we had not intended to. Our intentions were limited: to open a few windows, to air out the musty house of Soviet-literature, to give people a chance to breathe something other than “socialist realism.”

Why then did authorities react so violently? In part, it was the typical response of provincial and ignorant *apparatchiks* to the threat of literature—of literature itself. At the same time, though, it provided the occasion for a few cynical people to promote themselves as guardians of the Communist Party and socialist ideals. As far as I know, those who helped orchestrate the performances and played their roles correctly were delighted at their success. Kuznetsov even received a shiny new medal for his jacket. But I cannot help thinking that they were a little too hasty with their self-congratulations. Most of them failed to notice that something new had been introduced into the atmosphere, something that I do not think will be forgotten.

Authorities certainly didn't expect any further disobedience after their

crackdown on *Metropol*, which is perhaps why they lost their composure when a new literary almanac, *Catalogue*, appeared in the fall of 1980, when the echoes of the *Metropol* scandal were still in the air. This time they responded a little more directly and heavy-handedly. Contributors were arrested on the street; their apartments were searched; manuscripts and typewriters were confiscated—all in response to a group's request for permission to establish a small literary club independent of the Union. Philip Berman was forced to leave the country; Evgeny Kharitonov, who was only 40, died of a heart attack after a series of interrogations and searches; many others were placed under close watch. Evgeny Kozlovsky, a novelist and the rising star in the current literary firmament, was arrested and put into the KGB's Lefortovo prison. He is soon to go on trial on charges of “manufacturing and disseminating works of literature with anti-Soviet content.”

By all signs, it appears as though somebody at the top is seeking a “final solution” to all literary problems. And from this, we might conclude that any attempts at even moderately independent literary activity in the Soviet Union are doomed to failure. But perhaps we, like the Soviet leaders, are rushing to conclusions. For just as the *apparatchiks* have repeatedly overestimated the danger posed by Russian literature, have they not also underestimated its stamina?