A Revolutionary Gospel:

A dissertation submitted to

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Abstract

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A Note on Translations and Abbreviations

Preface

The city of Nizhnii Novgorod straddles the Oka river at its confluence with the mighty Volga, like a hand plugging the tributary into Russia’s national river. At this intersection, a fascinating hydrological phenomenon occurs. Instead of mixing with each other, thereby becoming unrecognizable, the two rivers seem to flow side-by-side for some time. The Oka’s resistance against the Volga’s titanic momentum is a result of a rich concentration of sediment picked up from the riverbed on the way. This suspension of earthen material makes the tributary dense enough to change the Volga’s appearance and behavior noticeably. Several kilometers south of Nizhnii Novgorod, having passed through the “mixing zone” downriver the confluence, the newly reconstituted Volga appears to go back to normal on the surface as the sediment disperses across the river’s width. In reality, its essence below the surface is forever changed afterward.

This interesting phenomenon is an apt metaphor for Nizhnii-native Maksim Gor’kii and what fascinated me so deeply by his life, work, and impact on his readers. Much like the Oka’s intrusion into the Volga, Gor’kii changed the face and essence of Russia with his lifetime of work, which often concentrated the voices of the masses into a powerful rhetorical force. Monarchs across Europe feared him as a revolution-maker, and he was among the world’s most-read authors of fiction in the twentieth century. With the ear of Soviet leaders, literary fame, and lofty social connections, he exercised influence few others have before. Nevertheless, I was more interested in his internal battle. Below Gor’kii’s own resistance to the status quo around him, currents defiantly clashed within his identity, as well. He not only arrived into but also embraced the liminality of the late 1800s and the turn of the twentieth century in the Russian Empire. Born in 1868 and immediately thinking about 1918, for a long time Gor’kii was conflicting currents of Old Russia and a Russia yet to be born. This dissertation project seeks to capture Gor’kii’s “mixing zone” of the irreconcilable, as he becomes what the world knows him to be, as he becomes the Russia that we know today, as he shows us our common humanity. Irrespective of whether you are connected to a “mixing zone”—I, too, grew up near a MMZ, at the Missouri and Illinois rivers’ confluence—everyone goes through at least one in their lifetime.