Chapter 6  
An Intermezzo on Capri

“The Russian people have forged a sacred union with Freedom. Let us believe that from this alliance, new strong individuals will be born in our nation that has been tormented both physically and spiritually. However, we must not forget that we are all people of yesterday, and that the great task of the nation's revival lies in the hands of those shaped by the harsh lessons of the past, in an atmosphere of mutual distrust, disregard for others, and grotesque selfishness.”  
—Gor’kii, “Untimely Thoughts,” (1917)[[1]](#footnote-2)

“The gift of all gifts is the truth... Now the vagabonds are shod, and now the private professors are destitute. Has it become better in Russia? Have the sprouts of the Social-Democratic School, with Rector Gor’kii at its helm, transplanted from under the blue Capri sky to the Russian soil, grown as the conscientious gardener dreamed?..”  
–I. I. Aikhenval’d, “Maksim Gor’kii” (1918)[[2]](#footnote-3)

Once the October Revolution had taken place, the transpositions Gor’kii had been trying to write into existence could also be realized, but would they? Since *Mother*—and likely before—he hoped that when the Empire was no more, the “people of yesterday” would become “new strong individuals,” as Pavel does. As we know in hindsight, however, even if some in the RFSFR and USSR could and would rise to the occasion as Gor’kii wished, the most important people remained weakened by the “harsh lessons of the past” and thus prone to old ways. *A Revolutionary Gospel*’s first four chapters aim to define the “lessons” to which Gor’kii alludes here, his proclamations of “Truth” based on decades of witnessing history up close and personal. Such is “the gift of all gifts” about which Aikhenval’d wrote: change is possible, but there is no outrunning the past. Gor’kii knew this better than most around him, though that did not stop him from trying to radically change human nature. The Capri School and its “sprouts” were the new Soviet people Gor’kii had been hoping to sow across the country. Unfortunately, Russian soil was simply too hostile for these ideas to take root.

At the beginning of this investigation, it seemed as though Gor’kii was trying with all his might to divorce Russia’s future from its Orthodox past; however, as I pause at this inflection point, it seems more likely that he was trying to move the Russian Orthodox tradition away from its contemporary trajectory and toward something new. Having documented a portion of the evidence that Gor’kii was deeply concerned about people’s spiritual needs, I would like to suggest that he went on to spread that concern to other revolutionary writers and, to the extent that he could, to Bolshevik cultural politics. Archival research done in June 2023 in Italy lends insight into Gor’kii’s intentions and actions following Bloody Sunday. With additional analysis of the young writers learning his style, I show how the spirit of his post-Christian transpositions continued in the works of Il’ia Surguchёv (1881-1956), Ivan Vol’nov (1885-1931), and Aleksei Zolotarёv (1879-1950). Finally, I suggest what likely became of this trend in Gor’kii’s later career, including in his work with the People’s Education Commissariat and the Soviet Writer’s Union. As we have seen, though not always visible on the surface, the religious humanism that burned in Gor’kii’s heart and mind after Bloody Sunday was never fully extinguished even in his final years.

*A Revolutionary Gospel* arose from two supposition: first, that change, especially radical change, happens gradually and with at least some continuity with the past for the sake of the system under revision; and second, that surely, at least one of the major figures in the early Soviet system understood that first law of nature. The preceding chapters have demonstrated that Gor’kii indeed knew that Russians could not simply start from zero to build a completely new society. His pre-revolutionary literature projects the vision for a renewed foundational narrative to serve Russia after the Romanovs and institutional Orthodoxy. In the body of *A Revolutionary Gospel*, I bring to light Gor’kii’s spiritual humanism, a complex web of personal ethics, popular Christianity, political economics, and faith in Russians to evolve. My discussion points out how Gor’kii transposed elements of the Christian literature, from names to phrases to doctrine to entire books of the Bible, to show his readers a distinct-yet-recognizable post-Christian way of life that could and should be the *narod*’s future. Perhaps most importantly, *A Revolutionary Gospel* offers scholars and readers a different, capacious avenue of understanding Gor’kii and his contemporaries. This study takes a heretical approach to analyzing its subject. Gor'kii may not have been outright lying when he called himself an “atheist,” but he was not telling the whole truth. In fact, he believed the *narod* could be God themselves, if they were up to the task. To summarize the first chapter’s epigraphs: there is no such thing as an atheist. That is the gospel truth.

At times, life subordinates what we have planned in favor of what others have planned for us. Such was the life and fate of Gor’kii when Lenin tasked him with running the Capri Workers' School following Bloody Sunday. In reality, the so-called school itself only lasted four-and-a-half months, from July 23 to December 7, 1909, when Lenin discovered what kind of institution Headmaster Gor'kii was truly running. The exact nature of the Capri School curriculum is debatable, as nothing has been discovered attesting to precisely what Gor’kii was teaching on Capri. Archival materials provide information, however, on the curriculum of the Bologna Workers' School run by Lunacharskii, which received Lenin’s continuing support. These courses included “Political Economics” (taught by Bogdanov), “The History of Russian Literature and the Workers Movement in the West” (taught by Lunacharskii), “The Woman Question and the Finnish Question" (taught by Aleksandra Kollontai), and “Practical Occupations, Propaganda, Agitation, Etc.” (taught by Andrei Sokolov).[[3]](#footnote-4) Rather, what remains from Gor’kii’s Capri School is a police record of a propaganda campaign advocating for a Russian democratic republic.[[4]](#footnote-5) One may extrapolate from this information, as well as from the from the fact that much else surrounding the School seems to have been destroyed, that Gor’kii was taking advantage of the distance afforded by the Italian island to conduct classes his own way. Despite the fact so little is left in the official record from the Capri School, we may nevertheless learn more from the unofficial record. The students of the School who studied directly under Gor'kii strove to become talented writers in their own right.

Not every visitor to Capri is recorded, but there is a small number of other writers’ works directly attributable to Gor’kii’s mentorship on the island. The purpose of the following section, thus, is not to prove that these four pieces of literature were written on the island, but rather to establish for future research that Gor’kii used his time during and after the Capri School to teach others the post-Christian philosophy and method at the center of the current study. My aim is therefore to seek further avenues of investigation into both the nature and purpose of such spiritual thinking resulting from Gor’kii’s search for a moral post-Christian future society. While each of these authors addresses social ailments in their own way, their time spent with Gor'kii and a common search to make use of the past, rather than simply throw it away, unites them. I follow the throughline from Gor’kii’s thinking to the works of Il’ia Dmitrievich Surguchёv (1881 – 1956), Ivan Egorovich Vol’nov (ne Vladimirov, 1885 – 1931), Aleksei Alekseevich Zolotarёv (1879 – 1950), that were begun, written, or finished on Capri in consultation with Gor’kii in 1909-13. These works form a second generation of post-Christian transpositions elevating the common Russian to the role of liberator of the *narod* from a morally bankrupt ruling class.

The first of Gor’kii’s visitors was Il'ia Dmitrievich Surguchev, the son of a wealthy businessman, a graduate of the Stavropol seminary, and fellow member of the Znanie publishing collective. Records of Gor’kii’s influence on Surguchev's work starts in April 1910, approximately when the younger author began publishing. Two years later, in the thirty-ninth edition of Znanie, Surguchev’s *The Governor* [*Gubernator*] (1912) was published. The novel demonstrates several commonalities with Gor’kii’s *Mother*, among other works. Its plot follows a provincial official’s spiritual awakening in the last year of his life as he comes to understand the decrepit state of the Russian elite’s values, including his own, Like Pavel and Pelageia, the governor’s growing disgust with corrupt secular and religious authorities becomes an engine for internal change guided by a Biblically sourced sense of right and wrong. Psalm 90, a song praising God as “my refuge and my protection” [*pribezishche moe i zashchita moia*], is a transpositional leitmotif throughout the first two-thirds of *The Governor*. The psalm emphasizes the ability of one under God's protection to conquer evil, and the line of Ps. 90:13, “you will tread upon the snake and the basilisk; you will trample the lion and the dragon,” turns into reality more than once for the main character.[[5]](#footnote-6) Elsewhere in *The Governor*, the local oil baron’s stockpile goes up in flames, engulfing the setting in a hellish fire. After the source becomes known, characters only refer to the baron as “the bourgeois.”[[6]](#footnote-7) The fire only goes out once the governor’s young daughter dies, the event which becomes the ultimate impetus for his internal conversion. Finally, throughout the novel but particularly after Sonya’s death, the familiar resurrection narrative plays an increasingly important role in shaping the plot. From the beginning, arguments about the possible existence of immortality are scattered among the governor’s obsessive thoughts about his impending death. After the daughter dies in childbirth, the governor is more certain than ever about both his own death and life after death. The novel ends during Holy Week. The governor’s final act is to pardon and free all the prisoners in his province before Easter by lying to the warden that the order came down from the Tsar. This mercy, he believes, will open their eyes to the truth. He has found liberation from human restraints and, in a Christly manner, wishes the same for others. The novel, while less political than Gor'kii's works, interweaves a humanistic interpretation of Orthodoxy and contemporary issues in an easily recognizable manner.

The second of Gor’kii’s visitors was Il’ia Egorovich Vol’nov, a revolutionary writer from a destitute peasant background, which became a primary theme in his writings at Gor’kii’s insistence. Vol’nov arrived in Italy in January 1911 by way of Paris after spending much of his time between 1905 and then in various prisons for agitating peasant workers for the SRs. On Capri, Vol’nov lived alongside and consulted Gor’kii regularly while composing his largest and most famous work, *The Story of the Days of My Life: A Peasant Chronicle* [*Povest’ o dniakh moei zhizni: Krest’iankaia khronika*] (1913). The novel, a fictionalized autobiography, describes a boy, first Van’tia and then Ivan, from seven to thirteen years as he experiences the defining moments of his “Childhood” and “Adolescence,” per the book’s divisions. Vol’nov uses the main character’s still-forming, childhood worldview to pathologize the village life’s inhumane conditions, in which he and many others had grown up. Poverty, violence, drunkenness, crime, and hunger repeatedly inflict the residents, who deny others’ humanity in the form of constant insults, property theft, child marriage, and physical fighting. Like Gor’kii’s past works and his own autobiography, which would appear just months later, the young male protagonist must find his own ethical compass in preparation for a brutish life as an adult. Fathers, in particular, are a perennial antagonist for Vol’nov, as well; Van’tia suggests murdering his father to make life easier.[[7]](#footnote-8) God and religion play a primary role in the boy’s development, but Christianity appears either in a symbolic manner or secondary to other ideas, not dissimilar to Gor’kii’s early works. In one scene, an elder retells the Parable of the Sower reflecting the Russian spiritual landscape. Christ returns to Earth with St. Peter, Il’ia the prophet, and St. Nicholas [*Nikolai Chudotvorets*]. They approach a farmer, asking, “What do you sow?” A destitute man responds humbly, which inspires Christ to promise a bountiful crop. The food he is growing, buckwheat, is a stereotypical peasant food among Russians and other Slavs in Eastern Europe. When they approach a rich farmer with the same question, he ignore Christ’s question and spits on Peter the Apostle, leaving the trio nonplussed. Vol’nov takes the four types of ground, which are to symbolize people’s receptiveness to Christ’s message, and distills them into two socioeconomic populations: the poor and the rich. Similar to Gor’kii’s criticism of the merchant class, Vol’nov transposes a Biblical parable into the Russian context in order to publicly rebuke the attitudes of the ruling class, which, for him, is the wealthy villagers.

1. “Подарок всех подарков - правда. ... Теперь босяки обуты, теперь приват-доценты обездолены. Стало ли лучше в России? Из-под голубого каприйского неба на русскую почву перенесенные ростки социал-демократической школы, с ректором Горьким во главе, так ли взошли, как об этом мечтал добросовестный садовник?..” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Archive ID 41 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Archive ID 161 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Luke, in chapter 10 of his gospel, quotes this very line between telling the Narrative of the Seventy Apostles and the Parable of the Good Samaritan. (10:19) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Surguchev, p.147 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. p. 77 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)