The Individual after Stalin:
Fedor Abramov, Russian Intellectuals,
and the Revitalization of Soviet Socialism, 1953-1962

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines the effort of Russian writers to reform Soviet socialism in the first decade after Joseph Stalin’s death. My departure point is the idea that the Soviet experiment was about the creation not only of a new socio-economic system, but also of a New Man. According to the logic of Soviet socialism, it was the New Man who would usher in the new socio-economic order by living out philosophical ideas in his everyday life. Under Khrushchev, Russian writers bestowed the New Man with even more power to build Communism. Stalin, the superhuman engine of historical progress, had died, giving ordinary citizens more agency, according to the contemporary discourse, to shape the future and overcome the consequences of his cult of personality. A new emphasis was placed on sincerity and the individual; and not only on fashioning the future, but also on understanding the details of the past and present. Among writers, a new importance was allotted to the diary, which was conceptualized as a space of sincerity, and as a genre that helped one grasp the facts of everyday existence and pen realistic representations of Soviet life.

This dissertation investigates this discourse of sincerity, realism, and the diary among the literary intelligentsia. It features a number of intellectuals, Aleksandr Iashin, Valentin Ovechkin, Aleksandr Tvardovskii, and several others, many of whom kept diaries in, or employed the diaristic genre in their works of, the Khrushchev years. Based
on a reading of their unpublished and published writings, my project locates not a single personality ideal, but several, united by an emphasis on sincerity and realism. I examine Khrushchev’s Secret Speech about Stalin’s cult of personality in this context, and demonstrate that the speech, commonly considered a discursive departure in Soviet history, in fact echoed earlier narrative conventions. For the purpose of close reading, I center the project around Fedor Abramov (1920-1983), a leading writer of the post-Stalin era, and how he used his diary and personal notebooks to fashion himself into a New Man. I analyze Abramov’s effort to transform not only his thoughts and actions, but also his emotions and diaristic grammar in keeping with his version of the new personality ideal.

The conventional interpretation of the Khrushchev era is of a period of uneven cultural liberalization during which the leadership pursued socio-economic goals incompatible with its desire to maintain a monopoly on power. My focus on self-transformation builds a bridge between the cultural and social, economic, and political histories. In the contemporaneous literature, I locate a discourse that describes personal transformation as the catalyst of socio-economic and political change. Personal transformation, I conclude, was the primary imperative of the age. I thus situate the Khrushchev era in a century-long Russian tradition of living out philosophical ideas in everyday life in an effort to move History forward, and of writers conceptualizing themselves as leading forces of change. Finally, I demonstrate that the version of the New Man into which Russian intellectuals aimed to fashion themselves and their fellow citizens under Khrushchev marked a crucial break in the understanding of the individual in Russian and Soviet history.
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To my parents,
who left to give me the opportunity to go back
Introduction

The defining metaphor for the early post-Stalin years is a Thaw, a term first used by Il’ia Erenburg in the 1954 novella of the same name, then embraced by contemporaries and historians in their turn. In the historiography it has come to denote a season of optimism tempered by uncertainty, a time when Soviet citizens witnessed a measure of cultural liberalization and institutional reform and hoped for still more, but feared that whatever changes had been achieved promised to be impermanent or incomplete.1 Yet the metaphor meant more than this to Erenburg and his contemporaries. Erenburg’s novella is about the residents of a provincial town who overcome their fear and callousness and embrace their true feelings and express their true thoughts, but whose transformations are far from complete. The novella presents the consummation of such transformation as the catalyst of cultural liberalization, institutional change, and, ultimately, the creation of Communism; personal transformation was the force that would make the impermanent permanent, the incomplete complete. The notion is captured in the penultimate chapter, in which a young artist unfreezes himself and stomps on a patch of ice in an enthusiastic fit of self-expression. As the chapter ends the artist continues smashing the ice, which lies cracked, the reader imagines, but still present and unmelted.2

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1 The idea of “impermanence” or “incompleteness” comes from Nancy Condee, “Cultural Codes of the Thaw,” in Abbott Gleason, Sergei Khrushchev, William Taubman, eds., Nikita Khrushchev (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 160-76. The term Thaw is often used interchangeably with the term de-stalinization. For the relationship between them, see Polly Jones, “Introduction: The Dilemmas of De-Stalinisation,” in Polly Jones, ed., Dilemmas of De-Stalinisation: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era (London: Routledge, 2006), 5. Jones writes that Thaw “might better capture the fragility, the potential for reversal (or ‘freeze’), which each tentative forward step carried.”

2 Il’ia Erenburg, Ottepел’: povest’ (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1954), 139.
According to the novella, it was the ordinary man who would usher in the transition to the new season, or turn the Thaw into a Spring. In other words, he was to be more than a hopeful but anxious spectator. This dissertation argues that among the literary intelligentsia personal transformation was the primary imperative of the early post-Stalin years.

Whether the Thaw thus amounted to a break with the Stalin era is a complex question. Personal transformation had been a defining mandate of the Stalin years. Under both Stalin and his successor, Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet subject was to become selfless, collectivist, and a lichnost’ or personality, a free and rational human being. Nor was the idea that a self-expressive ordinary man was an agent of History necessarily a departure from the previous period. It had emerged in the early 1930s and characterized Soviet discourse to varying degrees for the next two decades. Yet it had existed alongside the competing notion that a select number of “outstanding individuals” were the leading catalysts of historical change.³ The most outstanding among these individuals, of course, was Joseph Stalin. What changed after Stalin’s death in 1953 was that Soviet writers, and the Soviet leadership, too, placed the emphasis on ordinary people, all of whom could become outstanding by transforming themselves and smashing the ice.⁴ In this sense the Thaw witnessed an application of a central imperative of the Stalin era to the whole of Soviet society.

³ Jan Plamper, “Introduction: Modern Personality Cults,” in Plamper and Klaus Heller, eds., Personality Cults in Stalinism (Göttingen: V & R Unipress, 2004), 29-32. During the Stalin years, for example, the term vozhdizm, or leaderism, had a negative charge, but the word vozhd’, or leader, had a positive one.

⁴ Plamper writes: “The 1954 edition of the ‘Great Soviet Encyclopedia’ already reflected Stalin’s death insofar as all references to him and quotations from his writings were removed, even if everything else essentially stayed the same” (Bol’shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia, Vol. 25, Moscow 1954, 304-5). See Plamper, “Introduction,” 32.
The Thaw broke from the Stalin years more cleanly in the tasks the Soviet leadership and literary intelligentsia assigned to ordinary men and women. Stalin’s Soviet Union had accomplished a great deal. It had defeated Nazi Germany in the Second World War. It had expanded its empire into East-Central Europe. It had created an industrialized economy rivaled in size only by that of the United States. It had, in short, turned peasant Russia into a superpower. Superpower status, however, had come at an enormous cost. Soviet peasants were impoverished and virtual serfs on the collective farms. Poorly paid and heavily taxed, they had no incentive to work, which proved a debilitating weight on agricultural productivity. City dwellers lived in cramped communal apartments and had trouble acquiring basic consumer goods. Though better compensated than the collective farmers, they too were underpaid, and industrial productivity suffered accordingly. Both the agricultural and industrial sectors were further burdened by antiquated infrastructure and hyper-centralized administration. Then, of course, there were the arrests, exiles, and executions, which had destroyed the lives of millions.\(^5\) It was this extraordinary inheritance that the leadership and intellectuals called upon ordinary Soviet citizens to discern and overcome.

First, however, Soviet citizens had to transform themselves. The type of people they were to become also distinguished the Thaw from the Stalin years. Stalin’s Soviet Union may have become a superpower, but its citizens were hobbled by fear, passivity, and distrust. Soviet writers prescribed a variety of personality ideals to their post-Stalin readers; but almost all of them called upon their readers to purge themselves of these

debilitating qualities and subsequently uncover and take on the so-called mistakes and shortcomings in Soviet life. They asked the same of less civically mature writers, urging them to move in their literature from the romanticist to the realist pole of the Soviet Union’s official aesthetic, Socialist Realism. Both writers and readers were to be engaged, courageous, and outstanding, which the Stalin era had demanded of them, too. Yet Thaw-era discourse acknowledged that, while Soviet citizens were to become outstanding, they could not become perfect. They were human, unlike their imagined Stalin-era predecessors.

Most significantly, in contrast to their Stalin-era counterparts, post-Stalin-era citizens were to emulate Erenburg’s young artist and embrace their true feelings and express their true thoughts, none of which were believed to be anti-Communist. In short, they were to live according to a new definition of iskrennost’ or sincerity. Whereas under Stalin sincerity required that Soviet citizens sincerely embrace the positions of the Central Committee and Stalin himself, after Stalin’s death sincerity demanded that citizens replace the Central Committee, Stalin, and even Lenin as the sources of Communist truth. If they succeeded, they would elevate themselves to the status of Thaw-era New Men. Soviet socialism is not often, if ever, associated in the popular imagination or the secondary literature with the epistemological power or historical agency of the independent individual. Such was precisely the case, however, among the writers who are the subjects of this dissertation.

The Soviet leadership, too, called upon Soviet citizens and writers to overcome a late-Stalin-era torpor and illuminate and combat mistakes and shortcomings, but only the mistakes and shortcomings that the leadership itself had identified. Here is where the
concordat, such that it was, of the Thaw broke down. The intellectuals called for sincerity, or a turn to one’s soul to find Communist truth, which they submitted had been forsaken by a corrupt leadership. Meanwhile, the authorities considered the call an apostasy and force of destabilization. They reacted accordingly, attacking the writers and creating a political climate in which they could not successfully transform themselves.

The Soviet writers who championed sincerity also embraced a particular literary genre, the personal diary, which they claimed captured their new personality ideal. In *The Thaw*, for example, the mother of the young artist recalls that she kept a diary during the Revolution and Civil War. The temporal coincidence between diary writing and Revolution suggests that engaging in the former was a revolutionary act, while participation in the latter was an intensely personal enterprise. To keep a diary was simultaneously to do something for oneself and to participate in the Revolution; it was to make radical, progressive change by being sincere. In the literature of the immediate post-Stalin era, other writers also presented diaries as repositories of sincere expression and thus of true empirical data about the problems in Soviet life. They made clear that diaries were by no means to remain private; they were to be shared or published and thus serve as models of sincerity for their readers, whom they would inspire to transform and build the Communist utopia. Yet, because of political reaction, the writers’ own diaries did not embody the personality ideal, nor could they be published. It is the story of one of these unpublished diaries that this dissertation seeks to tell.

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This dissertation analyzes various Party speeches and pronouncements and dozens of poems, plays, tales, sketches, short stories, and novels in an effort to discover the dominant personality ideals and literary genres of the immediate post-Stalin years. It features a number of leading writers of the Thaw: Erenburg, Valentin Ovechkin, Aleksandr Tvardovskii, and several others, many of whom kept diaries in, or employed the diaristic genre in their works of, the Khrushchev years. For the purpose of close reading and narrative focus, however, the dissertation centers around Fedor Abramov (1920-1983), a leading writer of the post-Stalin era, and his use of his own diary to fashion himself into a particular incarnation of the Thaw-era New Man and create the Communist future. Best known as a founder of Russian village prose, a literary movement that emerged in the late Khrushchev era and dominated Soviet letters in the Brezhnev years, Abramov was the author of scores of tales and short stories as well as the tetralogy *Brothers and Sisters* (1958-1978).

This dissertation focuses on the mid- and late 1950s, the period before Abramov reached the height of his fame. When Stalin died, Abramov was a Party member and literary critic in the employ of the Department of Soviet Literature at Leningrad State University, one of the Soviet Union’s most prestigious institutes of higher education. In 1954, he earned national repute for an essay he published in *Novyi mir*, the Soviet

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Union’s leading literary journal, about the lack of realism in postwar prose about the Soviet countryside.\(^8\) During these years his foremost goal, however, was to finish and publish a novel about the wartime Russian village that he had begun as a graduate student at Leningrad State in 1950. In 1958, he published the novel, *Brothers and Sisters*, which would become the first volume of the eponymous tetralogy. Like Erenburg in *The Thaw*, Abramov in *Brothers and Sisters* presented characters who not only long anxiously for a better future, but also transform themselves in keeping with a personality ideal that promises to change the course of History.\(^9\) Like Erenburg, Abramov fashioned an ideal that combined sincerity and older imperatives such as selflessness and collectivism. Yet, in contrast to the author of *The Thaw*, Abramov traced the sources of his characters’ positive and negative characteristics to the traits of a particular nation, ethnic Russians.

The ideal to which Abramov subscribed in his diary is identical to the one he presented in his novel. With the help of his diary, Abramov was thus trying to become sincere and both more and less Russian as he understood the term. The diary is in fact something of a key that unlocks the meaning of the novel. In *Brothers and Sisters*, Abramov could not explicitly criticize the Central Committee or present the individual as the ultimate source of truth. If one reads the novel on the background of the diary, however, one discovers that in his novel Abramov articulated this argument. In his diary,


Abramov also made clear that the selflessness and collectivism of his novel’s characters, ordinary Russian peasants, were an antidote to what he considered the moral corruption among Soviet Jews and urban *intelligenty*, about whom he wrote scores of entries. His anti-Semitism and negative view of the intelligentsia also distinguished his conception of the personality from that of Erenburg, who was Jewish.

The version of Abramov’s diary examined in this dissertation is the complete text, which is in the possession of Abramov’s widow, Liudmila Krutikova. Abramov began his diary in January 1954 and kept it until November 1957, originally conceptualizing it as a text in which to record notes for his novel and future fiction. Extending to more than eight-hundred typed pages, more than three-quarters of which are single spaced, the diary is a massive document. Its size is rivaled only by its richness, which is the reason it and its author have been selected as the centerpiece of this study. Other source materials include Abramov’s personal notebooks for these years, which are also in Krutikova’s custody and are nearly as long and valuable as the diary, as well as Abramov’s published letters, literary criticism, and fiction. Like his contemporaries, Abramov came to conceptualize the diaristic genre as particularly well suited to capturing the reality and personality ideal of his time. He came, in fact, to see his own diary as his true literature, considering it more aesthetically and socially significant than *Brothers and Sisters*. He arrived at this conclusion even though he would not have been able to publish it, which, of course, restricted its social value, but only its immediate social value. Abramov held

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fast to the notion that his diary was socially significant given another imperative shared by his, Erenburg’s, and other writers’ personality ideals: that the individual remain optimistic about the degree of openness the Soviet Union might one day achieve.

One of Abramov’s primary occupations in his diary was to record notes about a given individual he encountered in his everyday life, measure him or her against his ideal, and create a sketch of his or her character. In a sense, Abramov’s passages about himself also amount to a character sketch, only a character sketch of a different kind. This dissertation adopts the methodology of Soviet semioticians, who argue that the creation of one’s personality, whether in everyday life or in documentary genres such as diaries and letters, is an aesthetic exercise, as one chooses to see or depict oneself in some ways and not in others. It also draws upon the insights of Western post-structuralists, who hold that not only the personality, but also the self is an aesthetic or historical construct. In his diary, Abramov was thus never expressing a transhistorical self, but always creating a “character” from the multiplicity of his thoughts and experiences.

The idea that personality has historical agency has a long history in Russia. It begins in the 1830s with the appearance of Peter Chaadaev’s “Philosophical Letters,” in which Chaadaev argued that Russia was socially and politically backward. During that

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decade and subsequently, the newly emergent Russian intelligentsia contended that the antidote to the Russian backwardness diagnosed by Chaadaev was personal transformation, a conceit it borrowed from the European historicist notion that individuals and nations change progressively over time, and from the Hegelian idea that individual consciousness is the measure of History’s progress.\textsuperscript{13} Two leaders among the intelligentsia, Mikhail Bakunin, later of anarchist fame, and Nikolai Stankevich, an organizer of one of the first intelligentsia circles in Russian history, in their personal correspondence of the 1830s began to fashion themselves after personality models they had found in Romantic literature. Stankevich began to depart from the romantic model almost immediately and to create a realist personality in his everyday life even before it existed in literature, a transition taken to completion by the literary critic Vissarion Belinskii in the late 1830s and 1840s.\textsuperscript{14} In his diary in the late 1840s and early 1850s, the radical critic Nikolai Chernyshevskii fashioned not only his everyday behavior, but also his everyday inner or psychological life after his own version of the realist personality, which he later presented in literary form in his 1863 novel \textit{What is To Be Done}?\textsuperscript{15}

In the late nineteenth century, personality transformation remained crucial among a new branch of the intelligentsia, the Russian Marxists. According to these thinkers, if earlier one could become a historical personality by dint of having assimilated a certain


set of moral values and behavioral norms, now, because of the materialism of their doctrine, most people could become historical personalities only during or after the transformation of the relationship between the working class and the means of production, which is to say, when the working class had made Revolution and taken control of the factories. One did not become a personality by way of some sort of mechanical, impersonal makeover; one had to actively transform oneself. In this sense, freedom, or voluntarism, remained, despite the predetermined nature of Revolution, for one had to consciously conclude that a particular historical moment demanded revolutionary action. Freedom, in the famous formulation, was necessity. The working class, however, could not come to a conclusion about the opportune time for change “spontaneously,” or on its own. It had been dehumanized by industrial capitalism and thus received revolutionary “consciousness” from an external agent, the Marxist intelligentsia, the small group of individuals who had already become personalities and divined the course of History. Upon performing its tutelary role, the Marxist intelligentsia became historically obsolete, and collapsed into the emerging classless society.16

The project to universalize the intelligentsia imperative and create personalities en masse in Russia began after the October 1917 Revolution. Such was the central objective of the Revolution; Soviet Russia would arrive at Communism once it had created a society of personalities, or what the Communist Party called New Soviet Men.17 The


17 Halfin, From Darkness to Light, 52.
New Man was not only to have the free rational faculties of the *intelligent*, but also to exchange the capitalist’s selfishness for the socialist’s collectivism, and reject the division between the public and private as a capitalist fiction about the right to autonomy in the bourgeois order. The Party, of course, had taken these ideas from Marx. The founder, however, had left a great deal about his ideal citizen unclear, which meant the Party itself was left to flesh out his contours. As many scholars have observed, the Party did not invent moral values or behavioral norms unilaterally, but arrived at them through a more dialectical, if unequal, relationship with the people.

Over the last decade two historians, Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck, have demonstrated that Stalin-era Soviet citizens, especially members of the young generation, worked to transform themselves in keeping with official notions of historical personality. As a result of their pioneering work, scholars now associate the Stalin years not only with the Gulag, but also with self-transformation or, in the language of the time, “working on oneself.” Whereas Halfin has shown that university students crafted their autobiographies to align themselves with the official image of the New Man, Hellbeck has demonstrated that Soviet citizens used their diaries to achieve the same end.

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19 Hoffman, *Stalinist Values*, 4-5.

Halfin is interested in the “poetics,” or the form, of his subjects’ autobiographies more than extratextual phenomena, Hellbeck examines the social and personal factors that attracted a particular Soviet citizen to Soviet “ideology,” which he conceptualizes as “a ferment working in individuals and producing a great deal of variation as it interacts with the subjective life of a particular person.”


21 See John Keep, “Sergei Sergeevich Dmitriev and His Diary,” Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 4:3 (2003): 709-34 (710-11). Engaging Hellbeck’s work in his essay on the late-Stalin and Thaw-era diary of the Soviet historian Sergei Sergeevich Dmitriev, John Keep writes: “Hellbeck’s postmodernist approach seems better fitted to diaries kept by those who rose up from the worker-peasant mass in the 1930s as a result of Stalin’s ‘revolution from above’ than it does to that kept in the postwar years by a professional historian such as Sergei Sergeevich Dmitriev […]” Keep’s objective is to demonstrate that Dmitriev’s diary “reveals a man whose ‘soul’ was deeply divided between his public commitments and private feelings […]” and that it “casts light on the thinking of an entire segment of Soviet society during Stalin’s last years and the ‘thaw’ era.” What Keep fails to recognize, however, is that social mobility has no bearing on Hellbeck’s “postmodernist approach,” for his point is that the subject is necessarily engaged in a project of creating, or writing, his self, given the self’s discursive nature. Dmitriev may have expressed himself one way in public and another way in private, but it does not follow that, in private, he was not writing his self. Keep’s misstep is that he has conflated Hellbeck’s methodology (the idea that subjects write their selves) with Hellbeck’s argument (the content of the selves they are engaged in writing): if the methodology is poststructuralist, the argument is that his subjects aimed to transform themselves into Stalinist selves.

A second criticism is the idea that the Soviet subject was “modern,” like the Western or liberal subject. See Alexander Etkind, “Soviet Subjectivity: Torture for the Sake of Salvation?” Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 6:1 (Winter 2005): 171-86. Etkind argues that the concept of “subjectivity,” taken from Foucault, does not apply to the Soviet case because “Foucault urged us to listen to the multiple voices of the victims. The concept of ‘Soviet subjectivity’ reproduces the rhetoric of power in a moment of unprecedented monologicity.”

For a somewhat critical take on the novelty of Halfin’s and Hellbeck’s arguments, see Mark Edele, “Soviet Society, Social Structure, and Everyday Life: Major Frameworks Reconsidered,” Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History 8:2 (Spring 2007): 349-73. Edele argues that Hellbeck simplifies the totalitarian school’s view of the Soviet subject, which held that the “internalization of Bolshevik values and ideas […] tended to differ according to an individual’s inclusion into the system” (355). Edele continues: “Despite the availability of alternative discourses, however, [the totalitarian school’s] research found that it made little sense to have only two categories – belief and disbelief – for loyalty to the Soviet enterprise. Even those who strongly opposed Stalinism had often internalized Soviet discourse as a method of thinking – a proposition that anticipated the recent research on ‘Stalinist subjectivity’” (355). Edele finds Halfin’s and Hellbeck’s novelty in the following: “[A]lthough the Harvard scholars did stress the important role of ideology in the integration of the system, they did not stress discourse as an independent force in daily life nearly enough. Here, the literature on ‘Stalinist subjectivity’ is an important corrective” (358).

This dissertation argues that Soviet citizens continued to “work on themselves” in the immediate post-Stalin years and created a new model of thought and behavior in an effort to build the Communist utopia. To be sure, the attachment to expressive lichnost’ or personality remained; but it was a personality that centered around a new definition of sincerity. Scholars of the Khrushchev era have not yet investigated the imperative of self-transformation, which this dissertation contends was nothing less than a defining feature of the period. Nor have they properly conceptualized the subject into which the Soviet citizen was to transform himself.

During the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, Western journalists, literary scholars, political scientists, and the occasional historian focused on the arts, literature, and high politics of the era, in part because of the traditional inclinations of their trade or disciplines, and in part because evidence was limited primarily to official sources. Political studies asked whether the Khrushchev era was an example of progressive change in Soviet history, and interpreted Khrushchev’s failure to be a function of his idiosyncratic leadership. Many studies of Soviet culture described a confrontation between “liberals” and “conservatives,” or good and bad artists and intellectuals, often

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22 Hellbeck has written that the regime was uninterested in historical personality in the post-Stalin years. This may have been true for later years, but not for the period under discussion in this dissertation. See Hellbeck, “Russian Autobiographical Practice,” 295.

overstating the former’s challenge to the Soviet system, and the latter as careerists doing
the bidding of the leadership. Some of these studies focus on the political side of the
conflict, examining official positions and power dynamics within cultural institutions.\textsuperscript{24}
Yet most concentrate on the era’s “liberal” texts, analyzing their ideas and aesthetics,
casting them – again, often incorrectly – as rejections of Socialist Realism and departures
from Stalinism, and presenting their fates as symptoms of the political climate.\textsuperscript{25} The
more insightful works illuminate the continuities between the Stalin and Khrushchev
eras, while not overlooking the changes, and present the Thaw as a reinvigoration of
Socialist Realism.\textsuperscript{26} During the Gorbachev era, Soviet scholars, in search of a usable past
for glasnost’ and perestroika, became more interested in the politics of the Khrushchev
years.\textsuperscript{27} Western academics, meanwhile, turned to the Khrushchev era to understand the
gestation of the Gorbachev phenomenon.\textsuperscript{28}

\textsuperscript{24} Harold Swayne, \textit{Political Control of Literature in the USSR, 1946-1959} (Cambridge: Harvard University

\textsuperscript{25} Edward Crankshaw, \textit{Russia Without Stalin: The Emerging Pattern} (New York, 1956), 113-40; George
Gibian, \textit{Interval of Freedom: Soviet Literature during the Thaw, 1954-1957} (Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 1960); Priscilla Johnson and Leopold Labedz, eds., \textit{Khrushchev and the Arts: The Politics
of Soviet Culture, 1962-1964} (Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 1965); James Billington, \textit{The Icon and the
Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture} (New York: Knopf, 1966), 554-64; Abraham Rothberg,
Deming Brown, \textit{Soviet Russian Literature since Stalin} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978);
Svirski, \textit{A History of Post-War Soviet Writing}; Dina Spechler, \textit{Permitted Dissent in the USSR: Novy Mir
and the Soviet Regime} (New York: Praeger, 1982); and Vladimir Shlapentokh, \textit{Soviet Intellectuals and
in 1952 to show continuity, see Edith Frankel, \textit{Novy Mir: A Case Study in the Politics of Literature, 1952-

\textsuperscript{26} Hosking, \textit{Beyond Socialist Realism}; and Clark, \textit{The Soviet Novel}, 189-233, esp. 189-90. For another
work that discusses continuity, see Edward J. Brown, \textit{Russian Literature since the Revolution} (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press, 1982). On the turn to the individual after Stalin, see Hosking, \textit{Beyond

\textsuperscript{27} Aleksei Adzhubei, \textit{Te desiat’ let} (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1989); Adzhubei, \textit{Krushenie illuzii
(Moscow: Interbuk, 1991); Iu. Aksutin, ed., \textit{Nikita Sergeevich Khrushchev: Materialy k biografii
(Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1989); Fedor Burlatsky, \textit{Khrushchev: The Era of
Khrushchev Through the Eyes of His Advisor}, translated by Daphene Skillen (New York: Scribner, 1991);
Sergei N. Khrushchev, \textit{Pensioner soiuznogo znachenia} (Moscow: Novosti, 1991); and Sergei N.
Immediately after the Soviet Union’s collapse, interest in the Khrushchev era waned, even among historians, who were now more likely to situate the period squarely in the past and thus within their disciplinary purview. Instead of turning to the Khrushchev years, however, historians reexamined their conclusions about Stalinism in light of the newly opened Soviet archives and the entrée of literary theory and its methodologies into their discipline. Over the last decade, however, the situation has changed dramatically; historians have turned their attention to numerous aspects of the era. Political historians have employed new approaches and newly available memoirs and archival sources to build upon earlier studies. They have emphasized that Khrushchev failed to reform Soviet socialism not because of his personal idiosyncrasies, but because of his incompatible objectives; it was impossible, they argued, to revitalize Soviet socialism while retaining the Party’s monopoly on political power. Scholars of


31 Abbott Gleason, Sergei Khrushchev, and William Taubman, eds., *Nikita Khrushchev* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); and Iu. Aksiutin and A. Pyzhikov, *Poststalinskoe obshchestvo: problemy liderstva i transformatsii vlasti* (Moscow: Nauchnaia kniga, 1999). This also true of several works that appeared in
Soviet culture have turned their attention to new cultural phenomena. One historian, for example, has pointed out that reformist intellectuals held both liberal and nationalist views, while another has corrected for scholars’ overemphasis on high, unofficial, and Western culture by investigating Soviet mass media.\footnote{Vladislav Zubok, Zhivago’s Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); and Kristin Roth-Ey, “Mass Media and the Remaking of Soviet Culture, 1950s-1960s,” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2003), 16-17, 20-21, 26.}

Most of the new work, however, has been done on social and cultural history, given both the partial opening of the archives and larger trends in the discipline. The new scholarship can be divided into four categories, the differences among which stem from competing ideas about the strength of the Stalin- and Khrushchev-era Party-states and the power of their ideas.\footnote{The new scholarship is quite large and equally diverse. What follows is an attempt to synthesize this body of literature while doing justice to the variety of approaches and conclusions. Henceforth in the introduction the Party-state will be referred to simply as the state for the sake of brevity.} The first group of historians complicates interpretations that dominate earlier literature on the Thaw, namely that these years witnessed the emergence of a state that became less intrusive in everyday life and of a new, critical Soviet citizen. At the heart of these scholars’ arguments is the notion that the Stalin-era state was strong enough to shape Soviet subjectivities, and that the Khrushchev-era state aimed to retain much of its predecessor’s power. One historian has argued, for example, that Khrushchev reversed course after his denunciation of Stalin’s cult of personality not
because the intelligentsia challenged his version of events and thus his leadership, but because Soviet citizens remained attached to Stalin and rejected de-Stalinization.\footnote{Iurii Aksiutin, “Popular Responses to Khrushchev,” in Gleason, Khrushchev, Taubman, 	extit{Nikita Khrushchev}, 177-208.} Other historians have pointed, for example, to the Khrushchev-era state’s effort to dictate the consumption and domestic habits of Soviet women as evidence of its continued intrusion into everyday life.\footnote{Susan E. Reid, “Masters of the Earth: Gender and Destalinization in Soviet Reformist Painting of the Khrushchev Thaw,” 	extit{Gender & History} 11:2 (July 1999), 276-312; Ol’ga Vainshtein, “Female Fashion, Soviet Style: Bodies of Ideology,” in Helena Goscila and Beth Holmgrein, eds., 	extit{Russia-Women-Culture} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 64-9; Susan E. Reid, “Cold War in the Kitchen,” 	extit{Slavic Review} 61:2 (2002), 211-52; and Susan E. Reid, “The Khrushchev Kitchen: Domesticating the Scientific-Technological Revolution,” 	extit{Journal of Contemporary History} 40:2 (April 2005): 289-326.} The historical sociologist Oleg Kharkhordin, drawing heavily upon the work of Michel Foucault, has gone so far to claim that the Khrushchev-era state became even more intrusive than its predecessor in the lives of Soviet citizens.\footnote{Oleg Kharkhordin, 	extit{The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).}

Historians in the second category posit a Khrushchev-era state strong enough to shape the subjectivities of Soviet citizens, but argue that it created subjectivities different from those of the Stalin era. One scholar, for example, contends that Khrushchev-era policies such as the construction of separate apartments for individual families helped to constitute a new version of Soviet subjecthood.\footnote{Christine Varga-Harris, “Constructing the Soviet Hearth: Home, Citizenship, and Socialism in Russia, 1956-1964,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 2005). For other studies of this tendency, see Steven E. Harris, “Recreating Everyday life: Building, Distributing, Furnishing and Living in the Separate Apartment in Soviet Russia, 1950s-1960s,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2003); Steven E. Harris, “‘I Know all the Secrets of My Neighbors’: The Quest for Privacy in the Era of the Separate Apartment,” in Siegelbaum, ed., 	extit{Borders of Socialism}, 171-90; and Susan Costanzo, “The 1959 Liriki-Fiziki Debate: Going Public with the Private?” in Siegelbaum, ed., 	extit{Borders of Socialism}, 251-68.}

The third group theorizes a weak Khrushchev-era state and significant change to Soviet citizens’ worldviews and historical consciousness. For them, the Khrushchev era
was a time during which Soviet citizens became more autonomous, holding fast to Soviet ideals but becoming more critical thinkers, inspired by the tradition of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia.\textsuperscript{38}

The final set of scholars combines the insights of the preceding three groups. They argue that Soviet citizens under Khrushchev became more critical and autonomous subjects, yet in doing so did not look to the nineteenth-century intelligentsia for inspiration, but continued both to draw upon select features of the Stalinist legacy and/or be shaped by the Khrushchev-era state. Several historians contend that even the discourse of reformist artists and intellectuals was shaped by the Stalin era. Interior designers, architects, and city planners, for example, may have rejected Stalinist pseudoclassicism and tried to buck the Party’s control, but they continued to impose aesthetic and ethical standards upon Soviet citizens and thus assert control over them.\textsuperscript{39}

In a study of Party discipline, one scholar maintains that the Party became more intrusive in realms such as marriage, child-rearing, and alcohol consumption. Taking on Kharkhordin, however, he explains that Party discipline “was a far more overt and state-centered mechanism of power than Foucauldian discipline,” and that Party surveillance was not “faultless and ubiquitous” but far less encompassing, “understood better as the


state empowerment of small cliques of zealots, busy-bodies, and self-interested citizens.\textsuperscript{40} According to other historians, Soviet citizens were able to resist the encroachment of the state and create autonomous spaces for themselves, in part because the state did not have the resources, inter-institutional unity, or intra-institutional discipline to be as intrusive as it would have liked.\textsuperscript{41}

This dissertation affirms the conclusions of the historians of the latter category. Yet, in exploring the complex interplay among Stalin- and Khrushchev-era discourses and their creative appropriation by Soviet citizens, this project is concerned above all with the concept of personality, the importance of which earlier studies overlook. In so doing, this dissertation does not simply add to the new socio-cultural history, but builds a bridge between it and the older social, economic, and political histories. In the literature of the era, this dissertation locates a discourse that describes personal transformation as the catalyst of social, economic, and political change. Personal transformation, it concludes, was the \textit{primary} imperative of the age. Some of the new narratives of


personality can be found in Khrushchev’s evaluation of Stalin in his secret speech at the Twentieth Party Congress, which this project presents as something of an epiphenomenon of the Thaw. The dissertation thus casts the Khrushchev era as an extension of a century-long Russian tradition of living out philosophical ideas in everyday life in an effort to move History forward, and of writers conceptualizing themselves as leading forces of change. Finally, it demonstrates that the version of the New Man into which Russian intellectuals aimed to fashion themselves and their fellow citizens under Khrushchev marked a crucial break in the understanding of the individual in Soviet history. What these intellectuals presented was an ordinary Soviet citizen who did not need to be told – by the Central Committee, Stalin, or Lenin – what to believe, how to behave, or what to say. The citizen was himself the source of truth and engine of change.

Chapter 1 of this dissertation, “The Inheritance: The New Soviet Man between Revolution and Late Stalinism,” covers the Lenin and Stalin years to create a context for the discussion of the Khrushchev era. The chapter establishes that the objective of Soviet socialism was the creation of New Men, and that the Soviet writer was to play a crucial role in this project. Drawing upon sources such as Fedor Abramov’s contemporaneous letters, photographs, and wartime diary; retrospective journal entries and short stories; memoirs of friends and colleagues; and interviews with his widow Liudmila Krutikova, the chapter argues that Abramov was attached to the personality ideal as it existed in the 1930s; explains what led a collectivized peasant to embrace the Soviet project; introduces his dream of becoming a Soviet writer; demonstrates that he refashioned himself in
keeping with a new image of the New Man during the Second World War; and explores his interest in realism and the Soviet countryside after the war.

Based on a reading of Khrushchev-era Party speeches and Soviet literature about the countryside, the second chapter, “The Empirical Imperative: Literature and the Soviet Countryside after Stalin,” establishes that incumbent upon the Thaw-era personality was the meticulous study of rural reality. The chapter shows how Abramov’s ideas about the countryside, as presented in his diary, notebooks, literary criticism, and first novel, *Brothers and Sisters*, differed from those of the leadership and thus established the ordinary citizen as a font of truth and historical agency. The last part of the chapter demonstrates that Thaw-era writers, both those who wrote about the villages and those who wrote about the cities, elevated the diaristic form above that of the novel, hitherto the privileged genre in Soviet aesthetics, because of its ability to capture the empirical demands and sincerity imperative of the new personality ideal. This conclusion, at which Abramov himself arrived over time, sets the stage for a more detailed examination in later chapters of Abramov’s diary, and for a reflection upon how an unpublished text could have aesthetic and social significance given the tutelary objectives of Soviet literature.

Chapter 3, “The Agents of De-Stalinization: The Role of Personality after the Cults of Personality,” focuses more heavily on sincerity. The chapter proves that different groups of writers conceptualized sincerity as well as other aspects of the post-Stalin personality ideal differently, and situates Abramov in one of these groups. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to an analysis of the degree to which Abramov’s understanding of personality permeated his diary entries about ordinary citizens, his
students, his colleagues, Soviet writers, and Stalin and his successors. Abramov’s entries about the post-Stalin leadership also advance this dissertation’s conclusion that ordinary men and women displaced the Central Committee as the source of authority and agency.

The fourth and final chapter, “In a Glass Case: The Life of an Aspiring Soviet Writer,” investigates Abramov’s diary entries about himself, in which he evaluated his own thoughts and actions according to his personality ideal and urged himself to be a better Communist and Soviet citizen. The chapter applies to Abramov the Soviet contention that one’s personal life has moral implications for one’s professional life – and, in the case of the Soviet writer, for one’s literature. It thus argues that because Abramov used his diary to work on himself as a moral subject, he also used the text to work on himself as a Soviet writer. It evaluates the degree to which he succeeded at this moral enterprise and locates the aesthetic and social significance of an unpublished diary in the answer.
Chapter 1

The Inheritance:
The New Soviet Man between
Revolution and Late Stalinism

To understand Fedor Abramov’s image of the New Soviet Man in the immediate post-Stalin years, one must understand his image of the New Man under Stalin. For the years before the Second World War, this is a difficult task, since the available sources are minimal. One must rely on a sampling of sources from archives in Karpogory, the center of the district in which Abramov’s native village, Verkola, is located; the careful use of the memoirs of his classmates and family members; and the equally cautious use of his post-Stalin-era diary entries in which he recalled his experience of the 1920s and 1930s.

For the war and postwar years, the sources are also limited, but more revealing than for the prewar years. They include some ten entries from Abramov’s wartime diary, published by his widow Liudmila Krutikova in 2005; select pages from his SMERSH lichnoe delo, or personal file, declassified in 2002; and letters written to Krutikova and friends in the postwar years, published by Krutikov in 1995. Analysis of Abramov’s image of the New Man in the war and postwar years poses its own complications, however, for scholars have not limned the contours of the New Man for these periods.¹

To capture the prescriptive image of the wartime and postwar New Man – of which there were various versions during each period – would require a dissertation or two in and of

itself. This chapter thus makes a preliminary attempt to uncover the personality ideals of these periods, and examines the extent to which Abramov assimilated or built upon them.

Abramov’s family background seemingly made him a less than ideal candidate for attachment to the Soviet project. Born on February 29, 1920 in Verkola, a remote village in the northern European province of Arkhangelsk, Abramov was the fifth and final child of Aleksandr Stepanovich Abramov and Stepanida Pavlovna Zavarzina. Aleksandr Stepanovich died soon after Fedia’s second birthday; wearing shoes ill-suited for the northern cold, he suffered frostbite, had his foot amputated, and died of complications from the operation. One of the poorest families in a village that was impoverished even by the cruel standards of Russian villages, the Abramovs in fact prospered after the death of their patriarch. In a letter to one of Abramov’s Soviet biographers, Abramov’s sister Maria Aleksandrovna (b. 1918) attributed the family’s advancement to the work ethic of Stepanida Pavlovna, an adherent of the Old Believers, a Russian orthodox sect whose members were known for their industriousness; yet the relatively permissive climate of the New Economic Policy likely also played a role. By the late 1920s, the Abramovs had a bull, two horses, two cows, and some fifteen sheep, which made them seredniaki, or middle peasants, according to Soviet taxonomy.2

As middle peasants, the Abramovs found themselves the objects of an increasingly discriminatory rural policy. According to Soviet ideology, it was the bednota, or poor peasants, who constituted the central pillar of Party support in the countryside, while the middle peasants stood alongside as their nominal allies. Yet the alliance proved untenable quickly, for the Party consistently implemented measures that favored the poor at the expense of the middle peasants, levying higher taxes against the latter and stripping them of their voting rights. Failure to clearly differentiate between seredniaki and kulaki, or rich peasants, further complicated the authorities’ relationship with the middle peasants. Local officials tended to treat them and the kulaki similarly; during collectivization, for example, officials rounded up and exiled many seredniaki together with their kulak neighbors.³

Little is known about the Abramovs’ reaction to the Party’s treatment of seredniaki or to collectivization. Abramov did not discuss the latter in depth in his personal papers or published work, and mentioned the former only once in his prose, in an autobiographical short story of the late 1970s in which he explained that, even though he had graduated first in his class from elementary school in 1932, he was denied admission to the secondary school in a neighboring village on account of his seredniak status. A devastated twelve-year-old blamed his mother’s industriousness; he recalled having thought that his family would have remained among the bednota, who were given priority in school admissions, had she been less hard-working. The theme of the story is

the endurance of moral values antithetical to Stalinism such as “pity,” “mercy,” and “empathy” in his aunt Irin’ia, a religious woman whom he turned to for moral support during this difficult time. Yet Abramov did not present himself as having turned away from the Soviet project and toward his aunt’s religiosity as a result of the discrimination. The image he offered is of a boy eager to learn and resentful at having been denied the opportunity, which suggests that he had internalized at least some of the Party’s values and vocabulary.

Fedia’s precise adolescent thoughts about the Soviet experiment in the late 1920s and early 1930s, however, are impossible to discern without contemporaneous sources. In their absence, one can turn to the reactions of his peers to the assertion of Communist control over the countryside. As Sheila Fitzpatrick has argued, rural youth constituted one of several demographics that tended to respond favorably to collectivization. Many young people were enthralled by the armed, leather-clad urbanites who descended upon the villages to carry out collectivization, and watched excitedly as the Party burned religious icons, even if they helped their mothers hide their own.


5 In his diary in 1954, Abramov wrote of collectivization in his native village in line with the Party’s narrative, recalling that kulaki shot at Komsomol members. In a 1966 letter to Novyi mir’s Vladimir Lakshin, he claimed that “in the years of collectivization […] our peasantry manifested the greatest self-sacrifice and selflessness,” “voluntarily” joining the collective farm. Both statements, however, should be read cautiously, as the years after collectivization may have colored his perception of earlier events. See DFA, 19 (March 6, 1954); and Fedor Abramov to V. Ia. Lakshin, October 3, 1966, in Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh (St. Petersburg: “Khudozhestvennaia literatura,” 1995), 6: 434.

Ultimately, Abramov was able to enroll in a five-year secondary school, but some fifty kilometers northwest of Verkola, in the district center Karpogory, where he lived with his brother Vasili (b. 1913) and, later, his wife Ul’iana Aleksandrovna. At school in Karpogory, Abramov’s attachment to the Soviet project, such that it was when he arrived in 1932 at the age of 12, deepened and became more meaningful. Soviet elementary and secondary schools were responsible not only for educating their students in traditional disciplines, but also for molding them into Soviet citizens. “We should see to it,” Lenin had proclaimed in 1918, “that the entire business of education, upbringing and teaching of our youth consists of instilling in them the Communist morality.”

An excellent student, Fedia finished first in his class and won a number of awards – in the ninth and tenth grades, a Pushkin Stipend for his command of Pushkin’s poetry, and two more Pushkin Stipends for his place at the head of the class. The evidence suggests that Fedia not only excelled academically, but also proved himself on a moral or political level. In the eighth grade, he was nominated to the Komsomol, an exclusive group in the 1930s, which helped administrators and teachers achieve the school’s educational and

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7 L. V. Krutikova-Abramova and A. I. Rubashkin, eds., Vospominaniia o Fedore Abramove (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 2000), 32, 36, 40-41; and Egorova, Moi Fedor Abramov, 309, 312. On Soviet elementary and secondary schools, Nicholas DeWitt writes: “Until the mid-1930s, the Soviet system of elementary and secondary education as based on 9-year school (deviatiletka), consisting usually of 4 years of elementary education in a people’s school (narodnaia shkola), 3 years of junior secondary education in a ‘first-division school’ (shkola pervoi stupeni), and 2 years of senior secondary education in a ‘second-division school (shkola vtoroi stupeni)” (23). Before the mid-1930s few students completed the second-division secondary school. See Nicholas DeWitt, Education and Professional Advancement in the USSR (Washington, D. C.: National Science Foundation, 1961), 135, 150.

8 V. I. Lenin, Sochinenia, Vol. 31, 266, quoted in DeWitt, Education and Professional Employment in the USSR, 120.

9 Krutikova-Abramova and Rubashkin, Vospominaniia o Fedore Abramove, 31, 34. Abramov found himself in the “tenth” grade despite completing only nine years of elementary and secondary school because, as DeWitt writes: “In 1934 the 9-year system was replaced by 10-year schooling (desiatiletka) … The standard components of 10-year schooling were: 4 years of elementary (nachal’noe) education, 3 years of junior or ‘incomplete’ secondary (nepolnoe srednee) education, and 3 years of senior or ‘complete’ secondary (polnoe srednee) education” (24).
moral objectives; led extracurricular activities in the arts, athletics, and outdoor recreation; and organized activities for Octobrists (ages 7-8) and Pioneers (ages 9-14) such as movies, plays, concerts, and lectures on Marxism-Leninism. During the summer after the eighth grade, Fedia worked as a counselor at the district’s Pioneer Camp, set up on the grounds of the Artemievo-Verkol’skii Monastery, which stood on the southern bank of the Pinega River, opposite his native Verkola. In the capacity of both Komsomol member and camp counselor, one of Abramov’s tasks was to begin the cultivation of the younger children into New Men, and to work on his own self as well.

To be a New Man meant to have a particular vision of the world and to live according to a comprehensive set of moral values and behavioral norms. Some of these values and norms remained constant over time. Throughout the Lenin and Stalin periods, for example, the relationship between the Soviet citizen and the Party-state was governed by the principle of democratic centralism, according to which the citizen could and should participate in debates about future Party policy, but only until the Central Committee took a position. Other values and norms, however, changed. By the late 1920s and early 1930s, leading Communists grew uncomfortable with a reigning libertinism and moral nihilism. As David Hoffman has argued, they moved to formulate a comprehensive moral and behavioral guide for the first time. While they did not create an explicit code, an implicit one emerged from the rulings of the Party control commissions, which applied directly only to Communists, but created standards for

10 DeWitt, *Education and Professional Employment in the USSR*, 125-26, 129-30. The Octobrist organization was later folded into the Komsomol.

11 Krutikova-Abramova and Rubashkin, *Vospominaniia o Fedore Abramove*, 31, 35.
Soviet society more generally. The code called for good hygiene, smart dress, sobriety, politeness, efficiency, traditional education, and respect for authority, all of which Party leaders not only believed would help the Soviet Union overcome Russian backwardness and increase economic productivity, but also was embraced for aesthetic reasons. The code required the Soviet citizen to live by the same standards in his personal life, which served to ensure their translation into his professional or public life. Failure to lead a moral personal life was often considered a portent or symptom of political malfeasance. Party functionaries tended to respond favorably to the new expectations, often eager to signal their standing in an emerging social structure by way of their appearance and conduct.\(^\text{12}\) The Party also began to articulate russocentric ideas, celebrating imperial Russian historical and military figures, which, as David Brandenberger has argued, the leadership found more effective than Marxist discourse in cultivating popular support.\(^\text{13}\)

At the same time, the Party began to use a rhetoric of the soul and personality to describe the ideal Soviet citizen, replacing an earlier emphasis on class and comparison of the New Man to a machine.\(^\text{14}\) After Stalin’s announcement in 1936 that the Soviet Union had created the institutional foundations of socialism, the New Man replaced institutional change in the official discourse as the primary agent of historical progress.

The rehabilitation of the individual was captured in the official aesthetic of Soviet

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12 Ibid., 1, 12, 16-17, 57-58, 65, 76.


14 Hellbeck, Revolution on My Mind, 27-28, 33; Hoffman, Stalinist Values, 28, 70; Oleg Kharkhordin, The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 167; and Jan Plamper, “Introduction: Modern Personality Cults,” in Klaus Heller and Jan Plamper, eds., Personality Cults in Stalinism (Göttingen: V & R Unipress, 2004), esp. 20, 27, 30-31. According to Kharkhordin, the true nature of the Soviet subject became increasingly internalized in the 1930s, receding from litso to sebia, that is, from an external “face” to an inner “self,” from a focus on class (ascribed by the Party) to a focus on the individual.
socialism, Socialist Realism, whose “master plot” became the Soviet subject’s evolution from spontaneity to consciousness.\textsuperscript{15} The idea was to “work on oneself,” with the help of one’s official collective, and “sincerely” accept the social and political whole.\textsuperscript{16}

By all accounts, including his own, Abramov embraced many elements of Communist morality as it existed in the mid- and late 1930s. A classmate in Verkola recalls that Fedia refused her invitation to her family’s home in the mid-1930s because it was small and unattractive at a time when the Party was emphasizing the good life.\textsuperscript{17} Archival documents in Karpogory reveal that at school meetings he commended the “discipline” of tenth-graders but complained of shortcomings in moral instruction; reprimanded Komsomol members for smoking and unsatisfactory work with Pioneers; and criticized a teacher, a certain Iakovlev, for his nervousness and lack of discipline in the classroom.\textsuperscript{18} In his diary in 1954, Abramov recalled how he and his peers had been raised on Socialist Realist classics such as Pavel Bliakhin’s \textit{Red Devils}, Dmitrii Furmanov’s \textit{Chapaev}, and Nikolai Ostrovskii’s \textit{How the Steel was Tempered}, which he called “the Gospel of our generation.” “All of our games were infused with a class spirit,” he added. “Even if we stole from gardens, then only from the rich.”\textsuperscript{19}


\textsuperscript{17} Egorova, \textit{Moi Fedor Abramov}, 239-40.

\textsuperscript{18} Krutikova-Abramova and Rubashkin, \textit{Vospominaniia o Fedore Abramove}, 34; and Egorova, \textit{Moi Fedor Abramov}, 220-21, 239-40.

\textsuperscript{19} DFA, 161 (September 1, 1954). For Abramov on Pavel Korchagin, the hero of Ostrovskii’s novel, see Egorova, \textit{Moi Fedor Abramov}, 394.
The official discourse also shaped Abramov’s thoughts about his professional future. In an article in Komsomol’skaia pravda in 1976, he recalled a childhood dream of becoming a pilot or geologist, professions glorified in the works of a favorite author, Jack London, whose tales of the will and intellect’s subjugation of nature had been championed by Lenin. He also considered becoming a teacher of the masses, inspired by his own teacher in Karpogory, Aleksei Kalintsev. Born in 1882 into a Mezen’ merchant family, Kalintsev was decorous, erudite, and well dressed, which impressed Fedia, who had arrived in Karpogory at the age of fourteen, little read and carrying a burlap knapsack containing crackers and a pair of peasant felt boots.

Fedia loved to read and dreamed, too, of becoming a writer. A secondary-school classmate recalls Fedia standing between classes with his head in a book, while his peers played games; and that the uneasy and undisciplined teacher, Iakovlev, scolded Fedia for reading during math class. According to a Russian admirer, Fedia became more interested in literature after the union-wide celebration of the Pushkin Centenary in 1937. In June of that year, a local newspaper ran a short appraisal of a poem he had written and recited at the District Artistic Olympiad. The poem, “The Spanish Girl,” was praised for its form, rhythm, and depiction of the heroism of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War and criticized for unspecified shortcomings in the content of its

20 Clark, The Soviet Novel, 102.
22 Egorova, Mol Fedor Abramov, 221.
23 Ibid., 317.
narrative. According to the reminiscence of his brother Vasili’s wife Ul’iana Aleksandrovnna, the following year, when he was in the tenth grade, Fedia wrote a short story about the same subject, a Soviet cultural obsession at the time. Intending to submit it for publication, he asked Kalintsev for his opinion; but Kalintsev advised against submission. To write a good story, his teacher told him, he needed to be more familiar with his subject.

In 1938, Abramov was admitted to the Faculty of Philology at Leningrad State University, one of the Soviet Union’s most prestigious institutes of higher education. He had been accepted even after the Party, concerned about the quality of university graduates, had jettisoned admission criteria that favored peasant and proletarian applicants. Founded in 1819, St. Petersburg University, renamed Leningrad State after Lenin’s death in 1924, had been attended by some of imperial Russia’s most famous writers, scientists, and revolutionaries, including Ivan Turgenev, Ivan Pavlov, Nikolai Chernyshevskii, and Lenin’s brother, Alexander Ul’ianov, who was arrested and executed for his involvement in the terrorist organization the People’s Will in the 1890s. Lenin himself, denied admission because of his brother’s activities and his own political malfeasance at Kazan’ University, had taken his examinations for a law degree at the

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24 The article, published in Lesnoi front on June 7, 1937, is reproduced in Egorova, Moi Fedor Abramov, 320.

25 Krutikova-Abramova and Rubashkin, Vospominaniia o Fedore Abramov, 41-42.

26 DeWitt, Education and Professional Employment in the USSR, 247. There were two types of VUZy in the Soviet Union: the more specialized institute and the more general university; and the university was the more prestigious, and there were 40 in 1959. See Dewitt, Education and Professional Development in the USSR, 209.
In the 1930s, Leningrad State boasted the Soviet Union’s premier Faculty of Philology. A number of its scholars had worked at the famed State Institute of the History of Art on St. Isaac’s Square, before it was shuttered in 1930, and at the Leningrad Institute of Philosophy, Literature, and History (LIFLI), which was subsumed into the Faculty of Philology in 1936. Many of these scholars – among them, the luminaries Viktor Zhirmunskii, Boris Eikhenbaum, Grigorii Gukovskii, and Vladimir Propp – kept their jobs through the repressions of the late 1930s.28

When Abramov left for Leningrad in the fall of 1938, the Soviet Union had nearly emerged from the Great Terror. It is unknown if anyone close to Abramov at Leningrad State was arrested in the final months of the Terror. According to a history of the university, nineteen students were accused of being “enemies of the people” and expelled in 1937 – their subsequent fate is unmentioned – but the source does not provide data for 1938.29 Earlier, in May, Abramov’s favorite teacher, Kalintsev, had been arrested. According to a classmate, none of his students believed that Aleksei Fedorovich could possibly have been an “enemy of the people.” Kalintsev had been arrested in the middle of the night; according to the memoirs of one of his colleagues, his students staged a rebellion at school the next morning upon learning what had happened (although she does not explain what the “rebellion” consisted of). A second classmate, who had moved to

29 Verbitskaia, 275 let Sankt-Peterburgskii gosudarstvenny universitet, 310.
Arkhangelsk after the ninth grade, recalls receiving a letter from Abramov lamenting his arrest. At his trial in Karpogory in January 1939, one after another Kalintsev’s colleagues, former students, and teachers from nearby schools testified that he was the son of a merchant and had once been a member of the Socialist Revolutionaries. They accused him of maintaining ties to the SR underground and Trotskyites, of praising Bukharin, and of slandering Stalin. Found guilty and sentenced to an industrial labor colony in Arkhangelsk, he died of tuberculosis in February 1941. Abramov never learned where he had been sent or when and how he died.  

It is unlikely that Kalintsev’s or anyone else’s arrest “terrorized” Abramov. Memoirs of students and young, educated Soviet citizens suggest that this cohort, raised under Soviet power, believed the charges against “enemies of the people” more than others. The standard response to the arrest of a friend or relative was that a mistake had been made and would soon be corrected. Likely more skeptical, parents and grandparents were reluctant to speak about politics with their children and grandchildren for fear they would make inopportune comments at school or university. More questioning young minds may have been reassured by the dismissal and arrest of the NKVD chief, Nikolai Ezhov, in November 1938, and the subsequent review of 1.5 million arrests, annulment of 450,000 court decisions, and release of 30,000 people from

30 Egorova, Moi Fedor Abramov, 182-235.
jail and 327,000 from the Gulag.\textsuperscript{34} In addition, as Robert Thurston has demonstrated, many students did not feel terrorized because only specific groups were targeted for arrest – Party officials, military officers, industrial managers, and writers and artists. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, for example, wrote that he and his friends, then in their early twenties, did not “realize the sort of arrests that were being made at the time, and the fact that they were torturing people in prisons […] How could we know anything about those arrests and why should we think about them? All the provincial leaders had been removed, but as far as we were concerned it didn’t matter. Two or three professors had been arrested, but after all they hadn’t been our dancing partners.”\textsuperscript{35} In his notebooks in 1964, Abramov recalled that, when collective farmers were being arrested arbitrarily in the 1930s (although it is unclear if he is referring to collectivization or the Terror), “I at best assumed injustice in relation to individual people. It is now that many assure that they already at that time understood everything. No, I didn’t understand.”\textsuperscript{36}

If Abramov felt threatened in the late thirties, the feeling was born not of the Great Terror, but of a former peasant’s encounter with an urban intellectual milieu. Leningrad State must have intimidated an eighteen-year-old who not only came from a remote village, but also had his first experience of a city, Arkhangel’sk, en route to the former imperial capital.\textsuperscript{37} In their memoirs, Abramov’s classmates emphasize his anxiety

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 279-80.


\textsuperscript{36} Abramov as quoted in L. V. Krutikova-Abramova, “Kommentarii,” in Fedor Abramov, \textit{O voine i pobede} (St. Petersburg: Zhurnal Neva, 2005), 209.

\textsuperscript{37} Oklianskii, \textit{Dom na ugorе}, 21.
upon arriving in the Soviet Union’s second largest city and at one of its finest universities, which may have been more acute, one might add, for someone who valued a sense of belonging to the collective. One classmate, Moisei Kagan, a Leningrad native, notes that Abramov felt ill-at-ease among his peers, who came from intelligentsia families, spoke foreign languages, and frequented local museums, theaters, and concert halls. Tamara Golovanova, also born in Leningrad, writes that Abramov’s northern upbringing “was opposed in its entire essence to the urban (including the literary) mode and way of life.” The Leningraders, she explains, had no sense of the harshness of the world in which he had been raised, and he, for his part, was intimidated by the new milieu he had entered. She and her friends loved and respected Abramov and considered him to have been a “remarkable, unique personality,” but, shy and anxious, he kept his distance. In the postwar era (she does not specify when), Abramov, presumably a published writer by this time, chided Golovanova: “I was like this then, too… But you didn’t notice me; you were the elite.”

In June 1941, when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, Abramov was finishing his third year at Leningrad State. Abramov and more than a hundred students in the Philology Faculty joined the *Narodnoe Opolchenie* or People’s Militia, an all-volunteer force that also included factory workers, reserve soldiers, and retired officers. In the fall, Abramov’s company, untrained, unseasoned, further handicapped by a

38 For another discussion of the importance of a feeling of belonging to the collective, see Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*, 118, 146, 152-53, 156, 161.


shortage of rifles and with a single submachine gun, engaged a better equipped German
Army on the Leningrad Front. When one Soviet soldier died, another, unarmed, picked
up his rifle and joined the battle. By mid-September, the Germans were within seven
miles of the city center; nearly half of the Soviet troops had been killed in the fighting.\footnote{Overy, \textit{Russia's War}, 102.} Abramov was among the lucky, suffering a minor injury to his forearm on September 24.
In November, he sustained a more serious injury, this time to his legs, and was sent to a
hospital in blockaded Leningrad, set up in one of the auditoriums of Leningrad State’s
Faculty of History, where six months earlier he had sat listening to lectures. He was now
on a makeshift cot, surrounded by wounded soldiers wearing gloves and winter hats and
piling mattresses on themselves to stay warm. In early 1942, authorities established a
connection with the outside over a frozen Lake Ladoga, twenty miles to the east. Rations
and supplies began to flow in, and women, children, the infirm, and the wounded,
Abramov among them, began to flow out.\footnote{Overy, \textit{Russia's War}, 105-11.}

On April 11, 1942, Abramov arrived in Karpogory, where for the next four
months he taught literature at the local secondary school. At some point, perhaps more
than once, he visited his native Verkola and witnessed the wartime trials of the local
peasants.\footnote{L. Krutikova-Abramova, “‘Kakie uroki my vynesli iz voini?’” in \textit{O voine i pobede}, 4; and L. Krutikova-
Abramova, “Posleslovie,” in Abramov, \textit{Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh} 1: 603. As Brandenberger has
written, “Perhaps the two most important subjects in the wartime classroom were history and literature –
subjects expected to illustrate by means of analogy the imperative of state policies that literally demanded
‘all for the front.’” See Brandenberger, \textit{National Bolshevism}, 134.} The Soviet Union suffered horrendous losses during the war; and the rural
Soviet Union, home to sixty percent of the population on the eve of the cataclysm,
suffered above all. In the initial stages of the war, the German Army occupied more than seventy percent of Soviet land under cultivation, which also happened to be the fertile black-earth of Ukraine and southern Russia. The villages in northern and eastern Russia thus bore the burden of feeding the Soviet military as well as the civilian population. Able-bodied men had left for the front, leaving women, children, the elderly, the infirm, and evacuees to work the land, without tractors or even horses, all of which had been requisitioned by the Red Army. To plough the rocky, infertile soil, three or four women hitched themselves to a horse plough. Meanwhile, the state increased the percentage of the harvest it expected the peasants to deliver; often nothing remained for the peasants themselves. They survived thanks to their private plots, toward which the authorities adopted a more permissive attitude than during peacetime. Nevertheless, the peasants’ diets were more meager than city dwellers’. Many went hungry, starved, and suffered from attendant disease.\footnote{44 John Barber and Mark Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front, 1941-1945: A Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II* (London: Longman, 1991), 78, 84-86, 89, 99-104, 168-69, 187-88; Zhores A. Medvedev, *Soviet Agriculture* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987), 125-29; and Alexander Werth, *Russia at War, 1941-1945* (New York: Dutton, 1964), 709.}

In July 1942, Abramov remobilized and served in a reserve infantry regiment in Arkhangel’sk, and later, in February 1943, enrolled in the local Military Machine-Gun Academy.\footnote{45 Krutikova-Abramova, “‘Kakie uroki my vynesli iz voini?’” in Abramov, *O voine i pobede*, 4.} In April 1943, he was conscripted to join the counterintelligence organization SMERSH, an acronym for smert’ shpionam, or “death to spies.” In August, he was named a SMERSH assistant investigator in the White Sea Military District.\footnote{46 “Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del SSSR. Lichnoe delo, Abramov Aleksandrovich Abramov.”} SMERSH’s official *raison d’etre* was to unmask spies in the armed forces, but it also surveilled soldiers’ and officers’ morale and loyalty; its agents were known to summarily
According to the Party, SMERSH was staffed by consummate New Men – Stalin’s most selfless and disciplined and thus most trusted and cherished subjects. The organization found Abramov attractive because of his education and proficiency in German and Polish, which he had studied at Leningrad State; in no time, he was promoted to investigator and in June 1944 to senior investigator in the Arkhangel’sk Military District. Abramov seems to have found SMERSH attractive, too. In a photograph of him and a colleague, taken on Victory Day, May 10, 1945, he and his confere stand with their right hands in their tunics in emulation of Stalin, suggesting Abramov embraced the imagined intimacy between the SMERSH agent and the Soviet leader.  

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49 For a list of SMERSH’s divisions, see Stephan, *Stalin’s Secret War*, 214. It is unclear in which of the divisions Abramov served.

50 In the émigré journal *Kontinent*, its editor, the novelist and dissident Vladimir Maksimov, alleged on the occasion of Abramov’s death in 1983 that Abramov had personally executed fourteen people, citing an unnamed Leningrad academic whose own source, Maksimov attested, was Abramov himself. In *Novosti*, a university classmate, V. Zavalishin, charged that Abramov had shot deserters on the front lines. See Vladimir Maksimov, “Kolonka redaktora: skorb’ ne po adresu,” *Kontinent* 37 (1983): 384; and John Givens, review of *The Life and Work of Fedor Abramov*, ed. David Gillespie, *The Slavic and East European Journal* 3 (1998): 546. Krutikova maintains on the basis of conversations with Abramov and notes toward an unfinished autobiographical story, “Who is He?” that Abramov conducted himself heroically while in SMERSH, having released an innocent couple (see Krutikova-Abramova, “‘Kakie uroki my vynesli iz voini?’” 4). One of Abramov’s former SMERSH colleagues, Fedor Ivanovich Iastrebov – who snapped the picture of Abramov with his hand in his tunic, and with whom I spoke on June 1, 2010 – denies these accusations on the fallacious grounds that SMERSH agents did not kill anyone.
While in SMERSH, Abramov kept a diary, some ten entries of which have been published by his widow Liudmila Krutikova. He was motivated to begin the diary by his dream of becoming a writer, which he had retained from his school days in Karpogory. “The worm of literature is eating away at me again,” he wrote on January 23, 1944, and explained that he had been reading Henrik Ibsen and had been inspired to sketch out a play. As outlined in the same entry, the play’s setting is a collective farm, and the plot centers around the Stalinist and wartime dictum that one must subordinate one’s feelings for family and friends to one’s devotion to the state. The story begins on the eve of the war, and opens with a village wedding that becomes a celebratory seeing-off of the local men, including the groom, as they leave for the front. The groom’s father, an illiterate old man, replaces the collective-farm chairman, who has also left for the front, and proves an adept leader. The play would culminate in his son’s desertion and return to the village, where he would be executed by his father. It was not to be a tragic conclusion, but an affirmation of first principles.51

The diary reveals little about Abramov’s activities as an investigator and later as a senior investigator in SMERSH. It cursorily documents a trip to the town of Kargopol’, in southwestern Arkhangel’skaia oblast’, for an interrogation; the return flight to Arkhangel’sk, which was Abramov’s first time in an airplane; a trip to Vologda for another interrogation, this time of the “enemy”; and a third journey, to Kharovskaia in Vologda oblast’, for “conversations with Kraus.”52

51 Abramov, O voine i pobede, 110 (January 23, 1944).
52 Ibid., 108-9 (April 21, 1943).
What the diary does reveal, however, is Abramov’s use of the text to demonstrate his identity as a New Man. In an entry on May 10, 1945, now a member of the Party – he became a candidate member in March 1944 and a full member in April 1945 – Abramov affirmed his devotion to Stalin, whose fatherly and inspirational image had reappeared in Soviet discourse after the battle of Stalingrad.53 “At 9 in the evening Stalin spoke,” he wrote. “I was lying on a cot in the janitors’ room. All of my feelings were directed towards the great person.”

I thought that his speech today would be passionate, burningly joyful. After all, people, for whom Stalin is the god and conscience of our era, after these nightmarish years of war, are so in need of a warm, fatherly word!

But Stalin’s speech was Stalinist, laconic, restrained.

“Comrades! Fellow countrymen and countrywomen!” – this is how it began. It ushered in the end of the war and the transition to peaceful work. Because of the accent I did not understand everything.

Incidentally, in restraint of feelings is great wisdom.54

During the war, the model of the New Man changed in various ways, as it had several times previously. A new wartime model cast the ideal Soviet citizen as a Russian who was a warrior, and whose best characteristics were clear-headedness, staunchness, and patience, all of which made him superior to other nationalities.55 All of this Abramov tried to demonstrate in himself in the pages of his diary, writing of living from

53 For Abramov’s Party membership, see “Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del SSSR. Lichnoe delo, Fedor Aleksandrovich Abramov.”


55 This builds on Brandenberger, National Bolshevism, 226-39.
report to report; how his mood depended on the news from the front; and how Russia’s victory celebrations were superior to England’s. “Damn, it is magnificent!” he wrote of a 220-gun salute in Moscow marking the 1943 victory at Kharkhov. “It is more magnificent than the tolling of bells in England in honor of English victories.”56 “The Russian people, less than other peoples, falls for the bait of sensational and thunderous reports, but on this day, they did not doubt the possible veracity of this report,” he remarked of rumors of Germany’s capitulation on May 8, 1945.57 “In Czechoslovakia Hitlerite bands […] are still resisting. No matter, Russian guns will quiet them,” he noted on May 12.58

Another component of the wartime ideal was hatred of Germans, exemplified in the journalism of the Soviet-Jewish writer Il’ia Erenburg. A well-known novelist, Erenburg was the Soviet Union’s most popular wartime journalist, whose status as such demonstrated that non-Russians continued to occupy prominent places in Soviet life despite the official russocentrism and, it should be added, the attendant anti-Semitism. Erenburg penned over two-thousand wartime articles, primarily for the Red Army newspaper Krasnaia zvezda, about the imperative not only to hate, but also to kill Germans. “Let us not be indignant,” Erenburg implored. “Let us kill […] If you do not kill a German, a German will kill you. He will carry away your family, and torture them in his damned Germany […] If you have killed one German, kill another. There is nothing jollier for us than German corpses.” Soviet soldiers learned to despise and kill

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56 Abramov, O voine i pobede, 108-9 (August 23, 1943, 23:00).
57 Ibid., 112 (May 10, 1945, gor. Petrozavodsk).
58 Ibid., 116 (May 12, 1945, 17.00).
Germans and to love and cherish Erenburg, whom they affectionately referred to as “Iliusha” and “Our Il’ia.” He became so popular that it became illegal to roll tobacco in his articles, which were often found in the pockets of dead Soviet soldiers. In April 1945, however, Erenburg fell from official favor. Disgusted by the brutal treatment of German civilians by advancing Soviet soldiers, which he had witnessed firsthand in early 1945, he spoke out on the matter on two occasions in Moscow in March, to which his superiors did not respond favorably. What was more, Stalin no longer found his articles useful now that the Red Army had occupied Germany and was seeking German cooperation. On April 14, Pravda ran an article criticizing Erenburg for painting the entire German population with the same brush.59

Abraham loved Erenburg’s articles; when they disappeared from the press, he lamented it. In his diary on May 12, 1945, he wrote that Erenburg had “faithfully served the people,” and that it was rumored Hitler “would have sacrificed his best army for the head of this Jew,” but that Erenburg had “exited the stage.” He mentioned Pravda’s explanation for Erenburg’s dismissal and expressed his agreement with it. “[E]quating the Germ[an] people with the government puts them beneath the axe of the guillotine, for the united nations have decided to mercilessly punish war criminals,” Abramov opined. “In this sense, Erenburg’s articles could have, and unquestionably, would have, been an unneeded trump card in the hands of Hitlerite propaganda for propagandizing the idea of the resistance of the German people to the last.” Erenburg had thus been sacrificed for the collective good: “[W]e sometimes sacrifice individuals [individami], so strong is our

desire to produce well-being for the collective, for society. Undoubtedly, I.E. is precisely such an ‘offering.’ However, the sacrifice of an individual for the sake of the collective and popular good – this is true humanism.” Abramov noted that Erenburg had been replaced in Pravda by the ethnic Russian novelist Leonid Leonov, and complained that Leonov’s articles “The Morning of Victory” and “Russians in Berlin” lacked Erenburg’s trademark bite. “True, they are written by a Russian person, or rather, by a Russophile,” he reasoned. “[….] Leonov is Russian. Our age is such that a Russian should write about the Russian.”

In this passage Abramov tried to embrace the new tendency, which rejected the hatred of Germans, and to accept the official argument for Erenburg’s removal. The official argument, however, does not seem to have been sufficiently convincing. For this reason, he turned to another aspect of the personality ideals to justify Erenburg’s dispatch, fashioning an argument that a Russian, who had such commendable qualities by dint of his nationality, deserved the job of a Jew. Yet russocentrism failed to reinforce the new official position. Abramov was simply too attached to the old anti-German ideal and the man who had done so much to espouse it. Immediately after the sentence about Russians writing about Russians, Abramov changed course:

Erenburg’s style is extremely distinctive. It is the reflection of the feverish tempo of the life of our era. In it everything is mixed up. The combination of everyday details with high things and ideas. It acts very sharply on the intellect and emotions. Erenburg’s art[icles] are sheer teeth They are written by a person consumed by hatred for the enemy and boundless love for his own people.

I want Il’ia to rise from the dead!

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60 Brandenberger, National Bolshevism, 6, 239. Brandenberger defines “russocentrism” as “an expression of ethnic pride […] derived from a strong, articulate sense of Russian national identity,” as distinct from Russian nationalism, which “is a much more politicized concept referring to group aspirations for political sovereignty and self-rule along national lines” (6).

61 Abramov, O voine i pobede, 118-20 (May 12, 1945). In a note on 118, Krutikova writes that Erenburg resumed writing on May 10, 1945, and that Abramov was mistaken.
A final change in the wartime New Man to be examined was his reevaluation of the Russian village, which before the war, in line with the urban bias of Marxism, had been consistently denigrated as a site of backwardness. The German attack had reacquainted Russians with some of the memories and joys of the villages from which they hailed; and members of the leadership, for reasons of expediency or perhaps their own attachment, permitted Soviet writers and poets to celebrate the traditional countryside. In a paradox, the Party, while treating the peasants terribly, permitted their praise for the first time in its history. In wartime literature, a version of the New Man was a Russian who was deeply attached to his native village and who waged the war on its behalf. One’s village was an object of affection and embodiment of the Russian nation; one fought for and longed to return to it in peacetime. In Konstantin Simonov’s 1942 play, *The Russian People*, one character, Ivan Nikitch, tells another, Valia, that he is fighting for the motherland, which leads to the following exchange:

Valia: You know, Ivan Nikitch, everyone says: motherland, motherland … and they probably imagine something big when they say this. But I don’t. In Novo-Nikolaevka we have an izba on the edge of the village and two birch trees next to the river. I hung a swing on them. I hear about the motherland, but I just recall the two birch trees. Maybe this isn’t a good thing?

Ivan Nikitch: No, it is a good thing.

Valia: And when I remember the birch trees, I remember my mother and my brother standing next to them. And about my brother I remember how he left for Moscow the year before last to go to school, how we saw him off, and I remember the station, and from there the road to Moscow. And I remember Moscow. I remember everything, everything. And then I think: where do my memories begin? Again with the two birch trees. Maybe this isn’t a good thing? What do you think, Ivan Nikitch?

Ivan Nikitch: Why is it not a good thing? We probably all remember things this way, everyone in one’s own way.63

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62 Kirschenbaum, “‘Our City, Our Hearths, Our Families,’” 828, 831, 845.
In his 1941 essay “Motherland,” Aleksei Tolstoi took the attachment to the village a step further; if Valia pines for place, for the site of the two birch trees, Tolstoi longed for a way of life. After the existence of native places such as the snow-covered izba had been threatened by the Germans, Tolstoi wrote, Soviet Russians began to realize their value. In his notebook on October 26, 1943, the poet Aleksandr Tvardovskii wrote of having visited his native village in Smolenskaia oblast’, which had been destroyed. “If everything that marked my existence on this earth, that somehow gave voice to me, were erased and destroyed in such a fashion, then I suddenly become emancipated from something and unneeded,” he reflected. “But then it came to me: precisely for this reason I must live and do what I ought to do. No one, besides me, will reproduce that unique world that is vanishing from the face of the earth, which was and is still for me, when nothing from it remains.”

Abramov’s anxiety in Leningrad in the late 1930s may have prepared him to react favorably to Simonov’s play, Tolstoi’s essay, and similar texts. One finds an echo of Tolstoi’s and Tvardovskii’s words in one of Abramov’s diary entries, in which he reflected on the traditional Russian village threatened not by the Germans, but by the force of linear, modernizing time. “I received a letter from Valia 3,” he wrote on August 21, 1943. “A very nice letter. She is living well: she is working, swimming day and

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night, picking berries and mushrooms, and celebrates holidays according to the old customs. What could be better? Oh, time, time! You have carried off, forever carried off rural, wooden Rus’, its mellow chimes, its beautiful holidays… Oh, patriarchal Rus’, how I love you."

The sources do not demonstrate if, and to what extent, Abramov continued to celebrate the traditional Russian village in the postwar years. What they do reveal, however, is an enduring dream of becoming a published writer and a lasting interest in rural life more generally. Within days of the armistice, Abramov began to ask himself whether, if he chose not to return to Leningrad State and instead enrolled in the MVD Academy in Moscow to pursue a career in the NKVD, he would be able to realize his dream. As he wrote in his diary on May 13, 1945, he, like every Soviet citizen, was trying to decide what to do in the postwar era of reconstruction. He noted that a career in the NKVD promised him a comfortable life, but that he did not love the work, and that it would not give him enough time to write. He was by no means sure he had the talent to succeed as a writer, he confessed, but feared the regret of never having tried. To the Western reader, schooled in things Soviet by the popular press and some scholarly monographs, Abramov’s dilemma – should he become a writer or an NKVD agent? – may appear paradoxical. Yet the tasks of the writer and chekist overlapped to a

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66 Abramov, O voine i pobede, 108 (August 21, 1943, 23:00).

67 Ibid., 121 (May 13, 1945). For his thoughts about attending the academy, see also Kagan, O vremeni i o sebe, 70.
significant extent, for the Party considered both to have an exceptional ability to penetrate the individual soul and discover what secrets might be hidden inside.\textsuperscript{68}

Abramov chose to return to Leningrad. In a July 1945 letter to his superiors in SMERSH, in which he asked to be demobilized and permitted to return to Leningrad State, he cast his decision as both his own desire and optimal for the state: “There is no doubt that, having a higher education, about which I have dreamed for the length of my entire conscious life, I will bring the state more use than otherwise.”\textsuperscript{69} His request was granted. He returned to Leningrad State that fall, no longer the teenager who had arrived in Leningrad in 1938 uncomfortable about his rural origins; he now embraced and even flaunted them. His classmate Lia Levitan recalls that Abramov “loved to imitate the simpleton, play the role of the country bumpkin: he would say, we peasants, our job is to walk behind the plow, we don’t understand those refinements of yours… […] he sincerely believed that his true business was to plow and mow, and he reproached himself because he was neither plowing nor mowing, because he had left behind his native village and was doing something that was incomprehensible and useless to his fellow villagers.”\textsuperscript{70} Abramov was indeed playing a role; he had last been a peasant in 1932, at the age of twelve – with the likely exception of the summers – when he moved to Karpogory to live with his brother Vasilii.

Abramov graduated from Leningrad State in the late spring of 1948 and began graduate school that fall in the university’s recently established Department of Soviet

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\textsuperscript{68} For a similar idea, see Evgeny Dobrenko, \textit{Political Economy of Socialist Realism}, translated by Jesse M. Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 104.

\textsuperscript{69} “Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del SSSR. Lichnoe delo, Abramov Aleksandrovich Abramov.”

\textsuperscript{70} Krutikova-Abramova and Rubashkin, \textit{Vospominaniia o Fedore Abramove}, 79-80.
Recalling the choice in the early 1980s, he explained that he would have preferred to immediately try his hand at writing fiction, but enrolled in graduate school because as a professor or literary critic – the professions for which the department trained its graduate students – he would be able to support both himself and his eldest brother Mikhail (b. 1907), who had returned from the front to the Abramovs’ native Verkola, to work for the local collective farm. Mikhail was Abramov’s only family member left in their native village; his brother Nikolai (b. 1911) had died at the front and his mother had passed away in 1947. Krutikova, who was also a graduate student in the Department of Soviet Literature in 1948 and married Abramov in 1949, recalls that she and Abramov sent portions of their stipends to Mikhail and taught extra courses to make ends meet. To be sure, Mikhail needed his brother and Krutikova’s help, for the postwar countryside was in crisis. Fifteen million peasants had died during the war, and only half of the surviving peasant-soldiers returned to live in their native villages. What is more, policymakers continued to prioritize heavy industry, and demanded even more work of collective farmers than during the war, while paying them less. Between 1947 and 1950, the average collective farmer earned only 100 kilograms of grain per year. In 1948, an in-kind tax was levied on the private plot.

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71 The department seems to have been established in 1946. See A. F. Berezhnoi, V pervye poslevoennye gody: 1946-1954 (K istorii Leningradskogo-Sankt-Peterburgskogo gosudarstvenogo universiteta (St. Petersburg: Iздатel’ство S-Peterburgskogo universiteta, 2005), 31.


73 L. V. Krutikova-Abramova, “Posleslovie,” in Abramov, Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh 1: 603. I have not been able to learn where Maria and Vasilii lived at this time.

Meanwhile, Soviet literature told a different story about the countryside. In September 1946, Andrei Zhdanov, the first secretary of the Leningrad Regional Committee and head of the Central Committee Secretariat’s Propaganda Administration, delivered a speech that inaugurated a new era in the history of Soviet literature. In his remarks, Zhdanov attacked the satirist Mikhail Zoshchenko and poet Anna Akhmatova as aesthetic and ideological deviants, and disparaged the journals in which they had published, *Leningrad* and *Zvezda*. The assault cascaded into the zhdanovshchina, a crusade against so-called “formalists,” advocates of innovation and creative freedom including the poet Boris Pasternak and the director Sergei Eisenstein.75 After 1946, Soviet literature, including literature about the countryside, became dominated by embellishment and the so-called no-conflict theory. Socialist Realism, which had always tended toward the Romantic, now presented a perfect world. Positive heroes became more positive versions of their prewar selves, and traveled an unobstructed road from spontaneity to consciousness. Negative heroes remained, but only as shadows of their former selves. In the contemporary parlance, conflicts pitted the better against the good or the excellent against the better. Such literature had almost no place for suffering, even during the most trying periods of the war. Challenges had become a relic of the past; pride and optimism, the imperative of the present.76 Semen Babaevskii’s 1947 novel


Cavalier of the Golden Star was the paragon of the new literature. Its protagonist, Sergei Tutarinov, was a Mikhail Abramov in the mirror of Stalinist fantasy: a peasant who returns from the front to his native village and fashions a five-year plan and, without any trouble, rebuilds the local collective farms.  

Abramov’s precise opinion of postwar rural policy and literature is unknown; but his choice of dissertation topic suggests that he remained drawn to the countryside and preferred the realist to the romanticist pole of Socialist Realism. Abramov chose to write his dissertation on Mikhail Sholokhov and his 1932 novel Virgin Soil Upturned, a canonical text of Socialist Realism about collectivization in a Don Cossack village. One of the Soviet Union’s most talented writers, Sholokhov had been celebrated by Soviet and Western critics alike for his realistic portrayals of the Cossacks in The Quiet Don, his multi-volume epic about the Civil War; Soviet critics, however, had given the first two installments, published in 1928 and 1929, mixed reviews, protesting that Sholokhov had failed to include a model Communist in the work. Virgin Soil Upturned silenced the critics, having offered them the protagonist Semen Davydov, an exemplary Party member.  

By the time Abramov began his dissertation, the scholarship on Sholokhov had grown into a cottage industry of 300 articles and 2 books published in Moscow and Leningrad alone, much of which measured Sholokhov’s work against the standards of the

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official aesthetic. Critics probed his novels for evidence of class divisions in the
countryside, a desire among the Cossacks for Revolution and a recognition of its
historical necessity, an explicit and politically appropriate message, and a positive hero
who subscribed to these ideas. All of this proved that their author possessed a correct
view of the world.\textsuperscript{79} Fewer studies, however, appeared in the late Stalin years.
Sholokhov’s realism was inimical to the postwar embellishment and no-conflict theory;
the character of Davydov may have been a model Communist in the thirties, but he fell
short in the late forties and early fifties, for he spoke idiosyncratic and unpolished
Russian, succumbed to sexual desire, and was an imperfect human being more
generally.\textsuperscript{80}

Abramov’s choice of \textit{Virgin Soil Upturned} as a dissertation topic was an
unorthodox one; no other dissertations on Sholokhov, candidate or doctorate, were
defended at Leningrad State between 1946 and 1954.\textsuperscript{81} Abramov’s analysis of
Sholokhov’s novel, however, amounts to standard Socialist Realist criticism. In an early
article based on his research and published in \textit{Vestnik Leningradskogo universiteta} in
March 1949, Abramov argued that \textit{Virgin Soil Upturned} proved that Sholokhov had seen
the world through a Socialist Realist lens; he had demonstrated the historical necessity of
collectivization, the peasantry’s support of collectivization, and its continued struggle

23-25, 31, 33, 36; and Ernest J. Simmons, \textit{Russian Fiction and Soviet Ideology: An Introduction to Fedin,

1954, 24-27, 36, 41, 47-48, 118.

\textsuperscript{81} See \textit{Dissertatsii, zashchishchennye v Leningradskom ordena Lenina gosudarstvennom universitete imeni
A. A. Zhdanova, 1934-1954 gg. (Bibliograficheskii ukazatel’)} (Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo Leningradskogo
universiteta, 1955), 185-87. This source lists twenty-two dissertations in Soviet literature. Although the
Department of Soviet Literature was founded in 1946, one candidate dissertation on Soviet literature (on
Gor’kii) was defended in 1941.
against the psychology of the old order. Abramov also contended that Sholokhov had shown that he had overcome the shortcomings of *The Quiet Don*, having presented Davydov and his growth into a New Man, however imperfect he might be. “In the image of Davydov,” Abramov declared, “all the best qualities of a Bolshevik of the Soviet epoch are personified: wholeness and clearness of worldview, an acute hatred for and irreconcilability with the enemy, an inexhaustible love for the people, boundless devotion to the Party, and passionate, life-asserting optimism,” a style of leadership based on “an element of explanation and conviction,” and a fidelity to criticism and self-criticism, “that fundamental driving force of the development of Soviet society, of the Soviet people.”

When Abramov began his dissertation, he also began working on a novel about the wartime Russian village, loosely based on his own experience in Verkola in 1942. Crucial to the possibility of his publishing the novel, should he ever finish it, was his claim to an irreproachable biography. In his “Autobiography,” which he completed on March 18, 1943, on the eve of his enlistment in SMERSH, Abramov noted that none of his immediate family members or relatives had been “repressed” or lived abroad; his only family member who had been convicted of a crime, he wrote, was his brother Nikolai, who had served “a year or a year-and-a-half” in a labor camp on charges of hooliganism.

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83 Krutikova-Abramova and Rubashkin, *Vospominaniia o Fedore Abramove*, 82.

In the early 1950s, however, Abramov’s wife Liudmila Krutikova threatened to tarnish his perfect biography. Born in Petrograd in 1920, the daughter of a dentist and dressmaker, Krutikova began at the Philology Faculty at Leningrad State together with Abramov in 1938. Just before the war, she married a student in the History Faculty, originally from the Donbas, and became pregnant. When the war began, Krutikova wanted to join her classmates in the Narodnoe Opolchenie, but her husband urged her to evacuate for the sake of their child. She went to Kirovskaiia oblast’ in central Russia, where her sister-in-law lived, and then to the Donbas to stay with her husband’s parents, where she gave birth to a baby boy, Serezha, soon after she arrived. As the Germans approached the Donbas in September 1941, she considered fleeing, but her mother-in-law dissuaded her. She would be in a horse-drawn wagon, and the Germans, in tanks, her mother-in-law impressed upon her; she would not get far. Krutikova thus remained as the Germans occupied the territory in October.85

Rather than return to Leningrad, Krutikova enrolled in Kharkov University after the war, concerned that, branded with the stigma of having remained on occupied territory – which, because it lay beyond the reach of its propaganda, the Soviet government had deemed a breeding ground for treason – she would not be able to continue her studies at Leningrad State. With the help of a noted professor, however, she was able to return to the university for graduate school in the Department of Soviet Literature in 1947. It was then that she met Abramov. She and her husband had separated; her son, at ten months old, had died during the German occupation. She and

85 For the German advance on and occupation of the Donbas, see Werth, Russia at War, 1941-1945, 251.
Abramov married in 1949, but unofficially, as she had been unable to document her separation.\textsuperscript{86}

At Leningrad State, Krutikova wrote her dissertation on Maksim Gor’kii; but she was not allowed to defend it, at least not in Leningrad. During a university Party meeting in December 1949, on the eve of her defense, an unknown man took the floor and attacked the Philology Faculty for training a graduate student who had sat out the war on occupied territory. The Faculty buckled under pressure, canceled the defense, and expelled her.\textsuperscript{87} Krutikova left Leningrad for Minsk, where she found a position as an instructor in the Department of Literature at the Belorussian University. Yet in Minsk, too, she ran into trouble. An outspoken young woman, Krutikova challenged the teaching and scholarship of the department chair, I.V. Gutorov, a member of the Ideological Section of the Central Committee of the Belorussian Communist Party. Gutorov, who did not appreciate the criticism, angled to cancel her dissertation defense, in June 1950, but failed. He succeeded in having her removed from her teaching position, but only until Moscow intervened and reinstated her. The experience did not intimidate Krutikova; rather, it emboldened her, for during a department meeting in December 1950, together with her friend and colleague Leonid Reznikov, she criticized a book Gutorov had written on Vladimir Maiakovskii. In retribution, Gutorov charged

\textsuperscript{86} Divorce was discouraged beginning in 1944 more so than it had been in the mid-1930s, which witnessed a campaign to strengthen the Soviet family. See Sarah Davies, “‘A Mother’s Cares’: Women Workers and Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia, 1934-41,” in Melanie Ilic, ed., \textit{Women in the Stalin Era} (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), 102.

Krutikova and Reznikov with *gruppovshchina*, or clannishness, and attacked them during a meeting of the university Academic Council.  

To take on Gutorov was to be a good Soviet citizen; it was to speak the truth to bureaucrats, as did the positive hero in the Soviet novel. Abramov, however, neither encouraged Krutikova to fight for her convictions nor came to her defense after she had done so. Instead, he berated her, and berated himself for getting involved with her, for her conduct threatened his impeccable biography. In a letter to Krutikova on June 3, 1950, he declared:

I’m telling you frankly: if you don’t come to the right conclusions given my suggestions, if you don’t overcome your idiotic thoughtlessness, which has already been very costly to both you and the people associated with you [it is unclear what Abramov is referring to here – A.P.] – I want nothing to do with you. I don’t want to tremble every minute for you and for myself. A year of this [the time that had elapsed since her expulsion – A.P.] is enough for me! If you don’t change your behavior, we’re splitting up. This is my final word. There will be no more lenience or edification.  

After learning that Krutikova and Reznikov had been accused of *gruppovshchina*, he wrote, on March 24, 1951:

I’d never have guessed that you [and Reznikov] had planned to topple the elephant. This is naïveté – nothing more. You need to keep your feet on the ground. And there is no reason to throw yourselves headlong into something that is useless. Why didn’t you think of the consequences earlier? I told you again and again, and all the time, about the peculiarities of your situation.
This letter suggests, however, that Abramov was not worried only about his biography. He seems to have also been thinking strategically, urging Krutikova and Reznikov to consider if their actions would drive historical change. It is unknown if Reznikov was a member of the Party; Krutikova, for her part, was not. Abramov’s exchange with, and tutelage of, Krutikova smacks of a more mundane and academic version of Fedor Klychkov’s effort to temper Chapaev in Furmanov’s famous 1923 novel.91 This is particularly clear in a third letter, written on May 10, 1951:

Honest and principled, you [and Reznikov] are objectively giving more significance to the means than to the end. […] The end, the end, just and great – this is what is most important. One can be principled in everything, everyday, but if your everyday adherence to principle does not allow you to achieve the great goal, of whose achievement depends the triumph of adherence to principle on this plot of land, then this is not adherence to principle, but unscrupulousness.92

The “end, just and great” to which Abramov referred was at once abstract and concrete: Communism and his dream of publishing a novel, which, in line with the aims of Socialist Realism, would help to effect progress toward utopia. Abramov had begun a second novel the previous year, about the provincial intelligentsia and, more specifically, Krutikova and Reznikov’s trials at the Belorussian University. Here was a familiar topic, unlike the Spanish Civil War, the subject of the short story that he had penned as a teenager. In a letter to Krutikova on June 7, 1951, he wrote that he had shared his ideas for the plot with his friend Fedor Mel’nikov, who responded favorably, but who added that it was unlikely such a work would be published. In the letter, Abramov echoed

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92 Fedor Abramov to L. V. Krutikova, May 10, 1951, in Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh 6: 416.
Mel’nikov’s doubts – without elaborating upon them or the plot – but declared that he would write the novel anyway.⁹³

Abramov chose to concentrate his energies, however, on the novel about the wartime Russian village. In a letter written to Reznikov on May 23, 1951, he related that he was nearly finished with his dissertation and would likely accept an unspecified job at Pushkin House, which would give him plenty of time to write. Reznikov had written earlier, urging him to take a teaching position in a provincial town in order to learn more about his subject. In his reply, Abramov agreed, noting that “to write a book, conditionally speaking, about the intelligentsia, one must go to the provinces.” He continued:

But the fact is that most likely I will not begin with it. I am simply not prepared yet for such a serious work, and indeed the material itself has not passed through my heart. I understand it well, but feel little […] […] Strange as it may seem, but you view me as if I were already a writer, for whom the only thing lacking is knowledge of life. But I view myself entirely differently. It is possible that I indeed have some gifts, but for them to develop, for this I must work a great deal, a very great deal. And for this, in turn, I need not only knowledge of life, but perhaps most importantly – time is essential.⁹⁴

There was an additional consideration: if he failed at fiction, he would need to return to scholarship, which would be impossible at a provincial institute of higher education, which would not have a research library or employ scholars with whom he could discuss his work, and would saddle him with a teaching load that precluded serious research.

Krutikova, he added, might not be able to find an entirely satisfactory job at a Leningrad

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⁹³ Fedor Abramov to L. V. Krutikova, June 7, 1951, ibid., 6: 418.

institute of higher education in the beginning, but everything would work out eventually.\textsuperscript{95}

Although he did not mention it in his letter to Reznikov, the subject that had passed through his heart was the wartime experience of his native village, whose people he had imitated in Leningrad. In a letter to Krutikova on January 28, 1950, Abramov mentioned that he had shared his ideas for the novel with Mel’nikov. “Everything – the conception, the plot, the characters, and the episodes – was very much to his liking. He raves about them even to this day […] In general, he considers me nearly a writer already. He demands that I quit graduate school and write and write.”\textsuperscript{96} In his letter of May 10, 1950, in which he wrote of just and great ends, Abramov explained: “Dreams about the novel aren’t leaving my head. Its atmosphere has swallowed me up.” He complained that he was riddled by doubt. Could he succeed as a writer? Could he even finish his dissertation?\textsuperscript{97} In neither one of these letters, however, did Abramov disclose the themes of the novel.

On June 7, 1951, Abramov received a letter from Krutikova and another from Reznikov. In the letters, which arrived in the same envelope, Krutikova and Reznikov tried to convince Abramov to leave Leningrad upon completing graduate school, and find a teaching position at a provincial institute of higher education, because Krutikova would not be able to find work in Leningrad. Abramov replied immediately. In his letter,

\textsuperscript{95} Fedor Abramov to L. Ia. Reznikov, May 23, 1951, in ibid., 6: 239-41. For background on Reznikov, see 610.

\textsuperscript{96} Fedor Abramov to L. V. Krutikova, January 28, 1950, in ibid., 6: 411. Elsewhere Krutikova writes, it seems incorrectly, that Abramov began the novel in the summer of 1950. See Krutikova-Abramova, “Posleslovie,” in \textit{Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomasakh} 1: 603. Here, she notes that in 1948-1949 Abramov began to share scenes he imagined he would incorporate into the novel.

\textsuperscript{97} Fedor Abramov to L. V. Krutikova, May 10, 1950, in \textit{Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomasakh} 6: 411-12.
addressed to Krutikova, Abramov explained that leaving Leningrad was out of the question. He had dreams. He wanted to become a writer, had been working on his novel for three years, and, because of the teaching load, would have no time to write while teaching in the provinces. The letter includes a profession of love, but also a proclamation that literature was more important to him than their relationship, and that if forced to choose between the two, he would choose the former. In this Abramov was entirely of his time, which privileged the craft or profession, which served to advance the Communist cause, over personal relations or love. The passage is candid, urgent, and purposeful:

Yes, I love you, I love you alone. But if for your sake I had to abandon craftsmanship, I would not abandon it. I say this honestly and openly…

This is not a phrase! This is not the time to trade in phrases. Let it be that I am making a mistake, let it be that I am confused in your eyes, having gotten into my head that I have been chosen by God. Let me be fated never to become a writer. And nevertheless my entire life will be devoted to craftsmanship, but it is the strongest of all my desires, and even stronger than my feelings for you. Here there can be no illusions.

Craftsmanship – this is not vain entertainment for me, nor an egotistical desire to become famous. No!

Craftsmanship for me – this is my life and, in this sense, I have not yet had a life.

It must be, or everything will end in catastrophe, or rather, in philistine vegetation. Everything will end in my never becoming true to myself, never becoming an individual.

Abramov conceded that life in Leningrad would not be easy; they would not have a lot of money and would have trouble finding a place to live. Then, he added that she would surely have trouble finding a decent job. Should she be denounced again – presumably when applying for a job or after having found one – he would not stand up for her, he admitted. “I’m not exactly a strong person […] and in addition too

impressionable and inclined towards all kinds of anxieties as a result of the smallest trifles. […] Don’t hope for a miraculous transformation on my part.” For him, however, she was a “full-valued person, but society for still a long time will hold another view. And here I doubt you will be able to do anything.”

In June 1951, Abramov turned down the position at Pushkin House and accepted a teaching position in the Department of Soviet Literature at his alma mater. In a June 23, 1951 letter to Krutikova, he explained that he had chosen the Leningrad State job because his salary at Pushkin House, 1,200 rubles per month (considerable by contemporary standards), would not have been enough for them. His letters appear to have been convincing; in September 1951, Krutikova joined her husband in Leningrad. There, after Stalin died, Abramov would try to become a stronger person.

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99 Fedor Abramov to L. V. Krutikova, June 7, 1951, in Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh 6: 417-19. For the persecution of people who lived on occupied territory, see Zubkova, Russia after the War, 105-6.


101 Liudmila Krutikova, interview by author, St. Petersburg, Russia, September 21, 2007.
Chapter 2
The Empirical Imperative: Literature and the Soviet Countryside after Stalin

In the final years of the Stalin era, the Soviet leadership began to recognize that denial of the problems in Soviet life was undermining economic and social progress. The leadership moved to address the problems in 1949 and, after Stalin died on March 5, 1953, began to engage them more earnestly. One of the spheres of Soviet life to which Stalin’s successors turned their attention was the countryside, which over half of the population continued to call home more than thirty-five years after the Bolsheviks had taken power to create an urban utopia. Neglected for decades, the countryside became the object of a modernization campaign masterminded by the Party first secretary, Nikita Khrushchev. Soviet writers played a key role in the modernization project. In opposition to the likes of Semen Babaevskii and the embellishment of reality, a new school of literature – later named the Ovechkin school after the pioneering prosaist Valentin Ovechkin – emerged that placed a premium on scrupulous, empirical study of rural life. Ovechkin and the writers who followed his lead were thus central to the creation of a defining element of the Thaw-era personality: rejection of the false enthusiasm that permeated postwar rural literature and official discourse and an embrace of sober, critical, and meticulous examination of the Soviet countryside.

Among the writers of the Ovechkin school was Abramov, whose interest in Sholokhov was indeed a symptom of a gravitation toward the realist pole of Socialist Realism. Scholars have considered Abramov’s primary contribution to the Ovechkin
school to be an essay, “People of the Kolkhoz Village in Postwar Prose,” published in April 1954 in Novyi mir, the Soviet Union’s leading literary journal. In the article, Abramov presented the principles according to which he was writing his novel about the wartime Russian village, and condemned Babaevskii and a host of other writers for their misrepresentation of the countryside in their late-Stalin-era literature. Abramov’s novel, Brothers and Sisters, appeared in 1958 in the Leningrad literary journal Neva and is also considered an important text of the movement.

Yet Abramov contributed far more than an article and novel to the prose of the Ovechkin school. In January 1954, he began to keep a diary, which includes scores of passages about the countryside. During his summers in Verkola, he kept notebooks, which can be conceptualized as “pocket” diaries, following a distinction that another writer of the Ovechkin school, Aleksandr Iashin, made between his own diary and notebooks. Abramov harnessed his diary and notebooks to living the empirical imperative of the era; he used them to learn more about the so-called mistakes in, and shortcomings of, the Soviet countryside, and thus to gather material for his novel and future works of fiction. What Abramov learned led him to see a rural reality that departed from that presented by the Soviet leadership, and thus played a role in his shifting the source of Communist truth from the Central Committee to the ordinary citizen. The first part of this chapter compares Abramov’s vision of rural life as revealed

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by his diary, notebooks, and novel to that of the leadership and Ovechkin school. It demonstrates that Abramov measured the Central Committee’s policies against its own rhetoric. The second part of the chapter shows that, over the course of the mid- and late 1950s, he and the other writers of the Ovechkin school, and of the Thaw more generally, came to privilege the diaristic genre over the novel, because of its relationship not only to the empirical imperative, but also to the new view of the source of Communist truth.

The Soviet leadership’s turn toward the countryside began in the late Stalin years. In 1949, the Ministry of Agriculture, under a new leader, Khrushchev, began to formulate a raft of reforms that promised peasants a material incentive to work on the collective farm and, in a radical departure from previous policy, to improve the standard of living in the countryside. Khrushchev hoped not only to reduce peasants’ taxes, raise procurement prices and wages, and introduce pensions, but also to build clubs, schools, hospitals, theaters, and movie houses, and move the peasants from traditional huts to flats in multi-storey apartment blocs. In short, he hoped to transform the village into a so-called agrocity and incorporate the peasants into urban society, and thus to create a single, unified working class, “to overcome the differences between town and country.” He also aimed to increase agricultural productivity in order to meet the growing consumer expectations of urban residents, whose unhappiness had been undermining the continued expansion of the industrial sector.

Khrushchev’s Ministry of Agriculture, however, had little in the way of real power. Authority rested with Georgii Malenkov, the chairman of the Council of Ministers and the member of the Politburo in charge of agriculture. Malenkov
implemented only that part of Khrushchev’s plan directly related to production: the amalgamation of some collective farms and the conversion of others into state farms. The peasant, then, continued to suffer, or fled to the cities.\textsuperscript{4}

In the keynote address to the Nineteenth Party Congress in October 1952, Malenkov made a first effort, however modest, to remove the veneer from the official image of rural life. To be sure, he proclaimed that “the grain problem, previously considered the most acute and serious problem [in the Soviet Union], has been successfully, finally and irreversibly resolved.” If he did not mention impoverished peasants or agricultural decrepitude, however, he did speak of insufficient mechanization of agriculture, lapses in consciousness among rural Communists, and rural officials who suppressed criticism and made personnel decisions on the basis of personal relationships. What is more, he issued a summons to artists and writers, who had been creating, he asserted, “many gray and mediocre works, and sometimes even hackwork, which distorts Soviet reality.” He called upon them to “castigate the vices, shortcomings, and unhealthy phenomena which are widespread in Soviet society,” and inspire officials and ordinary citizens to overcome them.\textsuperscript{5}

After Stalin’s death the leadership began to reveal a much greater extent of the problems in the countryside and to implement some of the reforms that Khrushchev believed were necessary to increase agricultural productivity. The first order of business


\textsuperscript{5} Georgii Malenkov, \textit{Otchetnyi doklad XIX s”ezdu partii o rabote tsentral’nogo komiteta VKP(b): 5 oktiabria 1953 g.} (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1952), 69, 74, 84-85, 110-11, 113-16, 133, 137, 139-40, 143, 147, 157-58.
was to scapegoat Lavrentii Beria whom the post-Stalin leadership accused of willfully failing to implement “the most important” agricultural reforms in order “to undermine the collective farms and create difficulties in the productive provision of the country.” For this and other charges, he was arrested and executed in July 1953.⁶ At a session of the Supreme Soviet in August, Malenkov introduced a first series of reforms which legislators summarily adopted: abolition of the in-kind tax on private plots, forgiveness of all related debts and arrears, the introduction of a small monetary tax on private plots, and higher procurement prices for goods produced by collective farms above their quotas.⁷

Most consequential, however, was the September 1953 plenum of the Central Committee, at which Khrushchev revealed that agricultural production had increased by only ten percent since 1940, contradicting Malenkov’s pronouncement at the Nineteenth Party Congress. Khrushchev cited causes for low growth no different from those mentioned by Malenkov in 1952. They included technology shortages, poor leadership on the state and collective farms, and the absence of material incentive, although Khrushchev placed more emphasis on the latter. As had been his intention since 1949, Khrushchev unveiled a number of reforms that addressed the problem of material incentive, the main cause of the Soviet Union’s agricultural ruin. These reforms included a reduction in the monetary tax on the private plot and abolition of the tax on personal livestock, and an increase in procurement prices and wages, some of which were to be

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⁷ Medvedev, Soviet Agriculture, 162-63.
distributed as quarterly advances. Having thus ostensibly solved the problem of material incentive, Khrushchev urged Soviet citizens to attend to the flaws in their own personalities. Because of political opposition to reforms that were not directly related to production, he was unable to begin the urbanization of the countryside. 

It was Malenkov’s and Khrushchev’s summons that gave impetus to the Ovechkin school. The writers of the Ovechkin school focused on the power of individual rural leaders and ordinary peasants to increase agricultural productivity; they wrote of material incentive only insofar as they praised the Central Committee for having solved the problem at the September 1953 plenum. The cornerstone of the movement was a series of sketches, *District Routine*, published between 1952 and 1956, in which the school’s namesake argued that rural officials who implemented bad policies and suppressed criticism from below were the primary causes of the Soviet Union’s agricultural woes.

As a result, Ovechkin explained, collective farmers and other rural residents refused to express themselves for fear of the consequences. Writers such as Gavriil Troepol’skii, 

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8 N. S. Khrushchev, *O merakh dal’neishego razvitia sel’skogo khoziastva SSSR: Doklad na Plenume TsK KPSS 3 sentabria 1953 g* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1953), 6, 7-10, 13, 17. See also Medvedev, *Soviet Agriculture*, 163, 183-84.


11 See, for example, the reaction of Ovechkin’s and especially Troepol’skii’s characters to the September plenum in “With One’s Own Hands” and “Neighbors,” respectively. See Valentin Ovechkin, “Svoimi rukami,” in *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh* (Moscow: “Khudozhestvennaia literatura,” 1989), 2: 141 and G. Troepol’skii, “Sosedyi, rasskaz,” *Novy mir* 4 (1954): 94.

Vladimir Tendriakov, Aleksandr Iashin, Efim Dorosh, and Vladimir Soloukhin articulated the same theme in their own works, and cited additional obstacles to higher productivity, too.\textsuperscript{13} Troepol’skii and Tendriakov wrote of selfish peasants who preferred to work on their private plots rather than for the collective farms.\textsuperscript{14} Tendriakov also reflected upon capitalist vestiges that lingered in peasants’ souls and the failure of conscious peasants to help others overcome them.\textsuperscript{15} Appropriating wartime and postwar russocentrism, Dorosh lamented that rural leaders had not assimilated local knowledge into modern agricultural practice, harnessed the virtues of the Russian national character, or recognized the power of Russian peasant dialects and traditional Russian architecture to inspire collective farmers.\textsuperscript{16} Soloukhin shared Dorosh’s russocentrism, writing of the collectivism of the Russian peasantry and the wonders of Russian peasant music and domestic and religious architecture.\textsuperscript{17}

If Ovechkin’s \textit{District Routine} was the fictional cornerstone of the movement, Abramov’s “People of the Kolkhoz Village in Postwar Prose” was its non-fictional counterpart. In “People of the Kolkhoz Village in Postwar Prose,” Abramov condemned

\textsuperscript{13} For the most famous example, see Aleksandr Iashin, “Rychagi,” in Margarita Aliger, ed., \textit{Literaturnaia Moskva: literaturno-khudozhestvennyi sbornik moskovskikh pisatelei} (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatelstvo khudozhestvenny literatury) 2: 502-13. See also V. Tendriakov, “Nenast’e, ocherk,” \textit{Novyi mir} 2 (1954): 66-85, as well as the works cited in the rest of this paragraph.


\textsuperscript{15} V. Tendriakov, “Ne ko dvoru, povest’” \textit{Novyi mir} 6 (1954): 42-94.


\textsuperscript{17} Vladimir Soloukhin, “Vladimirskie proselki,” \textit{Novyi mir} 9 (1957): 82-141, and \textit{Novyi mir} 10 (1957): 75-134. These installments were published as a separate volume in 1958. See Vladimir Soloukhin, \textit{Vladimirskie proselki} (Moscow: Mol. Gvardiia, 1958).
the embellishment of the countryside in postwar collective-farm literature, measuring the
work of Babaevskii, Galina Nikolaeva, Sergei Voronin, and others against the content of
Malenkov’s address to the Nineteenth Party Congress and Khrushchev’s speech at the
September 1953 plenum. Uniting the authors upon whom he focused, he wrote, was the
way in which they had described the postwar reconstruction of the collective farms. To
different degrees, they had understated the obstacles to Soviet agriculture’s revival: a
shortage of resources and manpower, and vestiges of capitalism that lingered in the
consciousness of many collective farmers, who preferred working on their private plots to
toiling on the collective farms, and continued to seek alternative, non-socialist sources of
income. As presented in these short stories and novels, and especially in those by
Babaevskii, collective farmers were not only model citizens, but also invariably beautiful,
had thick, curly heads of blond hair, dressed impeccably, spoke perfect, grammatically
correct Russian, and lived in a pastoral idyll upon which, at night, the moon always
shone.\(^\text{18}\)

The caustic tone in which Abramov wrote his article suggested that everyone,
including the objects of his attack, knew that the image of the countryside they had
presented was specious. According to contemporaneous discourse, to truly understand
and pen a realistic work about the countryside, one needed to study it. Sober, meticulous
examination of rural life was thus Abramov’s demand in his article, and helped to
constitute a new behavioral ideal that eschewed the unhinged fantasy of the late Stalin
years. Near the end of the essay, Abramov observed that Ovechkin, Tendriakov, and

\(^{18}\) Abramov, “Liudi kolkhoznoi derevni v poslevoennoi proze.”
Troepol’skii had published a number of realistic works in 1953 and thus had taken the new imperative to heart.\(^{19}\)

Investigation of rural reality was Abramov’s goal in beginning his diary in January 1954.\(^{20}\) To be sure, the novel that Abramov was writing was about the wartime Russian village, not rural Russia as it appeared in the mid- and late 1950s. By definition, however, the Soviet novel was to be relevant to the present-day even if it told a story about the past. Abramov intended to incorporate what he learned about the post-Stalin-era countryside into his narrative about the wartime countryside, but without misrepresenting either; he would have to balance not only the realism and romanticism of the official aesthetic, but also the truths of two temporalities.\(^{21}\)

The diary reveals that Abramov turned to a variety of sources in his effort to learn about the rural Soviet Union. He read the Soviet press, mined letters from his brother Mikhail’s family, and solicited information from friends and colleagues who had traveled to the countryside to visit their relatives. He found the press, of course, often unreliable. In February 1957, he complained of a photograph in *Pravda*, of Viacheslav Molotov at a Voronezh collective farm, that in his estimation amounted to a pictorial incarnation of postwar kolkhoz literature. It captured Molotov and collective farmers dining at a table overflowing with sausage, cheese, buns, and champagne, none of which the collective

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 226-27.

\(^{20}\) On using a “notebook” to gather material for one’s literature, see K. Paustovskii, *Zolotaia roza: povest’,* in *Izbrannye proizvedeniia v dvukh tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1977), 1: 43.

\(^{21}\) It is possible, too, that he hoped to use some of the material for sequels to the novel. In January 1956, for example, he noted that he dreamed of expanding the novel into a multivolume epic about the wartime and postwar village. See DFA, 1 (January 19, 1956). See also DFA, 336 (September 20, 1956). At some point after having recorded them, he returned to the passages and made a line along their margin in red pencil, presumably to make them easier to find. This statement is based on a reading of the original manuscripts for 1954. No other passages are marked up in a similar way.
farmers had access to. Abramov did not criticize specific newspaper articles for misrepresenting rural life, but his commentaries about some reveal his having read them critically. He paid no attention to an explanation in a Pravda article, for example, that productivity shortfalls on state farms were caused by the failure of central state-farm bureaucracies to maintain a close connection to local personnel, and the inability of local personnel to increase productivity despite having been provided with new technology and experienced workers. Instead, he posed questions about the state farmers’ material incentive, which went unmentioned in the article.

Abramov turned to his personal network of sources to complement what he learned from the newspaper and to compensate for its limitations. In recording the information these sources provided, he was in effect creating his own newspaper, published in one copy. Notable about the data he acquired is that it did not lead him to cite the shortcomings of local residents or officials as the causes of low productivity, as had the leadership and other writers of the Ovechkin school. Instead, as in his remarks

22 DFA, 25 (February 19, 1957).


24 Of the relationship between Ralph Waldo Emerson’s journal and the American newspaper – a useful contrast to the relationship between Abramov’s diary and the Soviet newspaper – Lawrence Rosenwald has written: “[T]he best example of American hurry is perhaps the American newspaper – that shockingly concrete and lengthy chronicle of the time, that public ‘journal’ of exemplary regularity, regulated by, indeed almost a manifestation of, the mechanical succession of days […] Against such compulsive regularity, against the pressure of the day so sharply imprinted by the daily newspaper, Emerson’s irregularities seem a sort of principled idleness […] a partial rejection of American mechanical and mercantile capitalism; this diaristic suggestion of a deliberately unsystematic, irregular, almost dilatory relation to calendrical time seems a partial rejection of American tempo, of its conception of time, its adaptation of human rhythms to the rhythms of clock and calendar and bell.” See Lawrence Rosenwald, Emerson and the Art of the Diary (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 88-89. Abramov was neither seeking refuge from the “compulsive regularity” of modern life nor rejecting its “conception of time,” but rather was becoming more engaged in modern time; and deeper engagement required deeper immersion in reality, which, in turn required that he learn as much as possible about it. To be sure, Abramov did not write in his diary on a regular basis, but he did try. See DFA, 66-67 (September 24, 1957).
about the Pravda article about state farms, he focused on the issue of material incentive, on the high taxes and low wages of collective farmers. In early 1956, for example, he noted that his niece Galina had written to him from Verkola and mentioned that her father, Mikhail, had been trying to earn extra money to buy meat to pay the meat tax.²⁵ Around the same time, he recorded that Mikhail had paid an outlandish sum of taxes in kind – in meat, in eggs, and in hides – and earned only 500 grams of grain and a single ruble, even though he had accumulated 870 workdays.²⁶

An anger pertaining to the plight of the peasantry infuses these passages. “How absurd it is!” Abramov exclaimed about his brother having to buy meat to pay the meat tax.²⁷ “The devil knows what this is!” he cried about Mikhail’s in-kind taxes.²⁸ The content and tone suggest that Abramov, unlike the Soviet leadership and other writers of the Ovechkin school, was concerned about more than agricultural productivity; he longed for a just rural policy, one that would improve the rural standard of living and foster happiness among the peasantry. Abramov was concerned about more, too, than his own family; when he wrote of Mikhail, he extrapolated from Mikhail’s own predicament to that of the peasantry in general.²⁹ He was thus a step ahead of the leadership. If the leadership had stopped speaking of reform after increasing material incentive, Abramov

²⁵ DFA, 35 (January 25, 1956).
²⁶ Ibid., 118 (March 29, 1956). For other examples, see 33 (April 1, 1954), 106-7 (May 29, 1954), 161 (April 8, 1956), and 265 (May 24, 1956).
²⁷ Ibid., 35 (January 25, 1956).
²⁸ Ibid., 118 (March 29, 1956).
²⁹ See, for example, ibid., 118 (March 29, 1956).
went on, calling for what Khrushchev had envisioned for the peasantry before losing the battle to rearrange policy priorities.

What is more, to emphasize the absence of material incentive as the cause of low living standards was implicitly to fault the individuals responsible for its absence: the members of the Central Committee. For Abramov, the September 1953 plenum may have lowered taxes and raised procurement prices, but these changes did not substantially increase peasants’ incomes. In his view, the reforms failed to substantially address material incentive and thus kept agricultural productivity low. Over the course of the mid- and late 1950s, the leadership may have increased procurement prices further, but it needed to raise them even higher to sufficiently incentivize labor, given how low they had been on the eve of the September plenum.\textsuperscript{30} Moreover, the system of advance payments inaugurated at the September plenum quickly broke down. To improve it, the leadership introduced the distribution of monthly, rather than quarterly, advances both in cash and in kind. Yet cash advances were small, and in-kind advances, random, and no larger in 1958 than in 1952.\textsuperscript{31}

In other passages Abramov, while not explicitly criticizing the Central Committee, failed to respond to its pronouncements as it mandated. In a speech to the February 1954 Central Committee plenum on agriculture, for example, Khrushchev highlighted a host of mistakes and shortcomings in the agricultural sector, but asserted in conclusion that “the Soviet people under the leadership of the Communist Party have set to work with a firm faith in the success of the task [of increasing agricultural

\textsuperscript{30} Medvedev, \textit{Soviet Agriculture}, 165-67, 177.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 184-85.
productivity]” and “confidently and firmly are moving forward to the victory of Communism.” On March 23, 1954 after reading the speech, which appeared in Pravda on March 21, Abramov opined: “The call for truth, for sharp criticism of shortcomings is gladdening. But at the same time the speech depressed me. What a mess we have in agriculture.” For Abramov, the source of Communist truth had at the least begun to shift from the Central Committee to the Soviet citizen. As we have seen, this was a result of his having measured the leadership against its own standards: the degree to which it had given the peasants a material incentive to work on the collective farms and had improved the rural standard of living.

Abramov had harsh words for writers of the Ovechkin school who failed to recognize that peasants had little material incentive to work for their collective farms. Tendriakov, a luminary of the early Thaw, in particular earned Abramov’s ire. Tendriakov’s 1954 short story “The Wart,” he complained, was “talented, but half truthful” because Tendriakov blamed the peasant for being more attached to his private plot than to his collective farm, even though he had no material incentive to work on the latter. “At least if he received as much hay per workday as my brother received two years ago, then it would be difficult to expect that he have a passionate relationship to collective-farm work,” Abramov wrote in February 1954. “This means that in a year he earned enough hay for his cow for two or three days.” Later in the passage Abramov stated programmatically: “I think that the most important thing [for the improvement of agriculture] is the peasant, the collective farmer. We must make sure that he has a material incentive to work on the collective farm, that he is fed and dressed. Then things

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will go well. Otherwise, it is unlikely.” Abramov found Tendriakov’s 1954 sketch *Foul Weather* “through and through mendacious” for the same reason. “In it the peasant is damned because he selfishly worked on his own plot and does not want to leave for the collective-farm fields,” he observed. “But why does he not want to work in the collective farm’s fields? Here is the question that must be answered. One really should not imagine that the peasant is some kind of receptacle for vices and the vestiges of the property owner.” Tendriakov’s 1954 tale *Not Quite Right* suffered from the same flaw: “As we see, again Tendriakov lashes the proprietary ways of the peasant and again turns his back on the explanation of the reasons.”

Abramov’s use of his diary to learn about the countryside is also evident in the form or structure of his passages. Abramov wrote his passages in what might be called an empirical mode. He grounded them in “facts” – a newspaper article he had read, a letter he had received from a relative, or a conversation he had had with a friend or colleague – to which he appended his own commentary. After mentioning a letter from his brother Mikhail about the high taxes he had paid, for example, Abramov lamented the absence of a principle of progressive taxation in the rural tax code. “And why is everyone taxed the same amount?” he asked. “Why should a peasant who earns nothing

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33 DFA, 6-7 (February 7, 1954).

34 Ibid., 14-16 (March 6, 1954). Upon making the comment about “Not Quite Right,” Abramov had not read the sketch himself, but had heard about it from Aleksandr Dement’ev, the deputy editor of Novyi mir and his colleague at Leningrad State. Upon reading the sketch, however, Abramov had a more favorable opinion of it. See DFA, 36 (April 1, 1954).

35 Of the 48 passages about the Soviet countryside, 41 are structured this way. The sixty passages I mention earlier in the chapter include passages about literature about the countryside, as well.
for his workdays pay the same amount as a peasant who lives on a model collective
farm?” After he posed these questions, Abramov moved on to a thought about the
absence of differentiation in Khrushchev’s approach to the private plot. “Right now there
is also another thing being carried out,” he wrote. “Individual plots are being reduced in
size, and in some cases taken away entirely. Of course, this is good in the case of rich
collective farms. But what about the poor ones?”

A diarist, of course, does not
necessarily need to place fact before thought in his journal. To do so is a function of
historical context; in Abramov’s case, it is evidence of an attempt to live the empirical
imperative.

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36 DFA, 118 (March 29, 1956). On six occasions, Abramov provided thought without fact. “Yesterday I
was thinking: just not long ago the planning for each collective farm was carried out from the center,” he
noted in 1955, after the promulgation of limited decentralization. “Just think about it: the sowing in
Verkola was formulated in the Ministry” (DFA, 69 [October 23, 1955]). “On the dictatorship of the
proletariat,” he reflected in 1957. “Is its existence always justified? Why must the collective farmer be
subject to the dictatorship of the worker? After all, given their relationship to property, are they not right
now in an equal position?” (DFA, 65 [May 22, 1957]). Such statements, however, are rare; thought was
important, but thought required facts, which were in short supply.

37 In different eras and in different milieus, diarists structure their passages differently. Rosenwald
has written the following about the form of Emerson’s journal, the Transcendentalist diary par excellence: “In
most of the Transcendentalist diaries, the individual entries are ordered from dross to gold – from, that is,
the bare facts of a lived day to the truths rooted in it and flowering from it. Not in Emerson’s, however; his
utterances seem to arise ex nihilo, altogether severed, to use another phrase of Kierkegaard’s, from the
umbilical cord of their original mood. […] Emerson seems to be keeping the exemplary Transcendentalist
journal […] characterized by the ‘sallies of conjecture, glimpses and flights of ecstasy’ […] Emerson need
not write; nor, once having chosen to write, need he write anything in particular or limber up before
thinking or do compulsory exercises before launching the free flight of the imagination” (Rosenwald,
Emerson and the Art of the Diary, 89-93). An example of an Emersonian entry is: “Everything good, we
say, is on the highway. A virtuoso hunts up with great pains a landscape of Guercino, a crayon sketch of
Salvator, but the Transfiguration, The Last Judgment, the Communion, are on the walls of the Vatican
where every footman may see them without price. You have for 500 pounds an autograph receipt of
Shakespeare; but for nothing a schoolboy can read Hamlet … I think I will never read any but the most
commonest of all books” (39). The point is that Emerson did not mention the event that occasioned the
conclusion: in this case, that everything good is not, in fact, on the highway. Abramov, of course, did not
write as Emerson wrote, nor would he have written as Emerson wrote, as his diaristic practice was shaped
by his own historical circumstances: a place and an era in which the subject was to learn more about the
world in which he lived. For Abramov, the dross was the gold, given that the facts had been distorted by
the Party and intellectuals for more than a decade.
The empirical mode governed Abramov’s inclination to ask questions in his commentaries, too, which leaves the passages open-ended and calls for further investigation. Most of the questions are rhetorical (like those about progressive taxation and private plots), suggesting that Abramov found the correct course of action obvious and the leadership’s failure to pursue it exasperating. Yet a couple of them are genuine inquiries. In February 1954, for example, he mentioned having learned of productivity shortfalls on state farms from the article in Pravda. “Why?” he asked. “[…] Is it possibly because [state farmers’] labor is poorly compensated and they, too, have no incentive to work,” he wondered. “What is going on?”

On a trip to the forests of northern Leningrad to buy firewood, he wondered if the peasant had become as attached to the collective farm as he was to his private plot or had been to his pre-collectivized private property, and if anything could be done to effect this transformation. In the passage, Abramov began with the fact:

Today I […] felt the strength of property. During the day I carried firewood […] And I found it pleasant to look at [the logs], to brush off the snow from each little log, to weigh them in my hand, to lay them out straight, and to cover them in iron. And with what enjoyment I chopped the big logs.

Then he recorded his commentary:

I at first thought – labor is itself rewarding (carrying the firewood for me – these were the most pleasant minutes), but no – I should not deceive myself. Labor is labor, but the feeling of ownership, needless to say, is something different. Property arouses a satisfaction of some kind […] And I thought: what happiness his property gave the peasant. It was not for nothing that the peasant with such love stamped around on his homestead, swept up each blade of grain […] And how he tended to his horse and to his cattle. He would jump out of bed and run to the cattle seven times in the middle of the night, and would work in the field or strip from dawn to dusk and would retain his cheerfulness – and this was not only for the sake of a piece of bread. It gave him happiness. For this reason the toil was endurable when people slept three hours a night.

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Then he posed his questions:

But has collective-farm property become as close to the heart and one’s own (rodnoi) as personal (lichniaia)? Does the peasant have the sense of being a master and property-owner (in the good sense of this term?)? Has this been replaced with anything? That is the question.\(^{39}\)

The goal was to learn more about the peasant’s relationship to the collective farm, and most likely, to learn whether conditions could be created that would lead the peasant to love it.\(^{40}\)

One should also note Abramov’s use of the terms “pleasant,” “cheerfulness,” and “happiness” in the above passage. Abramov may have been ultimately concerned with the issue of increasing agricultural productivity, but it was not his exclusive concern. There is an attention to the peasant’s mood that is missing from official discourse and much of the prose of the Ovechkin school. For Abramov, the peasant is more than a work horse or agricultural implement. The peasant – or rather, the happy peasant – was an end in and of himself.

Soviet writers of the immediate post-Stalin years stipulated that anyone who wished to write about the countryside not simply study it from afar, but move there or, at the least, spend extended periods of time there. In his diary in October 1954, Aleksandr Tvardovskii, editor-in-chief of Novyi mir and responsible for publishing many Ovechkin school works, posited that to write about the collective farm, one needed to live in the

\(^{39}\) DFA, 54 (February 26, 1956).

\(^{40}\) For the importance of the question mark, as opposed to the exclamation point, in Thaw-era discourse, see Vladimir Bakhtin, “V Kosmozero,” Na rubezhe 6 (1956): 102.
countryside for the course of a year.\footnote{Aleksandr Tvardovskii, “Iz rabochikh tetradei (1953-1960),” Znamia 7 (1989): 144 (October 8, 1954).} In a speech to the Second Congress of Soviet Writers in December 1954, Ovechkin reproached writers for not traveling to the locations where their stories were set, but rather remaining in their offices in Moscow or Peredelkino, a writers colony on the outskirts of the capital. To live in a village for a month and write a novel about the locale, he lectured, was unacceptable. Ovechkin excluded several young writers from blame, including Tendriakov and Troepol’skii, noting that they were exceptionally well-traveled journalists or had formerly worked as rural professionals and remained connected to their old milieus.\footnote{Vtoroi vsesoiuznyi s”ezd sovetskikh pisatelei: 15-26 dekabria 1954 goda: Stenograficheskii otchet (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1956), 250-51. Tendriakov was an official in the provincial Komsomol, and Troepol’skii was a trained agronomist. See Clark, “The Centrality of Rural Themes in Postwar Soviet Fiction,” 98n13. Ovechkin repeated his argument at a conference on collective-farm literature in October 1955. See V. Ovechkin, “Vsesoiuznoe soveshchanie literatorov, pishushchikh na kolkhoznye temy: Novoe v kolkhoznoi derevne i zadachi khudozhestvennoi literaturey,” Literaturnaia gazeta, October 29, 1955, 3.} In a speech to the Twentieth Party Congress in February 1956, Sholokhov lamented that the overwhelming majority of Soviet writers lived in cities, not on workers’ settlements or in villages, and urged anyone who wished to write about their native villages or small towns to move there.\footnote{M.A. Sholokhov, “XX s”ezd Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuza: Rech’ tovarishcha M.A. Sholokhova,” Pravda, February 21, 1956, 8.}

The writers of the Ovechkin school anticipated or heeded these calls. While writing \textit{A Village Diary}, his central contribution to the movement, Dorosh spent many months in, and repeatedly returned to, a village in the central Russian district of Rostov Velikii. In the introduction to the diary, he wrote that he had visited the village for the first time in 1952, on assignment for a Moscow newspaper, for which he “gathered material, wrote and published a sketch and, perhaps, would never have returned here, as it
almost always happens with a journalist.” Since then, however, he had returned to the district several times each year. Soloukhin, for his part, spent the summer of 1956 traveling through his native Vladimir province by foot and wrote about it in his *Vladimir Country Roads*. In 1954, Iashin went “incognito” in the Altai region, enrolling in a course for tractor drivers under the pseudonym Popov. In a letter that summer to the poet Stepan Shchipachev, he confided: “I seriously want to take the state exams and receive a tractor driver’s license. Poets must become proficient in a related profession [related, that is, to the topic of their poetry].”

Abramov endorsed these calls, too. In his diary in May 1954, he wrote that at *Novyi mir*’s offices in Moscow, where he had traveled to discuss his article “People of the Kolkhoz Village in Postwar Prose,” he had met Anatoli Chivilikhin, a member of the editorial board. “The fool, he assured me that on material from business trips one can well produce novels and poems,” he wrote. “But in my opinion, no!” For financial reasons, Abramov had no interest in abandoning Leningrad and moving to his native village per Sholokhov’s demand. Yet, between 1954 and 1957, he spent his summers in Verkola – with the exception of 1955 – where he lived with his brother Mikhail and his wife Anna in their izba. On July 4, 1954, the day of his departure for Verkola, he wrote: “I still know little about all the measures that are being introduced to improve

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44 Dorosh, *Derevenskii dnevnik*, 5-6.

45 Soloukhin, “Vladimirskie proselki.”


47 DFA, 107 (May 29, 1954).
agriculture. In Verkola, he learned more and recorded what he learned, also in an empirical mode, in his notebooks.

Like those in Abramov’s diary, the entries in his notebooks are dated and split into passages, most of which are shorter than the passages in the diary; he seems to have carried his notebook around the village and, on the run, recorded a sentence or two. A central object of analysis in the notebooks, as in the diary entries about the countryside, is agricultural productivity. Unlike in the diary, however, in the notebooks Abramov noted the existence of a great deal of apathy and fear among the peasantry, shortcomings that he implicitly presented as barriers to higher productivity. If these phenomena can be found in official discourse and Ovechkin prose, they are found in much starker form in the notebooks, further evidence of a divergence between him and the Central Committee.

Indeed, the passages about political indifference are astonishing, insofar as they present a peasantry that lived in a world of its own, seemingly entirely removed from the political culture and concerns of the Soviet state. On June 30, 1956, Khrushchev, aiming to quell opposition to his leadership, ushered a resolution through the Central Committee that rewrote and diminished the not-so-secret speech he had delivered at the Twentieth Party Congress in late February. In Verkola, the resolution was read in July at a Party meeting that Abramov attended. The collective-farm chairman and Communist who read the report, an incredulous Abramov related in his notebook, did not know the name of the

48 Ibid., 140-41 (July 4, 1954).

resolution, calling it “The Central Committee resolution about the cult of personality and its harmful consequences [consequences, in the original Russian, was wrongly declined – A.P.].” What Abramov found most stunning, however, was that the peasants in the audience sat in complete silence, listening to the “sermon” and understanding nothing. After five or ten minutes, none of them was even paying attention; some of them had fallen asleep, others were smoking, and still others were staring out the window. Not only had no one disagreed with the resolution, Abramov wrote, no one even cared about it, even though it feigned to describe the last thirty years of their lives. “The cult of personality,” he concluded, was before them in full flower: “obtuse […] [people] who understood nothing and did not dare admit it.”

After the meeting, he visited a collective farmer and saw a large portrait of Stalin on the wall of his izba. When Abramov asked why he had not removed the “icon,” the collective farmer replied that the wall would have been bare without it and, in any event, it had already been paid for. Another peasant acquaintance whom Abramov visited pointed to the portrait of Stalin on his wall and asked Abramov if he should remove it. After Abramov answered that he should, the peasant replied: “Well, I’ll find a replacement and take it down, but for now, I’ll keep it up – it doesn’t matter, no one comes over.”

Abramov paid as much attention to fear among the peasantry. In the summer of 1957, he wrote of Ivan Andreevich Burachkin, an elderly priest who had served eighteen

50 ZKFA, 3-5 (July 23, 1956). Emphasis in the original.

51 The cult of personality will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3. Here, it should be noted that the consequences of the cult of personality, as Abramov used the term in this instance, were identical to the consequences of the rural officials in the works of the Ovechkin school who suppressed criticism from below.

52 Ibid., 8-10 (July 23, 1956).
years in prisons and camps and had returned to Verkola in the late 1940s. In 1930, Burachkin had been accused of being a kulak, arrested, and sentenced to two years in prison and five years in exile for failing to pay his taxes. According to Burachkin, he could have avoided arrest if he had removed his cross and cut his hair, but he refused to exchange his faith for his freedom. Soon after his own arrest, his wife was arrested, too, and sentenced to three years in prison and five years in exile. In 1937, Burachkin was able to return to Verkola, only to be arrested again. Nineteen thirty-seven was a particularly brutal year in the camps, he told Abramov. In later years, he explained, he was treated relatively well because he followed orders, for which his fellow prisoners beat him. He was released early, in 1947, for good behavior. In general, however, Burachkin preferred not to talk about his time in prison and the camps. He worried about being arrested again, not because of the trials he might endure, but because he did not want to die away from home. The sight of Abramov writing in his notebook as he talked made him uncomfortable; he worried he was composing a denunciation.\(^{53}\)

Abramov’s concern for the rural standard of living and peasant happiness is particularly evident in the notebooks, which include a number of passages about features of urban life that had been introduced in the countryside. Whereas Khrushchev had not accomplished his goal of redirecting resources toward the urbanization of the countryside, Abramov learned during his summers in Verkola that the countryside had,

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 9-11 (August 4, 1957), 5 (August 10, 1957), and 2-4 (August 28, 1957). For another example, see 14 (July 18, 1956). Mention of collectivization-era arrestees, but not returnees, can be found in the published prose of this period. See, for example, V. Tendriakov, “Chudotvornaia, povest’” \textit{Znamia} 5 (1958): 3-55, esp. 10. Abramov’s passages about Burachkin are not symptoms of the gestation in Soviet literature of Solzhenitsyn’s \textit{A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich}, which appeared in 1962, for Abramov does not express sympathy for Burachkin or question the grounds for his arrest.
The notebooks amount to something of an ethnography of a new, modern village. Abramov noted, for example, that Verkola’s peasants had begun dressing according to a higher level of culture (kul’turnee). The city dweller, in his cotton clothes, had once looked peculiar to them. Now, however, almost all the male peasants wore cotton undershirts and T-shirts, and even old women wore cotton shirts. Also, the automobile had been introduced in the countryside; for the first time, old women traveled by car to the raking. “New Men” – literate, cultured, and broad-minded – had appeared in the village. The collective-farm chairman, brigadiers, Party organizer, and livestock leader were young and well educated. “Yes, one can say with confidence: the chasm between the city and village is disappearing,” Abramov proclaimed. He observed that the old, independent (edinolichnaia) village, consisting of large houses with large yards for a family’s livestock, was being replaced by a new, collectivist village, which boasted small, cheerful homes with small extensions for the single family cow. In the old village, the entire home was subordinated to the farm. “The person was essentially only an appendage to his farm, to his livestock,” Abramov wrote in an application of Marxist language to rural Russia. Now, the home, with its big windows and multiple rooms, was for the individual himself.

He wrote of similar changes in 1956 and 1957. The peasants now slept with pillows and blankets, even elderly peasants wore slippers in the evenings, and everyone drank tea, morning, day, and night. Earlier, he remarked, people had swam in white canvas shirts and pants, but now they swam in their underwear, evidently a sign of

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54 Efim Dorosh’s A Village Diary is something of an exception.

55 ZKFA, 9-10 (July 1954) and 10-11, 13 (July 15, 1954).
Peasants continued to dress better, and an old man had started wearing sandals instead of boots during the summer. He was enthusiastic about these changes; he expressed not a single mournful word about the disappearance of traditional Verkola as he had done in his diary in 1943.

Abramov lamented, however, that the source of these changes was the city, not the village. None of this “came from the land,” which remained neglected, he wrote in 1954. “It comes from the city,” where collective farmers worked on the side. The local collective farm remained unproductive and thus an unreliable source of income for the peasants. Between 1954 and 1957, Abramov cited various causes of low productivity, most of which can be found in Ovechkin prose: short tenures of collective-farm chairmen (Verkola had had twenty-four in twenty-six years), the absence of pensions, which prompted villagers to dream of finding work elsewhere; district-committee officials who demanded that the collective farmers start the mowing too early; and young men and women who, while remaining in the village in greater numbers than in earlier years, cared only about dances and clothes and looked down upon working for the collective farm.

Yet, just as in his diary, Abramov affirmed in his notebooks that the primary obstacle to higher productivity was the absence of material incentive. For the land to

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56 Ibid., 7 (August 1, 1957) and 7 (August 29, 1957).
57 Ibid., 15-16 (July 27, 1957).
59 ZKFA, 5 (July 23, 1956).
60 Ibid., 15 (August 2, 1957) and 10 (August 1, 1957).
61 Ibid., 11-12 (July 26, 1957) and 13-14 (July 27, 1957). See also 12 (July 26, 1957).
become the origin of the changes, he wrote, collective farmers needed a guarantee that they would be paid at the end of the year. In 1956, he mentioned a poster that hung outside the village club, listing how much meat, milk, and hay the collective farm had to deliver to the state, but not how much bread or money a peasant would receive per workday. “The most terrible consequence of the cult of personality,” he continued, “was people’s disregard for and indifference to their collective farm.”

In 1956, he recorded that the collective-farm chairman, a certain Nekhoroshov, had told him that “an entire revolution” was needed to improve Verkola’s collective farm. In 1957, he wrote of a new collective-farm chairman, Ivan Postnikov – Verkola’s twenty-fifth – and his own, contrary prescription for increasing productivity: Verkola did not need a revolution, Postnikov had said, but something much more mundane: rubles for the collective farmers, perhaps 4 or 5 per workday. “‘Yes,’ [Abramov] agreed, ‘the ruble is the best propagandist.’” No matter the chairman, Postnikov explained, nothing would change without rubles to pay the collective farmers. The trouble was that he had no idea where to find them. The collective farm was caught in a vicious circle, he said: to get the peasants to work, the collective farm needed rubles, but to get rubles, the peasants needed to work.

Abramov’s conversation with Postnikov inspired another passage that marked a crucial change in his view of the collective farm. In the passage, titled “What type of person the chairman of the collective farm should be,” Abramov proposed that a

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63 Ibid., 8-10 (July 23, 1956). See also 7-8 (August 1, 1957) and 8 (August 12, 1957).
64 Ibid., 15 (July 24, 1956).
particular kind of collective-farm chairman could overcome the material-incentive problem that Postnikov considered insoluble. In so doing, Abramov strengthened, but did not solidify, his ties to the leadership and Ovechkin school, as his ultimate goal remained not only higher productivity, but also a higher standard of living, and his vision of rural life remained more negative. The way out of Postnikov’s vicious circle, he wrote, was a chairman who would sacrifice himself for the common cause, who would live the life of his collective farmers and not entertain the thought of leaving the collective farm – a chairman, he concluded, who would be a Peter the Great on the level of the village. “If necessary, he must thoroughly break [the collective farmers] and, like Peter, scold them, get angry […]” When he brings about a change on the collective farm, it will become easy. Then the collective farmers will themselves straighten out the slovenly workers. Then the propagandist will become the ruble.” “Here one needs the heroic feat of one person. Here is the role of the personality in history.” For Abramov, taxes had become low enough and the value of a workday had become high enough for a collective-farm chairman to be able to make a difference.

Despite the reference to Peter the Great, however, Abramov did not call for the inauguration of a rural tyrant. He described the ideal collective-farm chairman as selfless, someone who would reject his position’s privileges, including his 1,200 ruble per month salary. The chairman would earn only what his collective farmers earned. “You starve, I starve,” Abramov wrote. He would also be resourceful, economical, technologically literate, and a good accountant. Nor was the call for a rural Peter the Great a return to the Stalin-era notion that only select, “outstanding” individuals made History, for the raison d’être of Abramov’s Peter was to create more people like himself.
The end of Abramov’s diary captures this evolution from a focus on material incentive to one on local leadership. On September 25, 1957, he wrote that “objective conditions” – by which he meant economic conditions or peasant incomes – for the improvement of collective farms had not existed in earlier years, and thus that chairmen had been unable to make a difference on their collective farms. According to what he had learned about the countryside, however, objective conditions had recently improved to the point that collective-farm chairmen could finally have an impact; even if the meat tax was still too high, he wrote, other taxes had been sufficiently lowered and procurement prices had been sufficiently raised.66 What would prove profoundly difficult, however, was finding chairmen who resembled Peter the Great. “Where can one find so many talented people?” he asked in his notebooks in 1957.67 In his novel he provided the answer.68

*Brothers and Sisters* is about a fictional wartime village, Pekashino, that bears a strong resemblance to Verkola. Notwithstanding the fact that its focus is the Second World War, the novel is distinct from Abramov’s diary and notebooks in an important regard: nowhere in the text did Abramov discuss the issue of material incentive. The focus is on the power of individual agency with respect to both local leaders and ordinary peasants, whom Abramov presented as having played crucial, underappreciated roles in the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany. Yet the reason for this emphasis on individual

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66 Ibid., 73-74 (September 25, 1957).
67 Ibid., 5-6 (August 14, 1957).
agency was not the fact that the novel appeared in 1958, after Abramov had shifted his focus in his diary and notebooks from material incentive to local leadership and ordinary citizens. As one learns in the diary, Abramov finished his novel in late 1956 and immediately began submitting it to publishers. It is unlikely that he had the time or opportunity to radically revise the work after having changed his view of rural reality in the summer of 1957. To have focused on the power of personality was thus to have compromised, but only with respect to his depiction of the present, not of the past. The war was a time of unprecedented deprivation for much of the Soviet countryside, and the peasants who chose to work hard did so not because they expected material reward. The emphasis on personality was also a compromise only in relation to the village, not to the city, or more specifically urban intelligentsia, who were exceptionally well paid, and were a principal audience for which Abramov wrote. Abramov’s change of mind about the collective farm in the summer of 1957 was nothing short of serendipitous for the coherence of his own views and those presented in his novel.

In *Brothers and Sisters*, Abramov suggested that one could find in the wartime Russian village if not actual, talented people to become chairmen of the post-Stalin collective farms, then inspirational models to be emulated. Chief among them was the wartime chairman of Pekashino’s collective farm, the 35-year-old Anfisa Petrovna Minina. A simple, uneducated peasant, Minina has never delivered a speech before being elected chairman in the spring of 1942, when the novel begins. She faces a number of obstacles, in addition to the perennial challenges of the infertile soil of the northern countryside, to meeting the grain demands of the wartime state: a deficit of seed,

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69 DFA, 1 (February 1, 1957).
manpower, and bread, and a late start to the sowing season because of lingering cold weather. Nevertheless, Minina delivers, for she is something of a Peter the Great. She may not be technologically savvy or a trained accountant, but she is stern, selfless, and modest, and knows the land. She works alongside her collective farmers and talks to them about their problems, consoling those who have lost loved ones in the war. She challenges both her subordinates and superiors and informs her superiors of unfair and irrational policies. As a result of her leadership she earns a seat in the village soviet and candidate-membership in the Party.70

For Abramov, if cultivation of model collective farmers depended on the character of the collective-farm chairman, cultivation of model collective-farm chairman depended on the character of district-committee officials. Additional characters in Abramov’s novel include Ivan Lukashin, a wounded soldier dispatched to Pekashino as the district committee’s envoy, and Aleksei Novozhilov, the district-committee first secretary. Whereas Lukashin facilitates Minina’s election, Novozhilov supports her conduct as chairman. When the novel begins, the chairman is Khariton Likhachev, a little Stalin, a conventional figure in Thaw-era literature. Like Stalin, Likhachev has pockmarks on his face, a deformed left hand, and ties to the Caucasus by virtue of his Astrakhan cap. He accuses his subordinates of harboring anti-Soviet opinions when they criticize him, and takes credit for their accomplishments.71 When Lukashin first arrives in Pekashino, he is critical of the collective farmers; Leningrad is starving, Belorussian

70 Abramov, “Brat’ia i sestry,” 14-15, 41, 46, 49, 53, 63-65, 87-88, 107, 120, 152-53, 158-65, 173, 217-21, 226. She is not perfect, however; she doubts herself and sometimes despairs, and the darkened skin around her eyes testifies to her physical limitations.

71 Ibid., 11-12, 24-26, 33, 39, 41-47, 51, 88, 240.
civilians are being slaughtered, and the Soviet Union is fighting for its survival, he says, and they, meanwhile, are living their lives without a sense of urgency. Yet he quickly recognizes that Likhachev’s dictatorial and misguided leadership is responsible for the problems on the collective farm, and that the peasants are doing everything they can. He then holds a meeting, at which the collective farmers remove Likhachev and elect Minina, and challenges Likhachev when he attempts to silence the collective farmers by casting aspersions on their patriotism. Lukashin worries about having facilitated a change of leadership without the district committee’s permission, but concludes that the peasants understand their affairs better than he and should have the right to make their own decisions. Novozhilov, for his part, reacts calmly to the news that the collective farmers have ousted Likhachev. He speaks cordially with Minina, considering it his duty to help his region’s collective-farm chairmen, agrees when she recommends certain agricultural reforms, and commends her for standing up for herself when another official attacks her.

The model leadership of Lukashin, Novozhilov, and especially Minina reveals the potential of the common Russian people; it is this potential, or power, that is the main theme of Abramov’s novel. (One should recall that, in Abramov’s notebooks, Peter the Great is an instrumental figure; his role is to stimulate and create exemplary collective farmers.) It was the residents of the small, poor village of Pekashino and thousands like it in the non-black-earth regions of central and northern Russia who, not only without material incentive, but also without their able-bodied men, who are away at the front, had

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73 Ibid., 51, 54, 165, 200-201, 243.
to feed much of the Soviet home front and military in the painful year of 1942, while the German army occupied much of Ukraine and southern Russia. Brothers and Sisters is a panegyric to the children, elderly, and above all women who, as Abramov told it, rose to the challenge, subordinated personal desires to collective needs, and opened a second front against the Germans long before the Allies landed on the beaches of France. When properly led, these simple, ordinary peasants exemplify the staunchness, selflessness, and collectivism of the Russian national character.

They include the 25-year-old Olena, who is betrothed to a soldier but has an affair with, and is impregnated by, the local blacksmith. She justifies her infidelity by pointing to her age and the possibility that her fiancé may never return, but breaks down upon realizing what she has done. Another is the 35-year-old Anna Priaslina, who must raise her six children alone after her husband dies at the front and, although she does not have enough food for them, let alone for herself, nevertheless toils in the fields for the collective farm. One of Anna’s children, the 12-year-old Lizka, should be playing with dolls, but behaves like an adult and helps her mother around the house and raise her younger siblings. Stepan Andreianovich Stavrov, an old man who is uncommitted to the collective farm when war breaks out, is transformed upon learning that his son has died in battle and donates a large number of his belongings to the collective farm. Trofim Lobanov, a picaresque and stubborn Old Believer and braggart, becomes more serious upon learning that the Germans have taken the Caucasus and are approaching Moscow.

For context on 1942, see Alexander Werth, Russia at War, 1941-1945 (New York: Dutton, 1964), 388-408; and Medvedev, Soviet Agriculture, 221.

For Olena, see Abramov, “Brat’ia i sestry,” 87, 150-51; for Anna, see 76-78, 121-22; and for Lizka, see 125-29, 132-36.
and the Volga. The main male peasant character is Anna Priaslina’s eldest son, the 14-year-old Mishka, who must become a surrogate father to his five younger siblings, and resembles Abramov’s own surrogate father and eldest brother Mikhail.

Abramov presented the peasants’ morality as rooted in traditional rural life and actualized by the Soviet experience, and especially by the war. It echoed an idea expressed in Andrei Zhdanov’s well-known 1946 speech about Soviet culture: “Today [that is, after the war] we are not what we were yesterday, and tomorrow we will not be what we are today. We are no longer the Russians we were before 1917, and Russia is no longer the same, nor is our character. We have changed and grown along with the great transformations that have radically altered the face of our country.” One finds Abramov’s reflection upon the traditional roots of the peasants’ morality in the following passage, written in a voice belonging both to the narrator and to Lukashin, and the only passage either in the novel or in the diary and notebooks that celebrates the traditional village:

And from everything that surrounded him, from the old, moss-covered izba with its smoky walls, which the forest tightly touched up against; from the glistening cows, milked beneath the open sky; from the warm campfire, over which black pots and tea-kettles hung, and next to which bearded old men fussed – from all this breathed a world so primordial that time, it seemed, had not glanced here for centuries. But here, in the forest backwoods, where in the evenings everything living suffered and groaned from mosquitoes, these were the wisest and most time-tested forms of existence.

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76 For Stepan Andreianovich, see ibid., 15, 17, 28, 31, 33-35, 38; and for Trofim Lobanovich, see 37, 62-63, 70-75, 222-26.

77 For Mishka, see ibid., 22, 84, 86, 91, 92-94, 98-102, 112-13, 122-23, 125, 191-93, 203-5, 212-14, 219-21, 235-36, 238.


79 Abramov, “Brat’ia i sestry,” 181.
In a passage about Lukashin’s thoughts on the previous page, however, Abramov made clear that the war had elevated the peasants to new moral heights:

[A]…great and mighty force, unknown until now, moved the people. It, this force, lifted the decrepit old men and women from the stove-benches, compelled the women to exert themselves in the meadow from dawn until dusk. It, this force, made the teenagers men, drowned the hungry cry of the child, and it, this force, led Anfisa into the Party... 

In addition, later in the novel, Novozhilov says to Lukashin: “[S]uch conscience emerged (podnialas’) in the people [during the war], the soul of each person has been laid bare.”

The terms used to describe the manifestation of this “force” or “conscience” – “unknown until now” and “emerged” – limn not a radical departure but an organic development, or the appearance of something that already existed in latent form. The force, or conscience – perhaps not accidentally, the Russian words force and conscience, sila and sovest’, are both feminine, suggesting a close relationship between them – did not emerge spontaneously; it was the Party that had prepared the people for their moral accomplishments. “Can you imagine what would be the case today if over the last twenty years,” Novozhilov asks Lukashin, “we had not developed this very woman into such a diligent worker?”

For Abramov, however, the Party may have unleashed the potential of the Russian national character, but the Party and the Soviet and wartime experience had not created a Russian as new as Zhdanov had proclaimed in his speech, which had helped to introduce the no-conflict theory and the practice of embellishment. In short, Russians still had

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80 Ibid., 180. For another example, see 68.
81 Ibid., 241.
82 Ibid., 201.
shortcomings. As he had written in his notebooks, Abramov argued in *Brothers and Sisters* – in a more moderate tone, to be sure – that Russians remained lamentably cowardly and passive. If he had begun to see himself as a source of Communist truth, he regretted that many of his fellow citizens did not see themselves in the same way or, if they did, were too timid to voice their opinions. When Lukashin arrives in Pekashino, for example, he encounters three peasant women, Marfa, Nastia, and Vasilisa, who criticize Likhachev for insisting they begin the sowing before the land has thawed. Upon learning that Lukashin is a district-committee representative, however, they “with silent consternation exchanged glances with one another,” and Vasilisa cries: “You really shouldn’t judge us! […] We may have said something we shouldn’t have.” What is more, when the collective farmers remove Likhachev, their rebellion occurs literally in the dark: during the war, the lights in the village are out and the peasants, unseen, criticize the status quo because they know they cannot be identified for retribution. “They are rising up only because it’s dark…” Likhachev whispers to Lukashin. “But in the daylight not a soul would make a sound.”

Many of Abramov’s characters are patient to the point of submission. For example, when Novozhilov proclaims that “such conscience emerged in the people,” Lukashin qualifies his praise by citing the peasants’ “tolerance” (*terpimost’*) for a slanderer and selfish collective farmer, Fedor Kapitonovich Klevakin:

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83 Ovechkin and Iashin had also discussed cowardice and passivity but did not connect these traits to Russianness. Troepol’skii, Tendriakov, and Dorosh had not discussed these characteristics. In contrast, Soloukhin shared Abramov’s approach, although Abramov foregrounded the cowardice and passivity of the Russian people more than Soloukhin had. For Soloukhin, see “Vladimirskie proselki,” in *Sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh* (Moscow: Golos, 1995), 1: 17, 56-57, 159, 184.

84 Abramov, “Brat’ia i sestry,” 39.

85 Ibid., 42, 44.
And you know what surprises me. The tolerance of the collective farmers. [...] I would shake his soul out of him [Fedor Kapitonovich]; I would settle the score. Take Stepan Andreianovich... I had a conversation with him about Fedor Kapitonovich. He just brushed it aside. [...] And the others? They seem to shrink away from him; they are afraid to dirty themselves.86

Although Abramov did not include a discussion of material incentive in the novel, he nevertheless made demands of the leadership. First, he wanted the members of the leadership to behave in such a way that would cultivate more personalities. Second, he urged the leadership, however gently, to guarantee the collective farmers, who had suffered so much during and after the war, a better and happy life. Despite her dedication to the war effort, for example, Anfisa Petrovna has her own, personal desires. She wants to fall in love and become a mother, modest wishes, nothing more than “the most simple, the most ordinary female happiness.” She is married in fact, to a man at the front, but it is a loveless and abusive marriage to which she consented only because the man had raped her (she would lose the child) and her mother had insisted that she marry him to redress the sin. After becoming chairman Anfisa Petrovna falls truly in love for the first time, with Lukashin, who notices that this ostensibly stern, industrious woman has another, softer, more tender side. The challenge for Anfisa Petrovna – no less formidable than toiling on the non-black-earth under wartime conditions – is to subordinate personal desire to her social responsibilities. Sometimes she fails: Lukashin visits her in her izba and she forgets entirely about a report she must deliver, the first of her life; and after a fire injures another peasant, Nastia, she and Lukashin spend the evening together and kiss. After both of these episodes she reproaches herself; it is wartime and she feels she must concentrate on the affairs of the collective farm, and by no means should she be

86 Ibid., 242.
enjoying herself while her fellow collective farmers endure hardship after hardship.

After kissing Lukashin she realizes she has forgotten about Nastia – which is to say, she has forgotten about the suffering sown by the war. In Anfisa Petrovna, Abramov poses the question: when is the right time for the Soviet subject to begin thinking about her own personal happiness? The end of the novel intimates that such a time will, and ought to, come once the war has ended; Anfisa Petrovna, who despairs that “she will not have a spring” pages earlier, muses that the future may be joyous after all.87

As Abramov was writing his novel, the writers of the Ovechkin school were turning to literary genres that they believed best presented their ideas about the rural Soviet Union. In the early 1930s, when Socialist Realism was declared the official aesthetic of Soviet socialism, officials did not elaborate upon what they considered to be the best genre for the new Soviet literature. The generic preferences, like the content of Socialist Realism, emerged in practice rather than from theoretical pronouncements.88 The privileged genre became the novel, because its long, closed form captured the Soviet man’s evolution from spontaneity to consciousness. In the late Stalin years, however, the rural novels of Babaevskii, Nikolaeva, Voronin, and others had misrepresented the countryside to such an extent that the new literary imperative was not so much to narrate, as to learn the facts of, rural life.

For this project Ovechkin, Troepol’skii, Tendriakov, and Iashin turned to the short form: the short story, the tale, and especially the sketch. Given the task at hand, a virtue


of the short form was its common association with inconclusiveness. Much was
unknown about the countryside in the post-Stalin Soviet Union; so much, in fact, that the
writer did not have enough data to craft a new definitive narrative. It was not yet time to
write a Virgin Soil Upturned for the new day, even if Sholokhov was himself trying. (In
1952, Sholokhov had begun publishing excerpts from the long-awaited second volume of
Virgin Soil Upturned, which the Ovechkin school and their sympathizers did not receive
favorably). 89 Another merit of the short form was the notion that writers who took a
sober look at Soviet reality tended to write shorter works. 90

Compared to the short story and tale, the sketch proved particularly well suited to
the empirical imperative because of its close association with non-fiction and its
consequent claim to presenting an unfiltered picture of reality. Second, it was
conventional for the temporal frame of the sketch to be a single day, which facilitated
attention to detail and allowed the sketch to compensate for the shortcomings of another
diurnal form that aimed primarily to inform, the Soviet newspaper. 91 Finally, because it
was ostensibly about “a concrete event,” the sketch allowed its author to be more critical
than he or she might be able to be in a genre of more universal pretension. 92

89 See, for example, Ovechkin, “Vsesoiuznoe soveshchanie literatorov, pishushchikh na kolkhoznii temy: Novoe v kolkhoznoi derevne i zadachi khudozhestvennoi literatury,” 3.


literatury); and Hans Elveson, The Rural Ocherk in Russian Literature after the Second World War (Goteborg: Institutum Slavicum Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1975), 7, 12, 14, 22, 32, 122-23.

92 This is the implication of discussion of the sketch in “Problemy sovremennoi literaturnoi kritiki,” Literaturnaia gazeta, April 18, 1957, 1-3 (2).
After 1953, and especially after the Twentieth Party Congress, the writers of the Ovechkin school also began to exploit another genre, the personal diary. As they conceptualized it, the diary was a text kept privately by exemplary rural functionaries and officials in which they recorded thoughts more personal than those revealed in other textual or non-textual forums. The personal nature of the diary – and its assumed truthfulness – was crucial given that these writers had concluded that the primary cause of low agricultural productivity was local leaders who suppressed criticism and created a climate of fear. The writers of the Ovechkin school also presented the diary as something they kept themselves, which did not simply document the length of their stay in the countryside, but related ideas more intimate than those shared in other genres. Accordingly, they suggested that fear of self-expression afflicted not only rural residents, but also writers. For both themselves and rural leaders, they argued, the diary was not to remain a private text; they communicated that it should be shared publicly, even published, in order to introduce one’s most intimate thoughts into public discourse and, in so doing, urge others to disregard or combat their fear of self-expression. Some writers also saw the diary as insurance against slander; if one recorded all of one’s thoughts and activities, the idea went, one could present the text to a procurator as evidence of one’s innocence.

The diary shared and built upon the sketch’s formal advantages as well. Like the sketch, the diary is open-ended, but in the sense that it concludes only with the death of the diarist or his choice to end the diary – not much of an ending because he can always change his mind.93 As the sketch tends to be, the diary is necessarily written in a diurnal

93 For the diary’s lack of a conclusion, see Rosenwald, Emerson and the Art of the Diary, 8n9.
temporality. More so than the sketch, the diurnality of the diary mimics that of the newspaper, as it is after all a diurnal digest of events.\(^94\) Better than the sketch, the diary communicated that its object of study was something of an unknown, even something foreign, for most of the diaries published in the immediate post-Stalin years were foreign travelogues: Konstantin Simonov’s *Norwegian Diary* (1956), Boris Polevoi’s *American Diaries* (1957), and Semen Babaevskii’s *The Branches of an Old Stick: From My Chinese Diaries* (1957), among many others.\(^95\) There was thus a consensus that a day-to-day “non-fictional” account was the most effective means of informing readers about unfamiliar places.

In several of the sketches of the period, one finds mention of, and text from, a number of diaries that capture these ideas. In “In the Same District,” the third installment of Ovechkin’s *District Routine*, which appeared in *Novyi mir* in March 1954, Communists gather at the House of Culture for a meeting of district Party activists, during which a number of mindless speeches are given. After a series of speeches threaten to render the meeting useless, the collective-farm chairman Dem’ian Openkin takes the stage, removes a notebook from his coat pocket, and explains: “‘This here does not contain theses, comrades’ […] ‘This is the diary of a collective-farm chairman. That

\(^{94}\) For the diurnal similarity between sketch and diary, see Hans Elveson, “The Rural Ocherk in Russian Literature after the Second World War,” 12.

is, it is my personal diary. I make entries in it every day – about where I was, what I did. If they ever heave me before the procurator for the breakdown of work – this is my acquittal. The procurator will read it, will understand and sympathize.” Openkin suggests that he began keeping the diary for fear he might be arrested; but he also relates that its entries are not definitive, conclusive statements – “This here does not contain theses” – and that the diary facilitates an attention to detail – “I make entries in it every day – about where I was, what I did.”

The use to which Openkin puts his diary during the meeting renders it even more meaningful. The entry that he reads is one he made while listening to the earlier speeches. It recounts various meetings that he attended over the previous two weeks and names others that he must attend before the end of the month, and laments that they not only leave him no time to work on his collective farm, but also are closed to the common people. In the middle of the entry, Openkin begins to address the meeting attendees. Seamlessly, the entry becomes a speech, suggesting that the latter should be modeled on the former; only something as personal as a journal entry, Ovechkin suggested, would inspire the people. When Openkin finishes his speech, the audience applauds, and some ten people are inspired to take the floor to echo his remarks. Earlier in the sketch, Martynov asserts that a Party activist in his capacity as an orator is a writer, “an engineer of human souls.” Thus, in his description of the reception of Openkin’s speech, Ovechkin not only communicated the power of the personal and the literary forms in which it was expressed, but also intimated that a diary was true literature.96

In “A Difficult Spring,” the fifth and final installment of District Routine, which appeared in Novyi mir in 1956, the Machine Tractor Station (MTS) director Khristofor Dolgushin keeps a diary, too, to better understand his bailiwick. At a meeting in his office with regional-committee representatives, he removes several thick notebooks from his desk drawer and says: “We at the MTS do not often see secretaries of the regional committee. I would have a lot to tell you. These are my diaries. From my first day I began to record everything that I saw, learned, and thought.” The comment suggests not only why Dolgushin chose to keep a diary, but also that the diary contains some of his most important thoughts, and which he has not had the opportunity to share with the regional committee.\textsuperscript{97}

It was no accident that Tvardovskii, the editor of Novyi mir, placed the first installment of Ovechkin’s District Routine in a section of the journal called “The Diary of a Writer.” In his own diary in October 1954, Tvardovskii posited that to write about the collective farm, one needed to live in the countryside for the course of a year, and to keep something like a “diary” (the quotation marks are his own) and record one’s impressions every day.\textsuperscript{98} At least two writers to some extent realized Tvardovskii’s wish. Between 1956 and 1958, Dorosh published three installments of A Village Diary. A day-to-day account of Dorosh’s stay in a village in the central Russian district of Rostov Velikii, A Village Diary is not an actual diary but rather simulates the genre. Dorosh does not date his “entries,” but does include section breaks and spaces to separate one day or one passage (for some days, he records more than one passage), respectively, from another.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 250.

\textsuperscript{98} Tvardovskii, “Iz rabochikh tetradei (1953-1960),” 144 (October 8, 1954).
He writes in the present tense, does not create a plot, and does not include dialogue, focusing the text instead around his own thoughts. Soloukhin in some measure realized Tvardovskii’s wish as well. In his *Vladimir Country Roads*, the account of the trip he took through his native Vladimir province in the summer of 1956, Soloukhin also exploited the diaristic form. In the account, published in late 1957, Soloukhin wrote in the first person and divided his narrative into separate days, titling them “Day 1,” “Day 2,” “Day 3,” and so on.

Contemporaries noticed that Dorosh’s and Soloukhin’s works resembled diaries and thus captured the most intimate thoughts of their authors and the details of rural life. In his own diary in 1961, Iashin wrote: “It is interesting that recently noticeable successes in prose have occurred by complying with authenticity, in documentariness. These are almost diaries without specially invented literary plots.” Among the successes, Iashin noted, was Soloukhin’s *Vladimir Country Roads*. “These works win one over with their authorial directness (*neposredstvennost’*),” Iashin continued, “with their desire to speak confidentially to the reader about everything as though to one’s closest friend, and their conviction that everything that is one’s own, and that is personal and frank, cannot be uninteresting to others.”

In an article in *Novyi mir* in 1966, the literary critic Vladimir Lakshin argued that the diary had become more important genre among rural writers during the Thaw. According to Lakshin, Dorosh, for example, had embraced the diaristic

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99 *Vladimir Country Roads* may more accurately be called a travelogue, which has the same relationship to time and space as a diary.

100 Some of the days are grouped together, for example, “Day 6, 7, 8, and 9,” “Days 17-22,” and “Days 27-30.” Soloukhin published two additional works in these years loosely modeled on the diary. See Soloukhin, “Kaplia rosy,” in *Sobranie sochinenii v desiati tomakh* 2: 255-460; and Soloukhin, “‘TERNOVNIK (OSENIII DNEVNIIK),’” *Nash sovremennik* 5 (1959): 160-90.

form because it brought the reader, long subjected to embellished rural prose, closer to unadulterated rural reality, and offered him more independence in coming to conclusions about the countryside because of its spontaneity and shapelessness. “The spirit of free and unprejudiced juxtaposition of facts,” Lakshin wrote, “without the ‘incorporation’ (nataskivaniia) beforehand of definite conclusions, should make an impression on the reader, who loves to make sense of life by himself and has no patience for hints.”

Soviet writers who wrote about urban life presented ideas about the diary similar to those of the Ovechkin school. Tvardovskii once said that Vladimir Pomerantsev’s “On Sincerity in Literature” (one of the most important texts of the Thaw, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter) was comprised of entries from Pomerantsev’s diary. Tvardovskii added that he intended to make the section of the journal in which “On Sincerity in Literature” appeared, “The Diary of a Writer,” which he called a forum for “free expression,” a regular feature of each issue. His deputy, Aleksandr Dement’ev, once mentioned too that Novyi mir wanted to allot more space to “The Diary of a Writer.” Other writers reflected upon the virtues of day-to-day narratives. In Iosif Gorelik’s 1956 short story “A True Position,” one of the main characters thinks to himself: “If one were to record, day after day, everything that was said on this or that side of the telephone cord, and only record, not add a single word, what an amazing work


104 This occurred at a May 26, 1954 meeting of the Writers’ Union secretariat. See Stenogramma zasedaniia, Tentr. Arkh. SSP SSSR, op. 28 n/kh., d. 16, cited in ibid., 421.
would emerge from one’s pen!”

In Nina Ivanter’s 1959 novella “It’s August Again,” one character says to another: “[I]magine for yourself if you suddenly found some kind of notes of a participant in the war of 1812. Any writer would jump through the roof! But after all what people remember right now will also be very important sometime. So go ahead and record it. Every day. You know, like Zola, who engraved above his fireplace: ‘Not a day without a line.’ But what if – not a day without a page?”

Abramov came to privilege the diaristic form somewhat later than some of the other writers of the Ovechkin school, even if he kept his own diary. In a passage in his diary about Marietta Shaginian’s *The Diary of a Writer, 1950-1952*, an urban as well as rural journal published in 1953, he derided the significance of the genre. A representative of the Russian avant garde who began penning Socialist Realism under Stalin, Shaginian was a veteran writer of both sketches and diaries, and conceived of *The Diary of a Writer* as a primer for beginning sketch writers. In the introductory “Note to Readers,” she instructed beginning sketch writers to learn above all to see the facts of the world as the Party did, and thus to distinguish “the fundamental and leading features [of life] from the chance and ephemeral.” A way to succeed at this enterprise was to keep a diary, she explained, a model for which she offered her own. *The Diary of a Writer* includes

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sections of Shaginian’s diary from the previous three years: a portion from November 1950, which she spent in Armenia; from August 1951, when she visited Estonia; and from December 1951 to July 1952, which she spent at home in Moscow. In these excerpts, Shaginian described her daily activities, most of which relate to her work on her sketches. As presented in the diary, Shaginian is incredibly active, visiting parks, theaters, museums, universities, newspapers, mines, factories, logging enterprises, and collective farms – nearly any kind of institution that existed in the Soviet Union. The facts she compiles, taken from the newspaper and derived from her own observations, limn a Soviet Union moving headlong toward Communist utopia. Almost all of them are symptoms of progress; everywhere she looks, Shaginian sees larger harvests, increased mechanization, urbanized district centers, higher levels of culture, and the reconstruction of cities destroyed during the war.108

In February 1954, Novyi mir published a review of The Diary of a Writer.109 At twenty-five pages, it was unusually long for a review in the journal, testifying to the importance of Shaginian’s diary and the genres of the sketch and diary to the review’s author, the literary critic Mikhail Lifshits, and to Novyi mir’s editors.110 The Diary of a Writer, however, did not embody Lifshits and Novyi mir’s principles; accordingly, the review of the diary was unfavorable. Lifshits in effect argued that Shaginian’s diary demonstrated her disregard for the empirical imperative, which he applied to both rural

110 Between Stalin’s death in March 1953 and February 1954, Lifshits’s “Dnevnik Marietty Shaginian” was only the second review of a single title published in Novyi mir’s “Literaturnaia kritika” section. The other, V. Pankov’s “Roman F. Panferova ‘Volga-matushka reka,’” which appeared the previous month, was only ten pages long. See Novyi mir 1 (1954): 247-57. Another book review section, “Knizhno-zhurnal’noe obozrenie,” featured much shorter reviews.
and urban life. At the root of the problem, he explained, was the hasty, feverish pace at which Shaginian worked. At every stage of the creative process, she skipped a step, to the extent that she even acknowledged its existence. She failed to conduct preliminary research before going on location. She failed to seek the detailed guidance of experts. She failed to turn to easily accessible textual sources to verify ideas about subjects about which she knew nothing. And she failed to give herself enough time to think. All of this, Lifshits maintained, reflected a larger problem in Soviet society that he called “the Oblomov phenomenon turned inside out,” a reference to the lethargic hero of the nineteenth-century writer Ivan Goncharov’s novel of the same name. What handicapped the Soviet Union was not Oblomov’s lassitude, but Shaginian’s impetuosity and elation; and more generally, writers who knew nothing about technology or economics, for example, but who confidently proposed solutions to technological and economic problems. Such an approach led them to misrepresent and embellish reality.\footnote{Lifshits, “Dnevnik Marietty Shaginian,” 206-31.}

In his diary in April 1954, Abramov expressed his agreement with Lifshits’s opinion of Shaginian’s diary. Indeed, Abramov’s own “People of the Kolkhoz Village in Postwar Prose” dovetailed with Lifshits’s review, as the former criticized the authors of postwar rural prose for embellishing reality and presenting characters who, like Shaginian, easily overcame any obstacle they encountered.\footnote{Abramov, “Liudi kolkhoznoi derevni v poslevoennoi proze.”} Abramov, however, noted that Aleksandr Dement’ev, Novyi mir’s criticism editor and a colleague in the Department of Soviet Literature at Leningrad State, had allotted too much space in the journal to a review of a subject as inconsequential as a diary. “I am surprised by
Dement’ev,” he wrote. “How could he publish this article? Why? Why devote a whole three printer’s sheets to some sort of diary? They have found a problematic question! […] In actual fact, that old sinner should have been torn apart in 1.5-2 pages – that’s all.”

Further evidence of Abramov’s disregard for the diaristic form was that, while Ovechkin, Dorosh, and Soloukhin were experimenting with the genre, he was working in the more traditional form of the novel. For a Soviet novel, however, Abramov’s novel is structured unconventionally, reflecting the heightened importance of short fiction in the mid- and late 1950s as well as one potential feature of the diaristic form, plotlessness. *Brothers and Sisters* does not make smooth transitions, but rather jumps from the trials of one character to those of another; the two-hundred-and-fifty-page novel consists of 47 chapters, most of which are unconnected to the chapters that immediately precede or follow. In a May 22, 1958 letter to Boris Zaks, an editor at *Novyi mir*, to which he had submitted his manuscript, Abramov explained that he had intended each chapter to be a separate short story. In the novel itself, he cast the form as that of a chronicle. In the prologue, the narrator writes of having stumbled upon an old wooden table in the fields while visiting his native village in the early 1950s. The wooden table, he explains, bore the inscriptions of generations of men who had rested on its benches during the fall haymaking season. Crosses, triangles, and squares spoke of a bygone era, while initials, full names, and five-pointed stars reflected recent times. The narrator recalls a name with “1942” engraved alongside it, the inscription having evoked memories of that painful

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114 RGALI, f. 1702, op. 8, d. 174, l. 72.
year, and having realized that the “wooden chronicle” did not bear the initials or names of the women who, during the war, had replaced the men on the collective farm. It was his responsibility to tell their story, he concluded – in effect, to continue the chronicle but in the form of a novel, or put differently, to bend a novel to the form of a chronicle.115

Reviewers remarked on the structure of the novel, and not always favorably. On May 7, 1958, Zaks wrote to Abramov to share his opinion. “In general, the work gives a good impression (especially if one takes into account that this is the first work of prose by a literary critic),” Zaks explained. “The color of the northern village and interesting people are well presented. And nevertheless I have found that the author should continue to work on the manuscript.” Zaks cited several shortcomings – among them, the novel’s “abruptness, patchiness of form.” The chapters, he wrote, were too short, ended inopportunistly, and did not connect to those that preceded or followed. “[A]s a result the work begins to break up into scenes from the village of Pekashino [the setting], to depart from the form of a novel, to lose wholeness.”116 On May 27, Zaks replied to Abramov’s letter of May 22, in which Abramov had written that he had structured each chapter as a completed short story. Zaks advised that it was fine to structure his chapters this way, but that the chapters must be “both complete and incomplete simultaneously. Excessive completeness, the isolation of one chapter from another is what creates the sense of a ditch, a hole, a jump. It is from here that emerges what I called the absence of joints.”117

115 Abramov, “Brat’ia i sestry,” 7-9. In the Slovar’ sovremennogo russkogo literaturnogo iazyka (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1957), 6: 194, chronicle, or letopis’, is defined as follows: “The regular recording of some kind of events; the history of something.” As Abramov presents the term chronicle in his prologue, it is a “regular recording” not of events but of names, and without an explicit plot.

116 RGALI, f. 1702, op. 8, d. 174, l. 82. Emphasis in the original.

117 RGALI, f. 1702, op. 8, d. 174, l. 70.
In *Leningradskaiia pravda* in October 1958, after the novel’s appearance in *Neva*, Arkadii El’iashevich commented upon the “weakness of its plot,” which he found surprising given that its author had clearly been influenced by Sholokhov.\(^\text{118}\) In *Znamia* in December 1959, however, El’iashevich changed his mind, explaining that the novel was “more exactly a series of separate pictures or scenes than a harmonious narrative, but in this form the novel convinces the reader of its fidelity to the truth of life.”\(^\text{119}\) Others embraced the form from the outset. In *Druzhba narodov* in January 1959, Mikhail Alekseev wrote favorably that *Brothers and Sisters* was not a novel but a “chronicle,” or a “series of sketches, outwardly little connected to one another.”\(^\text{120}\) In an April 1959 letter of recommendation for Abramov’s application to join the Union of Soviet Writers, A. Grin praised Abramov for not inventing a plot, but rather for allowing a plot to emerge organically from his own observations.\(^\text{121}\) In *Literaturnaia gazeta* in August 1959, V. Litvinov observed sympathetically that the novel did not have “a plot in the conventional sense.”\(^\text{122}\)

While working on his novel, however, Abramov was changing his mind about the significance of diaries and their importance relative to novels and short fiction. Over the course of the mid- and late 1950s, he began to consider the diary exceptional in its ability to examine not only the Soviet village, but also the Soviet city, the implication being that

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\(^\text{121}\) RGALI, f. 631, op. 39, d. 47, l. 50.

the city had also been misrepresented in Soviet literature, and to give voice to his own
truths. “For more than two months I have not picked up my ‘diaristic’ pen,” he wrote in
September 1957. “And I should have. No newspapers, no books can establish a true
picture of the time that has passed. In diary entries there is a freshness of feeling, an
attention to those facts that occupied you and your contemporaries.”¹²³ “Literature in our
time has moved from [literary journals] to diaries,” he noted in October 1957 of the
external pressures that shaped and damaged published literature. “Later they will study
our epoch using diaries.”¹²⁴

One might question the diary and notebooks’ social significance, as they were not
published under Khrushchev (or, for that matter, under Brezhnev or Gorbachev) and thus
could not have directly contributed to the creation of the Communist utopia. Nor could
they have been published, at least in their complete, unadulterated form, because of the
degree to which they departed from – and, as will become clear in later chapters –
explicitly challenged the vision and opinions of the Central Committee. Yet the notion
that one’s personal diary could become literature captures a feature of the Thaw-era
behavioral imperative: optimism that change was not far off and thus that, at some point
in the future, one would be able to place one’s personal diary and its contents in the
public realm.

¹²³ DFA, 66 (September 24, 1957). Emphasis mine.
¹²⁴ Ibid., 97 (October 5, 1957).
Chapter 3

The Agents of De-Stalinization:
The Role of Personality after the Cults of Personality

If post-Stalin Soviet writers rejected the no-conflict theory and scrupulously perused Soviet rural life for mistakes and shortcomings, what they discovered was a grave shortage of brave and independent people. Put another way, in their effort to overcome one harmful theory the writers discovered a second one, the theory of the cult of personality, according to which a limited number of “historical personalities” shaped history, marginalizing the common people and sapping them of their courage and independence.¹ Before the Twentieth Party Congress in February 1956, when Khrushchev delivered his so-called secret speech about Stalin’s cult of personality, no one included Stalin among the personalities who had their own cults and feigned to propel the Soviet Union toward Communist utopia. After the congress, the former vozhd’ became the object of their analysis as well. The task of Soviet writers was to make the damaging impact of the cults of personality known to the population, work to transform cowardly and passive subjects into courageous and independent citizens, and demonstrate that ordinary men and women – not superhuman leaders – were the true engines of historical progress, both in the Soviet village and in the Soviet city.

The Soviet leadership, for its part, may have begun denouncing the cult of personality, but for many Soviet writers the leadership was not doing enough to cultivate personality among ordinary men and women. On March 20, 1954, Abramov wrote in his

¹ See, for example, B. Riurikov, “O bogatstve iskusstva,” Literaturnaia gazeta, February 20, 1954, 3-4.
diary: “When you constantly read about the exposure of the cult of personality, you begin to lose respect for the personality in general. Why in our country do they not heighten the significance of personality? Why do they not fight for the development of individuality? It is time to speak seriously about this.” Abramov was suggesting that, in attacking the cult of personality, the leadership was forgetting about personality itself.

This chapter reveals that a variety of discourses of personality can be found in the published literature of the immediate post-Stalin years. The chapter is primarily concerned with the central place of one of these discourses in Abramov’s passages about urban life, many of which he made because he hoped to write his second novel about the intelligentsia, as well as in his passages about the leadership after the Twentieth Party Congress. The personality ideal found in these passages is nearly identical to that found in *Brothers and Sisters*, indicating that Abramov’s fictional heroes and heroines were models to be emulated by urban as well as rural residents.

One might contend that, because he harnessed his diary to his dream of becoming a writer in the Socialist Realist mold, the attention Abramov paid to personality in his entries is unremarkable. Personality, or put differently, an individual’s evolution from spontaneity to consciousness, was after all the “master narrative” of the Socialist Realist novel. One should not read the diary, however, only as Abramov’s notes for novels or short stories; it was also evidence of how a Soviet citizen saw the world in which he lived. The diary was at once a creator of Socialist Realism and its creation, for an objective of Socialist Realism was to teach writers and readers how to see their

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2 DFA, 26-27 (March 20, 1954).
surroundings. The diary thus captures the degree to which a particular understanding of personality shaped a Soviet citizen’s view of the post-Stalin Soviet Union.

Soviet discourse stipulated that the Soviet people were to influence one another’s view of the world and behavior at and across every level of society. Pioneers were to set an example for children; Komsomol members, for teenagers and students; and Party members, for their non-Communist colleagues. Parents and grandparents were to raise their children and grandchildren to become good Soviet citizens; teachers were to help bring up the younger generation as well. Instructions as to how to see and conduct oneself in the world were to saturate the entire Soviet space. There were the ubiquitous statues of Lenin and Stalin; and, when Lenin and Stalin were not visible, there were the Soviet people themselves, who were to provide examples for one another on the street, in museums, in cafes – in a word, everywhere they went. Soviet writers, the engineers of human souls, whose books everyone was to read, cast perhaps the widest didactic net. It extended even to one’s desk or couch in one’s room or apartment, where one averted one’s eyes from the outside world and fixed them on the printed page, only to receive another lesson in thought and behavior.

Various models of thought and behavior existed over the course of Soviet history and, during most periods, competing models coexisted. During the immediate post-Stalin years, at least four models competed for the attention of Soviet citizens, each of which included features of the 1930s ideal such as kul’turnost’, optimism, and professional competence. Yet these four models also departed from the 1930s and other Stalin-era

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models. One post-Stalin ideal was centered around the principle of sincere thought and action, and was first articulated by the poet Ol'ga Berggol’ts in her essay, “A Conversation about Lyricism,” which appeared in Literaturnaia gazeta in April 1953, and later and more provocatively by Vladimir Pomerantsev in his essay, “On Sincerity in Literature,” published in Novyi mir in December 1953. In an appeal to Soviet poets, Berggol’ts pointed to a regrettable “impersonality” in their work, or their substitution of “genuine feelings and passions for their ersatzes and surrogates.” She urged Soviet poets to champion “sincerity” and “self-expression,” to reveal their “individual relationship to an event, to a landscape,” their “individual character,” and “own relationship to life.” In “On Sincerity in Literature,” Pomerantsev made a similar, but more forceful plea to the entire literary establishment. He urged literary figures to be aggressive, even hostile, in taking on insincere comrades. In a dialogue between him and a hack novelist in the essay, Pomerantsev speaks sharply and unapologetically, to which the novelist responds: “Wait, wait, you are really being a bit too forceful”; “What do you really want!”; and “Well, this has already crossed the line! Let’s assume that my book is not so good, but your tone is still ten times worse.”

Berggol’ts and Pomerantsev advocated a circumscribed notion of sincerity, one that by no means intended to enable the interrogation of pillars of the Soviet project such as single-party rule, state ownership, or the absence of markets, or principles of Socialist Realism such as partiinost’, ideinost’, or narodnost’. Instead, for these two writers, to be

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sincere meant to overcome passivity, cowardice, careerism, or whatever else may have been keeping their colleagues from expressing their true opinions, the assumption being that all of them were Soviet citizens or Communists at heart and longed to create the Communist utopia. To be sure, the Soviet leadership had been calling for sincerity since the early 1930s; but under Stalin to be sincere, or true to oneself, was to be true to the Party, to work to assimilate and become genuinely devoted to the Party’s position. In the postwar years, however, the Soviet leadership had discredited itself, and the source of truth shifted from the Central Committee to rank-and-file Communists and ordinary citizens. According to the logic – but not the letter – of Berggol’ts’s and Pomerantsev’s essays, rank-and-file Communists and ordinary citizens had no intention of upending the Soviet political system, but had the epistemological right to challenge its leaders, including the Central Committee.

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7 Frankel’s incorrect interpretation of sincerity has contributed to a problematic explanation for its emergence. Defining sincerity as a challenge to the Party spirit, she has looked for its roots outside of Soviet discourse, finding them in the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia, which held that “the creative artist owed his ultimate loyalty to his own vision of the truth, that he belong to his own sub-group which has its own rules different from and even superior to those of the state.” See Frankel, *Novy mir*, 1-2. For a similar discussion, see Dina Spechler, *Permitted Dissent in the USSR: Novy mir and the Soviet Regime* (New York: Praeger, 1982), xv. More recently, Vladislav Zubok, while defining sincerity correctly, has made the same argument about the inspirational force of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia. See Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 10, 20-21, 26. For her part, Elena Zubkova has argued that Soviet intellectuals embraced the intelligentsia tradition because of their experience in the Second World War, which “demanded a special type of personnel, people of high professional qualities capable of bold initiatives” and “independent thought.” See Zubkova, *Russia after the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945-1957* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), 12, 15-19, 88-89, 96, 146, 156-59.

What all of these interpretations ignore is the inspirational role of Soviet socialism and its ideas of criticism and self-criticism or, put differently, the power of Soviet ideology to regenerate the utopian project. This is not to deny that these writers embraced the nineteenth-century intelligentsia, or even saw themselves as contemporary incarnations of legendary figures such as Vissarion Belinskii, Nikolai Dobroliubov, or Nikolai Chernyshevskii. To model themselves after Belinskii or the other intelligenty,
Beginning in January 1954, Berggol’ts and especially Pomerantsev, as well as other writers who wrote on sincerity, were attacked in the Soviet press and at meetings in Moscow and Leningrad. On July 23, 1954, Pomerantsev’s article, as well as three others that had appeared in Novyi mir in 1954, were condemned in a Central Committee resolution, “On the Mistakes of the Editorial Board of the Journal Novyi mir.” On August 11, the Writers’ Union presidium passed its own resolution, a “detailed” version of its Central Committee counterpart, which censured the four articles for their “incorrect

however, was not to fashion themselves without recourse to Soviet discourse, for Soviet discourse had appropriated and redefined the nineteenth-century intelligentsia for its own purposes. As far as Zubkova’s argument about the role of the war is concerned, it is problematic on several counts: it overlooks the Soviet imperative of criticism and self-criticism, and the need to take the initiative to survive not only during the war, but also during the material deprivation of the prewar years. What is more, it is based almost exclusively on memoirs, the problematic nature of which Zubkova touches upon herself. See Zubkova, Russia after the War, 11-19. The few contemporaneous sources she uses, “letters from the front [and] diaries,” do not substantiate her claims.


9 For mention of the Central Committee resolution, see E. S. Afanas’eva et al., eds., Apparat TsK KPSS i Kul’tura, 1953-1957 (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2001), 284, 292.
and harmful tendencies." The Party’s assault on Pomerantsev was a curtailment of excess; it was not a wholesale rejection of the theme of his article. Evidence of the durability of his and Berggol’ts’s plea was that sympathetic works appeared during the height of and after the consummation of the campaign against Pomerantsev. Notable in this regard was Il’ia Erenburg’s novella *The Thaw*, published in *Znamia* in May 1954, in which Erenburg told the story of residents of a provincial Russian town who unfreeze, as it were, and become increasingly true to themselves. More provocative was Vladimir

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10 For the passage of the Writers’ Union resolution, see “V prezidiume Sovuza pisatelia,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, August 12, 1954, 1. For the resolution itself, see “Ob oshibakh zhurnala ‘Novyi mir’: Rezoliutsia prezidiuma pravleniia Sovuza sovetskikh pisatelei,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, August 17, 1954, 3. For an account of the Writers’ Union presidium meeting at which the resolution was passed, see “Za vysoikiu ideinost’ nashei literatury!” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, August 17, 1954, 3. See also Frankel, *Novy mir*, 63, 66-69.

The launch of the campaign against Pomerantsev corresponded to the loss of influence of Georgii Malenkov, chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, and the rise of the more conservative Nikita Khrushchev, the first secretary of the Party. Pomerantsev’s article may have met a similar fate, however, had Malenkov remained in a position of superiority, for it was more provocative than the preceding pieces. Frankel, *Novy mir*, 63-68; and, as cited by Frankel on 171n55, Robert Conquest, *Power and Policy in the USSR: The Struggle for Stalin’s Succession, 1945-1960* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 247.

Dina Spechler argues that the literary establishment saw Pomerantsev’s and the other *Novyi mir* article as a threat to its role and status, and condemned them for this reason. Spechler concedes, however, that political officials had more authority than their cultural counterparts. See Spechler, *Permitted Dissent in the USSR*, 24-30. For another discussion of the political context, see William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 263-64. For evidence of the Central Committee’s mobilization against Pomerantsev in February, see Afanas’eva, *Apparat TsK KPSS i Kul’tura*, 200-201, and for the literary establishment’s mobilization in March, see 206-10.


Dudintsev’s novel Not by Bread Alone, which was serialized in Novyi mir in August, September, and October 1956, and in which Dudintsev presented Soviet institutions staffed from top to bottom by corrupt, unsavory bureaucrats, and a courageous engineer who, with the help of small formal and informal collectives, overcomes them and builds a new pipe-casting machine for the state.13

A second model also called for sincerity, but stipulated that it would reveal fewer problems than had the model presented by Erenburg and Dudintsev, and thus gave more legitimacy to the Central Committee. The works of Ovechkin, Troepol’skii, and Tendriakov discussed in the previous chapter fall in this category. So too, for example, does Iosif Gorelik’s 1956 short story “A Definite Position.” The setting of, and supporting characters in, Gorelik’s short story evidence a fine state of affairs in the Soviet Union; the factory in which the story takes place is relatively productive and the secretary of the factory Party committee, for example, is an exemplary Communist. The only

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conflict is between the factory director and the head technologist; the latter, who has “a
definite position” that he refuses to forsake, challenges the former on various occasions.
The director considers promoting – importantly for this model, not firing or demoting –
the technologist to make his own life easier, but at the last minute changes his mind.¹⁴

The Soviet writers who fall in the first and second categories did not present any
particular class or nation as more capable of sincerity or other virtues than another. Other
writers, however, combined the second model’s brand of sincerity with the notion that, if
not all, then many of the virtues of the Soviet people were a function of the Russian
national character. This model combined discourses of the post-Stalin Thaw and wartime
and postwar russocentrism, and was especially attractive to writers of rural origin, who
were insecure upon entering an urban intellectual milieu, a feeling exacerbated by their
high levels of education and the increasing Westernization of urban aesthetic and material
culture.¹⁵ The model’s russocentrism was reinforced in December 1957, when the Soviet
leadership founded the RSFSR Writers’ Union and its periodical Literatura i zhizn’.¹⁶

The model’s creators included Efim Dorosh and Vladimir Soloukhin. As the previous
chapter argued, in his Village Diary Dorosh presented the Russian peasant as energetic,
innovative, and independent; old Russian dialects as spurring an individual to action;
Russian church architecture as humane and optimistic; and the architecture of traditional


¹⁵ This combines the insights of Yitzhak Brudny, Reinventing Russia: The Soviet State and Russian
Nationalism, 1953-1991 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 33-39; and David
Brandenberger, National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian

¹⁶ Nikolai Mitrokhin, Russkaia partiia: dvizhenie russkich natsionalistov v SSSR, 1953-1985
(Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2003), 149; Spechler, Permitted Dissent in the USSR, 92; and Swayze,
Political Control of Literature in the USSR, 1946-1959, 199.
Russian homes as helping Soviet citizens respect the work of their ancestors and cultivate in themselves a sense of beauty, which would inform their own work. The model, however, did not idealize the Russian national character. In *Vladimir Country Roads*, for example, Soloukhin remarked on several occasions on the Russian peasantry’s passivity and cowardice.

The fourth and final model urged Soviet citizens to be sincere, too, but instructed them to see the working class and above all exceptional historical personalities such as Stalin as the positive forces in Soviet life, and the intelligentsia and Jews as the bearers of shortcomings with whom they must battle. The adherents of this model were not concerned primarily with the welfare of the Soviet or Russian people; of ultimate importance to them was the strength of the Soviet/Russian state, which the ideas and conduct of the intelligentsia and Jews ostensibly endangered. Vsevolod Kochetov was their standard bearer, and their primary texts, Kochetov’s 1954 novel *Youth is with Us* and 1958 *The Brothers Ershov*. Kochetov and likeminded writers were born in villages or small towns, and forged by the etatism of Stalinism and older traditions of Russian

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anti-Semitism deepened by the tensions of the Second World War and the postwar anti-cosmopolitan campaign.  

Abramov’s diary reveals the degree to which he assimilated the idea that personal behavior could transform the Soviet Union and create a Communist utopia. One of his primary concerns was to learn about his fellow citizens, measure them against his standard of thought and behavior, and thus evaluate their contribution to building Communism. In his mind the overwhelming majority of them were moral failures. His particular personality model combined anti-Semitism, suspicion of the intelligentsia, and celebration of the Russian people with the first model’s ideal of sincerity. It is something of a hybrid of models one, three, and four – without the latter’s etatism and emphasis on the historical role of outsized personalities – which is not surprising given that he came from rural and small-town Russia, too. One might speculate that the personal papers of many of the writers who belong to the third category shared Abramov’s definition of sincerity and negative opinion of Jews and the intelligentsia, which would place him squarely among their number.

The individuals about whom Abramov wrote come from a wide cross-section of Soviet life. Because he worked as a university instructor and began his diary in part to study the university milieu, most of them are his colleagues and students; but they also include ordinary Leningraders whom he passed on the street or encountered in other public spaces. Seemingly everywhere he went, he evaluated his fellow citizens, whether he was at a sporting event, taking public transportation, or at a café. In September 1955, for example, he wrote of having attended a soccer match between the Leningrad Zenith and the Indian national team, which the Zenith won, 8-0. Abramov had been “stunned [at the game] by the goodness of the Russian people,” some of whom desperately wanted India to score but a single goal, while others even rooted for India to win. “And this was not condescension,” he wrote, “which could be the case in another country; no, this was boundless Russian goodness and Russian love.” After the game, however, he spied another side of the Russian people. On the tram on his way home, a man decided to block the door just for fun. The crowded passengers began screaming, but the man remained in front of the door, continuing to amuse himself. Later, three men began cursing in front of a woman and her child, while the other passengers stood there, reluctant to intervene. “Yes, this is our people with respect to foreigners and with respect to their own,” Abramov noted in his diary, comparing the people’s behavior at the game to their behavior on the tram. “I’m convinced that at the stadium these three bastards were screaming: Go, Dzharavkharlal, go!”

21 DFA, 20-1 (September 23, 1955). For another example, see 54 (October 16, 1955).
Making the Soviet people care about one another was the responsibility of various institutions and, among them, the Soviet university. As an instructor in the Department of Soviet Literature at Leningrad State, Abramov was responsible of course for teaching his students Soviet literature and for preparing them for careers as teachers or literary scholars. He was extremely critical of those of his students who failed to meet his academic expectations; he drubbed them for having bad taste in literature, making scores of punctuation and orthographical errors in their written work, and being unable to handle his demanding criticism. Yet he did not limit himself to evaluating their academic competence, for his charge as an instructor was to create not only teachers and critics, but also moral subjects or Soviet citizens. This responsibility was all the more important given the fact that as teachers and critics, his students would be accountable themselves for inculcating Soviet morality in students and readers, respectively, and would scarcely succeed if they were themselves of dubious moral stock. The teacher was “possibly the most important figure in society,” he mused after observing some of his advisees in training at a local secondary school. “He fashions and forms the character of a person. A secondary-school teacher is a more important figure than a college instructor,” a conclusion he reached presumably because secondary-school teachers taught students in

22 For the Socialist Realist hero having the right professional qualities, see Rufus W. Mathewson, The Positive Hero in Russian Literature (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 208.


24 A good example of such an instructor, albeit on the level of the secondary school, is Erenburg’s Pukhov in The Thaw.
their formative years.\textsuperscript{25} The literary critic was also immensely important to him, for the critic spread his moral values throughout the institutions for which he worked.\textsuperscript{26}

Abramov found most of his students and young people generally to be morally degenerate; they left much to be desired as far as his personality ideal was concerned. He lamented the fact that they lied, cheated, and did whatever they deemed necessary to make their way in Soviet life.\textsuperscript{27} Yet most of all he regretted their ostensible disinterest in Communism. “[S]ome kind of youth is growing up for whom the revolutionary language already means nothing,” he wrote in December 1955. “This is terrible. Yes, in the last two years new trends have appeared among the students.” He found their “unbelief” particularly worrisome in the context of the Cold War and the possibility that hostilities might break out between East and West.\textsuperscript{28} Evidence of their disregard for Marxism-Leninism was the emergence of stiliagi, or style apers, young men and women who imitated Western trends. Creating an opposition between stiliagi and his own generation, Abramov wrote that stiliagi pursued philistine comforts and carnal pleasures, walked with “a wayward, weaving gait,” and wore “wild hairstyles and red-checkered peaked caps, and canary-yellow jackets that extended to their knees,” whereas his generation in the 1930s had lived austerely, walked imposingly and into the Communist future, and wore simple factory uniforms.\textsuperscript{29} Stiliagi were “mold,” “scum,” and “a serious problem in

\textsuperscript{25} DFA, 9 (February 12, 1954).

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 188-90 (April 20, 1956).

\textsuperscript{27} See, for example, ibid., 121 (March 31, 1956), 171-72 (April 19, 1956), 188 (April 20, 1956), and 250-51 (May 5, 1956).

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 149-52 (December 29, 1955).

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 53 (May 9, 1957).
society, [evidence of] its degeneration.” They had “openly proclaim[ed] their allegiance to bourgeois morals” and their disinterest in “building Communism.” He noted that they had colonized Leningrad’s central street, Nevskii Prospekt, from Moscow Station in the east to Liteinyi Prospekt in the west. As has been observed, Nevskii Prospekt was “the place to see and be seen” in Leningrad. Stiliagi, then, ambled across an urban stage from which they broadcast their styles and mores to a larger audience, which Abramov seems to have recognized.

Like some of his contemporaries, Abramov cast the stiliagi and the young generation’s other shortcomings as products of Leningrad’s finest Communist, and in most cases Communist intelligentsia, families. He asserted that wealthy and powerful parents corrupted their children by arranging preferential treatment for them. He wrote of a certain Briukhanovskii, an unexceptional student who had managed to secure postgraduate employment in Leningrad rather than Kazakhstan, where he had been assigned originally, only because his mother was a professor. Another student, a certain Kislitsina, had been expelled from Leningrad State for falsely alleging that the newspaper Smena, where she worked as an apprentice, supported the reinstatement of her boyfriend in the Komsomol. A ministry, however, was intervening to annul her expulsion only

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32 DFA, 89-91 (September 2, 1957).
34 DFA, 188 (April 20, 1956) and 250-51 (May 5, 1956).
because her father ran the Eastern-Siberian Railroad. The professor-parent of a third student had arranged for Leningrad’s Herzen Institute to give his or her daughter a job as an Ostrovskii specialist. “My god!” Abramov exclaimed after recording some of these examples. “Do parents think about what kind of disservice they are rendering their sons? After all, they are pushing them along the path of string-pulling, dishonesty, and time-serving, and by their love are themselves corrupting them. With what kind of moral baggage do these sons and daughters enter life? What will become of them if they wriggle so much already on the threshold of life.”

For all of the influence that parents had on their children, instructors had the obligation – especially if they were Communists – and power to intervene and recast their students into moral individuals. For Abramov, however, the trouble was that many of the instructors and Communists in the Department of Soviet Literature were no better moral tutors than their students’ parents. There were a number of reasons for their shortcomings: the university seemed to value only an instructor’s publication record and thus did not place enough emphasis on instructors’ mentoring. Some instructors tended to lavish attention on their most talented students, who as a result became lazy and arrogant while their peers suffered from neglect. And most instructors cared only about their careers and salaries.

36 Ibid., 180 (April 19, 1956). For another example, see 188 (April 20, 1956).
37 Ibid., 188-90 (April 20, 1956).
38 Ibid., 244-45 (May 5, 1956).
Abramov wrote about scores of colleagues. He wrote at length, for example, about Evgenii Naumov, an associate professor and the department chair, and Lev Plotkin, his former advisor and a scholar of the nineteenth-century literary critic Dmitrii Pisarev. He noted that Naumov’s favoritism had corrupted his advisee, Aleksandr Ninov (who would later become a famous literary critic); that he was an intellectual mediocrity who had destroyed the department; would do anything to keep his grip on the reins of power both in the department and at the publishing house, Sovetskii pisatel’, where he occupied a leadership position; and accused students of making anti-Soviet statements when it suited his interests. Plotkin, Abramov wrote, was just as disreputable. He took his female graduate students to his apartment before their dissertation defenses, and had a hotel room reserved for such occasions, too. He cared only about money and advancing his career. Although he had originally supported Pomerantsev’s “On Sincerity in Literature” and Erenburg’s The Thaw, he changed his tune after they had been condemned in the press.

Abramov often tied Plotkin’s and his other Jewish colleagues’ dishonesty, careerism, and indifference to the Russian people to their nationality, using many of the anti-Semitic tropes of the late-Stalin-era anti-cosmopolitan campaign. He remarked on

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39 Ibid., 70, 74 (May 14, 1954).
41 Ibid., 64-5 (May 14, 1954).
42 Ibid., 25 (January 20, 1956). For an example involving Naumov, see 148-49 (July 4, 1954).
43 Ibid., 44 (1956) and 246 (1956). For other examples, see 94 (May 27, 1954), 116 (June 15, 1954), and 175 (October 23, 1954). For lack of concern for the Russian peasantry, see 1 (January 22, 1954), 22-24 (March 20, 1954), 139 (June 30, 1954), 32 (January 24, 1956) and 262 (May 21, 1956).
44 Ibid., 79-81 (May 14, 1954) and 116 (June 15, 1954).
two occasions that Plotkin, a Belorussian Jew, had sat out the Second World War in Tashkent, a common anti-Semitic utterance.\textsuperscript{45} He wrote that another Jewish colleague, Boris Meilakh, did not deserve to be in the Party. “What does he have in common with the people, with my brother Mikhail?” Abramov asked. “They were both born in the same year, but one toils his whole life, while the other lives like a barin.”\textsuperscript{46} He grumbled various times of a Jewish resurgence in the Philology Faculty. The Jews were “on the offensive,” “want[ing] to even the score,” and trying to retake control of a department.\textsuperscript{47}

An instructor’s ability to cultivate moral subjects depended not only on his professional record, but also on his personal life, flaws in which evidenced deeper shortcomings that augured poorly for his professional life. According to Soviet discourse, citizens who lived model personal lives had more success at intervening in, and rectifying, the personal and professional lives of their peers, for their exemplary personal lives gave them moral authority and provided their peers with an easily accessible model. In Ovechkin’s “A Difficult Spring,” for example, the MTS director Dolgushin says of the brigadier Savchenko: “In addition to everything, he is simply a good person. But we to some extent pay little attention to this side of things when we promote someone to a leadership position. [….] If he is himself a respectable person – in his domestic life as well as production – it will be easier for him to cultivate

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 189 (December 3, 1954) and 114 (November 27, 1955).

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 137 (December 12, 1955).

A model personal life also gave a Soviet citizen peace of mind, which helped him become a diligent professional. Andrei Lobanov, the main character of Daniil Granin’s 1954 novel *Those Who Seek*, thinks he can live without love, but a colleague tells him that the one-sidedness of his life prevents him from fully understanding his colleagues. After the colleague recommends that Lobanov get married, Lobanov takes the advice, falls in love, and as a result not only better understands his colleagues, but also becomes more confident and adept at handling misfortunes. Romanticism lay the philosophical foundation of the connection between the personal and professional. As Isaiah Berlin has written in relation to the nineteenth century, romanticism holds “that man is one and cannot be divided; and that it is not true […] that a man is one kind of personality as a voter, another as a painter, and a third as a husband.”

Accordingly, Abramov wrote about his colleagues’ personal lives, about issues such as their penchant for alcohol, the way they dressed, and how they decorated their apartments. He wrote numerous passages about Nikolai Lebedev, a Party member and longtime friend, and his abuse of alcohol. In mid-1954 Lebedev had told Abramov that he had been run over by a car and fractured his skull. Lebedev’s wife was worried, Abramov noted, that he had sustained brain damage and would not be able to provide for

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50 For the former, see what Borzova says about her husband in Ovechkin, March 1954.

their two children and his ill mother. Abramov later learned that Lebedev had made up the story. It turned out that he had been drunk, and a friend had tried to sober him up by pounding his head against the pavement. In several passages in late 1955, he wrote that Lebedev had recovered from his skull fracture and returned to work, but had again gotten himself into trouble. He had come home drunk one night and fallen asleep on the couch while smoking a cigarette, and his apartment had caught fire. When the firemen arrived, they found him unconscious in his burning apartment.

Abramov also wrote about the personal life of his friend, colleague, and fellow Communist Irina Rozhdestvenskaia. On a number of occasions, he related that Rozhdestvenskaia subscribed to an anachronistic, ascetic standard of comportment from the 1920s. Recalling that Rozhdestvenskaia had described herself as a paragon of “the new type of person,” Abramov scoffed and ridiculed her ascetic ideal, noting that she paid no attention to her appearance; she owned only three dresses and wore torn stockings and old shoes even though she earned 4,200 rubles per month. Her asceticism, he wrote on another occasion, was simply her way of presenting herself as a better Communist than everyone else. Abramov also disapproved of the way she decorated her apartment, in which she hung portraits of Gor’kii, Marx, and Lenin. The trouble was not the portraits themselves; instead, what bothered him was her motivation for hanging

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52 DFA, 86 (May 14, 1954) and 112 (June 4, 1954).
53 Ibid., 136 (June 27, 1954).
54 Ibid., 14-17 (September 11, 1955).
55 Ibid., 134 (May 27, 1954).
56 Ibid., 3-4 (April 17, 1955) and 59-60 (October 16, 1955).
them: she hung them not because she wanted to, he noted, but because she believed the Party demanded it.\textsuperscript{57}

A third influence on the students was Soviet literature, which was to engineer everyone’s souls. Yet, for Abramov, many works of literature proved no better moral guides than the indulgent parents or self-centered instructors. Vera Panova’s 1953 novel *Seasons of the Year* was “philistine realism.”\textsuperscript{58} Mikhail Prishvin’s posthumous novel *Naval Thicket* was “interesting” but lacked “a human being.”\textsuperscript{59} And the first two installments of Kochetov’s 1954 novel *Youth is with Us* were praiseworthy, but the third and final installment, in which Kochetov celebrated Stalin and the leadership’s historical agency, proved that the novel “cannot stand up to any criticism.”\textsuperscript{60}

Abramov found some of the texts that called for sincerity too little concerned with Russianness and the plight of the Russian people and thus too “cosmopolitan,” a sentiment that captures the difference between the writers of categories one and three and the role of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign in dividing them. For example, he condemned Il’ia Erenburg after reading his article “The Century’s Path,” published in *Literaturnaia gazeta* on October 6, 1955. In the article, Erenburg took on a Western contention that the democratization of print culture in the Soviet Union had spelled Soviet literature’s demise, as evidenced by the fact that the Soviet Union had not produced its own Tolstoi. Erenburg allowed that Soviet letters could not boast of a

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 5 (April 17, 1955), 32 (September 25, 1955), and 139 (December 12, 1955).

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 96 (May 27, 1954).

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 147-48 (July 4, 1954).

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 192 (December 5, 1954).
Tolstoi, but argued that it was only because the Soviet man was changing and growing at a terrific pace, which made the task of the Soviet writer much more difficult than that of his nineteenth-century predecessors. Soviet culture nonetheless had great achievements to its credit, he continued, especially in the music of Dmitrii Shostakovich and Aram Khachaturian, and the literature of Vasilii Grossman, Viktor Nekrasov, Vera Panova, and Emmanuel Kazakevich (all of whom were exponents of sincerity). 61  “To speak of Soviet literature and not to mention Sholokhov [a favorite of russophilic authors]!” Abramov exclaimed of the “despicable Erenburg” on October 7. 62  He returned to the article on October 9 and complained that Erenburg had written that Russian genius had manifested itself in the nineteenth century only in literature and music. “The son of a bitch discarded Repin,” Abramov complained, and “bowed and scraped before Picasso.” Western critics, he continued, had long ago equated Sholokhov’s The Quiet Don and Tolstoi’s War and Peace. 63  “He extols Kazakevich, Grossman, and Panova. Well, how after this can one not wage war against this reprobate, how can one speak of reconciliation [with the “cosmopolitans”]? Does Erenburg need national culture? Does he really value Russia?” 64

Yet Abramov was critical of Sholokhov as well. On April 16, 1954, after reading excerpts from the second volume of his Virgin Soil Upturned, widely seen as a disappointment, Abramov wondered: “Is it really possible that even this one has [willfully] departed from the truth? I don’t understand what’s going with Sholokhov.”

63 Ibid., 38 (October 9, 1955).
64 Ibid., 37-38 (October 7, 1955). For additional examples, see 31-32 (March 24, 1957).
Krutikova, he continued, “insists that it’s the result of a break from the people. There’s a bit of truth in this. Gorelov, having been in Veshenskaia, said that his house is surrounded by a high fence [...] and that here and there knots are pushed out of it. This is how the people now communicate with the great writer. Through the hole of a knot!”

The excerpts had in fact revealed a fundamental moral transformation in their author. “Not only the style and language of Sholokhov has changed,” he wrote. “He himself has changed. Before his portrait struck you with its lofty intellectuality. Now looking at you is an ordinary steward with a well-groomed mustache.”

In these and other passages Abramov wrote not only about a particular literary work, but also about a writer’s personality, considering it evidence or a portent of inauspicious developments in Soviet literature. According to romanticism, it was a greater imperative for the writer than for the ordinary citizen to lead an exemplary life.

The writer had to be “conscious that he was on a public stage, testifying; so that the smallest lapse on his part, a lie, a deception, an act of self-indulgence, lack of zeal for the truth, was a heinous crime. […] if you spoke in public at all, be it as a poet or novelist or historian or in whatever public capacity, then you accepted full responsibility for guiding and leading the people.” In the Soviet context, this did not mean that the writer was an exceptional personality, only that more was demanded of him. If he made a moral

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misstep, he damaged not only his standing as a writer, but also his literary creation, for his readers would be less likely to give him their attention.68

The connection between the personal and professional is captured in a December 1955 article in Sovetskaia kul’tura about actors, creative professionals who literally spoke from the public stage. In the article, the anonymous author – the piece is signed “A Journalist” – wrote that, while at the theater, he had overheard an audience member say that she had seen the lead actress at a market, and that her hair was disheveled and that she had dirt under her fingernails. The actress may have performed well, the audience member continued, but these details about her everyday life made it harder to imagine her in the role of a good, selfless heroine. “When talent is properly used it is capable of arousing, and does arouse, the enthusiasm of the audience,” the journalist concluded. “But woe to the talent when its bearer arouses the disgust of the people around him by his unworthy, amoral behavior.” The journalist also included the following programmatic statement:

[...] the Soviet people have the right to demand, and do demand, that the artist should set an example and act as a model in all matters concerned with morality. The artist remains under the eye of his audience, not only when he is on the stage, but even when he is walking in the street, eating in a restaurant, traveling in a bus, or resting at a health resort. Yes, even within the walls of his own house he is really in a glass case. He must never forget that. [...] [....] [...] dear comrade artists, whatever you may be doing, remember that people are watching you! Watching you attentively and affectionately. Watching you in order to learn and to imitate.69


Abramov was himself an attentive member of the metaphorical audience. He complained in March 1954 of having learned from *Komsomol’skaia pravda* that the playwright Nikolai Virta had arranged for Komsomol members to work on his private plot. He lamented in April 1954 of the alcoholism of Sholokhov, Tvardovskii, Aleksandr Fadeev, Konstantin Simonov, Aleksei Surkov, and Fedor Panferov. In the same passage, he noted that a drunk Mikhail Bubennov had gotten into a fight with Surkov at the Moscow Writers Club and that one of them had pulled a knife. Worse, Panferov had attended a meeting while intoxicated and called on the attendees “to propagate and copulate, to flout any moral rules, to renounce the capitalist vestige of safeguarding their daughters from debauchery, to throw overboard the philistinic understanding of cheating on one’s wife or husband, and so on.”

What is remarkable about these passages, as well as the passages about ordinary people, students, and instructors, is the hostility with which Abramov invested them. One might be tempted to interpret this aggressiveness as a result of the lingering insecurity of a peasant who had risen into the literary intelligentsia, or perhaps a rhetorical effort to distance himself from people whose behavior may have reflected his own flaws. More useful, however, would be to exchange a psychological for a historical explanation, and recall that Pomerantsev and other critics and writers had argued that sincerity required hostility.


70 DFA, 32-33 (March 31, 1954).

71 Ibid., 40-41 (April 10, 1954). For another example of alcoholism, see 109 (June 4, 1954).
Noteworthy about Abramov’s passages about writers, as well as ordinary citizens, his students, and his colleagues is not only the degree of their aggressiveness, but also their one-sidedness. The objects of his analysis are almost always cast as unequivocally negative. Polly Jones and Miriam Dobson have argued that Soviet citizens had a difficult time assimilating complex images of individuals because they had been taught to see people as wholly good or wholly bad.72 Abramov’s diary substantiates this argument. His inclination to see people as entirely positive or negative is best captured in passages about his colleague Igor Lapitskii, about whom for a time he wrote with a degree of confusion because of his ostensibly contradictory character. Lapitskii was smart and erudite, Abramov reflected, but valued the opinions of ignoramuses, and lambasted idealists but was himself something of an idealist. He had “two souls,” a good, Russian soul, the root of his honesty and kindness, and a bad, corrupt soul, the cause of his cynicism and careerism, which had manifested themselves in his eager participation in the 1949 anti-cosmopolitan campaign.73 What Abramov found difficult to understand was how someone who loved things Russian – “a person who loves the Russian cannot be a bad person,” he noted of him – could be a prorabotchik, the literal translation of which is someone who works someone over.74 Abramov ultimately concluded, however,
that “he is definitely a bastard,” “A complete bastard and crazy,” which he had become because of Plotkin and other Jews in the department.\textsuperscript{75} Indicative of Abramov’s inability to see complexity in a given individual was his division of Lapitskii into “two souls,” as if a single soul could not accommodate such contradictory qualities.

For Abramov, parents influenced their children; instructors, their students; and writers, their readers. Yet the most powerful cultivating force in Soviet life was the Soviet leadership. The previous chapter touched upon this notion, for in Abramov’s opinion it was the leadership that had the power to improve the collective farms and transform the peasantry by continuing to lower taxes and raise procurement prices. If Abramov implicitly criticized the Central Committee in his passages about agriculture, he explicitly censured it after the Twentieth Party Congress and Khrushchev’s secret speech about Stalin’s cult of personality, and took Stalin and Beria to task as well.

Abramov wrote almost nothing about Stalin or Beria before the congress. He wrote nothing about the fact that, after Stalin’s death, Stalin’s successors did not name a single street, park, or building after him; present themselves as his heirs; or that the Leningrad leadership had removed his name from a banner, “Long Live the Party of Lenin and Stalin,” on the Peter and Paul Fortress in Leningrad for all of the city to see.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 137-38 (December 12 [sic?], 1955) and 149 (December 29, 1955). For other examples of colleagues whose contradictory characteristics confused Abramov, see his discussion of German on 78 (October 30, 1955), 130 (December 8, 1955), and 32-33 (January 24, 1956); and Gani cheva on 111-12 (June 4, 1954), 5 (April 17, 1955), and 107 (November 19, 1955). For Plotkin and Jews’ influence upon him, see 113-17 (November 27, 1955).

On the first anniversary of Stalin’s death, March 5, 1954, Abramov did not make a diary entry. On March 6, he wrote eleven pages, but without commenting upon the relative silence about Stalin in the press the previous day. Nor did he write about the seventy-fifth anniversary of Stalin’s birth in December 1954, the second anniversary of his death in March 1955, or the near silence that greeted the seventy-sixth anniversary of his birth in December 1955. Between January 1954 and the eve of the Twentieth Party Congress, he penned Stalin’s name only five times and without revealing his opinion of him or his diminished stature in Soviet discourse. In one of these instances, he noted that Plotkin had echoed Stalin’s opposition to wage-leveling; in another, that Nina Morozova, a member of the department partbiuro, had criticized Naumov for not citing Stalin in his doctoral dissertation; and in still another, that Igor Sats, an editor at Novyi mir had mentioned that Stalin had made Erenburg a world-famous writer. In the other two, he commented on Stalin portraiture: he noted that a friend had a Stalin portrait hanging above his desk, and predicted disapprovingly that Rozhdestvenskaia would give Krutikova a Stalin portrait for her birthday.

Abramov ended his silence after he learned of Khrushchev’s secret speech, a speech that is characterized by both strong similarities to and differences from the

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78 Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 270.

79 The partbiuro, short for partiinoe biuro or Party bureau, was the leading organ of a primary Party organization.

literature that constituted the first and second post-Stalin models of thought and behavior. In his speech, Khrushchev presented a Stalin who in some ways resembled the negative heroes in this literature. Both Khrushchev’s Stalin and these negative heroes had once been positive figures, but their characters devolved as the years passed. In *The Thaw*, for example, Erenburg’s central antagonist, the factory director Ivan Zhuravlev, over the course of the Stalin era becomes increasingly cowardly, suspicious, despotic, self-aggrandizing, ill-informed, and disconnected from the Party. Khrushchev told a nearly identical story about Stalin but made plain, of course, that Stalin’s shortcomings had much graver consequences for Soviet history: the moral and physical destruction of anyone who disagreed with him, or whom he suspected of disagreeing with him.

The turning point for Stalin, Khrushchev claimed, was the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934. He explained that a Presidium commission had investigated the fates of the congress participants and concluded that 98 of the 129 members and candidate members of the Central Committee elected at the congress, and 1108 out of 1966 congress delegates, had been arrested and executed, the majority in 1937-1938. After the congress, Stalin also began arresting former bourgeois nationalists, Trotskyists, and Right oppositionists even though they no longer posed a threat to the Party. By 1937, he had personally authorized the execution of thousands of Party members, state officials, and ordinary citizens. Khrushchev also spoke at length about Stalin’s conduct on the eve of and during the Second World War. Having been informed on several occasions that

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81 Erenburg, *Otepela’,* 13, 15-21, 36, 38, 48-49, 53, 61-62, 66, 85, 90-99, 103, 107-12, 115-20. Another example of a character who devolved into a negative hero was Dudintsev’s Drozdov in *Not by Bread Alone*, which appeared after the Twentieth Party Congress.

82 See K. Aimermakher, ed., *Doklad N. S. Khrushcheva o kul’te lichnosti Stalina na XX s”ezde KPSS* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2002), 53-57, 81, 87, 95, 98, 103, 114.
Hitler planned to attack the Soviet Union in June 1941, Stalin refused to believe it. After Hitler invaded and pummeled the Red Army, Stalin became nervous, even hysterical, and collapsed into passivity and fatalism. During the war, he continued to terrorize the Soviet people, exiling entire nations as alleged traitors, among them, the Karachaevs, Kalmyks, Chechens, Ingush, and Balkars. After the war, he continued to see enemies all around him even though the Party was more unified than ever before. He had approved the Leningrad Affair, Khrushchev continued, which the Party had previously pinned on Beria and Abakumov, and spearheaded the repression of the Kremlin doctors. Finally, throughout his reign, he had been instrumental in the creation of his own cult, seeing to it that his image eclipsed even that of Lenin.\textsuperscript{83}

Khrushchev qualified this negative image of Stalin much as Erenburg qualified his negative image of Zhuravlev. Khrushchev explained that Stalin had never been insincere, that “he was convinced that [everything he had done] was necessary for the defense of the interests of the toilers from the intrigues of enemies and attacks of the imperialist camp.”\textsuperscript{84} The trouble with the convictions to which Stalin had been sincerely attached, however, was that they were his own, not those of the collective; he had arrived at them, that is, without the assistance of the Party. If Khrushchev’s Stalin is not unequivocally negative, nor is Erenburg’s Zhuravlev. Zhuravlev loves his wife and his factory; he works hard and is honest to some degree; he feels bad that his workers must live in shanties; and when he plays with his daughter, “he becomes his old self.”\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 57-63, 66-108.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 115-16.
\textsuperscript{85} Erenburg, \textit{Ottepel’}, 21, 92, 94, 98-99 (21).
Khrushchev also brightened Stalin’s portrait as Erenburg did Zhuravlev’s. Khrushchev juxtaposed Stalin with Beria, whose role in Soviet history, he maintained, had nothing redeeming about it. Beria was a “bastard,” “foul enemy,” “vile provocateur,” “double-dyed enemy,” and “agent of foreign intelligence.” He had taken advantage of Stalin’s shortcomings, insinuated himself into his favor, and used it “to exterminate thousands of Communists and honest Soviet people.” He had created “a band” consisting of Viktor Abakumov and various NKVD agents, Khrushchev continued, who had tortured their victims, fabricated evidence against them, and orchestrated the Leningrad Affair. If Stalin had devolved from a good to a bad Communist, Beria had always been a monster. Indeed, Khrushchev revealed, he had worked in the intelligence services of the Musavat, an Azerbaijani nationalist organization that was snuffed out in the early 1920s. In *The Thaw*, a certain Khitrov does not have a single redeeming quality; he is sly, sycophantic – his name is derived from the Russian word for cunning, *khitryi* – and is Zhuravlev’s right-hand man.

Khrushchev, of course, could not write his entire speech in keeping with the conventions of the first model; it would have undermined his and the Central Committee’s legitimacy. Khrushchev thus spoke of more Stalin-era positive heroes than Erenburg had; they included Stalin’s victims, the Soviet people, and the Party. He explained that the victims had conducted themselves honorably not only before, but also after having been repressed. The cult of personality, he continued, had had a deleterious impact not only on the repressed, but also on the Soviet people and the Party more

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86 Aimermakher, *Doklad N. S. Khrushcheva o kul’te lichnosti Stalina na XX s”ezde*, 82-83, 95-96, 99-103.

generally. It had bred smaller cults of personality across the country, creating a culture of fear, distrust, passivity, toadyism, and deception. Yet the Soviet people and the Party had nevertheless achieved a great deal, he emphasized, and rendered the history of the Soviet Union positive overall. Stalin, then, was no more than a brake on historical progress, the chief agents of which had been “millions and tens of millions of people.”

Khrushchev’s speech differed from the first model in another way, too. Whereas the logical extension of Pomerantsev’s essay and Erenburg’s novella was criticism of the Central Committee, Khrushchev claimed that a fourth and final group of positive heroes was the Stalin-era leadership and thus he and Stalin’s other successors as well. The delegates to the Twentieth Party Congress, he explained, likely assumed that he and the rest of the Stalin-era Central Committee and Politburo had known about Stalin’s and Beria’s activities and should have done something to stop them. Yet they had known nothing, he insisted, for in the mid-1930s Stalin had marginalized them, pulling the curtains on the drama of his murderous reign. Yet on the rare occasion that they had been able to catch a glimpse of his wrongdoing, they had confronted him. Early in the war, Politburo members had tried to impress upon Stalin the urgency of taking action. After the war, they had tried to inform him of the dire state of Soviet agriculture, but he refused to listen. What had enlightened them about the extent of his misdeeds was the investigation and trial of Beria, after which they revealed what they had learned as quickly as they could. Khrushchev did, however, admit one misstep. “It cannot be said that […] we in everything follow the Leninist example,” he confessed. “It would be enough to say” that they had named cities, factories, state and collective farms, and

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cultural institutions after themselves, and thus had created their own cults of personality.  

It took some time before Abramov felt comfortable enough to comment upon Stalin or the individuals in the leadership who had condemned his cult of personality. One should not conclude that Abramov thus did not record a critical word about Stalin or the leadership for fear of the consequences; rather, what seems more likely is that Abramov, who had once believed in Stalin, had become ideologically disoriented. On February 20, 1956, in his first entry after the start of the congress, Abramov failed to mention that in opening remarks on February 14 Khrushchev had asked the delegates and foreign guests to stand in honor of three Communists who had died since the Nineteenth Party Congress in 1952: Klement Gottwald, the leader of the Czech Communist Party; Kyuchi Tokuda, the general secretary of the Japanese Communist Party; and Stalin, whom he diminished by mentioning in the same breath. Nor did he write of a speech Anastas Mikoian, the deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers, had delivered on February 15, in which he announced that a Leninist Party congress had not been held in the Soviet Union in twenty years, that a cult of personality had dominated and disfigured the Party, and that the Short Course and Stalin’s Economic Problems of Socialism were problematic texts. Abramov had doubtless read both speeches in Pravda, where they had been published on February 15 and 18, respectively. In his next entry, on February


91 Pravda, “Rech’ tovarishcha A. I. Mikoiana,” February 18, 1956, 4-6; and Taubman, Khrushchev, 271.

92 DFA, 45-49 (February 20, 1956).
26, he revealed that he was aware that something historic had taken place: “It’s been a long time since I opened my diary – and meanwhile events are brimming over, one is more momentous than the other. I ought to start with the congress, but it’s frightful, much is still unclear. I’ll begin with the small items.” He elaborated upon the “small items” – department affairs unrelated to the congress – but did not return to the subject of the congress.93

A third entry, on March 3, is different. “The word ‘historical’ was compromised a long time ago,” it begins. “But the Twenty-First [sic] Congress is indeed historical. A giant reevaluation of values has been carried out.” Abramov then summarized Mikoian’s speech and asked: “Then whatever was the entire Stalinist epoch? What does all of this mean? Among the people there is great confusion. All this, of course, is no accident. To go public with such information one must mull it over a thousand times. Apparently some kind of new data has been discovered. But the i’s have not yet been dotted.” It becomes clear that he was reflecting not only on Mikoian’s speech, but also on Khrushchev’s secret speech, for buried in his summary of the former is a series of questions: “How did this happen? How did it transpire that over the course of thirty years a socialist democracy turned out to be the bloody dictatorship of one person? Who is to blame for this?”94 Still, however, he did not mention Stalin’s name.

Abramov had learned of the speech earlier that day. He confided to his diary, on March 4, that he had overheard Plotkin, German Safronov, and Aleksandr Berezhnoi, the partkom secretary, whispering in the partbiuro the previous day and that “my hair stood

93 Ibid., 49-70 (February 26, 1956).
94 Ibid., 70-71 (March 3, 1956).
on end when I heard what they were talking about.” Then, after more than two years and some five-hundred pages, he wrote about Stalin at length for the first time. He began to approach Stalin no differently than he had approached his students, colleagues, and Soviet writers. He began by relating having learned that Khrushchev had given a three-hour speech to a closed session of the congress, and then recorded its contents as he had overheard them. It is an abridged and slightly inaccurate record, at least compared to the copy of the speech that was distributed by the Central Committee to Party cells within weeks of the congress to be read or summarized at Party meetings. By March 4, the partbiuro of the Department of Soviet Literature may have received their copy of the speech, as well as word of some of Khrushchev’s digressions from the prepared text.  

Not in the distributed version but in Abramov’s was the statement that 8,000 people had died in the mid-to-late thirties Terror; that Stalin was responsible for the loss of fifty million lives if one counted wartime deaths; and that he may have been an agent of the okhrana, the Tsarist secret police. If he had in fact uttered the last charge – which Abramov called “perhaps the most terrible thing” – Khrushchev would have undermined the narrative of Stalin’s devolution; if Stalin had collaborated with the okhrana, it would have cast a shadow over, and perhaps eclipsed, his accomplishments in his early, positive

95 For Berezhnoi’s position, see ibid., 140 (June 30, 1954). Berezhnoi was also the chair of the Department of Press Theory and Practice. See 41 (October 9, 1955).

96 Iuri Aksiutin, “Popular Responses to Khrushchev,” in Nikita Khrushchev, eds. William Taubman, Sergei Khrushchev, and Abbott Gleason (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 182-83; Taubman, Khrushchev, 283; and Dobson, Khrushchev’s Cold Summer, 82. For the decision and rules governing distribution, see Jones, “From Stalinism to Post-Stalinism,” 130. Dobson writes on 93: “A student project conducted in the 1990s seems to indicate that at least two-thirds of Muscovites remember hearing about the SS in 1956,” citing Aksiutin, “Novoe o XX s’ezde KPSS,” 120.

97 For Khrushchev digressing from the prepared text, see Aimermakher, Doklad N. S. Khrushcheva o kul’tichnosti Stalina na XX s’ezde KPSS, 44.
period. The speech as Abramov heard it undermined the entire Soviet experience: “It is tantamount to the end of the world.”

Anticipating the reactions of many Soviet citizens in the coming weeks, Abramov accepted Khrushchev’s focus on personality but challenged his contention that Stalin alone was at fault for what had happened. He extended the blame from Stalin to the Stalin-era leadership, which had failed to stand up to him, and thus added Stalin’s comrades as objects of his diaristic analysis. It is unclear, however, whether Abramov was accusing Stalin’s colleagues of a knowing silence. “Who is to blame?” he asked. “Khrushchev called Tito the only Communist who was not afraid of Stalin [sic]. But where on earth were they? Stalin annihilated the strongest and most honest Communists, but where were they? Why weren’t they touched? Who praised, who bent over backwards on his seventieth birthday to find the most toadying epithets with which to express their happiness to work under St.[alin]’s leadership?”

On March 9, Abramov suggested that Stalin had cast something of a spell on the Central Committee as well as the rest of the population. “Why did they not restrain him?” Abramov asked. “Why did they let the negative sides of his character grow to such monstrous dimensions? By inertia? How did it happen? Yes, for thirty years one person hypnotized the Central Committee and the entire country.” It has often been said that Khrushchev’s focus on personality did not amount to a Marxist analysis. Such a claim, however, overlooks the

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98 DFA, 71-73 (March 4, 1956).

99 Ibid., 71-74 (March 4, 1956). According to the official version of the speech, Khrushchev did not say this about Tito. For Khrushchev on Tito, see Aimermakher, Doklad N. S. Khrushcheva o kul’te lichnosti Stalina na XX s”ezde KPSS, 97-98.

100 DFA, 97 (March 9, 1956).
centrality of personality in Soviet Marxism. If one wishes to haul Khrushchev over the Marxist coals, a more appropriate charge would be that he was mistaken not in emphasizing personality *per se*, but in emphasizing a *single* personality, just as Abramov charged.

The speech was read to Party members in Leningrad State’s active hall on March 8. “What a nightmare! How terrible!” Abramov exclaimed in his diary that same day. The argument that Stalin had not been deliberately evil in the late-tsarist period and had been a good Communist before the mid-1930s did not lessen his outrage. The enormity of the charges overwhelmed; Khrushchev’s image of Stalin was unsatisfactory. In finding it thus, Abramov implicitly took issue with Khrushchev and the Central Committee, just as he had implicitly taken issue with them in his passages about the Soviet countryside.

Jones and Dobson have argued that Soviet citizens did not, or rather *could not*, accept Khrushchev’s portrait of Stalin because the Party had taught them to see an individual as wholly good or wholly bad. Abramov indeed had trouble assimilating images of morally complex individuals; but in Stalin’s case, it was not a composite image *per se* that was unassimilatable, but rather its content: the composite image presented a man who had killed tens of thousands of innocent people as a good, but tragically mistaken Communist. In Stalin, the bad simply outweighed the good. “The history of the world’s first socialist state has become an unparalleled bloody tragedy,” was

101 See Jones, “From Stalinism to Post-Stalinism,” pp. 130-32; and Dobson, *Khrushchev’s Cold Summer*, 21-49, 79-105. Dobson writes that because of “the interpretive framework developed by Stalinism” “citizens experienced difficulty in viewing Stalin as a composite being who had both positive qualities and flaws.”
Abramov’s conclusion, “an unprecedented tyranny and a mass extermination of people.”

Abramov then summarized the speech in nine single-spaced pages in staid, meticulous detail. Given the accuracy and unlikelihood that he took notes in the active hall, he must have copied the text sent to the partbiuro. On March 26, he reevaluated the cost of Stalin’s rule given what he had learned, writing his own secret speech and deepening his divergence from the official image of Stalin and thus his criticism of the Central Committee. He asserted that the cost of Stalin’s reign included not only the loss of human life, but also the allocation of scarce manpower and material resources to his glorification; the wartime imprisonment of hundreds of thousands of soldiers who followed his orders; the postwar persecution of the millions of civilians who had lived on German-occupied territory; and the destruction and impoverishment of the Soviet countryside. “No, it is impossible to recount all the evil that the father and friend of the Soviet people brought!” he exclaimed.

In this world the numbers don’t exist according to which one could determine it! Nikolai Palkin [Nicholas II] is called the Bloody for the fact that he executed five Decembrists and rehabilitated ten.

But what to call Iosif? Can he really be called bloody, too?! The human language does not have at its disposal the epithets with which to even approximate the extent of his evil deeds. It does not have them at its disposal because nothing similar has ever existed in the history of mankind. All those Neros, Atillas, Genghis Khans – they are capricious children compared to him.

102 DFA, 86 (March 8, 1956).
103 Ibid., 86-94 (March 8, 1956).
104 Ibid., 103-4 (March 26, 1956).
At meetings in March and April many Soviet citizens began publicly challenging
Khrushchev’s portrayal of Stalin and of the Stalin- and post-Stalin-era leadership. The
Central Committee found the disagreement with its version of events disconcerting; for
his part, Khrushchev chose to tack toward the conservatives to maintain his hold on
power. Consequently, an editorial in Pravda on April 5 presented a more favorable
image of Stalin by asserting that the Party had always been true to Leninism, and scolded
local Party organizations for failing to take on the “rotten elements” that had challenged
the official version of events. On April 7, Pravda ran an editorial from the newspaper
of the Chinese Communist Party that presented Stalin as an “outstanding Marxist-
Leninist” who had committed “serious mistakes,” not “crimes.” While denouncing the
cult of personality, the editorial affirmed that “Marxist-Leninists acknowledge that
leaders may play a great role in history,” and that “high centralization of authority must
be combined with complete democracy. When emphasis is put only on centralization,
many mistakes can arise.” On June 30, Khrushchev ushered a resolution through the
Central Committee that rewrote and diminished the speech to quell opposition to his
leadership. Published in Pravda in July, the resolution asserted that Stalin had
perpetrated unspecified “mass repressions” in which “many honorable Communists and

105 Dobson, Khrushchev’s Cold Summer, 89-91, 95; Jones, “From Stalinism to Post-Stalinism,” 133-35,
144n13; Vladimir P. Naumov, “Bor’ba N. S. Khrushcheva za edinolichnuiu vlast’,” Novaia i noveishaia
istoriia 2 (1996): 16; Taubman, Khrushchev, 285-87, 724; and Zubkova, Russia after the War, 186.
106 Taubman, Khrushchev, 287.
107 Pravda, “Kommunisticheskaia partiia pobezhdala i pobezhdaet vernost’iu leninizmu,” April 5, 1956, 2-
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108 Pravda, “Ob istoricheskom opyte diktatury proletariata: Redaktsionnaia stat’ia gazety
‘Zhen’min’zhibao,’” April 7, 1956, 2-4.
109 Taubman, Khrushchev, 287.
non-Party Soviet people were defamed and innocently suffered,” and distanced him from responsibility by mentioning “the criminal band of that agent of international imperialism, Beria” in the same sentence. The resolution blamed his cult of personality on the capitalist encirclement, or “the concrete objective historical conditions in which the building of socialism in the USSR occurred,” and rejected the notion that the Stalin-era leadership had not opposed “the negative phenomena associated with the cult of personality.” It asserted that Soviet achievements had created “the sort of atmosphere in which isolated errors and inadequacies appeared less significant against the background of the gigantic advances,” and the Soviet people had been too attached to Stalin to permit an attack against him during his lifetime.110

Abramov recorded many of the challenges to the speech made at the meetings in March and during the first days of April, and criticized the article that the leadership had placed in Pravda on April 5 in an effort to silence the dissenters.111 He complained that the article’s authors had fabricated allegations that speakers had given anti-Party speeches and thus had reverted to Stalin-era methods. He responded more favorably to the April 7 article, while criticizing its having downgraded Stalin’s “crimes” to “mistakes.” If in March he explained the emergence of the cult of personality by claiming that Stalin’s charisma had hypnotized the leadership and Soviet people, now he echoed the Chinese. “Our fundamental mistake,” he wrote, “was that we did not

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111 DFA, 143-44 (April 7, 1956).
complement centralism with democracy (demokratizm),” by which he meant a larger role for the people in public life.\textsuperscript{112}

The need for the leadership to introduce more democracy became Abramov’s rallying cry for the next several months, and would remain central to his political vision for years. It was based upon a faith in an enlightened few, a Leninist vanguard inclined and willing to check its own power, but also dedicated to reforming or replacing lower-level functionaries who did not share and propagate its democratic ethos, an ethos that would ensure that the repressions would not return. It is an echo and slightly more democratic recasting of the leadership’s own discourse. It is also one of the main themes of *Brothers and Sisters*. As we have seen, Anfisa Petrovna’s ability to be a model chairman depends on the support she receives from the district-committee first secretary Novozhilov, who represents the higher reaches of the Party establishment. “A moral revolution from above is necessary, a universal campaign against pedants and bureaucrats,” Abramov asserted on April 21. “It must be from above. Then life would begin to boil and a universal rebirth would begin. Right now the most important thing is the moral cultivation of people, cultivation in them of civic courage and bravery, honesty, intolerance for disgraceful practices and bureaucracy. Alas, our history is not the history of the spiritual and moral growth of people. Too many bureaucrats have been bred.”\textsuperscript{113}

On May 22, he wrote: “The collective will not crush the personality only if the personality is morally sound and civically educated. When they will conduct themselves

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 154-57 (April 8, 1956).

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 226 (April 21, 1956).
similarly, both when alone with oneself and in the collective.”

On September 21, he wrote again: “[…] without the cultivation of personality nothing can be done. […] We do not need a cult of personality, but we do need to cultivate personality. In the final analysis, history is made by personalities.”

Beginning with the article it had placed in Pravda on April 5, however, the leadership was not following this program. Abramov noticed that it was even suppressing expressions of support for Stalin. At a May Day demonstration, for example, the KGB had surveilled the university’s column of demonstrators to make sure no one had been carrying Stalin portraits. The leadership was not only controlling expression, but also failing to provide the people with news of what was happening around the country. A Soviet cruiser, for example, had hit an old mine off the coast of Odessa and sunk, drowning some 800 sailors, and the press did not so much as mention it. The press may have reported the true cause of the death of Aleksandr Fadeev, who had committed suicide in the wake of the secret speech, Abramov wrote, but only several days after his passing, while the Western press had likely disseminated the news immediately.

Among the pedants and bureaucrats whom Abramov believed the leadership needed to reform or replace were many of his colleagues at Leningrad State, particularly in light of their reception of the secret speech. Abramov recorded some of their reactions

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114 Ibid., 267 (May 22, 1956).
115 Ibid., 329-30 (September 21, 1956).
116 Ibid., 237 (May 5, 1956). For another example, see 243 (May 5, 1956).
117 Ibid., 233-34 (April 22, 1956).
118 Ibid., 254 (May 15, 1956). For another example, see 276 (May 24, 1956).
as the speech was being read in the university’s active hall on March 8. The audience, he lamented, listened lifelessly. Rozhdestvenskaia had taken her seat with a smile, but a blank expression appeared on her face as soon as the speech began. During the break, people joked about unrelated matters, unwilling to discuss what they had heard because, he guessed, they had not received instructions as to how to respond. An unnamed man from personnel approached and congratulated him on having recently been promoted to associate professor, which he found completely inappropriate. “No one even asked a question,” he wrote of the end of the reading: “An ovation! In honor of what? One must cry and scream, but they – thunderous, prolonged applause.” In the hallway, a panicked colleague intercepted him to say she had been wrong, Stalin had not suffocated his wife Nadezhda Allilueva. Back at his dormitory, he tried to discuss the speech with his neighbor, Maria Aleksandrovna, but when he mentioned it, she got scared and fled to her room.\footnote{Ibid., 94-95 (March 8, 1956). For an analysis of listeners’ reactions to the speech, see Jones, “From Stalinism to Post-Stalinism,” 130-35.}

His colleagues’ disreputable behavior persisted for weeks and months after the reading. In an effort to carry out the new Party line, Rozhdestvenskaia redecorated her apartment. Earlier, she had had two portraits of Stalin and one portrait of Lenin on her wall; after the speech, she had removed one of the Stalin portraits to demonstrate her fidelity to the Party’s new position.\footnote{DFA, 105-6 (March 26, 1956). For another example involving Rozhdestvenskaia, see 238-40 (May 5, 1956).} In late March, Plotkin, Naumov, and Dement’ev decided to remove Stalin’s name from their textbook on Sholokhov’s \textit{Virgin Soil Upturned}.\footnote{Ibid., 105-6 (March 26, 1956). For another example involving Plotkin, see 172-73 (April 19, 1956).} On March 26, Abramov divided his colleagues into three groups given their
reactions to the speech: the cowards, who avoided talking about it; the bureaucrats, who acted as if they had easily assimilated it; and the conscientious, who were tormented but did no more than send anonymous letters to the Central Committee.\textsuperscript{122}

On March 8, in his passage about the reading of the speech at the university, Abramov attested that “the worst thing” about the event was the portrait of Stalin hanging alongside that of Lenin behind the stage. “Everyone was looking at it, their souls full of indignation, but no one made a sound of protest or said a word. It was as if yet again the patience of the Russian people, for which the beloved St.[alin] so thanked them [in his 1945 toast], was intentionally being tested.”\textsuperscript{123} This comment about the Russian people was a bitter aside; but a couple of weeks later Abramov pursued the idea. “Whatever can stir, whatever can rouse the people from their torpor?” he asked on March 26. “Madame de Stille, it appears, said of the Germans: ‘They have a high-capacity for submissiveness.’ This suits us, the Russians, as well. Maybe this is why there recently existed two terrorist regimes.”\textsuperscript{124} If, on March 4, Abramov had counted Khrushchev and the members of the Stalin-era leadership among the individuals who were to blame for the emergence of Stalin’s cult of personality, here he took his emphasis on the role of the individual in history to a logical conclusion, blaming the people as well.

Following an abeyance in the fall of 1956, the reaction continued in late 1956 and early 1957. In February 1957, Kommunist ran an editorial that signaled a sharpening of

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 100 (March 26, 1956).

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 94-95 (March 8, 1956).

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 102 (March 26, 1956).
the conservative turn;\textsuperscript{125} the Party had also begun replacing the compromised Stalin cult with a revitalized Lenin cult.\textsuperscript{126} Khrushchev had retreated to outmaneuver his conservative opponents; in June 1957, he succeeded, ousting Malenkov, Kaganovich, and Molotov from the Presidium and Central Committee.\textsuperscript{127} In August, he announced his victory by placing an authoritative article on Soviet culture in \textit{Pravda} and \textit{Kommunist}.\textsuperscript{128} In the article, “For a Close Connection of Literature and Art to the Life of the People,” he rehearsed the image of Stalin presented in the June 1956 Central Committee resolution and reprimanded a number of writers and publications for their one-sided interpretation of the Party’s criticism of the cult of personality.\textsuperscript{129} In October, he completed his consolidation of power by removing Georgii Zhukov, the defense minister and a member of the Presidium.\textsuperscript{130}

\textsuperscript{125} The following discussion of literary politics is based on Frankel, \textit{Novy mir}, 107-15, and the cited primary sources. Frankel’s interpretation challenges Swayze, \textit{Political Control of Literature in the USSR}, 195, and implicitly, Spechler, \textit{Permitted Dissent in the USSR}, 63-70, 76-81. In the below, I have drawn on Spechler as well. The principal disagreement between Frankel and Spechler is on the nature of the February 1957 \textit{Kommunist} editorial. Frankel interprets the editorial as unambiguously conservative, whereas Spechler finds some irresoluteness but unfortunately does not provide evidence thereof. My own reading supports Frankel’s conclusion. For the editorial, see “Partiia i voprosy razvitiia sovetskoi literatury i iskusstva,” \textit{Kommunist} 3 (February 1957): 12-25. For further discussion of the context, see Taubman, \textit{Khrushchev}, 307.


\textsuperscript{128} Frankel, \textit{Novy mir}, 181-82n24.


\textsuperscript{130} Taubman, \textit{Khrushchev}, 361-64.
Abramov continued to criticize Khrushchev and the Central Committee as he followed these events and publications. Citing the 1956 Hungarian Revolution as the pretext, Abramov wrote that Khrushchev had commenced “a definitive return to the past,” to a “Stalinist course but without mistakes” with the publication of the February 1957 Kommunist editorial. He noted that the Party had begun to rehabilitate Stalin’s linguistic theories, that the word *cult* had vanished from the press, and that the term *demagogue* had replaced *enemy of the people*, and predicted that the Party would soon order the people to rehang Stalin’s portraits. The Party was effectively exchanging Marxism for *narodnichestvo* or populism, he remarked, for it was asserting that a handful of individuals made History.131 After the publication of “For a Close Connection of Literature and Art with Life [sic],” he noted: “All of the i’s have been dotted.” After Khrushchev removed Zhukov, he lamented: “The principle of one-man rule has triumphed completely.”132

Nor did Abramov approve of the revival of the Lenin cult. “You can think only within those borders within which Lenin thought,” he wrote disapprovingly. “If something is not in Lenin, it is unsuitable.”133 Abramov adored Lenin; but, for him, Lenin was a general or less constricting model of thought and behavior, a Communist who demanded that his comrades speak the truth, but did not dictate the content of that truth. “Lenin […] in the most difficult year for the young republic spoke the truth,” Abramov wrote in May 1954, “but we cannot speak of our shortcomings at full volume

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131 DFA, 22 (February 19, 1957), 31, 37 (March 24, 1957), and 46 (April 24, 1957).
132 Ibid., 71-72 (September 24, 1957) and 100-101 (November 2, 1957). See also 80 (September 27, 1957).
133 Ibid., 42 (April 2, 1957).
right now. Why?”

In April 1956, he noted that a colleague had told him that the Stalin-era leadership had abridged and distorted texts in the fourth edition of Lenin’s complete collected works. “How terrible!” he exclaimed. “The falsification of Lenin, to whom they swore and bowed at every step!” Crucial here is that Abramov wrote that they had sworn and bowed to Lenin at every step; meanwhile, Abramov himself cherished Lenin, but did not let him create boundaries for his own thought. Leninism was a guide, not an intellectual straitjacket.

Abramov’s diary does in fact contain passages about admirable citizens, students, colleagues, writers, and leaders despite all of its negativity. This was a demand of his personality ideal, too; one was to see not only one’s fellow citizens’ vices, but also their virtues, and to be optimistic about their ability to create Communism. Accordingly, wherever Abramov went, he scanned Soviet life not only for shortcomings, but also for merits. He noticed, for example, that in the months and first years after the Twentieth Party Congress some Soviet citizens had begun to become more outspoken. On the bus after Khrushchev delivered a speech in Palace Square in May 1957, he overheard a man ask a woman why she was carrying so many potatoes and, when she answered, “to eat them,” the man sarcastically reply: “But today everyone has been satiated by patriotic feelings from the meeting with Khrushchev,” which, he noted, was not something a Soviet citizen would have uttered in public in earlier years. After the launch of

\[134\] Ibid., 81 (May 14, 1954). See also 96 (May 27, 1954).

\[135\] Ibid., 157 (April 8, 1956).

\[136\] Ibid., 61-65 (May 29, 1957).
Sputnik in October 1957, he noted ecstatically: “The devil knows the extent of the Russian person’s talents”; and after Pravda reported that dozens of Soviet citizens had expressed interest in going into space and sacrificing their lives if necessary, he extolled the selflessness of the Russian people.\textsuperscript{137} He recorded several passages about his student and friend Aleksandr Gorelov, whom he praised for choosing to forego graduate school and find work as a teacher in a provincial school. Gorelov later changed his mind and enrolled in graduate school, at Leningrad State, but Abramov continued to commend him, noting that Gorelov had chosen a good, unfairly neglected topic for his graduate thesis, Russian lyrical song.\textsuperscript{138} Abramov also wrote approvingly of his colleague Boris Larin, an Old Bolshevik and dean of the Philology Faculty, whom he presented as a rare example of a Communist who had not been corrupted by the intelligentsia milieu and had remained attached to the Russian people.\textsuperscript{139}

Abramov began his diary after the appearance of Pomerantsev’s “On Sincerity in Literature,” and his diary contains reflections on the essay, if only by way of passages about criticism of the piece that began to appear in the Soviet press in January 1954. Abramov supported Pomerantsev; he considered his argument irrefutable. Nothing about sincerity – “the most important principle of art, its soul” – militated against Party-

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 95 (October 5, 1957) and 102 (November 2, 1957).

\textsuperscript{138} See, for example, his discussion of Aleksandr Gorelov in ibid., 16 (March 6, 1954), 24 (March 20, 1954), 35 (April 1, 1954), 139 (June 30, 1954), and 161 (September 1, 1954). For an example of another positive student, see 127-31 (April 1, 1956). For positive students from simple families, see 78-79 (May 14, 1954), 138 (June 30, 1954), and 175-78 (April 19, 1956).

\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 78 (October 30, 1955). For more on Larin, see 33 (September 25, 1955), 64 (October 16, 1955), and 95 (November 15, 1955). For examples of other positive colleagues, see 28 (March 20, 1954), 2 (1955), 33-4 (1955), and 108 (1955).
mindedness. Instead, Pomerantsev had called for a return to first principles and to Lenin, who had always spoken the truth.140

Abramov also praised Erenburg’s *The Thaw*, his hatred of Erenburg notwithstanding. After reading the novella in May 1954, he remarked upon its shortcomings – the undeveloped characters, for example – but commended the work as “brave and original,” “the most important event in recent years,” and “a writer’s grand meditation [...] about Soviet life, about our person.” The novella called “for a caring, sensitive attitude towards the simple person,” he rhapsodized. “To speak less about love for the people and to pay more attention to the concrete, living person. This would indeed be a genuine concern for the people, for the people are me, you, him, us – individual people.” Abramov considered this to be a corrective to the recent past, when “good, honest people were mutilated,” like Erenburg’s Koroteev, who had been expelled from the Komsomol because his step-father had been arrested in the *ezhovshchina*. The “most frightening figure” in the novella was Sonia Pukhova, he wrote, a “good, sincere (serdechnaia) girl” whose passion is literature, but who chooses to study engineering because it is more practical. “Where did this callousness come from?” Abramov wondered. What made this question particularly perplexing was that her father, Andrei Pukhov, a teacher and Old Bolshevik, was perhaps the most positive character in the novella. Abramov believed that Pukhov deserved more authority in Soviet life, that he should have become “the head of the province.” “Is it not strange: the soulless bureaucrat

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Zhuravlev holds the reigns of government in his hands, while the truly great person takes a back seat?” he asked.141

After the Twentieth Party Congress, some developments in literature lifted Abramov’s spirits. He responded favorably to a new installment of Tvardovskii’s poem *Distance beyond Distance*, which was published in the first volume of a new almanac, *Literaturnaia Moskva*, in which Tvardovskii mentioned a citizen who had been wrongly imprisoned.142 He did not record his opinion of the text of Dudintsev’s *Not by Bread Alone*, but around the time of its publication he referred to some of his colleagues by the names of its main characters.143

By late 1957, Abramov even wrote somewhat favorably of Khrushchev. After Khrushchev proposed the creation of an RSFSR writers’ union in his article, “For a Close Connection between Literature and Art in the Life of the People,” Abramov remarked: “Khrushchev’s statement is a night for art, but a Russian night. And the latter provides some consolation. Khrushchev gave the command for the development of Russian culture. Finally, on the fortieth year of Soviet power it is permitted to utter the word ‘Russia’ in Russia. It is sad, but it is truly progress.”144 That same day, September 24, he declared that “one must support Khrushchev. He is in a well-known sense a true pioneer (pervopochatnik). He was the first one to devote himself to the goal of feeding Russia

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141 Ibid., 95 (May 27, 1954). For praise of Tvardovskii, see 34 (April 4, 1954) and 105-7 (June 4, 1954).


144 DFA, 66-68 (September 24, 1957).
and the Russian peasant. Is this really not already a lot?” Abramov wondered, however, if feeding the peasant might be counterproductive, for a satiated peasant might no longer think about unspecified “cardinal questions.”

The next day, he returned to the issue of supporting Khrushchev, writing that at the beginning of the month “I was on the verge of metamorphosing into a true believer (pravovernyi ortodoks). This is said strongly, but in any case something like this occurred in me.” Abramov had not been on the cusp of reembracing the Stalin-era imperative that one assimilate and support the Central Committee’s positions (hence the qualification “This is said strongly”); rather, he had entertained the idea of rallying behind Khrushchev for instrumental reasons. “I reasoned the following way,” he explained. “All right, the intelligentsia is going to destroy the existing order of things. But then what? […] And is there even a force [among the intelligentsia] capable of leading the advance?” Khrushchev, he wrote, seemed to be that force. “[O]ne cannot deny the progress in our life” under his leadership. “The most important thing right now: to feed the people and give them housing. And is Khrushchev not doing this? Then why should one not support him?” For Abramov the stumbling block was that he now valued sincerity, or independence for the sake of independence. New ideals had emerged, and they got in the way of pragmatic calculations. “But then again hesitations. Would this not be a capitulation? Oh, the torment of a Russian intelligent!”

Abramov’s discovery of positive individuals among the Soviet people and leadership, however, did not translate into optimism about his country’s future. Instead,

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145 Ibid., 70 (September 24, 1957).

146 Ibid., 74-75 (September 25, 1957).
he invoked these individuals in an effort to work on his optimism, which he found wanting. On November 7, 1955, the anniversary of the October Revolution, for example, Abramov did not attend a demonstration for the first time in his life because he had been feeling a bit depressed. In another passage that same day, he mentioned that on the bus a few days earlier he had seen a blind man contentedly reading a book in braille, and reproached himself for having a bad attitude. “My discontent can be explained by something else,” he continued. “I want to really believe. I want to believe that everything in our country is good, excellent. But as soon as you take a look at life, you see something different. And it is this feeling of difference between the newspaper and life, the inability to reconcile them that torments.”

In late March 1956, after chronicling a number of positive developments – better relations with foreign countries; Soviet citizens, albeit high-ranking ones, traveling abroad and comparing foreign countries to their own; a new Russian jet-propelled airplane landing in London; and a new law that transformed the Ministry of State Security (MGB) from a punitive to reformatory institution – he affirmed: “I believe that the more time that passes, the better things will become.” The next sentence, however, changed the passage’s meaning: “I want to believe!”

147 Ibid., 82-83 (November 7, 1955).
148 Ibid., 108-9 (March 26, 1956).
Chapter 4
In a Glass Case:
The Life of an Aspiring Soviet Writer

A diarist is often a part of the particular world upon which he fixes his gaze. If he chooses that world as the object of his diary entries, it may also happen that a second object becomes himself, his vices and virtues, his failures and successes. His diary may thus become a space of reckoning, a tool to be used to improve upon his imperfect self. Something of the sort happened in the case of Abramov’s diary; the tool of an aspiring writer became the tool of an aspiring human being. If the primary imperative of the Thaw was self-transformation, the unfreezing of the self to unfreeze a society, Abramov used his diary to transform.

As the previous chapter argued, Soviet discourse held that a causal link existed between the Soviet citizen’s personal and professional life. The Soviet writer’s behavior, then, had a direct bearing on the quality of his literature. In the case of Abramov, a literary critic and university instructor who aimed to become a published novelist, both his personal and professional life had implications for the quality of the literature he was in the midst of creating. Abramov’s diary, the tool of an aspiring writer that had become the tool of an aspiring human being, thus again became the tool of an aspiring writer.

This chapter examines Abramov’s diary as an instrument he used to help himself become a writer in the sense that he harnessed it to his project of becoming a moral subject. The chapter makes clear that this moral project was not a solitary enterprise; according to Soviet discourse, one’s official collective – a Komsomol or Party cell and
school or place of employment – played an important role in helping one become a New Man. Because he saw the members of his Party cell and colleagues in his department as morally corrupt, Abramov for moral guidance relied above all upon an alternative collective consisting of his wife Liudmila Krutikova and closest friend Fedor Mel’nikov. The chapter analyzes post-Stalin-era conceptualizations of love and friendship, and evaluates the degree to which Abramov, often with Krutikova’s and Mel’nikov’s help, succeeded at becoming a good person and thus at becoming one of many engines of progressive change in a Stalin-less Soviet Union. The chapter investigates Abramov as a friend, husband, teacher, colleague, and literary critic, and demonstrates the ways in which his work on his novel, the writing of which required moral behavior, in fact undermined such behavior. It concludes that Abramov was nevertheless both a moral and immoral subject, and reflects upon the implications of this conclusion for the aesthetic and social significance of his novel and his diary.

The dissident Liudmila Alexeyeva recalls that the lingering hostility and absence of trust in the immediate post-Stalin years created a social culture in which people typically had two or three close friends.¹ Alexeyeva’s observation applies to Abramov, too, whose few close friends included his student Aleksandr Gorelov and former fellow student Fedor Mel’nikov. Of the two, Mel’nikov was the closer friend. Born in 1920 in a village in the Donbass region of eastern Ukraine, Mel’nikov moved to Leningrad in the late 1930s to study in the History Faculty at Leningrad State. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941, Mel’nikov volunteered for the Red Army and fought on

the Leningrad front. After the war he returned to Leningrad State, where he continued his studies in the History Faculty’s Department of Art History. By the mid-1950s, he had graduated, found a research position at Pushkin House, married and had two children, and was trying to make a name for himself as a painter.²

Abramov and Mel’nikov met at Leningrad State after the war. Mel’nikov had many of the qualities that Abramov found lacking in his fellow citizens. He was warm, talkative, spontaneous, effusive, playful, and charming. As captured in Abramov’s diary, he ran from place to place, appeared suddenly, remained longer than he expected to, and upon departing typically left his hat or briefcase behind.³ In short, he was colorful and original; “an artist in his soul.”⁴ Mel’nikov was a cherished “real friend,” unlike the guests at a colleague’s birthday party, who were “loathsome” and “consummate philistines […] interested in nothing more than their collections of matchboxes and rare books.”⁵ Abramov noted that after Mel’nikov learned of Khrushchev’s secret speech he condemned Stalin and the Stalin-era leadership, if in the safe company of his closest friend.⁶ To be sure, Mel’nikov was imperfect. He was uninterested in the “objective movement of life,” Abramov once quipped, drank too much, and could be “vain” and “immodest.”⁷ Yet these were the imperfections of a fundamentally good human being.

² L. V. Krutikova-Abramov and A. I. Rubashkin, eds., Vospominaniia o Fedore Abramove (Moscow: Sovetskii pisanets, 2000), 82; Tat’iana Fedorovna Mel’nikova (Fedor Mel’nikov’s daughter), Telephone interview by the author, November 16, 2007.

³ DFA, 10 (September 11, 1955) and 69 (1955).

⁴ Ibid., 11 (September 11, 1955).

⁵ Ibid., 183-84 (November 13, 1954).

⁶ Ibid., 120 (March 31, 1956). For another example, see 238-39 (May 5, 1956).

⁷ For the objective remark, see ibid., 4 (January 28, 1954); for drunkenness, 130-31 (1955); for immodesty, 6-11 (1955), 25 (1955), 61 (1955), 53 (February 26, 1956), and 170 (April 19, 1956).
Over the course of Soviet history models of friendship changed as did models of personality. The 1952 edition of *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia* defined friendship as “relations between people based on mutual personal attachment, spiritual closeness, and mutual assistance and collaboration in serving public interests.” As such, personal ties were to be subordinated to one’s devotion to the Party. If a friend disagreed with the Party, one was, first, to try to lead the friend back into the fold; but if the friend refused to budge, one was to terminate the relationship. The degree to which politics permeated friendship is evidenced by the nearly identical definitions of comradeship and friendship in the *Encyclopedia*. Under Stalin, Soviet literature included few examples of extra-professional or extra-institutional friendship; those that can be found are typically friendships between children, who, of course, are too young to have careers. The friendships are homosocial; when members of the opposite sex enter into relations with one another, they are either spouses or love interests, or the spouses or love interests of same-gender friends.

During the Thaw the homosocial nature of friendship persisted in Soviet literature, but other aspects changed. Some scholars have cast Thaw-era friendship as autonomous from a Communist system of meaning—a “private reserve,” an “island of

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9 *Bol’shaia sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, 2nd ed. [1956], s.v. “Tovarishch.” Under the entry “Tovarishchestvo,” or comradeship, the encyclopedia directs readers to “Druzhba,” or friendship.

10 This carried over into the Thaw, too. See Kochetov, “Molodost’ s nami,” *Zvezda* 9 (1954): 17-18, 30-32, 37, 95; and *Zvezda* 10 (1954): 43.

11 Abramov did have a friend of the opposite sex, Rozhdestvenskaia; it was perhaps the nonconventional nature of this friendship that led to rumors that Abramov was the father of her child. See DFA, 53 (April 27, 1954). For a collective that consists of men and women, see, for example, Vladimir Dudintsev, *Ne khlebom edinym: roman* (New York: Novoe russkoe slovo, 1957), 146.
private life,” and “feelings as something with which the Party has little to do.” 12 Thaw-era friendship was indeed a reserve or an island, or better, a refuge; but it was a refuge not from Communism, but of Communism. In an extension of the definition of sincerity in the first model of thought and behavior discussed in the previous chapter, friends were faithful not to the Party’s specific positions, but to each other, whom they saw as embodiments of the Party or Soviet spirit. 13

This was true of Abramov and Mel’nikov’s friendship as well. After its publication, Abramov’s article “People of the Kolkhoz Village in Postwar Prose,” became an object of the attacks against Novyi mir. In May 1954, Pravda and Leningradskaiia pravda condemned the article, and Abramov’s colleagues at Leningrad State began avoiding or criticizing him even if they had earlier supported his argument. In contrast, Mel’nikov remained true to his friend. “Last night Fedia came over,” Abramov wrote on May 29. “A dear, an infinitely dear person! A true friend! He had read in Leningradskaiia pravda about me, and he was tired, had not eaten the whole day, and was returning home from work. And then, having completely forgotten about food, about his own affairs, hurried to my apartment. It’s nice and a great joy to have such a


13 They did not need to be faithful to each other if the other was not interested in the Party spirit. See Andrei Lobanov and his friend Viktor in Daniil Granin, Iskateli (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1955), 16-28, 92, 137-43, 164-69, 418. In The Thaw, for example, the heroine Lena remains committed to her friend, the Jewish doctor Vera Sherer, who is ostracized after the revelation of the Doctor’s Plot. See Il’ia Erenburg, Ottepél’ (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1954), 11, 20-21. According to Thaw-era discourse, too, someone who did not have any true friends was not a good person. See the description of Drozdov in Dudintsev, Ne khlебom edinym, 31.
friend.”  

Mel’nikov’s devotion is evident not only in his subordination of the Party’s position to his friendship, but also in his simply forgetting about himself.

Abramov reciprocated if in less political circumstances. In September 1955, when Mel’nikov and his family were returning from a summer in Mel’nikov’s native Donbass in the middle of the night, Abramov made not a small point of having made the trip to the Vitebskii train station to meet his friend. “I accomplished a feat – I met Fed’ka,” he wrote in the introduction of a long passage about Mel’nikov’s return. “And however could I not have met him if he’s a friend through thick and thin.” If devotion requires sacrifice, Abramov presented his journey to the train station as a selfless, even dangerous act. “Fediukha, as always, is a real original,” he noted. “Normal people arrive during the day, in the morning, or in the evening, but he rolled up at 5:42 am.” He then described a long and harrowing trek through Leningrad in the small hours of the morning to meet his friend; it began with his having to wait for the bridges connecting Vasilevskii Island to the city center to come down, because of which he took a dark shortcut near the Saltykov Library, where he thought he would be attacked by dogs or hooligans. Yet he arrived without event. “An extraordinary happiness took hold of me,” he wrote of his arrival. “Look what a good person I am, I thought. I am meeting my friend. I came on foot, and I could have not come – I could have stayed home and written something. And I brought money along, just in case he was without a dime.”

The very fact that Abramov chronicled their friendship, in some thirty passages, reveals that theirs was not a friendship of the bygone era, during which writers wrote

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14 DFA, 97 (May 29, 1954). For another example, see 146 (July 4, 1954).

15 Ibid., 6-7 (September 11, 1955). For another example, see 120 (June 15, 1954).
little about personal relations. Their friendship had more meaning and thus demanded more words. Abramov commented upon the short shrift given to personal relations to the extent that this regrettable phenomenon persisted into the post-Stalin years. “The other day I read a sketch about Shaliapin (a small one),” he wrote in 1955. “Not a word was written about the singer’s personal life, about his wife and so on. But surely this is interesting. The same is true of our art. Everything personal, individual, and human is rejected. In the human being only the professional-official is seen.”

As he presented it, Abramov and Mel’nikov’s friendship resembled that of German romantics. “We parted like lovers,” he noted in the amorous language of romanticism of one of their outings. “Neither one of us wanted to leave the other.” Yet their relationship was informed not by an ethos inimical to the dominant ideology of their time, as in the case of the nineteenth-century romantics, but by a philosophy they believed truly embodied it. In the cherished social space they created, Abramov and Mel’nikov dined and drank; discussed culture, history, and politics; exchanged information they gathered themselves or from their respective social networks; visited museums and took boat rides and fishing trips; and interrogated each other’s thoughts and actions. Abramov also shared drafts of sections and chapters from his novel with
Mel’nikov, while Mel’nikov shared his art with Abramov. In September 1958, Abramov gave his friend a copy of the Neva volume in which Brothers and Sisters first appeared and, in an inscription, referred to the novel as “our creation.”

Abramov was not always the greatest friend. In an egregious example of fraternal failure, he even stole from Mel’nikov. The event occurred in February 1956, after he and Mel’nikov had taken a day trip to the northern reaches of Leningrad to buy firewood for the remaining months of winter. Having to leave early to pick up his son from art class, Mel’nikov asked Abramov if he would be willing to drop off his bundles of wood in the courtyard of his building. Abramov was annoyed; in his diary, he accused his friend of valuing his own time but not his friend’s. Nevertheless, Abramov obliged. Yet, while unloading the firewood at Mel’nikov’s building, he took several of the larger pieces for himself. In his passage about the event, he berated himself: “[W]hat a loathsome little soul I have! […] Son of a bitch. Who am I robbing? My own best friend. And after all, I don’t even need a lot of firewood. I have enough until the spring […] But I didn’t care – I was envious and snatched it. Here is the property-owning psychology. How I was repulsed by myself!”

A vestige of capitalism in his soul had led him to steal from his best friend; in isolating the old-world remnant, he tried to purge himself of it, and to according to Soviet fiction of the late 1940s and early 1950s. See Katerina Clark, The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual, third edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 195, 199, 204.

19 For Abramov sharing his novel and ideas for the epoch with Mel’nikov, see DFA, 4 (January 28, 1954), 10 (September 11, 1955), 25-26 (January 20, 1956), and 277 (May 24, 1956).

20 L. V. Krutikova-Abramova and G. G. Martynov, eds., V mire Fedora Abramova (St. Petersburg: Informatsionno-izdatel’skoe agenstvo “LIK,” 2005), 221. Abramov also referred to it this way in a 1959 letter to Mel’nikov. See Fedor Abramov to Fedor Mel’nikov, December 20, 1959, in Sobranie sochineni v shesti tomakh 6: 442. Mel’nikov had suggested the original title, My Countrymen, and delivered a copy of the manuscript to the journal Oktiabr’ in the summer of 1957. Krutikova-Abramova and Rubashkin, Vospominania o Fedore Abramove, 86-88.

21 DFA, 53-54 (February 26, 1956).
refashion himself as a good Communist friend and reinforce the bonds that bound his alternative collective.

Abramov also wrote often about his wife Krutikova, a third member of his collective. According to his presentation, Liusia (as he called her) was dedicated to the Communist cause, although she was not a Party member (nor was Mel’nikov, who joined the Party only in 1960). Unusually courageous, she was uncompromisingly opposed to Evgenii Naumov and Lev Plotkin and, as was discussed in the first chapter, was “among those who had no patience for the smallest injustice and was willing to fight on any occasion.”²² Curiosity and independence were central to her definition of the citizen, artist, and writer. “A human being is only a human being if he doubts and searches,” Abramov recorded her having told him in April 1956. “Once he ceases searching and doubting, he ceases to be a human being.”²³ “Liusia observed: painting is the same as poetry,” he wrote of a comment she had made at an exhibit of Leningrad painters in 1954. “The personality of the artist is needed here. Do artists, too, really have nothing to express?”²⁴

The Soviet Union was ostensibly the first country in the history of the world in which marriage was founded on true love and gender equality; according to the official discourse, Soviet marriage was a free and voluntary union of a man and woman who loved each other and wished to have a family, the primary social building block of Soviet socialism. Marriage was thus not simply a personal affair; it existed for the good of


²³ Ibid., 169 (April 8, 1956).

²⁴ Ibid., 191 (December 3, 1954).
society. Despite the gender equality enshrined in the Soviet legal code, the woman is subordinate to the man in much Soviet literature. The man’s objectives are paramount; the woman may have her own career, but it is less important than the man’s. She exists to comfort him; her love provides him the rest and respite required for his work. In service of the public good, she also watches him; she is an eye of the Party in the home.

During the Thaw, the social significance of marriage remained in Soviet literature; spouses supported one another in their respective efforts to build the Communist utopia. The subordination of the woman to the man continued as well. What changed, however, was that love acquired more significance. In various works of Thaw-era literature, one spouse leaves or divorces the other, hoping to find or finding true love elsewhere. In some works, an individual’s search for true love is a metaphor for

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25 Bol’shaia sovetskaiia entsiklopediia, 2nd ed. [1951], s.v. “Brak.”


27 See Granin, Iskateli, 197-205; and Dudintsev, Ne khlебom edinyim, 407.

28 For this idea, see Ovechkin, “Trudnaia vesna,” in Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh 2: 326.


30 See Ol’ga Berggol’ts, “Razgovor o lirike,” Literaturnaia gazeta, April 16, 1953, in Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh (Leningrad: “Khudozhestvennaia literatura,” Leningradskoe otdelenie, 1989), 2: 371, 375. Thaw-era love is often misinterpreted. See, for example, the discussion of The Thaw in Joshua Rubenstein, Tangled Loyalities: The Life and Times of Ilya Erenburg (New York: BasicBooks, 1996), 281-82, where Rubenstein writes that Erenburg “was asserting that politics had intruded too long and too violently into family life and personal relations. People had the right to ignore politics, to be happy, carefree, and in love.”
risk taking and the pursuit of higher ideals.\(^{31}\) In others, true love is possible only with someone who subscribes to Thaw-era principles, which include mutual loyalty.\(^{32}\)

Many of these features characterized Abramov and Krutikova’s marriage. In May 1953, Abramov and Krutikova coauthored a review for the Leningrad journal *Zvezda*.\(^{33}\) In the diary, however, Krutikova’s career appears subordinate to that of her husband. She had returned to Leningrad even though she, and the husband who had summoned her, feared she would be persecuted for having lived on occupied territory. As it turned out, she at first indeed had trouble finding work in Leningrad and so became an itinerant teacher, traveling to the far reaches of the Soviet Union to teach courses and administer exams. She and Abramov did not have children, which made the arrangement more viable. As the political climate changed, however, she began to find small jobs in Leningrad. In early 1954, for example, an editor at *Leningradskaia pravda* offered her an opportunity to write a review for the newspaper.\(^{34}\) By the beginning of the 1955-1956 academic year, she was able to teach correspondence courses in Soviet literature at Leningrad State.\(^{35}\) Abramov recorded having talked at length to Krutikova about her

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\(^{31}\) See Rita Guseva and her relationship with Andrei Lobanov in Granin, *Iskateli*, 53-57, 81-84, 102-4


\(^{34}\) DFA, 21 (March 6, 1954).

\(^{35}\) Ibid., 22-25 (September 24, 1955) and 37 (October 7, 1955).
teaching responsibilities and the bureaucratic hurdles she encountered. “I’m sitting and worrying,” he wrote on October 7, 1955. “I’m waiting for Liusia. I specially postponed a trip to the library. How will her first lecture go! An hour ago I walked by the lecture hall. There are not a lot of students, and she is standing behind the lectern. To not worry her, I, walking by, intentionally bent down [so she would not see him – A.P.]. Oh, I hope everything goes well!”

Yet Abramov did not note having helped Krutikova with her professional responsibilities, but did record that she was helping him write his textbook on Sholokhov.

Like Mel’nikov, Krutikova supported Abramov after Pravda condemned “People of the Kolkhoz Village in Postwar Prose.”

As discussed in the previous chapter, Abramov on various occasions endorsed the intellectual and behavioral demands that Soviet discourse made of Party members and writers. If he did not explicitly articulate the demands made of the writer in relation to himself, they permeate the text given the exceptionally high and comprehensive standard to which he held himself. The anonymous journalist’s summons to Soviet actors to abide by a moral code while doing something as mundane as walking down the street fell on receptive ears in the case of Abramov. In various aspects of his life, and not only in his friendships and marriage, he constantly strove to behave well and documented these efforts in his diary. In fact, as though taking up the journalist’s call, Abramov recorded that he had indeed conducted himself in exemplary fashion on the street, in a restaurant,

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36 Ibid., 37 (October 7, 1955).
37 Ibid., 169 (October 10, 1954).
38 Ibid., 45 (April 29, 1954).
39 See, for example, ibid., 104-7 (November 19, 1955) and 321 (September 21, 1956).
and on a tram. He wrote that during the Leningrad flood of 1955, while crossing the university grounds on his way to his dorm room, he helped two stranded university employees\textsuperscript{40}; that at the restaurant on Vasilevskii Island he reprimanded two drunk men who were swearing in the presence of women;\textsuperscript{41} and that on the tram after the soccer game between the Leningrad Zenith and the Indian national team, when three men began swearing in front of a woman and her child, he intervened and told them to stop.\textsuperscript{42}

In getting involved in the affairs of strangers, Abramov more often than not failed to achieve his goal. The anonymous journalist’s actress had it relatively easy; all she needed to do to avoid the judgment of her onlookers was to comb her hair and clean her fingernails. The task that Abramov had set for himself was far more difficult: to intrude into the lives of strangers – and, in some cases, boors and drunks to boot – and hope they would listen to Communist reason. Yet, to say the least, they did not welcome his reprimands. One of the men on the tram, for example, replied, “Close your hole or else I’ll close it for you.”\textsuperscript{43} Abramov gave no indication, however, of resolving to back off as a result.

For Abramov, not yet a published writer when he began his diary in January 1954, the part of his life ostensibly unrelated to his literature included not only his personal life, but also his professional life, in which he also held himself to a strict standard. In various passages, Abramov documented his success as a teacher and advisor. He wrote of a

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 46-47 (October 15, 1955).
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 54 (October 16, 1955).
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 20-21 (September 23, 1955).
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
Saturday lecture, for example, he had delivered that was poorly attended, but assured himself that it had gone well despite the small turnout, and complained that the department scheduled too many classes on the weekends. He recorded that a certain Larionova had praised his Sholokhov seminar as one of the department’s best, and that another student, Lesha Maksimov, had passed along that he and his classmates had enjoyed his thesis seminar.44 Noting that he had earned a reputation as a “beast” of an instructor, he grumbled that he was in fact an easy grader, as the lowest mark he had given was a “4” (the equivalent of a “B”).45

Yet Abramov also acknowledged his flaws as a teacher and advisor and urged himself to change; often Krutikova helped him detect them. “Evidently I need to think seriously about my behavior,” he told himself in February 1954 after learning that a student had complained about his heavy-handed manner. “Incidentally, Liusia said something similar to me. Hence, here I have a serious shortcoming.” One of his students, he added, had considered drowning herself in the Neva because of something he had said.46 In April 1955, he criticized himself for recommending a student for graduate school without having read her senior thesis; he had based his recommendation only on her performance during her second year.47 In May 1956, he condemned himself for having insisted at a department meeting that instructors should not have to participate in a subbotnik because they already had enough to do. “Lenin, the great Lenin, found time to

44 Ibid., 21 (March 6, 1954). For more complements, see 5 (April 17, 1955) and 28 (September 24, 1955).
46 Ibid., 8 (February 9, 1954).
47 Ibid., 5 (April 17, 1955). For similar examples, see 217 (April 21, 1956) and 260 (May 21, 1956).
participate in a subbotnik,” he confessed to his diary, “but I, a simple instructor, cite being busy. For shame!”

Abramov also wrote of his efforts to work on the characters of his colleagues. He told Irina Rozhdestvenskaia, for example, that he disapproved of her ascetic ideal, explaining that she, a single mother, would never find a husband if she continued to dress poorly. “What do you think, he’s going to be satisfied with your spiritual values,” he lectured her. “No, a person must have a dozen shirts.” Upon learning that Nikolai Lebedev had been hospitalized after he had set his apartment on fire, Abramov visited him in the hospital and tried to talk some sense into him. If he continued to drink so much, Abramov said, he was bound to lose his job. Abramov was friends with both Rozhdestvenskaia and Lebedev, but one should not interpret his intervention in their lives simply as the behavior of an insistent or concerned friend. Soviet morality required that colleagues understand and intrude into one another’s personal affairs. In these cases, however, Abramov seems to have been no more successful than he had been at the restaurant or on the tram. He provided no indication that Rozhdestvenskaia became a smarter dresser; Lebedev, for his part, was fired in November 1955.

Lebedev disappears from the diary after his dismissal from his job; Rozhdestvenskaia is a main

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48 Ibid., 240-41 (May 5, 1956). For another example of misbehavior at a department meeting, see 261 (May 21, 1956). A subbotnik is “A day’s work done by workers on a voluntary basis as part of a drive to boost the economy.” See Barry Crowe, Concise Dictionary of Soviet Terminology, Institutions, and Abbreviations (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1969), 148-49.

49 DFA, 3-4 (April 17, 1955) and 59-60 (October 16, 1955).

50 Ibid., 14-17 (September 11, 1955).

51 The demand is a theme of Granin’s Those Who Seek, in which a shortcoming of the main character, Andrei Lobanov, is his disinterest in his colleagues’ personal lives. See Granin, Iskateli, 230.

52 DFA, 101-2 (November 15, 1955).
character in the text, and Abramov, despite his seeming inability ever to change her mind, continued to argue with her about the right way to live.

Abramov also intervened in the more strictly professional affairs of his colleagues. After a May 1954 student discussion at which Plotkin claimed that Pomerantsev’s “On Sincerity in Literature” rejected Party-mindedness, Abramov confronted him and asked if he was against writers depicting the truth. After the Twentieth Party Congress, when S.V. Vallander, a deputy editor of Vestnik Leningradskogo universiteta, insisted that Abramov remove a Stalin quotation from an essay he had submitted on Sholokhov’s Virgin Soil Upturned, Abramov refused on the grounds that he would not excise Stalin from his scholarship only because Party policy after the secret speech seemed to require it. When Naumov, during a department meeting about changing the curriculum to accord with the post-congress Party line, proposed removing novels in which Stalin figured prominently such as Aleksei Tolstoi’s Bread and Petr Pavlenko’s Happiness, Abramov objected. “I, of course, rose against such unscrupulousness,” he wrote in his diary. “We must not dash to the other extreme” and delete Stalin from the pages and history of Soviet literature, which would falsify the past just as much as the cult of personality had. “Whether we like it or not, the thirty years following ’24 will go down in history as the Stalinist epoch. […] Why do we so freely and easily have our way with the facts of literature? We must critically illuminate the works and tell the students the truth. The most important thing that we must do (in

53 Ibid., 81 (May 14, 1954). For another example, involving a certain Alekseev, see 21-22 (January 20, 1956).

54 The Vestnik was published in six series in 1956, one of which, for instance, was the seriia istorii, iazyka i literatury. Vallander was a deputy editor of the entire journal.
the way of a conclusion) from the decisions of the XX congress is to cultivate
independence and a creative character.”

If Soviet critics condemned writers in the immediate post-Stalin years for writing to order and about issues they cared little about, Abramov’s attachment to his novel and its subject matter cannot be doubted, especially if emotional turmoil is any measure of attachment. He frequently wrote of trials he encountered while working on it, and his despair that he lacked the talent to finish it. “Creative work is torment!” he exclaimed in March 1954. “Where to find the words and necessary phrases. For the second day in a row I’m tormenting myself over the representation of Anfisa’s feelings. I see and feel everything, but I can’t get it down on paper […] What on earth is going on?” “I abandoned the novel, at least until the vacation,” he noted later that month. “And in general, am I correct to be doing this, laboring in this field? You read Sholokhov and you see: you are talentless!”

Abramov had encouraging moments, too, during which he felt as if he were making progress and even creating a work of merit. In these passages, his attachment to

55 DFA, 103-5 (March 26, 1956). For Abramov’s article, see F. A. Abramov, “Narod v ‘Podnatoi tseline’ M. Sholokhova,” in B. A. Larin, V. Ia. Pronn, and M. I. Privalova, eds., Mikhail Sholokhov: Sbornik statei (Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo Leningradskogo universiteta, 1956), 64-97. The article does not include citation of Stalin. For another example, see DFA, 84-85 (March 7, 1956).

56 Vsevolod Kochetov put the relationship in somewhat different form in his 1952 novel Zhurbiny: “To what extent the reasons for a person’s deeds are big or small, to that extent the deeds themselves are big or small.” See Kochetov, Zhurbiny: roman (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1952), 194. See also K. Paustovskii, “Zolotaia roza: povest’,” in Izbrannye proizvedeniia v dvekh tomakh (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaiia literatura, 1977), 1: 178-79.

57 DFA, 22 (March 9, 1954).

58 Ibid., 33 (March 31, 1954). For similar examples, see 164-65 (October 10, 1954), 176 (October 23, 1954), and 62 (October 23, 1955).
the novel is clear, too. “I am working on the novel,” he wrote in September 1954.

“Slowly, but sometimes successfully. The chapter about Vania-Sila’s funeral, it seems, turned out not too badly.”59 “All of September I worked on the novel,” he penned later that month. “It went well! Marfa is turning out interestingly. She is a real character. I am surprised myself that things are going so well.”60 “I love my people to death!” he burst out in October 1954. “They aren’t leaving my head. In my imagination more and more new details emerge. New scenes.” That same day, he noted that Rozhdestvenskaia had stopped by and asked him to read her some excerpts. As he read, her eyes welled up with tears. “What do you think?” he asked. “Why ask?” she replied. “Can you really not see? In some places it’s on the level of Sholokhov and Gogol’.” He hugged and kissed her. “Yes,” he wrote, “apparently I have grown.”61 In mid-February 1957, after Pavel Bystrov, an editor at Neva, read the novel and informed him of his intention to publish it, he exclaimed: “So I am talented!”62 “Finally opening before me is the road to literature,” he wrote a few days later, “which I have been building over the course of 6-7 years of backbreaking work.”63

The writing of Abramov’s novel, however, required more than an emotional attachment to his subject matter, a knowledge of rural life, and literary talent; it required moral behavior as well. Yet most of Abramov’s moral lapses were a function,

59 Ibid., 162 (September 1, 1954).
60 Ibid., 162 (September 18, 1954).
61 Ibid., 164-65 (October 10, 1954). For another example, see 10 (September 11, 1955) and 91-92 (November 15, 1955).
62 Ibid., 1-2 (February 1, 1957) and 15 (February 11, 1957).
63 Ibid., 16-17 (February 14, 1957).
paradoxically, of his work on the novel. One might say that the degree to which he was attached to his novel in fact undermined it; from time to time his devotion led him to subordinate almost all of the other aspects of his life to its completion and publication.

It does not seem to have affected his relationship with Mel’nikov; but the same cannot be said of his marriage to Krutikova. If Abramov valued Krutikova as a helpmeet and pined for her return to Leningrad, he also often referred to her as a nuisance. He complained of her having made him clean the floors of their dorm room before her thirty-fifth birthday party, which stole three hours of time he had intended to dedicate to the novel. On his knees with a rag in hand, he cursed her and threatened to leave her. If in the mid-1950s the Party instructed husbands to help their wives around the home, because of the weight of the “double burden” of employment and housework upon the latter, Abramov does not seem to have noticed. In a better mood that evening, he “decided to be a human being” and stepped out to buy her flowers for the first time in their five-year relationship. While buying the flowers, however, still annoyed at having had to wash the floors, he thought “nothing about Liusia,” and felt “no affection in [his] heart” upon returning home and depositing them in a vase. “What is this?” he inquired of his callousness. 64

Abramov rarely mentioned moments of marital joy; one that he mentioned is mediated by the novel. In November 1955, after Krutikova praised a section of the novel as “very strong,” Abramov, encouraged, could not sleep. Lying in bed, he began to think about a scene that he had long struggled with and, upon finding a solution to the problem,

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woke up Krutikova to tell her about it, and kissed her when she expressed her approval. “She liked it,” he noted. “I kept kissing her and saying ‘great,’ and love itself emerged.”

His devotion to his novel also hurt his teaching and got in the way of his other university responsibilities. Sholokhov, speaking at the Twentieth Party Congress, urged the Party to provide material support to aspiring young writers, and especially aspiring young writers who were teachers, explaining that the latter needed its help because they “unavoidably have to leave their former profession […] since it is impossible to be a teacher and a writer at the same time.” Abramov, of course, was not an ordinary teacher; he was an instructor at one of the Soviet Union’s finest institute of higher education, and coveted the position because it required less teaching than a similar one at a provincial institute. Upon taking the job, he seems to have believed he could strike the right balance between his current and future careers, but it proved more difficult than he had anticipated. “What am I thinking!” he exclaimed in October 1954. “I need to turn in the seminars on Sholokhov in December, and I have not even begun yet.” “Oh, what an incorrigible blockhead I am!” he cried in November 1954. “Tomorrow I have a lecture, I have nothing prepared, and I have been scribbling in the novel since the morning.” “I’m still no good at preparing lectures,” he wrote in October 1955. “But instead of preparing, since this morning I’ve been writing of my impressions of the last

65 DFA, 92 (November 15, 1955).
67 DFA, 169 (October 10, 1954).
68 Ibid., 91-92 (November 15, 1955).
several days.” 69 “The New Year! What will it bring?” he asked on January 19, in his first entry of 1956. “My wish is to finish and publish the novel. Will it come true? In the first ten days of the year I worked hard and completed four chapters. But now everything has again been disrupted. Everyday, meetings and more meetings. And exams. How to pull myself away from all this? For the sake of the novel I am sacrificing everything. I chose not to go to Vologda (I could care less about the [Sholokhov] seminars), and I have completely neglected my academic obligations and so on.” 70

In none of these passages, however, did Abramov instruct himself to pay more attention to his university responsibilities. In the October 1954 passage about the Sholokhov seminars, he noted that Rozhdestvenskaia had told him not to worry about them; he should focus on his novel, she had advised, evidently persuasively. “I’m going to advance the novel,” he wrote. “Liusia will help me with the textbook.” 71 In the October 1955 passage about his having been writing in his diary rather than preparing lectures, he noted that he had told Krutikova that she “should be scolding me.” Krutikova answered, however: “‘I never attached any significance to your lectures. Your calling is novels. And this is for the future of your novel.’” 72 Abramov’s subordination of his university responsibilities to his novel, and Rozhdestvenskaia’s and Krutikova’s encouragement of him to do so, was not necessarily disreputable behavior. Established Soviet writers often disregarded their own professional-institutional responsibilities – for example, as members of the Writers’ Union – because they believed their institutional

69 Ibid., 58 (October 16, 1955).
70 Ibid., 1 (January 19, 1956).
71 Ibid., 169 (October 10, 1954).
72 Ibid., 58 (October 16, 1955).
obligations were excessive, to the point that these burdensome obligations restricted and damaged their literary output.  

Whatever spare time his position afforded him created its own complication: he guarded his job jealously, and, despite his professed devotion to the truth, often was unwilling to take principled stands for fear of placing his job in jeopardy. In 1954, one of the largest set of passages in the diary is devoted to a conflict surrounding candidates to the Department of Soviet Literature’s graduate program, in which this dynamic manifested itself. The conflict pitted Abramov and his allies in the partbiuro – Rozhdestvenskaia, Nina Morozova, and German Safronov – against Evgenii Naumov, Lev Plotkin, and their cohort. As Abramov presented it, Naumov and Plotkin wanted to admit graduate students who would not challenge their authority, either in graduate school or upon graduating and taking up posts in the literary establishment, whereas Abramov and the partbiuro wanted to admit students who would fight for the truth and take on the likes of Naumov and Plotkin. At the center of the conflict were three undergraduates, candidates for two remaining openings in the graduate program: Naumov’s student, Aleksandr Ninov; Aleksandr Dement’ev’s student, Iurii Burtin; and Abramov’s student, Gorelov (all of whom would become well-known Soviet literary critics). Abramov supported the admission of his own student, Gorelov, and Dement’ev’s student, Burtin. There is a clear pattern to his behavior in the affair, which continued for months: first, he attacked, primarily Naumov; then, he retreated and compromised; and finally, in his diary, he condemned himself – and noted that Krutikova

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73 See E. S. Afanas’eva et al., eds., Apparat TsK KPSS i Kul’tura, 1953-1957 (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2001), 93, 140, 191.
condemned him, too – and implored himself to change. At a department meeting in February 1954, for example, Abramov took the floor and opposed Ninov’s candidacy on the grounds that he was arrogant, and suggested that he work as a teacher at a provincial school for a few years to improve his character. When Naumov protested, however, Abramov said nothing for fear of crossing him and hurting his chances of being promoted to associate professor. Later, upon describing the meeting in his diary, he urged himself to change.

But now this must end! Again the fight, again truth (istina) above all. I understand that by agreeing, by compromising, I become a scoundrel myself. To hell with the associate professorship! One should not receive it at the cost of concessions to scoundrels. After all, scoundrels don’t really care what you do. A boor yields only to strength. Thus, again a human being?

The pattern repeated itself at an Academic Council meeting in mid-May, at which Abramov, based on a close reading of Ninov’s undergraduate thesis, tried to further substantiate his claim that Ninov was arrogant. Abramov’s remarks at the meeting, which he recorded in detail in his diary, capture the causal connection in Soviet discourse between personal morality and behavior, on the one hand, and professional and political competence, on the other, better than any other passage in the diary. In his diary, Abramov presented himself as a fair and diligent reader of Ninov’s thesis, which was on Maksim Gor’kii. “I spent the whole day reading,” he noted, and opposed himself to Krutikova and his acquaintance Leonid Ershov, a scholar of satire at Pushkin House, both of whom questioned the thesis’s merit: “This is a really biased underestimation and I am against this – one needs to be just.” On the eve of the meeting, having finished reading it and drafting his comments, he hesitated: “I have to confess, I was very worried. Should I

74 DFA, 10-12 (March 6, 1954).
speak? After all, this would mean to forever disagree with Naumov and Plotkin.” Yet he could not back down, for to do so would make him no better than the “many people in our country [who] are outraged by injustice but don’t rebuff the various bureaucrats and insolent people.”

In his opening remarks at the meeting, Naumov surprised him: Abramov had expected him to oppose Gorelov’s and Burtin’s admission and support that of Ninov and a second student of his own, but Naumov announced that the department had decided to admit Gorelov. The fourth spot, he said, should be given to Ninov, not Burtin, who had once expressed and refused to recant “fallacious views” about Grigorii Melekhov, the protagonist of Sholokhov’s *The Quiet Don*. In dropping his opposition to Gorelov’s admission, Abramov wrote, Naumov had tried to make a deal: he and his allies would support Gorelov only if Abramov and his allies would support Ninov and sacrifice Burtin. Abramov, however, refused to accept the bargain, for Burtin was an “honest, frank, and determined person,” he wrote, and would never become a “weather-vane in scholarship or Naumov’s toady.”

In his own remarks at the meeting, Abramov explained that Burtin had made a mistake in his evaluation of Melekhov, but that one should not apply political labels to a mistaken student. Moving on, he again asserted that Ninov was arrogant and should be assigned to a provincial school, which would “help [him] free himself from his shortcomings, as only life properly polishes the person.” Abramov then sought to demonstrate the political significance of Ninov’s arrogance, turning the audience’s

75 Ibid., 67 (May 14, 1954).

attention to the appearance of his thesis. An undergraduate thesis, he explained, should begin with a title page listing the author, advisor, and title, but Ninov’s included a second page, which repeated his name and the title. “What is this? For what?” he asked. “It might appear to be insignificant, but it is revealing. We are literary critics and know the value of a detail. And here in this detail Ninov’s entire moral make-up reveals itself.”

The second title page had been included, he charged, to make the thesis look like a book. “Ninov, as you see,” he affirmed, “does not suffer from modesty.” Abramov, however, presented himself as a fair reader, and acknowledged that Ninov’s inclusion of the second title page may have been innocent. Yet he had found further evidence, he explained, of Ninov’s immodesty: he had written and argued his thesis with the intention to impress. Ninov had claimed, for example, to have found evidence of satire in Gor’kii’s early work, a dishonest, ludicrous assertion that he had made only to sound original. He had also maintained that if the last stage in the development of capitalist culture was comedy, as Marx had claimed, then the last stage in the development of capitalist political economy, imperialism, must also be a comedy. In Ninov’s interpretation of Marx, Abramov asserted, was the link between his morality and politics: “This is the type of political blunder to which one is led by striving for sensation and cheap effect!”

In his concluding remarks, about the soil from which Ninov’s shortcomings had sprung, Abramov moved against Naumov. “Wherever do these dishonest people come from?” he asked. “To cite the legacy of the cursed past is no longer convincing. Soon we will have lived under Soviet power for forty years. These bureaucrats and moneymakers you and I ourselves are creating – by the incorrect cultivation of youth.”

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77 DFA, 70-73 (May 14, 1954).
Abramov backed down, however, upon running into Plotkin in the hallway after the meeting. Plotkin told him that he had been correct to some extent, that Naumov should have instructed Ninov to work on his character. Yet Ninov, he continued, should not have to suffer as a consequence of his advisor’s mistake. To his later dismay, Abramov eagerly agreed and told Plotkin that Ninov should of course be admitted to the graduate program. After the exchange, he began to panic that he had irreparably damaged his relationship with Naumov. “He will not forgive me for this,” he wrote. “He will never forgive me. […] After all, by criticizing the moral character of Ninov, I exposed the unattractive soul of Naumov, which manifested itself in its entirety in Ninov.” He tried to make amends that evening at the thesis defense of Naumov’s advisee, a certain Evdokimova, who had already secured a spot in the graduate program even though she did not deserve it. During the defense, after Morozova and Rozhdestvenskaia challenged the thesis’s central argument, Abramov defended it. In his diary, he condemned himself again and again: “Oh, you miserable coward!″/ “I began to hesitate and shamefully capitulated in the end.”/ “I cursed myself and Liusia cursed me, but it was already too late. I am in general like this – I always ‘see the light’ and regret post-factum.” To blame was the “damned intelligentsia morass.” “When the hell will you learn, you swine?” he asked himself. “When the hell will you shake off all of that intelligentsia mire? After all, you are a peasant (muzhik)! You ought to have a strong hand in the fight with the parasites of the people.” Again, he told himself that he would conduct himself differently next time: “No, if I am really going to fight, then I must fight

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78 Ibid., 70, 74 (May 14, 1954). The legacy of the cursed past, however, continued to debilitate, but indirectly, through the older generation, Abramov and his colleagues, who had not transformed themselves and thus the old intelligentsia milieu. For this idea about the vestiges of capitalism, see Kochetov, “Molodost’ s nami,” Zvezda 10 (1954): 6.
to the end, to victory! With a faint heart it’s better not to spoil for a fight. With the impudent there should be no mercy!”

Abramov’s compromises for the sake of his job may appear difficult to reconcile with his authorship of “People of the Kolkhoz Village in Postwar Prose,” which several scholars have described as a uniquely courageous article. Polly Jones, for example, has argued that Abramov’s article “obliquely held Stalin responsible for the enormous critical and commercial success of idealised portrayals of post-war rural life [...] At one point in his sarcastic description of the improbable feats and implausibly high living standards in Babaevsky’s novels, Abramov accused the author of succumbing to the same ‘mood’ of heady optimism as Stalin, who often claimed – by implication, wrongly – that Soviet power ‘could do anything.’

Jones’s assertion, however, is based on a misreading of Abramov’s article and his quotation of Stalin. In the quotation, Stalin in fact criticized young Party cadres for their belief that Soviet power “could do anything,” and Abramov embraced Stalin’s criticism and applied it to rural writers like Babaevskii. Abramov’s article was a more moderate affair. Abramov saw no difference between the position he took in his essay and the position of the Party as presented by Khrushchev at the September 1953 Central Committee plenum. “It’s strange to see this

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79 DFA, 74-77 (May 14, 1954). The translation of intelligentshchina as “intelligentsia morass” is Igal Halfin’s. See Igal Halfin, Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 71, 76. As it turned out, Gorelov and Burtin were at first admitted to the graduate program, whereas Ninov was rejected. Naumov, however, succeeded in overturning Burtin’s admission and Ninov’s rejection. See Burtin, Ispoved’ shestidesiatnika, 39.


81 See Abramov, “Liudi kolkhoznoi derevni v poslevoennoi proze,” 214.
hackwork right now,” he wrote in March 1954 of a film that presented an embellished picture of the Soviet countryside, “when the Party has unequivocally said [at the September 1953 plenum] that the situation in the village is not very well.”

He also admitted in his diary that he had not been as critical in his article as he would have liked, noting, after the Party and literary establishment began criticizing him, that he had written it “timidly and gingerly.”

That said, Abramov’s penchant for compromise does not inform his passages about his effort to publish his article. In January and February 1954, when Khrushchev began to overtake Malenkov, articles in Literaturnaia gazeta and Znamia criticized Pomerantsev’s “On Sincerity in Literature.” In February, Novyi mir’s editors began to anticipate criticism for publishing Mikhail Lifshits’s “The Diary of Marietta Shaginian” that same month. As a result of the attacks, the editors hesitated to publish Abramov’s article. Meanwhile, Abramov remained true to his article’s position, believing it to be the Party’s position, too. In his diary between late January and late March, he wrote of the deplorable cautiousness of Dement’ev, his principal contact at Novyi mir, and Dement’ev’s fellow editors, who had repeatedly postponed the article’s publication.

“You understand, Fedor, Pomerantsev’s article, Lifshits’s article, and your article – this is already a line,” Dement’ev once told him. “And what kind of line at that! We’re saying

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82 DFA, 21-22 (March 9, 1954).

83 Ibid., 90 (May 27, 1954). Katerina Clark correctly notes that Abramov’s article did not mark a clear break with the Stalin era. “All through the forties,” Clark writes, “critics spoke out against [the no-conflict theory and varnishing] in articles and polemics that were published quite freely. Many an article was published attacking the kolkhoz idylls of Babaevsky, for instance (though critics of the Khrushchev era [among whom she counts Abramov], who were anxious to establish that the policies of that era were new, found it expedient to claim that Babaevsky’s defects were not noticed under Stalin).” Clark does not provide the reasons for these critics’ anxiety or their claims’ expedience. See Clark, The Soviet Novel, 207-8.

84 DFA, 7-8 (February 9, 1954).
that we don’t see anything positive in our literature [sic]. […] If only we could know what those on high thought about Babaevskii. You understand, so we wouldn’t make any mistakes… To somehow guess…” “My god, what petty people,” Abramov wrote. “And this is Dement’ev, whom everyone considers an outstanding person.”

Urging the editors to publish the essay as soon as possible, Abramov and Krutikova attached a three-page postscript to a second draft of the essay, signed by them both and written in Krutikova’s hand, in which they summarized the eighty-page double-spaced text that preceded it. The postscript, however, was more than a précis; why, after all, would Novyi mir’s editors need a summary of an essay they had already read twice? It was also an affirmation of their principles and an implicit plea for the editors to publish the attached article as soon as possible. In closing the postscript, Abramov and Krutikova issued a programmatic statement: “[O]nly truth – straightforward and unprejudiced – only impassioned fervor in the fundamental processes of our life, only courageous and [text illegible – A.P.] are the most fundamental conditions for the creation of works that are truly momentous and necessary for the people, and that are capable of withstanding the test of time. Writers and critics ought to make for themselves precisely this main conclusion from the latest decisions of the Party and government on questions of agriculture.”

As the political climate became more repressive, however, Abramov began to compromise. For example, he toned down his article, although it is unclear to what degree these revisions were forced upon him by his editors. The original title of the

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85 Ibid., 13-14 (March 6, 1954). See also 7-8 (February 9, 1954) and 8-9 (February 23, 1954).
86 F. 1702, op. 6, d. 540, l. 80-82.
piece, for example, was “Sins in the Field of Kolkhoz Literature,” which at some point in the editing process was changed to the neutral “People of the Kolkhoz Village in Postwar Prose.”

The diary reveals that his editors in fact compelled him to make some changes. In his diary on March 20, commenting on a Boris Riurikov article in Literaturnaia gazeta in which Riurikov condemned Pomerantsev’s “On Sincerity in Literature,” Abramov noted that Dement’ev was wrong to have excised criticism of Riurikov from his article. On April 4, he wrote of having read the published version of his article and discovered that the editors had “cropped and smoothed over all the edges. It’s a shame! And this after I had already signed the proofs. It’s outrageous.”

In a May letter to his friend Lia Levitan, he explained: “I regret one thing – that the editorial board of Novyi mir removed from the article all the biting and courageous wording. If one is really going to speak, then one should speak at the top of one’s voice and dot one’s ‘i’s and cross one’s ‘t’s.”

Within weeks of the article’s appearance in Novyi mir, the literary establishment, followed by the Party, moved against it. At a three-day meeting of the Writers’ Union administration, a number of critics and writers denounced Abramov’s essay, along with Pomerantsev’s and Lifshits’s articles. Riurikov and Aleksei Surkov, the union chairman, slandered Abramov’s essay as “menshevik” and “opportunistic.” In late April and May, criticism began to appear in the press. Unlike the reaction against Pomerantsev, who had been the focus of the earlier Literaturnaia gazeta and Znamia pieces, none of

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87 F. 1702, op. 6, d. 542, l. 1.

88 DFA, 30 (March 20, 1954). See also 2 (January 22, 1954).

89 Ibid., 34 (April 4, 1954).


these articles centered around Abramov or even the criticism section of Novyi mir. They attended to various works – Vera Panova’s Seasons of the Year, Erenburg’s The Thaw, and others – in a comprehensive appraisal of contemporary literature in the run up to December’s Second Congress of Soviet Writers. None of the criticism of Abramov was as harsh as that at the Writers’ Union meeting. The articles alleged that he had overstated the negative phenomena in Soviet life and had forbidden depiction of progressive phenomena; that he only focused on the shortcomings of Soviet literature or condemned it entirely, and thus opposed Socialist Realism. The most consequential piece was a May 25 article in Pravda, the Party’s flagship periodical, which repeated the charges against Pomerantsev and noted that the other articles – including a fourth essay, Mark Shcheglov’s review of Leonid Leonov’s The Russian Forest, published earlier that month – had caused “serious alarm.”

In diary passages about the campaign against his article, Abramov again complained of Dement’ev and the other editors’ lack of aggressiveness. “They’re engaged in the fight, but they’re looking around, thinking: should we do it this way? Will the leadership approve?” he wrote on April 29. “Whenever will people finally rid themselves of their slavish psychology? The cowardice of the figures at ‘N.M.’ is shocking.” The following sequence of ideas in the passage suggests that, while criticizing the editors, Abramov was also worried about the consequences for himself.

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While he first commented on the cowardice of the board, he then noted that “[a]n editorial board, if it agreed with the opinions of an author, ought to defend him from the hostile attacks of various scoundrels. The honor of the author is the honor of the editorial board.” Later in the passage, however, he acknowledged that the editorial board had reason to hesitate: they themselves might be punished if they were too aggressive. “Yet there is nothing strange here,” he admitted. “After all, all of them know what kind of reward follows a courageous statement. Dement’ev related that [in Leningrad] at the division of writers he was declared a popkovets [an associate of the first secretary of the Leningrad Regional Committee, P.S. Popkov, at the time of the Leningrad Affair]. Let him make some kind of ill-considered act and where is the guarantee that he will not be reminded of ‘the old,’ that this act will not be connected to the ‘popkovshchina’?”

Abramov was worried not only about losing his job, but also about the possibility of arrest, a concern that highlights the uncertainty of the political climate in the immediate post-Stalin years. In passages regarding criticism of his essay, he seems to have been gathering material for a defense should he be brought before his Party group, a higher Party body, or a legal organ for questioning. He chronicled the reviews and focused on the attacks against his and Pomerantsev’s articles, recording the publication in which the articles appeared, the publication date or issue number, the title (sometimes),

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94 A partgruppa, short for partiinaia gruppa, was a subdivision of a pervichniaia organizatsiia, or Primary Organization, the “[o]fficial name of the smallest Party (and Komsomol) organization. The minimum membership is three and such organizations are set up in Enterprises, Institutions, Military Units, etc. Primary Organizations comprising more than ten members form a Bureau.” Until 1934 the Primary Organization was called the partiinaia iacheika, or Party Cell. See Crowe, Concise Dictionary of Soviet Terminology, Institutions, and Abbreviations, 105, 107, 173. DFA, 54 (May 10, 1954), 88-90 (May 27, 1954), 97 (May 28, 1954). Abramov did not mention the Partiinaia zhizn’ article until June 15. See 114 (June 15, 1954).
and the author, and quoted, paraphrased, and refuted the arguments. Few people had been arrested after Stalin’s death for anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda, under Article 58-10 of the RSFSR Criminal Code, but Abramov could not be sure the trend would continue.\footnote{For the arrest of employees of institutes of higher education, see Benjamin Tromly, “Re-Imagining the Soviet Intelligentsia: Student Politics and University Life, 1948-1964,” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2007), 288. According to data cited in this dissertation, no employees of institutes of higher education were arrested in 1954.} In the opening passage of a May 27 entry, the first after the appearance of the Pravda article, Abramov, worried he might be arrested and his diary confiscated, addressed the arresting KGB officers:

> Why am I writing all this down? Some bastard, having read my notes, would probably say: “Well! He indeed does not like our reality.” So you should know: I do not want a government other than Soviet government. There is no life for me without it. I shed my blood for it during the war; I nearly starved to death. But I want for us to make fewer errors and mistakes, for there to be less arbitrariness. I want for the Russian peasant to live better. I want a great Soviet literature.\footnote{DFA, 88 (May 27, 1954). In the passage, Abramov employs a strategy commonly used by Communists to defend themselves in Party disciplinary hearings in the postwar period: citation of service and suffering or injury in the Second World War. See Edward D. Cohn, “Disciplining the Party: The Expulsion and Censure of Communists in the Post-War Soviet Union, 1945-1961,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 2007), 355-56, 361, 365-66.}

On June 18, Abramov compromised. He was compelled to confess before his department Party group that he had understated the merits of rural prose in his article. He confessed not because of fear of arrest, he wrote in his diary, but because if he lost his job he would not be able to write his novel or help support his brother Mikhail. His colleagues, he related in dozens of passages, were clearly and for self-serving reasons opposed to the position he had taken in his article. The few colleagues who had originally been well disposed to the article changed their tunes after the criticism began to
It was in fact his principal allies in the department – Morozova, Rozhdestvenskaia, and Nikolai Emel’ianov, among others – who pushed him to confess, believing that the department, which had approved the article before he had submitted it to *Novyi mir*, would be punished if it failed to react to the Party press, all the more so since it was rumored that a Central Committee resolution on *Novyi mir* would soon appear. On June 14, Morozova and a panicked Rozhdestvenskaia had urged him to confess to the charges made in a *Partiinaia zhizn’* article at a meeting of the department Party group. Abramov had categorically refused, but admitted that he may have understated the merits of rural prose, even though he had had no intention of comprehensively evaluating it, and that he also may have made some “imprecise formulations.” On June 16, Rozhdestvenskaia again tried to convince him and, this time, Abramov proposed a compromise: he would confess to having made minor mistakes, but not to having rejected Socialist Realism or anything else, a bargain Rozhdestvenskaia seems to have accepted. On June 27, he documented his confession in his diary, and emphasized that his actions were not his own: “Self-flagellation has occurred! How I tried not to, but I was obliged to compromise. The mistakenness of my article, otherwise the possibility of hardships would not have been ruled out (that is, there certainly would have been *orgvyvody* [organizational conclusions]).” “What is to be done?” he asked.

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97 For colleagues who reacted favorably to the article before the criticism appeared, see DFA, 41 (April 16, 1954), 44 (April 29, 1954), and 52 (April 27 [sic], 1954). For colleagues who continued to support him after the criticism appeared, see 54 (May 10, 1954), 111 (June 4, 1954), 117 (June 15, 1954), and 126 (June 16, 1954). For colleagues who reacted cautiously or negatively before or immediately after it appeared, see 8-9 (February 23, 1954) and 44, 52 (April 29, 1954). For colleagues who reacted negatively after the criticism, see 54-55 (May 10, 1954), 92-93 (May 27, 1954), 99 (May 29, 1954), 117-19 (June 15, 1954), and 140 (June 30, 1954).

98 Ibid., 120-23/24 (June 16, 1954).
“Do I really not have enough negative lessons in my memory? I need to write my novel and help Mikhail.”

That summer the campaign against Novyi mir reached its apex. In July, an article in Oktiabr’ revived some of the language of the late Stalin era, alleging that the four articles gave “material to our enemies” and amounted to a “well thought-out line” similar not only to that of Pereval, but also to that of the “cosmopolitan […] antipatriots” of Literaturnyi kritik, a journal Lifshits had been associated with and which was suppressed in 1940. On July 23, the Central Committee passed its resolution, “On the Mistakes of the Editorial Board of the Journal Novyi mir,” and on August 11, the Writers’ Union presidium passed its own resolution, which accused Abramov of rejecting the progressive in Soviet life and misunderstanding the September 1953 and February 1954 Party plenums. On August 17, Literaturnaia gazeta published the Writers’ Union resolution; the Central Committee resolution was never published.

Abramov spent that summer in Verkola. Upon his return to Leningrad in late August, he confessed again, this time to the charges in the Writers’ Union resolution at a Leningrad regional-committee plenum on August 28. Like some of the earlier entries,

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99 Ibid., 126 (June 27, 1954). He did not provide any details about the “negative lessons.”

100 See Z. Kedrina, “Mnogoobrazie zhizni i literatury,” Literaturnaia gazeta, July 29, 1954, 3-4, which criticized Shcheglov; and Aleksei Surkov, “Slovo pisatelya: ideinoe voruzhenie literatury,” Oktiabr’ 7 (July 1954): 139-49. For background on Lifshits and Literaturnyi kritik, the editorial board of which included Lifshits and Igor Sats, see Frankel, Novyi mir, 41, 184n10-11.

101 For mention of the Central Committee resolution, see E. S. Afanas’eva et al., eds., Apparat TsK KPSS i Kul’tura, 1953-1957, 284, 292. For the Writers’ Union resolution, see “V prezidiume Soiuza pisatelya,” Literaturnaia gazeta, August 12, 1954, 1; and “Ob oshibkakh zhurnala ‘Novyi mir’: Rezolutsiia prezidiuma pravleniia Soiuza sovetskikh pisatelei,” Literaturnaia gazeta, August 17, 1954, 3. For an account of the Writers’ Union presidium meeting at which the resolution was passed, see “Za vysokeiu ideinost’ nashei literatury!” Literaturnaia gazeta, August 17, 1954, 3. See also Frankel, Novyi mir, 63, 66-69.
Abramov’s entry about this second confession captures his fear of arrest and his compromises for the sake of his novel. Yet it also captures his criticism of the Party leadership, including the Central Committee, and thus testifies to the idea that after Stalin’s death the ordinary citizen had become the font of truth and the primary agent of historical change.

At the plenum, Abramov was censured in the terms of the Writers’ Union resolution by Frol Kozlov, the regional-committee first secretary. During a break in the proceedings, A.I. Popov, the head of the regional committee’s division of science and culture, found Abramov in the hallway and insisted that he speak. While speaking, to make his confession more palatable to himself, Abramov wrote on August 31, “I thought about one thing: to help the Party – if necessary, at the cost of my own abasement, abasement being the cost of renouncing the truth – in order not to allow our enemies to celebrate. If the CC has judged my article, then I, as a soldier of the Party, must observe its decision.” He had thus acted according to the Stalin-era demand that a Communist fall in line behind the Central Committee, but had done so only in part: he had not assimilated, but merely “observed,” the Party’s decision, and for instrumental or geopolitical reasons – “not to allow our enemies to celebrate,” which the July *Okтябръ* article and perhaps Kozlov in his speech had accused him of enabling. Although he had renounced the position he had taken in his article, he still believed it was the truth.

Abramov also articulated these ideas in a discussion of Kozlov’s reaction to his confession. He had thought his confession would appease Kozlov, but the first secretary in fact intensified his attack. In his closing remarks, he “mocked and taunted me, and called my statement [mockingly] ‘a speech of repentance.’ But this was indeed a selfless
confession! Then he said that I supposedly was not completely candid and did not name those who had directed me. Finally, shaking his fists, he broke out with wild threats: I, according to him, am undermining the Soviet system and am taking a stand against the collective-farm system.” In accusing Abramov of not having “named those who had directed [him],” Kozlov was likely referring to an admission Tvardovskii had made at an August 11 meeting of the Writers’ Union presidium, where he had accepted complete blame for the appearance of the four articles and claimed to have played a “direct practical role in the work of the criticism and bibliographic sections,” and that “not only the editing and not only the instructions (ukazaniie) to the authors, but even the titles of these articles, detailed consultation and supervision belonged to me.” Abramov may not have been aware of the extent of Tvardovskii’s confession, which had been published in Literaturnaia gazeta but only in part. If he was aware of it, he may have believed that Kozlov was recasting Tvardovskii’s confession to implicate him in a conspiracy. Whatever the case, Kozlov’s accusations were the most frightening to date; they echoed Article 58-10, the violation of which was punishable by anything from three months in prison to death, with the sentence being more severe for membership in a counterrevolutionary organization. “And all this from the high tribune of the plenum,” Abramov wrote. “You can imagine my state! I had the impression that he was

103 For an account of the Writers’ Union presidium meeting at which the resolution was passed, see “Za vysokuiu ideinost’ nashei literatury!” Literaturnaia gazeta, August 17, 1954, 3.
screaming in the direction of the secret service (*razvedka*): what are you looking at, take him away.” Abramov had disgraced himself by confessing, but the fact that his confession had failed to placate Kozlov made him feel even worse. Here, he explicitly asserted that the Central Committee, in its resolution, had been untruthful, and that if he had tried while confessing to think only about helping the Party, he had also been thinking about his own interests and his novel.

Yes, it’s in vain that I spoke, in vain that I admitted to that of which I’m not guilty. It’s said in the resolution that I groundlessly criticize Soviet literature, take a stand against all that is progressive and defend all that is old, that I don’t understand the CC decree on questions of agriculture and so on.

It’s all untrue! Where, when did I oppose the progressive? I opposed the bad representation of the progressive.

[...] Damned novel! It was for you that I sacrificed my honor.¹⁰⁵

After the plenum, worried about the consequences of Kozlov’s concluding remarks, Abramov approached the first secretary and scheduled an appointment with him for the next morning at Leningrad Party headquarters in the Smol’nyi Building. Abramov’s goal was to challenge Kozlov’s accusations and learn if he intended to include them in the published account of the plenum in *Leningradskaiia pravda*, where accounts of regional-committee plenums customarily appeared. In Abramov’s description of the meeting, one again finds the idea that the ordinary citizen was the source of truth and primary agent of historical change. During the conversation, Kozlov either clarified or revised his first accusation: the other parties involved had not been Abramov’s partners in a conspiracy but rather had manipulated him. That is, Abramov had not acted of his own accord, which diminished his responsibility for his actions. Of

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the charge that he had opposed the Soviet and collective-farm systems, Kozlov explained that he had simply intended to make an example of Abramov for “certain old men,” by whom he likely meant the 50-year-old Dement’ev, who may have been in the audience. Abramov, while relieved, insisted that he alone had been responsible for his article, which he again repented for having written, and added that he did not appreciate being made an example of. Before leaving, he asked Kozlov if he intended to publish his concluding remarks, to which Kozlov replied he would not. “I, as always,” Abramov wrote, “was deeply moved, and began to prattle: ‘Thank you. You’ve cheered me up. I was ready to hang myself.’”

Abramov’s description of the meeting is more “literary” than earlier sections of the passage and earlier entries in the diary. The literariness begins with the subject, a conversation between a Party superior and ordinary citizen or rank-and-file Communist, which often made for the climax of a Socialist Realist novel. In the Socialist Realist novel, the Party superior is presented as a positive hero: concerned for the masses, a patient listener, and a clear, simple, and direct speaker, whose blessing consummates his interlocutor’s elevation from spontaneity to consciousness. Abramov, however, portrayed Kozlov as something else. Providing a physical description of Kozlov – the first such description in the diary – he wrote:

I had barely entered the office when Kozlov spiritedly (molodtsevato) got up from behind the desk and, softly taking a step on the rug, made his way to greet me, smiling affably and

106 Making an example of someone was a common practice. See Cohn, “Disciplining the Party,” 63.
109 Ibid., 36, 39, 41.
extending both hands for a handshake. White little teeth, a well-groomed, powdered face, soft, curly hair, on which the barber had labored more than a little, a meticulously pressed suit, like that of a variety actor, a light blue shirt and a variegated little tie, a stylish one. His entire imposing, fashion-conscious figure expressed contentment.

In the first sentence, Kozlov appears youthful, energetic, gentle, and generous, as should the Party leader in a Soviet novel. In the second and third sentences, however, he appears foppish and self-satisfied, which recasts the first sentence as a portrayal of affectation. Abramov remarked upon a “strange incongruity between his almost completely gray hair and receding hairline [which lent him a certain gravity], and his completely smooth face, which lofty thoughts and concerns had not furrowed with wrinkles.” Per a convention of Socialist Realist characterization, according to which external appearances manifest internal natures, Abramov noted a second, more psychological incongruity, between Kozlov’s thoughts and actions as he delivered his closing remarks: “Pouncing on me with unfathomable accusations from the high tribune, Kozlov brandished his fists. But it was a strange thing: behind this gesture I saw neither strong anger, moved by great passion, nor conviction.”

The portrait served to distinguish Kozlov from one of his predecessors, Sergei Kirov, the Leningrad first secretary who was assassinated in 1934, and depict the degeneration of the Party leadership: “I looked at Kozlov and thought, wherever is the imposing, long-maned head of Kirov, with those pronounced, as if engraved, wrinkles on his face, and where is the fiery speech of the orator?”

In the conclusion of his account of the meeting, Abramov penned the following:

Leaving Smol’nii, I stopped in front of the Lenin monument [in the front garden].

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111 DFA, 155-56 (August 31, 1954).
A small, ordinary man who has played an immeasurable role in history (The literal translation of this sentence is: A small, ordinary man on the immeasurably high pedestal of history (Malen'kii, zemnoi chelovek na nepomerno vysokom tsokole istorii). In my translation, I have tried to unpack the metaphor – A.P.). A hand energetically thrust forward, a mouth agape with a passionate cry, short legs as if in motion, and a cap in the other hand.

A good monument! A very good monument!\(^{112}\)

This may seem a curious conclusion to a passage about Abramov’s having admitted, again, to having written a harmful article. Yet Abramov must have been tremendously relieved that the accusations Kozlov had made in his concluding remarks would not appear in *Leningradskaia pravda*.\(^{113}\) The two paragraphs accord with the conventions of Socialist Realist literature, in which conclusions are optimistic, present the protagonist as a New Man, and often are mere moments of radiance against the background of a bleak present.\(^{114}\) What is more, Abramov was calling upon himself to be transformed. If Lenin had been a “small, ordinary man” and had “played an immeasurable role in history,” Abramov, himself small and ordinary, could do the same.

Even if Abramov subordinated his article and Iurii Burtin’s academic career to his novel, both the article and graduate-program affairs demonstrate that his novel was by no

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\(^{112}\) Ibid., 160 (August 31, 1954).

\(^{113}\) On September 1, an article about the regional-committee plenum appeared in *Leningradskaia pravda* and, as Kozlov promised, did not include the charges he had made in his closing remarks. It mentioned only the accusation that Abramov and others had tried to “commit to oblivion the principles of the Party-mindedness of literature, and incorrectly interpret the directives of the Party about the fight against the so-called no-conflict theory.” Narrowing its focus to Abramov, it asserted that his article “demonstrates that the author incorrectly understood the decisions of the September and February-March Plenums of the CC KPSS.” See *Leningradskaia pravda*, “Plenum Leningradskogo oblastnogo komiteta KPSS,” September 1, 1954, 2-3. A general announcement about the plenum can be found in *Leningradskaia pravda*, August 29, 1954, 1. “I’m mentioned in a temperate tone, and my speech is cited in a most abbreviated form,” Abramov observed. “Good!” See DFA, 162 (September 1, 1954).

means his only concern. He may have been devoted to it above all, but he was also
dedicated to his work as a teacher and literary critic. Few people – Krutikova,
Mel’nikov, Gorelov, and Rozhdestvenskaia – knew about his literary dreams. To most of
his colleagues, he was an academic through and through. They believed he had a lot to
recommend himself as such; so much, in fact, that they wanted him to replace Naumov
and become chair of the Department of Soviet Literature. The idea was first raised
informally in November 1954 by Rozhdestvenskaia, Safronov, Igor Lapitskii, and Boris
Larin, the dean of the Philology Faculty; and in late 1955 the department partbiuro and
partkom endorsed the proposal.\footnote{DFA, 179-80 (November 4, 1954) and 190 (December 3, 1954); and for the partbiuro and partkom, see 41 (October 9, 1955) and 78-79 (October 30, 1955). The partkom, short for partiinyi komitet or Party committee, was the leading Communist organ in a given institution.}

Yet Abramov was opposed to the idea because of his novel. “Why should I argue
with everyone?” he asked in his diary on November 7, 1955. “Why do I need a new
collar around my neck when I’m still suffocating in the old one. I’m sick of work. I
want to drop everything and write. The clock is ticking and for a month already I haven’t
written a line. And I can’t. I’m the type of person who’s suited to doing one thing at a
time. To do several things simultaneously – of this I’m incapable. Oh, my novel! Will I
ever emerge with you into the light!”\footnote{Ibid., 82-83 (November 7, 1955).} That same day he wrote that Krutikova, Ershov,
and Rozhdestvenskaia had told him it would be unethical to reject the appointment
should he receive it, given his opinion of Naumov and the state of the department. “If
you turn this down,” Ershov lectured him, “then you are a windbag. What worth then are
all your words!”117 In December, he noted that a certain Stepanishchev had approached him in the university yard and complained that the “French,” i.e., the Jews, were overrepresented in the department, and that he needed to become chair to remove them or dilute their influence.118

That same month, Abramov cited a second reason for his opposition to the appointment: he did not think he was qualified. “What are they doing?” he asked. “I do not think I have any right to this position. It is terrible to recall that recently I was forced to miss two classes because I was incapable of writing a lecture. Nothing was coming together. How could I be chair of the department? But no one even wants to listen. Everyone is convinced of my abilities. Why? After all, this is serious business!” He shared his reservations with the partbiuro, and added that he was too cantankerous to hold a leadership position. Yet Berezhnoi, Rozhdestvenskaia, Emel’ianov, Morozova, and everyone else in the room disagreed, insisting that he was the right person to replace Naumov. “Abramov, as opposed to many others, has his own convictions, for which he has suffered,” Emel’ianov said. “Abramov is one of the few for whom the fate of literature is dear and who speaks out in the press on the vital questions related to its development.”119

On March 26, 1956, Abramov confessed that he had secretly coveted the position: “What a loathsome nature I have! […] Vanity is eating away at me. After all, to speak candidly, somewhere in the depths of my soul I am not against becoming chair. It is an

117 Ibid., 82 (November 7, 1955). For more from Rozhdestvenskaia and Krutikova, see 78-79 (October 30, 1955).

118 Ibid., 138 (December 12, 1955). For more, see 129 (December 8, 1955), 138-39 (December 12, 1955), and 149 (December 29, 1955).

honor and a glory. Son of a bitch!” Rozhdestvenskaia, he wrote, had been summoned to the regional committee to speak to Popov, who had replaced Kozlov as first secretary, and Abramov had told her that he would not oppose the appointment. “I hid behind a consideration of a principled character: the restoration of Naumov would be our defeat and so on. However, this is true. But here is the trouble: I have an ulterior motive, too – to become chair myself.” The ulterior motive of careerism bothered him so much – as did a worry that he would not be able to hide it – that he changed his mind and chose to withdraw his candidacy. On March 27, he wrote that the partbiuro and Aleksandr Aleksandrov, the university president, had approved his appointment, and that he had gone to the partbiuro to insist that they annul their decision, but had been rebuffed. A couple of days later, he visited Larin and tried to impress upon him that the department would not benefit if he took the post, but Larin urged him to reconsider, assuring him that he could quit if he found the work intolerable.

In April, the regional committee ratified Abramov’s nomination, and he accepted the position. His reservations lingered, however, for all of the reasons cited above. “And what a fool I am,” he wrote on April 8. “To allow myself to be condemned to this drudgery. And all because [I have] a lot of vanity and [am] a shameful ditherer.” He remained convinced that the department would not benefit. He was doomed to follow orders with which he did not agree; the position had already begun “killing the human being in me,” he wrote, for he had just penned a long passage about a student, but without

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120 Ibid., 107 (March 26, 1956).

121 Ibid., 109 (March 27, 1956).

122 Ibid., 112-13 (March 29, 1956).
thought or feeling. The implication is that the behavior of university officials, let alone
of ordinary citizens, could not have a positive effect on Soviet life. “And the novel?” he
lamented. “What have I done? After all, the department chair precludes artistic
craftsmanship.”

On April 19, however, he concluded that he had overreacted; no one else deserved
the position, certainly not Naumov. “No, to hell with it!” he exclaimed. “There’s no
need to stoop, off with the shameful feeling of guilt. […] Keep your head up, kid! You
didn’t steal anything; you’re not a careerist. You’re in your place!” He wrote nothing
about his novel; either department affairs had become more important to him in the wake
of the Twentieth Party Congress, or he believed he could both chair the department and
finish his book.

Nor did he write anything more about an inability to have a positive impact. He
seems to have believed that he should at least try to be a force for change, for he wrote
much more in his diary about the department’s students after accepting the position. The
trouble with Abramov’s objective, however, was that the students tended to harbor and
take more provocative positions than he and his likeminded colleagues. The vast
majority of the students did not challenge the principles of the Soviet system, but what
they wanted was more liberty to express themselves than the Party allowed. What
Abramov wanted to achieve had thus already been achieved; many of his students had

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123 Ibid., 164-69 (April 8, 1956).
124 Ibid., 170 (April 19, 1956).
125 Tromly, “Re-Imagining the Soviet Intelligentsia,” 4-5; and Zubok, Zhivago’s Children, 66.
begun to think and act independently. Abramov thus found himself in a paradoxical position: he tried to cultivate – or rather, maintain – the students’ independence but without losing control of them.

What also may have precipitated his shift toward the students was a series of cowardly acts he believed he had committed. When a certain Lev Fedorov, for example, mentioned in December 1955 that he believed the Soviet Union had so many problems because Communists no longer behaved as they had in the 1920s, Abramov fell silent. “It’s terrible when you must wriggle and dissemble when speaking to a student,” he confessed. When another student, Nikolai Solokhin, a leader of the Komsomol, delivered a speech in February 1956 in which he faulted instructors for poor “cultivating work,” Abramov had the urge to compliment him but refrained. “I’m frightened myself,” he admitted in his diary. “How will they perceive it upstairs? Will it not be interpreted as support for all fault-finding from the author of a fallacious article?” What he found particularly loathsome was that he had in fact encouraged Solokhin to give the speech; before the meeting, Abramov had addressed the Komsomol leadership and summoned it to reveal and overcome the shortcomings in Soviet life. Even more odious, he wrote, was that he had begun to worry that Solokhin would tell someone that he had inspired him to deliver his remarks. When Abramov passed him in the hall a few days later, he shook his hand and expressed his support, and thought to himself, “perhaps he’ll remember this and

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126 Juliane Furst traces this trend among young people to the late Stalin years. See Juliane Furst, “The Arrival of Spring?: Changes and Continuities in Soviet Youth Culture between Stalin and Khrushchev,” in Jones, Dilemmas of De-Stalinization, 135-53.

127 DFA, 141 (December 12, 1955).
won’t drag me through the mud.”  “What a disgusting psychology!” he exclaimed of himself.  “The students are the best thing in the department,” he wrote.

One must not lie to them or dissemble.  

The highest possible honesty.  They do not forgive falsities.  […]  

Next year I’ll work more with the students.  Yes, we work too little with them, we spend too little time with them.  We keep to ourselves, and they keep to themselves. ¹²⁸

His first attempt to attend more to the students came during a February meeting about an underground student journal, *Goluboi buton* or *The Blue Bud*.  Published in four copies in November 1955 by four students in the Philology Faculty, *Goluboi buton* was one of the first samizdat journals to appear in Leningrad after Stalin’s death.  Its first and only volume was subtitled, “A Monthly Literary and Anti-Literary Journal.  An Organ of a Free Group of Authors,” and published by “The Publishing House ‘We.’”  The foreword, “What is ‘The Blue Bud’?” announced the journal’s mission: “We will fight against dullness in form and crudeness in content.  Here are the only limitations for creative work, which in everything else must be free.”  On January 3, 1956, the student newspaper *Smena* published an article condemning the journal – the first article about samizdat to appear in the Soviet press – and subsequently the journal’s editors were attacked during a Komsomol regional-committee plenum and questioned by the KGB. ¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Ibid., 45–49 (February 20, 1956).  Solokhin was later expelled from the Komsomol.  See 60 (February 26, 1956).  Solokhin was later associated with the 1957 publication of the samizdat article “Status quo” by Mikhail Molovtsov, a graduate of Leningrad State’s Philosophy Faculty.  In 1958, Molovtsov, Solokhin, and two others were arrested.  See Viacheslav Dolinin and Dmitrii Severiukhin, *Preodolenie nemoty: Leningradskii samizdat v kontekste nezavisimogo kul’turnogo dvizhenia, 1953-1991* (St. Petersburg: Izdatel’stvo imeni N. I. Novikova, 2003), 23.

Abramov’s entries about *The Blue Bud* capture the circumscribed nature of his definition of sincerity. Abramov termed the journal “a bud of vulgarity and philistinism”; noted that it had presented Leningrad – “the city that made the revolution, where each rock is sacred […] the city that endured the terrible blockade and did not fall to the Germans” – as an “arrogant [city that] has turned up its nose higher than the heavens”; and reproached its contributors as “skeptics and pessimists [who] see nothing bright in life, [are] worn out and crumpled by life, and speak of the frailty of existence.” In short, he opposed its publication, even if it had been published in only four copies. In his remarks at the February meeting, he condemned the journal, to which the students in attendance did not react favorably. “I had the feeling I was speaking to an empty room,” he recalled. “I broke into a sweat.” “And what was absurd?” he recounted having thought. “They do not trust me, they see me as an enemy and, in the best case scenario, as a fool. But do you know who I am? I am someone who has always stood up for the truth and has never endured demagogy.” In retrospect, however, Abramov concluded that he had lost his audience because he had spoken with “faux eloquence.”

On April 7, 1956, just as the political reaction began against the Soviet people’s response to the secret speech, Abramov faced another test, this time during a meeting of a newly constituted student-discussion club about the Twentieth Party Congress’s implications for Soviet literature. For the course of the three-hour meeting, the students attacked late-Stalin-era and contemporary literature, condemned the cult of personality, and defended an outspoken speech that Sholokhov had given at the congress.

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130 DFA, 84 (March 7, 1956). For earlier mention of the journal, see 49 (February 20, 1956).

131 Ibid., 98 (March 9, 1956) and 100 (March 26, 1956).
A certain Bernadskii and Il’ia Foniakov made the most controversial remarks; the former quoted Hamlet’s “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” and maintained that Nikolai Bukharin had already exposed the rift between literature and life at the First Writers Congress in 1934, whereas the latter alleged that Socialist Realist literature had never existed and that Soviet life had corrupted the youth.\(^\text{132}\)

Of the instructors only Abramov, Morozova, Rozhdestvenskaia, and Nina Lavkonen had the courage to attend and, of these four, only Abramov had the courage to speak. In his remarks, Abramov focused on what he described as the objective of the student discussion club: to transform the students into personalities. “Yes, we must cultivate ourselves,” he explained, “cultivate from ourselves honest, principled people, who actively intervene in life, and do not make peace with evil and shortcomings.” To achieve this goal, he continued, the department needed to, and would, create an environment in which everyone would be able share their opinions freely, and be sure that they would not be repressed for doing so. Then, however, he moved to curtail the excess. He instructed Bernadskii to avoid “eccentricities” and “the cheap seduction of sensation,” but added that he did not suspect him of having bad intentions. He told Foniakov, for his part, that his remark about the absence of Socialist Realist literature was “a paradox, not needing refutation,” and that the history of their country did not amount to “a massive organized corruption of human souls.” To be sure, things “did not always turn out as we would have liked,” but “our intentions were honest – this is beyond all doubt.” Abramov judged it a satisfactory performance; he had been interrupted by only a
few questions and, although no one had applauded, no one had challenged him either. He noted in his diary that at future meetings an instructor should speak after each student; otherwise, the instructors might lose control of their charges, and everyone would be arrested.133

As the reaction mounted in late April and May, Abramov decided to submit his resignation as chair; as he had feared, he believed he was not accomplishing anything, was thus sacrificing time he could have been spending on his novel for no reason and, meanwhile, with every semi-unorthodox act, was damaging his relationship with the leadership and thus endangering his job. He drafted his letter of resignation in late May, after learning that someone had been informing the regional committee and even the Central Committee Secretariat of his conduct, including his comments at the April 7 meeting of the student discussion club, and that someone from the Ministry of State Security (MGB) had questioned Morozova about him. “After this how can one assert a contentious point of view of any kind?” he asked. “[…] I alone took an honest position [at the discussion club] and did not dodge a conversation with the students, and, in as much as I could, I gave an evaluation of their speeches. And to attack and pursue me? Yes indeed: if you want to live in peace and remain in good standing, do nothing.”134

133 DFA, 145-54 (April 7, 1956). In 1954, no one had been arrested; in 1955, five students had been arrested; and in all of 1956, four students and one instructor would be arrested. Tromly, “Re-imagining the Soviet Intelligentsia: Student Politics and University Life, 1948-1967,” 288. Tromly writes: “This table is based on counting cases charged under article 58-10 (anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda), a summary of which is published in 58-10: nadzornye proizvodstva.” For the latter, see 58-10, nadzornye proizvodstva Prokuratury SSSR po delam ob antisovetski agitatsii i propagande: annotirovannyi katalog, mart 1953-1958 [i.e. 1991], V. A. Kozlov and S. V. Mironenko, eds. (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnyi fond “Demokratii,” 1999).

134 DFA, 268-75, 277 (May 24, 1956).
was at around the same time that Abramov began increasingly to reflect upon the need for change to commence from above.

Unknown, however, is if Abramov ever submitted his letter of resignation, for he remained in the position at the beginning of the next academic year.\textsuperscript{135} In May 1957, after the Third Plenum of the Writers’ Union, he again resolved to resign and also to request a demotion to part-time.\textsuperscript{136} In September, however, he changed his mind again after a meeting with the academic head of the regional committee, a certain Bogdanov, who told him that the regional committee opposed his resignation.\textsuperscript{137} He had “a base, egotistical little thought,” he wrote. “And what if as a result of refusal they will put obstacles in the way of my firstborn [i.e., his novel]? Another bargain with my conscience? Or another sacrifice for the sake of a beloved cause? Very likely, both the former and the latter.”\textsuperscript{138}

As the events Abramov recounted reveal, he suffered numerous moral lapses. It does not follow, however, that he failed in his effort to be a good Communist according to his understanding of the concept. Thaw-era discourse suggested that the very exercise of keeping a diary was a moral enterprise, and not only because of the diary’s ability to capture Soviet reality or the sincerity ideal, as has been argued in Chapter 2. To keep a diary was also evidence of one’s effort to work on oneself. In Granin’s \textit{Those Who Seek},

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 310 (August 24, 1956). For another attempt to resign, in November 1957, see 297-301 (November 13, 1956) and 304-6 (November 21, 1956).

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 51-52 (May 7, 1957). For more, see 52-53 (May 9, 1957).

\textsuperscript{137} For Bogdanov’s position, see ibid., 149 (December 29, 1955).

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 67 (September 24, 1957).
for example, the main positive hero, Andrei Lobanov, keeps a “notebook” in which he not only summarizes his week, but also evaluates himself.\(^{139}\)

Moreover, many of Abramov’s moral “failings” were not in fact moral failings. The fact that Abramov noticed and recorded his shortcomings and misbehavior is in fact evidence of moral success given the Party’s long-standing demand that Soviet citizens, and especially Communists and writers, engage in self-criticism. A less self-critical man would not have discerned many of the personal shortcomings in himself that Abramov discerned. Paradoxically, Abramov appears immoral, but only because he was in fact moral. He himself stumbled upon this irony when examining his reaction to the news, in March 1954, that Krutikova had been diagnosed with a kidney stone. He noted in his diary that his first reaction was “acute bitterness,” but then noticed that he had begun to worry about his Sholokhov textbook, which Krutikova had been helping him write. “I am surprised at myself,” he wrote. “What is this? An indication of a petty soul or of an inclination to self-analysis?”\(^{140}\) The implication is that, if he had not been inclined to self-analysis, he might not have noticed the petty thought.

Because it facilitated self-criticism and thus self-improvement, the diary was crucial to the writing of his novel and his becoming a Soviet writer. Abramov in fact wondered if a more direct connection existed between his moral constitution and the quality of his literature. Upon learning of some unseemly behavior on Abramov’s part, for example, Krutikova asserted that someone like him would never be able to bring one of his heroines, Anfisa Petrovna, to life. “Could it be possible that she is right?”

\(^{139}\) Granin, *Iskateli*, 232.

\(^{140}\) DFA, 25 (March 20, 1954).
Abramov asked. “Could it be possible that there is such a direct connection between the moral height of an author and his best characters? Probably, this is true.”\textsuperscript{141} The connection is not one that Krutikova simply invented and Abramov hesitantly endorsed; contemporaries articulated the link, as well. One finds the idea in the article in \textit{Sovetskaia kul’tura} about the actress who had compromised her role by her disrespectful appearance at the market. One also discovers the notion in Sergei Zalygin’s 1954 “On Unwritten Short Stories,” in which Zalygin, another contributor to the Ovechkin school, stated: “It is doubtful whether a writer can create a hero if there is nothing [heroic] to write about the writer himself.”\textsuperscript{142}

A potential complication for Abramov’s moral standing was his participation in the anti-cosmopolitan campaign of the late Stalin years. At a Party meeting at Leningrad State on April 4, 1949 and an open session of the university Academic Council on April 5, Abramov denounced four “formalists” and “cosmopolitans”: Boris Eikhenbaum, Viktor Zhirmunskii, Mark Azadovskii, and Grigorii Gukovskii. Abramov’s participation had been solicited beforehand by the dean, Georgii Berdnikov, and the partbiuro secretary, Abramov’s friend Nikolai Lebedev. According to a fellow student, Boris Egorov, and Azadovskii’s son, Konstantin Azadovskii, some students and instructors participated eagerly and enthusiastically in the campaign, seeing it as an opportunity to curry favor with the authorities and advance their careers. Egorov and Azadovskii write that most students and instructors, among whom they count Abramov, participated

\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 165-66 (October 10, 1954), 175 (October 23, 1954), and 21-22, 25 (September 24, 1955).

reluctantly. They also explain that graduate students, junior faculty, and especially young
Party members were more susceptible than established scholars (some of whom played
sick and refused to attend the meetings) to Party pressure. Abramov also coauthored a
July 1949 article in *Zvezda* with Lebedev, in which they denounced the same four
professors as well as Viktor Shklovskii and Lidiia Ginzburg. Contemporaries attest,
however, that Abramov was forced to sign his name to the piece after Lebedev’s original
collaborator, Samuil Derkach, was arrested on charges of Trotskyism. After the
attacks, Azadovskii, Eikhenbaum, Zhirmunskii, and Gukovskii were fired; Azadovskii
and Eikhenbaum lost their jobs at Pushkin House as well. Gukovskii, for his part, was
arrested and executed in Moscow’s Lefortovo Prison.

Krutikova provides a version of events similar to that of Egorov and Azadovskii,
maintaining that Abramov participated in the campaign, if not reluctantly, then
unenthusiastically. As a Communist, “he considered it his duty to execute all Party
resolutions and orders,” she writes, but that “he spoke more softly than others, he did not
‘smash’ anyone, he did not destroy the professors like other Party actors, he limited

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143 For Abramov’s participation at the university, see Egorov and Azadovskii, “O nizkopoklonstve i
based on published materials, personal memoirs, and the Azadovskii family archive. For Abramov on
Gukovskii, see Krutikova-Abramova and Rubashkin, *Vospominaniia o Fedore Abramove*, 80, 93. For
Abramov’s article, see F. Abramov and N. Lebedev, “V bor’be za chistotu markistskoe-leninsko
literaturovedeniia,” *Zvezda* 7 (1949): 165-71. For discussion of the article, see Boris Egorov and
Abramov was also involved in rejecting Iurii Lotman from graduate school at Leningrad University on
account of his nationality. See Boris F. Egorov, *Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo Iu. M. Lotmana* (Moscow: Novoe
literatureoe obozrenie, 1999), 45-46. There is much discussion of Abramov’s involvement in the
campaign that cites no evidence. See, for example, Georgii Tsvetov, “Fedor Abramov and Russian Village

144 Egorov and Azadovskii, “O nizkopoklonstve i kozmopolitizme,” 171-72; and Dmitrii Sergeevich
Likhachev, *Reflections on the Russian Soul: A Memoir* (Hungary: Central European University Press,
2000), 272. For other descriptions of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign in the Faculty of Philology, see
Egorov, *Zhizn’ i tvorchestvo Iu. M. Lotmana*, 44-45; and Likhachev, *Reflections on the Russian Soul*, 268-
75, which mentions the university but focuses on events at Pushkin House.
himself to criticism of discrete, real shortcomings in the lecture courses, and for such ‘liberalism’ he was subjected to the Party’s reprimand.” Unfortunately, Krutikova does not elaborate on the “discrete, real shortcomings” or the reprimand.¹⁴⁵

The potential complication for Abramov’s morality was that the Thaw-era personality ideal demanded that Soviet writers publicly repent for their Stalin-era misdeeds. In a short June 1956 article about the suicide of his friend Aleksandr Fadeev, who had been tormented by his dishonesty under Stalin, Konstantin Simonov accepted some of the blame for Fadeev’s death. Simonov confessed that his own inaction had enabled Fadeev’s dishonesty in his fiction. He had failed to support his friend at a critical moment: when Stalin criticized him for not portraying the Party’s leading role in the war in the first volume of his novel *Young Guard*, and forced him to rewrite it. Simonov defended the novel, explaining that it was better to do the right thing “sometimes and later rather than never.”¹⁴⁶ Simonov continued his self-criticism in a longer article in December, in which he wrote that writers and critics were obliged to publicly and collectively discuss their Stalin-era mistakes and shortcomings, their half-truths and outright lies. Leading by example, Simonov admitted his own mistakes, criticizing a 1947 article he had written about Fadeev’s *Young Guard* in the same terms he had criticized himself in June, but added that his article had led not only Fadeev, but all Soviet writers astray. He confessed that in a second article, in 1949, he had wrongly questioned the patriotism of a number of theater critics and accused them of cosmopolitanism. The critics had made mistakes, he wrote, but none of their mistakes


suggested they had dubious loyalties. In part because of his article, he continued, the critics had been unable to publish or were too scared even to try. (Simonov failed to mention, however, that some of them had been arrested and killed.)

Abramov had a different opinion of his participation in the anti-cosmopolitan campaign. Whereas Simonov believed he had acted unjustly, Abramov did not believe the same about his own involvement, which contradicts Krutikova’s and Egorov and Azadovskii’s version of events, and which relieves him of the moral responsibility of confession. As explained in the previous chapter, Abramov endorsed much of the campaign’s rhetoric, even if he did not think “cosmopolitans” were political enemies who should have lost their jobs or been imprisoned or executed. Abramov mentioned his participation in the campaign three times in his diary: once in his account of his meeting with Kozlov and twice in other passages about the attacks against Novyi mir. In the description of his conversation with Kozlov, Abramov cited his participation in the campaign as evidence of his having always “followed the Party line in [his] work.” The comment, however, reveals little more than its literal meaning: it discloses nothing about his thoughts about having followed the Party line in this instance, and was uttered at a time when he was trying to defend himself from Kozlov’s charges. In the second

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147 Konstantin Simonov, “Literaturnye zametki,” Novyi mir 12 (1956): 239-57. At the beginning of the campaign, Simonov refused to participate, but his enemies attacked him, accusing him of supporting the “cosmopolitans.” Simonov then changed course. Orlando Figes, the only scholar who has written extensively on Simonov, argues that he “was afraid of losing his position in the Stalinist elite and thought he had to prove his loyalty by joining in the campaign against the Jews.” Yet Figes disregards evidence, cited in his own book, that complicates this interpretation. One of Simonov’s friends and victims, Aleksandr Borchagovskii “believed that Simonov was driven by personal ambition, and especially by a kind of political servility; he was simply too devoted to Stalin, too infatuated with the aura of his power, to adopt a more courageous stand.” See Figes, The Whisperers, 497-501, 518-19. For Simonov’s involvement, see K. Simonov, “Zadachi sovetskoi dramaturgii i teatral’naia kritika,” Pravda, February 28, 1949, 3; and K. Simonov, “Zadachi sovetskoi dramaturgii i teatral’naia kritika,” Literaturnaia gazeta, March 2, 1949, 2 and March 5, 1949, 2. See also Frankel, Novy mir, 176-77,68; Yehoshua A. Gilboa, The Black Years of Soviet Jewry, 1939–1953, translated by Yosef Shachter and Dov Ben-Abb (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1971), 174-75; and Swayze, Political Control of Literature in the USSR, 60-61.
example, Abramov wrote of his colleagues’ attacks on his article at an October 1954 meeting in the university active hall. “In ’49 in this hall I smashed the cosmopolitans,” he noted, in contradiction to Krutikova’s later claim, “and today in this hall I am being smashed.” The precise meaning of the sentence, however, is ambiguous. One can read it in two ways: first, that if he had perpetrated disreputable deeds in 1949, he had now become the object of such deeds; and second, that he had attacked real cosmopolitans in 1949, and these cosmopolitans were now taking their revenge.

The final example is more useful, and suggests that the latter interpretation is the correct one: in May 1954, after his friend Moisei Kagan had told him that some of his Jewish colleagues had been criticizing his article, he wrote: “To hell with them! I told Kagan that, if given the chance, I would write an article unmasking cosmopolitanism again.” In April 1956, he made plain that he continued to subscribe to the principles of the anti-cosmopolitan campaign, noting that he had challenged a partbiuro proposal to punish students and instructors who had been involved in the campaign on the grounds that “one cannot make peace with cosmopolitanism.” In a recent article, the literary critic Aleksandr Rubashkin writes that he once asked Abramov if “he really believed in the existence of these cosmopolitans. He answered, of course: ‘After all, we had returned from the war, and then we were told that our instructors are allegedly conducting themselves unpatriotically.’”

148 DFA, 167-69 (October 10, 1954).
149 Ibid., 99 (May 29, 1954).
150 Ibid., 144 (April 7, 1956).
A true complication for Abramov’s moral standing was that he did not always instruct himself to overcome his mistakes and shortcomings, especially if they were a consequence of his dream of becoming a published novelist. On various occasions, he cited or cursed his novel but continued to subordinate his ethics to its completion and publication. This dissertation contends that Abramov considered his diary rather than his novel to be his true literature because it captured this painful reality: the difficulty of both being sincere and becoming a published novelist in the post-Stalin Soviet Union, a difficulty that not only was true, but also undermined the aesthetic and social significance of his novel according to Soviet discourse.

Abramov entertained the idea that his diary was his finest literary work for the first time in September 1955. In his and Krutikova’s dorm room, he had read his August 31 entry about his confession before the regional-committee plenum and meeting with Kozlov to his friend and former student Gorelov, now a graduate student in the department, and his wife Galina. Gorelov, to whom he read passages from his novel from time to time, was astonished by what he had heard. It was the best thing that he had ever written, an effusive Gorelov told him. “Maybe the diary is the true literature of our time?” Abramov asked in his diary. Abramov did not note precisely what touched Gorelov so much. This dissertation argues that Gorelov and Abramov himself found the passage so meaningful because it captured the defining theme of the Thaw: the epistemological and historical agency of ordinary men and women who, despite the

152 Ibid., 12 (September 11, 1955).
seemingly insurmountable obstacles, aimed to live according to a particular personality ideal.

Abramov could conceive of an unpublished and, at the time, unpublishable diary as the true literature of his age because he tried never to lose hope either that he and other ordinary Soviet citizens could make change, if not immediately then eventually, or that the leadership would initiate reform. In a more liberalized political climate, he imagined that his diary, which he only partly in jest called his “notebook of heresies,” would be able to appear in print.\textsuperscript{153}

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 2-3 (April 17, 1955).
Conclusion

In *The Thaw*, Erenburg reflected upon the relationship between change from above and personal transformation. For Erenburg, as for Abramov, personal transformation required a more open political environment. In the novella, the thaw that begins after a long and brutal winter is not simply a natural change that has occurred independent of human will. If the thaw is a metaphor for the opportunity for self-transformation, what gives an individual this opportunity is a political moment, Stalin’s death and his successors’ change of course. Yet the fact that Erenburg chose a climatic metaphor to describe the post-Stalin political situation indeed restricts the power of human will, or at least the will of ordinary men and women. Erenburg’s metaphor suggests that the initiation of a thaw depends on the caprice of the heavens, which is to say, on the whims of a leadership so far removed from Erenburg’s young artist and his frozen puddle that he and his fellow citizens are fated, if only at first, to react to events rather than play the primary role in shaping them.

Yet what would Erenburg’s young artist have done if winter had returned, even if only in the form of a light frost? When *The Thaw* appeared in May 1954, the political climate had in fact already become inclement, as this dissertation’s featured young writer, Abramov, found himself the object of political reaction. In the absence of profound and enduring change from above, Abramov chose to continue to at least try to live according to a new, emergent personality ideal, but understood that he could expect only so much of peers who found themselves in danger of repression, as did his editors at *Novyi mir* in 1954. Yet Abramov again and again worked to transform himself in the absence of
change from above. The first Thaw, 1953-1954, had irrevocably changed the rules of the behavioral game. Even if he had concluded in the months after the Twentieth Party Congress that the creation of personalities required that members of the Central Committee themselves think and behave like personalities, he did not relieve himself or other ordinary citizens of the responsibility to think and behave morally.

Abramov stopped writing in his diary in November 1957 but, as a project he embarked upon after finishing *Brothers and Sisters* reveals, he continued to work on himself. Abramov never wrote his novel about the university intelligentsia. Instead, in 1958-1959, he penned a play, “One God for All,” based in part on his diary entries and experience at Leningrad State between 1954 and 1957, and in part on Krutikova’s experience at the Belorussian University between 1949 and 1951. Published in *Neva* in August 1962, “One God for All” is set at a provincial institute of higher education in the late 1950s after the Twentieth Party Congress.¹ The play tells the story of a woman, Elena Kolosnitskaia, who has finished graduate school in Russian literature in Moscow and is assigned to teach at an institute in an unnamed provincial town. Elena is a model teacher and colleague; she is, in fact, what Abramov, himself, aimed to be. Her colleagues, however, are a cast of characters based in part on the negative figures in Abramov’s diary. There is the senior instructor Avdot’ia Syroegova, an ideologue and xenophobe whose first instinct upon encountering a troublesome student is to expel him. There is the professor and department chair Il’ia Shiraev, a famous folklorist who has reached his esteemed station by denouncing his peers and colleagues, and who has

recently published a new collection of *chastushki* or humorous rhymes. There is the associate professor Aleksei Polyntsev, an idealist and romantic who has been hoodwinked into believing in the talent and good nature of Shiraev. And there is the student Viktor Chukhlov, a talented but troublesome sort.

The drama is set in motion by Elena’s arrival at the institute as the academic year begins. Rejecting Syroegova’s approach to the students, Elena works closely with them and especially with Chukhlov, inspiring him to go to the countryside to collect folklore for one of his assignments. In a paper based on his expeditions, Chukhlov criticizes Shiraev, many of whose *chastushki*, he concludes, have been fabricated. Whereas Shiraev’s *chastushki* are replete with Communist consciousness – if Babaevskii had written *chastushki*, these are the *chastushki* he would have penned – Chukhlov’s reflect a rural reality altogether different. After some hesitation, Elena resolves to support Chukhlov despite the threat it poses to her career. Polyntsev, for his part, is disabused of his earlier opinion of Chiraev and rallies behind Elena. True to character, Syroegova defends Shiraev and accuses Chukhlov of “revisionism” and Elena of opposing agricultural abundance. At the end of the school year, a vengeful Shiraev dismisses Elena from the institute, disingenuously citing a need for staff reductions.

Central to the story is the arrival from Moscow of Elena’s husband, Egor Tropinin, a rancorous and sharp-tongued graduate student in physics who believes that the work of scientists is far more socially useful than that of humanists. During his first visit to the provincial town, Egor lectures Elena and Polyntsev about the triviality of their conflict with Shiraev. His words, delivered after a much anticipated meeting of the Academic Council about Chukhlov and his criticism of Shiraev, are nearly identical to
Abramov’s own in his 1950-1951 letters to Krutikova. Science, however, has taken the place of Abramov’s novel:

Egor: Listen, is it possible for you not to get worked up over every trifle? As soon as something is not to your liking, then immediately: what, how? But really, what do you two expect? […] And imagine yourself in the place of this highly scholarly meeting. Physicists, mathematicians, chemists – businesslike people. And then there is some kind of fuss, trifles.

Elena: It’s a great pity that for you these are trifles.

Egor: Well, but what is your entire epic if one is to look at it soberly? As a result of what has a commotion flared up? As a result of some dozen clumsy rhymes.

Polyntsev: Are you being serious?

Egor: Completely. I always told her: Elena, don’t waste your time on trifles.

Elena: For shame!.. Trifles… From precisely this reconciliation with baseness begins.

Egor: It is stylish nowadays to fight against baseness. People stumble on a tussock in a flat place and scream: one must fight, they have covered up a world-wide evil! And you look at it: it’s nonsense, common and ordinary baseness. In the final analysis, I’m asking you: who gave you the right to so imprudently squander your energy? Is this what the common people expect from the people of science (nauka)?

Elena and Polyntsev remain unconvinced. For them, “ordinary baseness is indeed the most terrible evil in the world. […] It, like a cancerous tumor, imperceptibly eats away at people’s souls. It makes some skeptics, others cowards, and still others two-faced. […] Yes, if no one turned a blind eye to ordinary evil, there would not be any evil in the world at all.”2 Egor and Elena and Polyntsev fail to find common ground, and Egor walks out on Elena. Their marriage, it appears, is over.

Yet three months later, at the end of the academic year, Egor returns to the provincial town with his luggage in tow. He tells Elena and Polyntsev that he has defended his dissertation and has been offered a first-rate research position in Novosibirsk, but has turned down the position and chosen to move to Elena’s town. “I

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2 Ibid., 578. These are Elena’s words.
want to busy myself with students, with the youth,” he explains. “This place also has its revelations.” He was wrong to have challenged them, he confesses; he wants to help them take on ordinary baseness and fight for a common God – pravda or truth.3

In his play, Abramov rewrote and repented for his past and, in so doing, hoped to write his future. He no longer considered Reznikov and Krutikova’s battle against their department chair in Minsk, I.V. Gutorov, “useless,” “idiotic thoughtlessness,” or “unscrupulousness.”4 Theirs was the good fight, he suggested in “One God for All,” and he should have joined them. In having Egor sacrifice a promising career as a scientist in order to take on everyday evil, Abramov also intimated that the morally righteous path for himself would have been to have pursued a similar course, to have sacrificed a future as a novelist, or to have subordinated his novel to his work among the students at Leningrad State and to a more solicitous relationship with Krutikova. To be sure, the parallels between Egor and Abramov are not exact. Egor is a physicist, whereas Abramov was a novelist; and Egor’s pursuit of science is linked to the construction of bridges, cities, and satellites. But the parallels do not need to be exact to capture a larger likeness. Both Egor and Abramov subordinated the struggle against ordinary evil, and a concern for the individual of the here and now, to the realization of what they imagined to be larger goods. What had undermined Abramov’s moral standing and thus his novel in 1957, he tried to set right in his play.

The causal link between personal behavior and the merit of a work of literature is evident in a conversation about Erenburg’s *The Thaw* that Abramov had in Moscow in

3 Ibid., 590.

4 See Chapter 1, 34-35.
June 1954 with Igor’ Sats, an editor at Novyi mir. Abramov was surprised to learn that Sats considered Erenburg’s novella to be “vile,” “hackwork,” and “unscrupulous,” since Abramov saw it as the most significant literary event of the last several years. Sats complained that Stalin had made Erenburg world famous, and that Erenburg had expressed his gratitude by writing The Thaw. The implication was that, under Stalin, Erenburg had written whatever the leadership had demanded of him and that, under Khrushchev, he was doing the same. Later Abramov learned from Dement’ev that Erenburg had conferred with the Central Committee before publishing the novella. “To have such a work approved, said Dement’ev. The thaw! Here for you is the ‘civic’ feat of Erenburg.” For both Sats and Dement’ev, Erenburg’s behavior had compromised his novella. A paradox emerges: if Erenburg’s novella was not a civic feat, then The Thaw was not in fact evidence of a Thaw. In the immediate post-Stalin years, personal behavior was indeed paramount.

Whether “One God for All” was evidence of a Thaw is unknown; the available sources do not reveal the extent to which Abramov emulated Egor and his fight against ordinary evil in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Given that the Soviet Union did not experience a political Spring in these years, however, it is highly unlikely that Abramov could have transformed into his fictional counterpart. What is more, of course, if Abramov had lived his life according to the model he had presented in “One God for All,” he may never again have had the time to write a novel. Nor would he have remained in the good graces of the authorities, whose blessing he needed to publish one. According to Abramov’s personality ideal, to publish a novel in the Soviet Union in the immediate post-Stalin years was necessarily to undermine its aesthetic and social value.

\footnote{DFA, 107-8 (June 4, 1954).}
Only that which could not be published – either because of its content or because of its author’s behavior – had the potential to be true literature. Yet the unpublishable could be conceptualized as literature only if its author harbored at least some hope that, one day, it would be able to appear in print. If the eventual printed text could not present readers with an author who was able to live his personality ideal, it could at least offer them a truthful picture of his own, painful reality.
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