THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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Box 4.5 The Collective Voice

Collective creativity defined folk culture from its beginnings. At least, so argued the literary theorists Roman Jakobson and Petr Bogatyrev in 1929. Literary history, on the other hand, had traced a trajectory of individualisation which reached its zenith in the nineteenth century with the idealised individual of Romanticism and the supra-individual narrative voice of high Realism. Though much in Modernism revived the Romantic vision of the individual, Jakobson and Bogatyrev pointed to a different tendency, one that blurred the border between 'so-called high art [and] the so-called primitive' and that had been enjoying something of a resurgence in the modern era.

In the Russian context, the latter tendency was associated with the avant-garde and perhaps found no better expression than the poetry of the Futurists. In collaborative works like *Worldbackwards* (*Mirskontsa*, 1914), Aleksei Kruchenykh worked together with Velimir Khlebnikov and several visual artists to create a primitive folk aesthetic that implicitly voiced a nameless semi-literate collectivity. After the 1917 revolution, fellow Futurist Vladimir Maiakovskii dedicated his epic poem '150 000 000' (1921) to all the citizens of the Soviet Union and even made the collective into the author of the poem itself. The epic's first line reads, '150 000 000 is the name of the craftsman of this poem.' Other members of the Soviet avant-garde, meanwhile, realised collective authorship more literally in such works as *Great Fires* (*Bol'shie pozhary*, 1927), a 'novel of twenty-five writers' dreamed up by Mikhail Koltsov, with chapters by the likes of Isaak Babel, Aleksei Nikolaevich Tolstoi, and Vera Inber, all united by a single plot.

This strategy of collective authorship was taken up directly by the Stalinist state in such works as a lavishly illustrated volume on the Belomor Canal (1934) – the first great construction project of Soviet prison labour – which included contributions from several who had participated in *Great Fires*, alongside Maksim Gorkii, Viktor Shklovskii, and Mikhail Zoshchenko. Through such undertakings, a collective voice emerged that came to define Stalinist culture. A unified people spoke of the aspirations and achievements of the new society. The collective voice of Stalinism found perhaps its most widespread and memorable expression in song, usually performed in chorus. The 'Aviator's March' (*Aviamarsh*, 1923), for instance, a popular song throughout the 1930s, begins with a collective self-definition: 'We were born to make fairy tales reality.'

Opposing the enforced optimism and obsequiousness of this official collective voice, Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem* (*Rekviem*, comp. 1934–62) begins with a counter-collective rendered voiceless by the state. Hundreds wait in the freezing cold for some word of imprisoned loved ones. A woman turns to the poet and asks, 'Can you describe this?' 'I can', she responds. And in the ensuing verses, Akhmatova's lyrical 'I' channels the muffled scream of a 'hundred million people' into a poetic voice rescued from silent suffering.

In a similar way, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's monumental *The Gulag Archipelago* (*Arkhipelag GULAG*, comp. 1968, pub. in Paris, 1973) gathers the millions of voiceless incarcerated Soviets into a huge communal narrative that undermines the image of collectivity in official culture. In these projects the writer's voice becomes a conduit for a voiceless counter-collective, presenting an alternative to Stalinist culture that emerges through the singular, courageous voice of the individual writer.

As many late Soviet dissidents turned inward, others – especially those associated with Moscow Conceptualism – experimented with the collective discourses of the Soviet era, repurposing the verbal stamps of the socialist world. Vladimir Sorokin's early novel *The Queue* (*Ochered'*, 1985), for instance, is constructed from nothing but quotations of nameless Soviet individuals waiting in an endless line. The novel's voices, culled from generic Soviet speech, mix together into a collective late Soviet babel that reveals both the surprising poetry of the era and the distance between language and reality. Lev Rubinshtein's celebrated notecard poems likewise comprise snippets of everyday speech, official rhetoric, and lyrical insights, each typed on a separate notecard, to be shuffled and read by the poet in the course of a performance.

Performance became intertwined with the collective voice in the late- and post-Soviet eras in venues such as the 1990s Club of Literary Performance, hosted by Nikolai Baitov and Svetlana Litvak, or the 2010s Society of Anonymous Artists at Moscow's Teatr.doc. Such gatherings concentrated not on readings by well-known poets but on the collective anonymous creativity that would join poets and public as co-authors of an ephemeral text-performance each evening. Simultaneously, the rise of the internet gave poets and writers a new medium through which to co-create collaborative texts with their audiences. Online forums gave the collective voice new life while also connecting it back to its roots in the anonymous creativity that Jakobson and Bogatyrev had discerned in folk culture.

Bradley A. Gorski