

The Soviet poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko (1933-2017) and the fate of the ‘60s generation

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3 May 2017

Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the best-known Soviet poet from the 1960s to the 1980s, died at 83 from cancer on April 1, 2017, in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Yevtushenko, born in 1932 in the small town of Zima in Siberia's Irkutsk region, became one of the leading Soviet poets of the “thaw period” under Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev. Those years were bound up with official condemnation of the “cult of personality” around Joseph Stalin and the widespread hope within the Soviet people that the country could be renewed on a socialist basis.

In one of his most renowned poems, “The Heirs of Stalin,” published in 1961 at the time that Stalin's body was removed from the mausoleum in Moscow's Red Square, Yevtushenko wrote:

*Let someone repeat over and over again: “Compose yourself!”
I shall never find rest.*

*As long as there are Stalin's heirs on earth,
it will always seem to me,
that Stalin is still in the Mausoleum.*

[Translated by Katherine von Imhof]

Yevtushenko's father was a geologist of Baltic German origin. His parents divorced when he was 7 years old. The boy's original last name was Gangnus, but his mother changed it to her family name after they moved to Moscow at the end of the war.

In secondary school and during his student years, Yevtushenko struggled and had various problems, but he quickly emerged as a talented poet. His first attempts at writing poetry were published in the journal *Sovetsky Sport* (Soviet Sport), when he was 17 years old, and his first volume of poetry, *The Prospects of the Future*, came out in 1952.

The poem “Babi Yar,” written in 1961 in honor of the Jewish victims of mass murder by the Nazi occupiers in a ravine outside Kiev in the fall of 1941, brought him true international fame. In the poem, translated into 72 languages, Yevtushenko writes:

*I am
each old man
here shot dead.
I am
every child
here shot dead.
Nothing in me
shall ever forget!
The ‘Internationale,’
let it thunder
when the last antisemite on earth
is buried for ever.
In my blood there is no Jewish blood.
In their callous rage,
all antisemites*

must hate me now as a Jew.

For that reason

I am a true Russian!

[Translated by George Reavey]

“Babi Yar” is justly Yevtushenko's best known poem. It is deeply moving and had an enormous impact when it was first published in the Soviet journal *Literaturnaya Gazeta* in September 1961.

In the Soviet Union, both under Stalin and his successors, state anti-Semitism flourished behind the scenes and—under this malevolent official influence—found expression in everyday life. Even though Red Army correspondents such as Vasily Grossman had been among the first to write and report on the Holocaust, the horrors were subsequently covered up by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which denied that genocide had been committed against the Jewish people, instead arguing that only “Soviet citizens” were murdered.

Composer Dmitri Shostakovich, who incorporated the poem into his Symphony No. 13 (1962), reportedly told a friend: “I was overjoyed when I read Yevtushenko's ‘Babi Yar’; the poem astounded me. It astounded thousands of people. Many had heard about Babi Yar, but it took Yevtushenko's poem to make them aware of it. They tried to destroy the memory of Babi Yar, first the Germans and then the Ukrainian government. But after Yevtushenko's poem, it became clear that it would never be forgotten. That is the power of art.”

In the early 1960s, the great enthusiasm of Soviet young people for poetry generated the phenomenon of readings in large venues. The most legendary poetry evenings were the ones held at Moscow's Polytechnic Museum, which attracted thousands of admirers. Apart from Yevgeny Yevtushenko, the three best-known young poets—Andrei Voznesensky, Robert Rozhddestvensky and Bella Akhmadulina (who later became Yevtushenko's first wife)—also read their verses there.

The readings at the Polytechnic Museum became part of the fiction film *I am Twenty* (Marlen Khutsiev, 1965), widely recognized as one of the symbols of the “thaw” period and the attempts of the best layers of the Soviet intelligentsia of the time to make a connection between the epoch of the 1917 revolution and the contemporary period.

The young poets often emulated the leading figures of the 1920s, such as Sergei Yesenin and especially Vladimir Mayakovsky. The influence of the latter was particularly felt in the works of Rozhddestvensky and Yevtushenko himself.

The principal peculiarity of Yevtushenko's poetic style was the combination of a deep lyricism and self-examination—often bordering on self-infatuation and egocentrism—with a civic or social pathos and an urge to comment on the most topical questions of political life.

Yevtushenko elaborated his view on poetry, according to which the self-expression of the individual cannot limit itself to the “ivory tower” of

“pure art,” and according to which it [individual self-expression] is inseparable from the striving to have a certain social position, in his poem “The Bratsk Hydroelectric Station” (1965). This poem was conceived as a hymn to the success of building Soviet society, which surpassed anything hitherto known in human history.

*The poet in Russia is more than a poet.
Only those in whom the proud spirit of citizenship roams,
Who find no comfort or peace,
Are fated to be born as poets in Russia.*

At the same time, the main unresolved question that determined Yevtushenko’s fate as a poet, as it did that of the entire Soviet “‘60s generation,” lay in the incapacity to truly break with the Stalinist bureaucracy and find a direct path to the genuine history and spiritual pathos of the 1917 October Revolution.

This incapacity, in the final analysis, was an objective socio-cultural problem, not a failing of the individual artists. Stalinism had murdered off the finest elements in the working class and the intelligentsia, anyone perceived to represent a threat to the bureaucracy. As a result of the physical and intellectual devastation, the Soviet population was largely blocked from contact with genuine Marxism, including of course a left-wing critique of the counter-revolutionary regime itself.

The artists undoubtedly felt a sincere hatred and revulsion for Stalin, but the terrible practices and legacy of Soviet Stalinism could not be reduced to the personal foibles and malice of an individual, but rather were rooted in the nationalistic, reactionary theory of “socialism in a single country,” which represented the opposite of the international and revolutionary perspectives of October.

The 1960s generation certainly went through a romantic infatuation with the revolution and the Civil War. This resulted, inter alia, in the lines written in 1957 by Bulat Okudzhava, the son of the Georgian Old Bolshevik, Shalva Okudzhava, accused of “Trotskyism” and shot by Stalin during the Great Terror in the late 1930s:

*No matter what new battle shakes the globe,
I will nevertheless fall in that single Civil War,
And commissars in dusty headgear will bow in silence over me.*

To resurrect the genuine spirit of the first years of Soviet power, however, and to lay a bridge between the two epochs, separated by the gulf of a horrible tragedy, the political genocide of several generations of the Bolshevik party and the entire culture of Russian socialism, it would have been necessary to turn seriously to the heritage of Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition. This political heritage embodied the best traditions of October and represented the socialist alternative to Soviet Stalinism. But the conditions for the artists making such a turn were very unfavorable.

Making this conscious connection to the history of the Left Opposition, the continuator of Bolshevism, was also necessary for a new—and genuine—“discovery” of Lenin, whom the official Soviet “Marxism-Leninism” had turned into an embalmed mummy, a dead statue with the face of a “state person.”

Without confronting this primary and most critical problem, the generation of Soviet intellectuals of the 1960s was condemned to degeneration and moral degradation, as well as to an increasing creative impotence.

Ambivalence, growing hypocrisy and cynicism found their reflection in Yevtushenko’s work and personal eccentricities.

In the mid-1960s he condemned the witch-hunt in the USSR of poet Joseph Brodsky and writer Yuli Daniel, and wrote about the merciless suppression of the 1968 Prague Spring by the Brezhnev leadership in the words: “Tanks are moving on Prague, Tanks are moving on the truth.” He also wrote a series of poems about the Vietnam War. However, in the 1970s Yevtushenko turned more and more into a stereotyped figure of a “representative of Soviet culture” abroad.

The celebrity poet visited over a hundred countries, meeting not only

Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, but also such repugnant representatives of world imperialism as Richard Nixon.

The necessity to regularly “speak out” on topical political questions in the general spirit of the interests of the Kremlin leadership too often gave birth to hurriedly cobbled together, often botched verses. The journalist and writer Denis Dragunskii remarks: “Yevtushenko is flashy, colorful, and sometimes tasteless. Just like his clothes—these overtly colorful jackets, rings, shirts of crazy styles.”

Discussing Yevtushenko’s ability to establish relations with the powers that be and “advance himself,” Dragunskii cites a story of one journalist from the newspaper *Komsomolskaya pravda* [*Komsomol Truth*—organ of the Central Committee of the Komsomol, youth wing of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union], who observed Yevtushenko in the mid-1970s “twice during one day. In the morning, the poet came into the ‘Komsomolka’ [which was in these years one of the anchors of “free thought” within the framework granted by the authorities] and was dressed very fashionably, striking and foreign. And at three in the afternoon he met Yevtushenko in the Central Committee of the Komsomol and hardly recognized him—he was dressed in a modest, Soviet suit, tie... He apparently had gone home only to change his clothes.”

The process of degeneration of the Soviet intelligentsia was not completed in an instant, but stretched out over a lengthy period of time, at least two decades or more, proceeding quite steadily in the years of the so called “stagnation” (under Leonid Brezhnev and his successors). Nevertheless, having received a significant impetus from the “thaw,” Soviet culture continued to yield significant fruits for some time. The flourishing of cinema, for instance, continued from the late 1960s to the early 1980s.

But the continued rule of the counter-revolutionary Stalinist bureaucracy, which could only have been ended in a progressive fashion by a political revolution of the working class, doomed the Soviet Union.

Mikhail Gorbachev’s *perestroika* (“restructuring”) policies brought to light the hidden, long-term process of decay and the real danger of capitalist restoration, while leading layers of the Soviet intelligentsia “suddenly” discovered that, in the name of the democratic “values” of bourgeois society, they were prepared to curse the revolution, socialism and their own recent past.

The acknowledged leaders of the “Soviet ‘60s” in the various spheres of science and culture became the primary intellectual prop for the restoration of capitalism which the Stalinist bureaucracy conducted at the turn of the 1980s and 90s and which destroyed the Soviet Union.

Proceeding ever further along the path of renunciationism and anti-Communism, a significant section of this layer, including the above-mentioned Bulat Okudzhava, supported the authoritarian Boris Yeltsin regime and enthusiastically approved his shelling of parliament by tanks in October 1993. Some few years later, in full accordance with the positions of the most influential group of recently emerged “oligarchs,” they supported Vladimir Putin as Yeltsin’s successor.

Yevtushenko tried to find a new footing in the post-Soviet period, but without much success. His moderate criticisms of Yeltsin’s Russia allowed him to maintain or develop a certain popularity, but all this resembled, more than anything else, a life after death.

In 1991, he moved with his family to the United States, after receiving a position at the University of Tulsa. From this point on, he returned to Russia mostly for short visits; he held readings from time to time, gave interviews and worked on editing a five-volume anthology of Russian poetry covering “ten centuries in the history of the country.”

In 2014 Yevtushenko disgracefully supported the pro-Western coup in Kiev, which was carried out by far-right and fascist forces. A few days before the overthrow of Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich, he wrote the poem “State, Be a Human Being!,” in which he declared “With me on the Maidan are the warm ghosts of Pushkin and Briullov [Karl Briullov,

the Russian painter who donated the proceeds of the sale of one of his paintings to buy the freedom of Ukrainian writer-artist Taras Shevchenko from virtual slavery].”

This final transformation of Yevtushenko from a “fellow-traveler” and “friend” of the Soviet bureaucracy into a loyal supporter of imperialism guaranteed him the sympathies of the pro-Western liberal opposition, which “rehabilitated” him as fully as they could.

The poet and writer Dmitry Bykov speaks today of the “drama and triumph of Yevtushenko,” asserting he was “a man, endowed with super-human abilities.” At the same time, the decades-long “conflict” between Joseph Brodsky and Yevtushenko has finally come to an end. Brodsky, who received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1987, at the height of Gorbachev’s *perestroika*, had already, by the end of the 1960s, politically turned far to the right, to extreme anti-Communism. His personal animosity toward the officially recognized Soviet writers and poets found its most specific expression in his hostile attitude toward Yevtushenko. His animosity, it is said, went so far that Brodsky declared: “If Yevtushenko is against the *kolkhozes* [Soviet collective farms], then I am for them.”

When looked at today, this feud looks like a trivial episode, even though one that bears some significance if only from the standpoint of literary history.

It would be a gross oversimplification and a genuine error to regard the fate of the generation of the Soviet ‘60s as nothing more than one colossal defeat in the moral and creative sense. These figures left us quite a lot that is vivid and fresh and which will continue to live in the memory of future generations.

In the present day, the American ruling elite is conducting a ferocious anti-Russian campaign, trying to incite open hatred of the Russians as a people in order to justify their plans for global domination. Under such conditions one is pleased and moved to remember one of Yevgeny Yevtushenko’s best poems written in 1961. In one of the most difficult periods of the Cold War, on the eve of the Cuban missile crisis, he wrote, recalling the lessons of the Second World War:

*Say, do the Russians want a war?—
Go ask our land, then ask once more
That silence lingering in the air
Above the birch and poplar there. ...
Sure, we know how to fight a war,
But we don't want to see once more
The soldiers falling all around,
Their countryside a battleground.
Ask those who give the soldiers life
Go ask my mother, ask my wife,
Then you will have to ask no more,
Say—Do the Russians want a war?*



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