

# Soviet writer Anatoly Rybakov dies at age 87

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On December 23 the world lost one of its most important modern writers with the death of Anatoly Rybakov, the author of the anti-Stalinist *Children of the Arbat* trilogy. Rybakov, 87, died of complications from heart bypass surgery, having suffered two heart attacks earlier in 1998. He is survived by his wife, Tatyana Rybakova, and two sons, Alexandr and Aleksei.

Rybakov was born on January 14, 1911 (January 1 in the old-style Russian calendar) in the Ukrainian city of Chernigov. A socialist youth inspired by the October Revolution, he was arrested by Stalinist officials in 1934 for "subversion" and sent into exile in Siberia for three years. After his release, Rybakov worked as a transport engineer. During World War II he served as a tank commander. His war service apparently cleared the record of his arrest.

Following the war, he wrote *Kortik* ("The Dagger"), a children's story, in 1948; *Voditeli* ("The Drivers"), a novel, in 1950; and *Tyazhely Pesok*, a novel about the fate of a family of Russian Jews during the Nazi occupation, in 1979 (published in English in 1981 as *Heavy Sand*). Rybakov also wrote for television, film and theater.

Rybakov wrote *Deti Arbata* (*Children of the Arbat*), the first volume of the trilogy for which he is best known, in the 1960s, but was unable to have it published until 1987. Soviet journals twice announced, in 1966 and 1978, that *Deti Arbata* was to be serialized, only to have the decision revoked by government officials.

Nonetheless, Rybakov declined to have the novel first printed abroad, commenting later that he felt such a decision would mark a betrayal of his duty as a writer and his responsibility to the people of the USSR. In 1988 the novel appeared in English. The two succeeding volumes, *Strakh* (*Fear*) and *Prakh i Pepel* (*Dust and Ashes*), were published in Russian in 1990 and 1996 respectively, and in English in 1992 and

1996.

The novels chart the experiences of a group of childhood friends who grew up in Moscow's Arbat district from the time just prior to the arrest of the principal character, Alexander Pankratov (nicknamed Sasha and loosely based on the author), in late 1933 until the tragic wartime denouement ten years later.

In the *Arbat* trilogy Rybakov reveals his particular genius: an ability to combine a powerful sense of drama with a high degree of political and historical understanding. The work is neither a history with a thin veneer of fiction nor a story in which great historical events serve as mere background. It is not simply the product of a conscientious researcher, but a genuine work of art, a profound and moving tragedy. The author has a deep insight into his characters, particularly the way in which the social experiences through which they pass shape their intellectual, political and moral development. This infuses the characters--and Rybakov's writings as a whole--with realness and life.

The evolution of the protagonist, Sasha, is portrayed in a dramatically and psychologically convincing manner. Initially idealistic and somewhat iconoclastic, his outlook changes following his arrest to one of wariness and apprehension, not only about his own fate, but that of Soviet society as a whole. The lives of Sasha and his former companions are molded by the terrible experiences of the 1930s: the Kirov assassination, the mass arrests, the frame-up, torture and murder of Old Bolshevik leaders and socialist opponents of the ruling bureaucracy. The chronicle of Sasha's disillusionment and alienation, of the accommodation of a number of his former acquaintances to the official regime, and the relative isolation of those who behave courageously and decently, including his mother and an intellectual neighbor, convincingly accounts for his transformation. At the same time it reveals important truths about the

period in which Sasha matures.

The trilogy presents a chilling portrait of Stalin, also a principal figure in the story. His brutal character is shown to be the outcome of a complex interaction between his background, his personal traits--malice, vindictiveness, short-sightedness--and his political role as the dictator who prepared the show trials. After reading the novels' episodes involving Stalin, one instinctively feels that Rybakov has captured him well. The events described may not always have overt political significance--such as Stalin's encounters with his dentist, who is terrified of offending him--but they reveal aspects of the dictator's essence. When Stalin calmly reviews "confessions" soiled with the blood of their signatories, one gets a sense of his ruthlessness in dealing with those who were connected with the October 1917 revolution.

*Children of the Arbat* is the most aesthetically developed work of the series. In this volume, Rybakov's ability to seamlessly weave the threads of the trilogy's principal characters with those of the objective events taking place is at its height. In this regard, the novel stands in the great Russian tradition of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate*.

The second and third volumes sacrifice something of the style and artistry of the first, reflecting, perhaps, the author's sense of having limited time. Nonetheless, they make for enthralling reading and have exceptional moments. In one passage in *Dust and Ashes*, Rybakov introduces the moving "testament" of Leon Trotsky by having Stalin read a copy of it. In this instant Stalin, the embodiment of police cynicism and reaction, is juxtaposed against Trotsky, whose message is imbued with optimism and faith in human solidarity. "Life is beautiful. Let future generations cleanse it of all evil, oppression and violence and enjoy it to the full." Stalin reads these lines in silent fury. Rybakov's message is unmistakable: in the end, Trotsky's vision will triumph over Stalin's brutality.

The response to the novels varied. *Deti Arbata* initially gained a large following. The Soviet journal in which it first appeared had to boost its normal press run of 150,000 to 800,000. Rybakov soon received thousands of appreciative letters, especially from young people. However, the response of critics, particularly in the West, was lukewarm. In general, their reaction had

more to do with the prevailing political outlook than with objective artistic and intellectual criteria. The left-wing standpoint of Rybakov's novels rendered them of little value for the official anti-Marxist propaganda campaigns being waged in the West and the former Stalinist states.

A more serious appraisal of Rybakov's work is overdue. His artistic vigor and intellectual integrity place him among a small minority of late twentieth century fiction writers. The theme developed in his novels--the responsibilities of an individual to his society and his ideals--sets him apart. His works deserve the widest readership.



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