PILNIAK, BORIS (ПИЛЬНЯК, БОРИС 1894-1938)

Leading Russian ornamentalist prose writer. Pilniak’s debut novel *Golyi god* (*The Naked Year*) established him as one of the leading authors of Russian modernism, an innovator in literary form who defied cultural taboos. A so-called fellow traveler of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, who accepted the revolution without becoming a Party member, Pilniak adopted the ideal of progress, though an enthusiasm for the heritage of rural, anarchistic Russia remained a touchstone in his work. The dynamic, impressionistic prose style that Pilniak cultivated—fragmentary montages held together by allusive imagery and resonant refrains, romanticizing revolutionary ideals and sacrifices—was dubbed ‘ornamental prose.’ It inspired numerous imitations through the mid 1920s. Pilniak used his influence as a Soviet author to advocate for the writer’s need for independence from ideology and to help organise and direct the broad-minded publishing house Krug (1922-1929). Controversy haunted many of his later efforts to craft an authentic response to his times, even as he sought to integrate the expected social themes. He was arrested in 1937 and executed in 1938.

Yury Annenkov’s portrait of Pilniak, 1924.

**Timeline of Life and Famous Works Published During Lifetime**

1894: born in Mozhaisk, Russia

1909: first publications as a teenager

1913: finishes high school courses in Bogorodsk (near Nizhny Novgorod)

1918: first marriage; lives in an anarchist commune near Peski; first collection of stories

appears

1920: *Byl’e* (Bygones), second collection of short stories is published

1922: visits Germany on his first trip abroad; *The Naked Year* published

1923: travels to England with Serapion Brother Nikolai Nikitin

1924: moves from Kolomna to Moscow

1925: *Mashiny i volky* (Machines and Wolves) and novella “Mat’ syra-zemlia” (Mother Earth) are published

1926: novella “Tale of the Unextinguished Moon” is published abroad; travels to Japan and China

1929: novella “Mahogany” is published in Berlin and labeled slanderous; he is expelled as Moscow chair of the All-Russia Union of Writers, triggering his own and Pasternak’s resignation from the Union in protest

1930: *Volga vpadaet v Kaspiiskoe more* (*The Volga Falls into the Caspian Sea*) is

published

1931: travels six months in the U.S. A.

1932: *O’kei* (Okay), fictionalized travelogue of his U.S. visit is published

1934: acquires a dacha in the new writers’ colony Peredelkino (next to friend Pasternak’s)[[1]](#footnote-1)

1935: “Birth of Man,” short story sparks renewed controversy

1938: dies, six months after arrest in Moscow during Stalin’s Great Purge

Boris Andreevich Pilniak (born Vogau) was born 11 October (29 September old-style) 1894 in Mozhaisk, Russia. His father was a veterinarian of German descent, his mother a teacher from a Saratov family of merchants and craftsmen. Through early adult hood Pilniak lived in country towns south and east of Moscow where he acquired a deep empathy for Russia’s folk customs and traditions and for nature and man’s primal being. He grew to believe that culture and the enlightened use of technology promised by the Bolsheviks were the necessary antidotes to Russia’s backwardness and poverty.

Pilniak at his writing desk in Kolomna, 1922.

Through correspondence courses, Pilniak earned a degree in economics in 1920 from the Moscow Commercial Institute that he never used professionally. He began publishing under the pen name Pilniak after Russia entered World War I. An early collection of short stories *Byl’e* (Bygones, 1920) benefited from the notice of those with whom he was forging literary ties through participation in new post-revolutionary organisations like the Moscow Palace of Arts, supported by the Bolshevik cultural establishment, and the liberal All-Russia Union of Writers. Critics noted the influence of Pilniak’s elder contemporaries on his distinctive style—Alexei Remizov’s folkloric stylizations and Andrei BELY’s musical, rhythmic prose—but in *The Naked Year* they also recognized a talented and convincing portrayal of their own chaotic times.

Pilniak’s literary success encouraged him to take an active role in literary politics of the 1920s and also gave him uncommon opportunities to travel. A trip to Berlin in 1922 led to useful if problematic connections with émigré publishers and enhanced his reputation abroad as a chronicler of new Russia. Travel throughout the Soviet Union and to Western Europe, Egypt, the Arctic, Asia, and the United States over the 1920s and 1930s yielded material for numerous topical sketches and travelogues.

A second experimental novel *Mashiny i volky* (Machines and Wolves, 1925) looked for an elusive synthesis of the conflicting motives of civilization and nature, reason and instinct. A short story “Povest’ nepogashennoi luny” (A Tale of the Unextinguished Moon, 1926) implicated Stalin in the death of a rival Bolshevik and Pilniak had to apologize for this critical misstep. Two years later, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) launched a campaign vilifying Pilniak as a writer hostile to the Soviet state. He was forced to resign his leadership role in the Writers Union in 1929 and found it increasingly difficult to publish.

Pilniak turned from modernist devices to write an early and original version of the novel of socialist construction promoting Stalin’s Five-year Plan, *Volga vpadaet v Kaspiiskoe more* (*The Volga Flows to the Caspian Sea*, 1930). He chronicled the drowning of accumulated remnants of pre-revolutionary life behind a new hydroelectric dam. By reworking an earlier story *Krasnoe derevo* (Mahogany, 1929) into the plot of the novel (a characteristic strategy), he chose material that had already been labeled libelous by RAPP. Critics from the right and left accused him of artistic and moral compromise.

Pilniak’s subsequent fiction and travelogues in the1930s relied heavily on journalistic themes and techniques, although he continued to aim for original treatment of his material, as in the historical novel *Solianoi ambar* (Salt Barn, 1937), not published until fifty years after his death. Following his arrest as a Trotskyist sympathizer in October 1937 and execution 21 April 1938, his name was excised from Soviet Russian literature. It was not until the 1990s that his contributions were again recognized in Russia.

**References and Further Reading**

**Works by Boris Pil’niak**

**Novels**

*Golyi god* (*The Naked Year*) [1922]

*Mashiny i volki* (Machines and Wolves) [1925]

*Volga vpadaet v Kaspiiskoe more* (*The Volga Falls into the Caspian Sea*) [1930]

*Dvoiniki* (Doubles) [completed, 1935; published 2003]; also titled *Odinnadtsat’ glav klassicheskogo povestvovaniia* (Eleven Chapters from a Classical Narrative)

*Sozrevanie plodov* (The Ripening of Fruits) [1936]

*Miaso* (Meat), co-authored with Sergei Beliaev [1936]

*Solianoi ambar* (Salt Barn) [completed 1937; published 1990]

**Novellas**

“Ivan da Mar’ia” (Ivan and Maria) [1922]

“Povest’ Peterburgskaia, ili sviatoi-kamen’-gorod” (A Petersburg Tale, or Holy-Stone- City) [1922]

“Tret’ia stolitsa” (Third Capital) [1923]; also titled “Matʹ-Machekha” (Mother-Stepmother)

“Chernyi khleb” (Black Bread) [1923]

“Mat’ syra-zemlia” (Mother Earth) [1924]

“Zavoloch’e” (Zavoloch’e) [1925]

“Povest’ nepogashennoi luny” (“Tale of the Unextinguished Moon”) [1926]

“Ivan Moskva” (Ivan Moscow) [1927]

“Krasnoe derevo” (“Mahogany”) [in Berlin, 1929]

**Short Story Collections**

*S poslednim parokhodom i drugie rasskazy* (With the Last Ship and Other Stories) [1918]

*Byl’e* (Bygones) [1922]

*Smertel’noe manit* (The Fatal Beckons) [1922]

*Nikola-na-Posadʹiakh* (Nikola-na-Posad’iakh) [1923]

*Rasplesnutoe vremia* (Spilled Time) [1927]

*Rozhdenie cheloveka* (Birth of Man) [1935]

**Poetry**

Stikhi. (Verse) [1933]

**Travel Writings**

“Otryvki iz ‘Povest’ iz pisem, kotoruiu skuchno konchit’’”(Excerpts from ‘A Tale in Letters’ which is Boring to Finish’) [1923] Impressions of his trip to England.

*Rossiia v polete* (Russia in Flight) [1926]

*Korni iaponskogo solntsa* (Roots of the Japanese Sun) [1927]. Fictionalized travelogue.

*Kitaiskaia povest’* (Chinese Tale) [1928]. Fictionalized travelogue.

O' *kei. Amerikanskii roman.* (Okay, an American Novel) [1932]. Fictionalized travelogue.

*Kamni i korni* (Stones and Roots) [1934]. Japan reconsidered.

**Non fiction**

**Autobiography**

“Otryvki iz dnevnika” (Excerpts from My Diary) in *Pisateli ob iskusstve i o sebe* [1924], Moskva-Leningrad: Krug, 77-89. Includes a statement of his artistic credo.

**Letters**

*Pis’ma,* t. 1 (1906-1922), t. 2 (1923-1937) [2010]. Includes photographs.

**Further Reading**

**Biography**

LYSENKOV. V. I. (2005) *“Adres moi, st. Voskresensk”: Boris Pilʹniak v Kriviakine*,

Voskresensk: VIA. Many photographs of Pil’niak and family, as well as

of places and people associated with him.

RECK, Vera T. (1975) *Boris Pilʹniak: a Soviet writer in conflict with the state*,

Montreal: McGill, Queen’s University Press. Story of the literary and political controversies surrounding “Tale of the Unextinguished Moon” and “Mahogany” (1926-29).

**Selection of critical works**

BROWNING, Gary (1985) *Boris Pilniak: Scythian at a Typewriter*, Ann Arbor: Ardis.

A comprehensive account of Pil’niak’s biography and creative achievements, major themes, aspects of his style. Generous notes, chronology and bibliography.

EDWARDS, T. R. N. (1982) *Three Russian writers and the irrational*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press. A clear-sighted though incomplete appraisal of Pil’niak’s interests and methods as a modernist, focused on the 1920s.

JENSEN, Peter Alberg (1979) *Nature as code: the achievement of Boris Pilnjak 1915- 1924*, Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger. Detailed and scholarly in its approach to the language and creative focus of the early Pil’niak; quotations from Pil’niak are not offered in translation. Bibliography encompasses 1915 to 1924.

NICHOLAS, Mary A. (2010) “(Re)Constructing the Production Novel: Boris Pil’niak, *Mahogany*, and *The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea*,” in *Writers at work: Russian production novels and the construction of Soviet culture*, Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press: 154-196. Makes effective use of sources available after 1991 to explain the context and significance of a novel once maligned or ignored.

TROTSKY, Leon (1979; rpt. 1923) *On B. Pilnyak*, Letchworth, Herts.: Prideaux Press.

While ideologically slanted, the essay was among the first to identify many of the features of Pil’niak’s approach that impressed his contemporaries. See also: “On Boris Pil’nik” by Leon Trotsky <http://www.sovlit.net/onpilnyak/>

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**Source URLS for images  
1.** <http://www.photographersdirect.com/stockimages/a/annenkov.asp>

**2.** <http://www.nasledie-rus.ru/podshivka/pics/6911-pictures.php?picture=691105>

1. Gary Browning, *Boris Pilniak: Scythian at a Typewriter* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1985), 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)