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Hist 410

Untimely Thoughts Analysis

In *Untimely Thoughts*, Gorky stayed true to his pseudonym's meaning of bitter (Gorky, *Untimely Thoughts*, xxi) and told what he felt is the “bitter truth” about everything, including the acts revolution he once fully supported. As the book progresses, Gorky's tone became increasingly forceful as he criticized the Bolshevik leadership and got involved in polemics with Bolshevik and other writers. Gorky became increasingly critical of the Bolsheviks because they started to turn to the very same methods of control that the people rebelled against, and felt that by pointing these flaws out he could prevent the revolution from collapsing into a power grab and prevent Bolshevik tactics from stunting the people's “spiritual” growth.

Gorky's main point in *Untimely Thoughts* is that the Russian people need to embrace culture to overcome their spiritual slavery, and the revolution needs to be an integral part of teaching culture to the people. By spiritual, Gorky meant “a mixture of intellectual culture, ethics, and emotional attitude (Gorky, *Untimely Thoughts*, xviii).” Gorky felt that even though people were, at least at the beginning, free in terms of rights (freedom of speech, assembly, etc), they were still enslaved spiritually, saying “we continue to live dominated internally by the feelings of slaves (Gorky, *Untimely Thoughts*, 16).” He felt that the oppression of the monarchy had effects that lasted long after it was overthrown, such as a propensity towards violence for solving issues and harsh words in journalistic polemics. As a part of the intelligentsia, he spent a lot of time working to spread his views of culture to the general population, supporting such

groups as the Academy of Sciences and running a publishing house, as well as his many books and essays.

As well as his desire for people be inspired by culture, he was very passionate on the subject of the rights of the individual. He believed in freedom of expression for all, even the bourgeois newspapers which he felt were hostile to democracy (Gorky, *Untimely Thoughts*, 92). He valued human life greatly, and felt that violence was the “argument of despotism” and worthless in the realm of proving an idea wrong. As a believer in socialism, he certainly did not agree with the views of the bourgeois, but he realized that suppressing the views of all non-socialists would make them no different than the autocracy they had just overthrown. This belief in the rights of the individual was part of the philosophy of the intelligentsia since the late 1700's, and it was widely held among them that social change involved removing restraints to the development of the individual. At the same time as highly esteemed view of the individual, he was also highly cynical of the actuality of the Russian people's personality and actions, bashing them for among other things their “Oriental passivity towards fate” and tendency to blame others instead of attempting to fix the problems.

Gorky started out as a supporter of the February Revolution and the Bolsheviks, but as time went on he became disillusioned by the time of the October Revolution. He felt that the revolutionary movement had the same responsibilities of the intelligentsia to spread culture to the people and improve their morality. He came to the conclusion around the time of the “July Days” that, instead of inspiring cultural growth from tsarist time, the Bolsheviks inspired the animalistic instincts of the masses to further their political ends and taught the workers that social struggle meant “a bloody smashing of faces (Gorky, *Untimely Thoughts*, 130).” Also, he

thought the government should move away from the tactics used by the autocracy. The many actions of the Bolsheviks in the opposite direction proved his hopes in vain. They ended up using many of the same tactics as used before, doing things such as repressing opposition newspapers (including *Novaya Zhizn* in time), threats of violence and imprisonment, and disbanding democratically elected assemblies. He was very critical of these actions, up to the point of criticizing Lenin himself. In his writings, he compares Lenin's actions to Nechaev and Stolypin (Gorky, *Untimely Thoughts*, 85-86) and says that Soviet officials are no better than the tsarist ones were.

Gorky also disapproved of what he felt as the Bolsheviks using Russia as an experiment to inspire a worldwide socialist revolution. He viewed they were treating Russia like a horse injected with typhus so it produces anti-typhoid serum, killing the horse in the process (Gorky, *Untimely Thoughts*, 106). He agreed with the popular view that Russia needed to catch up economically before it could have a true socialist revolution, since most of the population was still peasantry. He felt that inspiring a revolution in order to spark a greater world revolution, as was suggested by Marx, would fail and only crush the working class and kill any hopes of a greater socialist revolution in the future.

As part of the intelligentsia, Gorky believed that his words and actions would influence Russia in what he felt was a more positive direction. Since he favored the discussion of ideas over violence, his writings were the best way to accomplish his task. By being vocal in a peaceful way about his objections, he hoped to change the course that the Bolsheviks were taking the country. He saw himself more and more as the conscience of the people as other critical voices were silenced (Gorky, *Untimely Thoughts*, ix). This relates to his ideas about culture and

educating the people. Since people needed time to adjust to being free, making sure their needs were being met and teaching them culture and positive ideas would help society as a whole progress towards the ultimate socialist society. At the same time, returning to the same methods as the autocracy would only cause regression and an ultimate failing of the revolution.

The articles in *Untimely Thoughts* indicate that early Bolshevik Russia was a chaotic place full of great hopes in the beginning and increasing repression as time progressed. Many essays deal with various incidents of the delivering of mob justice to thieves and other petty criminals. Many letters Gorky received are discussed, showing the increasing radicalization of the workers as the Bolsheviks tried to improve their small support base. A sub-theme throughout the book is his polemic with *Pravda*, the Bolshevik's newspaper and therefore an official outlet of Bolshevik policy. This starts out as a disagreement over ideas by two free groups in a free country, certainly not tame but staying civil and without excessive name calling and mudslinging, symbolic of the hopeful environment after the February Revolution. As the book moves on (and history progresses), Gorky's tone becomes more critical of the Bolshevik's actions, especially during and after the October Revolution, and in response *Pravda* becomes increasingly fanatic and accusatory. The last essay in the book dealt with claims by *Pravda* that he had sold out to the bourgeoisie, and after that the paper is closed down. This is symbolic of the way the Bolsheviks handled the problems they faced, by turning to the same authoritarian methods the people rebelled against. Whether it was a forceful takeover of the government before the Congress of Soviets could meet a second time, or newspapers being critical of this violent approach, the tactics were the same as in the tsarist regime. As well, many of the articles toward the end are focused these crackdowns on "opposition" to Bolshevik authority, wasting

away the talent of some of Russia's best intelligentsia such as I. D. Sytin instead of converting them to the side of the Bolsheviks. His call out to help Vera Petrova as she died of hunger showed that the Bolshevik take over had not solved the issues with the economy or even made them worse.

The Bolshevik's turning towards autocratic methods of quelling dissent and encouragement of violence, along with Gorky's intelligentsia roots, caused him to be so critical of the revolution he once was in favor of. He hoped that by speaking out, he could influence the track of the revolution's development in a more positive direction which would embrace his ideas about freedom and the individual within society. Unfortunately, like in the pre-revolutionary period, words were not enough, and eventually the Soviet Union became synonymous with totalitarianism and the repression of freedom.