Serapion Brothers (Серапионовы братья)

The Serapion Brothers were a collective of writers who formed a group in Petrograd in 1921 under the leadership of Evgeny Zamyatin and Viktor Shklovsky. The name of the group was taken from hermit Serapion from E.T.A. Hoffmann’s collection of stories *The Serapion Brethren* (1819-1821) who believes in creativity above all. The group was united by their belief in freedom of creativity and rejection of ideological control of literature, rather than through a devotion to a singular vision or artistic style - their writing differed widely from each other’s.

The emergence of the Serapion Brothers was enabled by the more liberal atmosphere of the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1921-28) period. The Serapion Borthers had their first meeting on 1 February 1921 at the House of Arts in Petrograd. The Serapions were united by their location as much as by their artistic inclinations. The original group included Nikolai Tikhonov, Veniamin Kaverin, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Victor Shklovsky, Vsevolod Ivanov, Elizaveta Polonskaya, Ilya Gruzdev, Mikhail Slonimsky, Lev Lunts, Vladimir Pozner, Nikolay Nikitin and Konstantin Fedin. Their artistic endeavours were offered some protection and patronage by Maxim Gorky and Viktor Shklovsky. The group stood for absolute freedom of art from politics. In one of the many manifestos produced by the group, Lev Lunts defines the Serapions’ goals in the following manner:

With whom do we stand, Serapion Brothers?

We are with the Hermit Serapion. We believe that literary chimeras are a special reality, and we will have none of utilitarianism. We do not want to write propaganda. Art is real, like life itself. And like life itself it has neither goal nor meaning; it exists because it cannot help existing.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Original Group of the Serapion Brothers

Despite their staunch rejection of politics within literature, most of the members wrote in one way or another about the revolution and were responsible for disseminating this theme across the literary field. For this reason they were tolerated by the otherwise controlling authorities as “fellow-travellers”, a term that designated writers who supported the Communist cause but did not belong to the Party. The Serapions published their first anthology in 1922. Throughout their existence the group rejected any formal union, suggesting that they were all born from different fathers and therefore did not belong together. They were only united by their belief in the freedom of literature and art. Because the group refused any formal union, its dissipation is gradual as its patrons Shklovsky and Gorky emigrated as early as in 1921, and Lunts, the author of the above lines, moved in 1923. Some writers moved to Moscow and the group lost its velocity. Although they were tolerated as “fellow-travellers” at first, they were soon accused of being anti-revolutionary and promoting the Western bourgeois idea of Art for Art’s sake. The group never formally disbanded but slowly petered out in the mid 1920s as writing conditions became further restricted.

**A selection of works by The Serapion Brothers written and/or published during their period together:**

Konstantin Fedin, “The Orchard” (“Sad”), “Stillness” (“Tishina”), “The Peasants” (“Muzhiki”), 1920-24

Veniamin Kaverin, *The End of a Gang* (*Konets khazy*), 1926

Lev Luntz, *The Outlaw* (*Vne zakona*), 1921

Nikolai Nikitin, “Night” (“Noch”), “Fort Vomit”, “Pella”, 1921-23

Elizaveta Polonskaya, *Signs* (*Znamenya*), 1921

--------------------------, *Under a Stone Rain*  (*Pod kammenym dozhdyom*), 1923

Mikhail Slonimsky, *The Sixth Fusiliers* (*Shestoy strelkovy*), 1922

Nikolai Tikhonov, *The Horde*  (*Orda*), 1922

Vsevalod Ivanov, *Partisans* (*Partizany*), 1921

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,  *Armored Train No. 14-69* (*Bronepoezd No. 14-69),* 1922

Zamyatin, Evgeny*, We* (*My*), composed 1921-1922

Zoshchenko, Mikhail, *The tales by Nazar Ilich Sinebryukhov,* 1922

**References and Further Reading**.

There are few scholarly books dedicated to the group, however it is possible to find chapters on the subject in most major works on Russian literature of the 20th Century.

Davis, Lesley Dorfman, *Serapion Sister: The Poetry of Elizaveta Polonskaya*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001)

Hickey, M. “Recovering the Author's Part: The Serapion Brothers in Petrograd”, *The Russian Review,* Vol. 58 (1), 1999, pp. 103-123

Kern, G. and Collins C., eds. *The Serapion Brothers : A Critical Anthology* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1975)

Oulanoff, Hongor *The Serapion Brothers: Theory and Practice*, (The Hague, Paris: Mouton &Co, 1966)

Slonim, Mark L'vovich, *Soviet Russian Literature. Writers and Problems* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964)

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1. ”Serapionovy bratia o sebe” (”The Serapion Brothers About Themselves”), *Literaturnye Zapiski*, No.3, (August 1, 1922), 25-31. Here the translation is from Gleb Struve, *Russian Literature Under Lenin and Stalin*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1971), p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)