

The Artamonov Business (1925): Maxim Gorky and the Russian Revolution

Owen Howell
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The *World Socialist Web Site* (WSWS) has been publishing a series of comments on artistic works from 1925, which have emphasised the critical impact of the 1917 Russian Revolution on artists worldwide. The audacious seizure of state power by the Russian working class, the triumph of the masses over forces of reaction through bloody civil war, and the notion that humanity was advancing to a higher, more progressive social order—all of this helped revitalise artistic life, opening new horizons and unleashing a broad cultural ferment. This was especially evident in the Soviet literary scene of the 1920s.

The revolution's influence was felt not only among the youthful writers of the new workers' state, but even among the best representatives of the old pre-revolutionary literature, none more so than Maxim Gorky. His work, *The Artamonov Business* (1925), apart from being arguably his finest novel, is significant for being the first major effort by Gorky, one of the last surviving figures of 19th-century Russian literature, to grapple artistically with the most consequential and explosive event of the 20th century: the Bolshevik Revolution.

The story follows a family of peasants, the Artamonovs, newly liberated by the 1861 abolition of serfdom, and traces their rapid transformation into wealthy owners of a textile factory. Ending with the business' takeover by revolutionary workers in 1917, the novel moves through the whole half-century leading up to the October insurrection, a turbulent period of vast social changes and political upheavals.

Gorky opens his chronicle with Ilya Artamonov, the family patriarch, arriving in the provincial town of Dromov. He strides into the town church and startles everyone with his rugged appearance. He scandalises the town elite by standing in the area reserved for them. Physically resembling a bear, the peasant is accompanied by three boys: his eldest Pyotr, his adopted nephew Alexei, and his other son, the hunchback Nikita. Immediately, Ilya sets about acquiring land for his textile factory, hiring labourers, and marrying Pyotr to the town mayor's daughter, Natalia. In the meantime, he cheerfully embarks on an affair with the mayor's wife, Ulyana, a match for his own vitality.

Ilya overflows with energy, and forces his will on all those around him with his overwhelming personality, fully confident in the fulfilment of his plan. The Dromov businessmen view their boisterous new competitor with suspicion and hatred, an attitude towards the family that slowly mellows over the following decades as the Artamonov fortune grows.

Returning from a business trip, Ilya is convinced of a bright future opening up for manufacturers amid Russia's industrial expansion:

Ilya Artamonov came back from Moscow in great spirits. He had grown younger, trimmed his beard close, grown still broader in the shoulder, it seemed, and his eyes were brighter; altogether he was like a plough with a brand-new coulter. He stretched himself out on the divan like a gentleman, and told them their business was going to go like clockwork, without fail—"Work enough for you

and your children and your grandchildren. For three hundred years ahead. We Artamonovs are designed to bring about a tremendous advancement in our country's economic prosperity!"

While at the outset Ilya fraternises with his labourers, who view him as a fellow peasant, the friendly atmosphere begins to change as the factory grows larger, with boss and worker taking on more distinct identities. The early sense of creative possibility is snuffed out by Ilya's sudden death, collapsing while delivering the factory's first steam-powered engine, and the family begins its steady decline. The genial strength embodied in Ilya fails to transmit to the next generation. We witness the sad decay of the young people as they transform with age into respectable bourgeois.

Pyotr, who succeeds Ilya as head of the enterprise, is unwilling from the start to run a factory. He dreams of his past life as a peasant in the steppes, working the land. His marriage a disaster, he falls in love with a simple woman who lives secluded in the woods, and imagines a life together with her, away from modern society. Everything irritates him, his family most of all. Consumed with frustration and unfulfilled desires, he plummets into alcoholism and debauchery.

Alexei, a mischievous child who gets into brawls, matures into a refined and frivolous bourgeois liberal. The hunchbacked Nikita, meanwhile, is despised by his family. Of no practical use to these social climbers, and suffering from unrequited love for Natalia, he makes a failed attempt at suicide. Later, he retreats to a distant monastery and tries, unsuccessfully, to lead a religious life.

Natalia herself, once shy and gentle, devolves into a self-absorbed housewife, indifferent to her children and concerned mostly with eating and sleeping. Whenever she comes alive from her stupor, it is only to give antisemitic outbursts at the dinner table.

Pyotr's eldest son Ilya, intelligent and promising, is the grand hope for heading the business, but at university he gets drawn into socialist politics and refuses to succeed his father. Much to Pyotr's fury, he severs all ties with the family to become a schoolteacher and Bolshevik, and disappears from the story. Pyotr's other son, the buffoonish Yakov, is as self-obsessed as he is incompetent at managing the factory. After going on a nightmarish month-long drinking bout at the Nizhny Novgorod Fair, Pyotr's mind starts to deteriorate.

In the novel's final part, the spectre of revolution haunts the Artamonovs. Alexei and his son Miron, a budding politician for the Cadets—the party of Russia's liberal bourgeoisie—note with anxiety the political radicalisation of their workforce. Secret meetings of workers are held. Spies descend on the factory. The 1905 Revolution and its defeat leave their mark.

The family struggles to keep pace with events as the newspapers announce them. The First World War arrives and the Artamonovs' workers, now soldiers fighting on the front, come home wounded and angry. And then, 1917 brings about the final breakup of the rotting family.

Pyotr, so deeply sunken into dementia, cannot even comprehend that he has been turned out of his own home by workers seizing the factory.

The Artamonov Business was Gorky's most ambitious work to date: a fiction spanning more than five decades and tracing the complex interplay between a private family drama and the march of history, between emotional and sociological life. The story's ruthless logic hurtles things towards the end, seemingly inevitably, as the gaiety of the early chapters gives way to the sinister downfall. Its characters are studies in how historical events, the passing of time and class tensions alter and distort individuals, all while massive shifts take place in the larger social structure.

The 1861–1917 period witnessed seismic changes in Russian society. A backward agrarian state was thrust into the vortex of world capitalism, producing deep social polarisation and acute contradictions. The emancipation of serfs, freeing them legally from their masters but leaving them economically shackled, created the foundation for a layer of richer peasants. Many of these followed their petty bourgeois aspirations into the industrial bonanza that was getting started.

Heavy industry, railways, mining and textile factories sprang up around major cities, fuelled by an influx of foreign and domestic capital, amid the emergence of imperialism internationally in the late 19th century. This created pockets of advanced technology embedded in a semi-feudal nation. A new, militant working class was being formed from peasants moving to the industrial hubs for work. Peasants in the countryside faced mass pauperisation. The Russian bourgeoisie, weak and incapable of leading a democratic struggle against tsarist autocracy, looked with fear on the working masses and sided with the landowning nobility to protect its newly gotten wealth.

Many of these social dynamics are given striking dramatic form in *The Artamonov Business*. Here, history is not a mere backdrop to the family saga—it is interwoven into the fabric of the Artamonovs' story. The Artamonov clan is seen as a microcosm for larger social processes. In this sense, Gorky was drawing from the rich heritage of Russian realist literature—a tradition of such giants as Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy—and applied its methods to make sense of the new 20th century turmoil.

The great 19th century Russian authors, through various ways and styles, were characterised, even more than their European counterparts, by an unflinching commitment to probing the objective social reality and distilling from it pearls of artistic truth. This highly critical approach had a deep-going impact on the consciousness of the population, including the most advanced workers, and their understanding of tsarist oppression. Rosa Luxemburg said the following about this mighty literary tradition:

it was born out of opposition to the Russian regime, out of the spirit of struggle. This feature ... explains the richness and depth of its spiritual quality, the fullness and originality of its artistic form, above all, its creative and driving social force. Russian literature became, under czarism, a power in public life as in no other country and in no other time. It remained at its post for a century until it was relieved by the material power of the masses, when the word became flesh.

The Artamonov Business marked a development in Gorky's style—previously more romantic and inclined to idealise his characters—of a more mature realism, as he turned his attention further towards the study of human complexities and their relation to social convulsions.

The novel's motley gallery of characters is testament to Gorky's fascination with the variety of human life. His powers to summon up a vast abundance of human types, like Dickens or Balzac, seem to know no

limits. He gives us vivid, memorable portraits of even minor figures, such as Seraphim the singing carpenter, Zahar Morozov the fearsome Bolshevik worker, or Zinaida the mill-hand and her countless affairs with the factory men. There's also Tikhon Vialov, the solemn peasant yardman, who acts as a chorus to the family tragedy.

Much of the book's weight comes from its incisive picture of the narrowness, spiritual poverty, and overall gloominess of Russian provincial life, which Gorky knew intimately from experience. The dreariness of Dromov and its stagnant inhabitants, the miserable selfishness of petty bourgeois upstarts, are painfully real. In this sense, *Artamonov* stands in a long line of Russian novels that condemn *poshlost*, or the self-satisfied vulgarity of the middle class.

But the Artamonovs are far from grotesque caricatures of money-hungry peasants—they are living beings infused with a host of contradictions and inner conflicts. The passages depicting Pyotr's mental struggles, his moments of self-questioning, demonstrate a psychological realism that recalls Tolstoy.

One particularly powerful scene shows Pyotr confronting his son Ilya, reading by the riverbank one evening, and pleading with him to stay in Dromov and take over the business. An argument flares up, and the young student points to the factory workers' graveyard nearby, shouting, "Look over there, there's a whole cemetery you and your factory have murdered!" Pyotr storms off in dismay, and only later does it occur to him that losing his son and heir has thrown his entire life's purpose into doubt:

The tranquil flow of the river was washing his rage away; the warm, greyish silence insinuated into him a mood full of dull astonishment. The most astonishing of all was that the son whom he loved, of whom he had thought uninterruptedly and anxiously for twenty years, had in a few brief moments slipped out of his heart, leaving only an angry hurt behind. Artamonov was convinced that he really had thought only of his son all these twenty years, day by day, living by his hope in him, his love for him, expecting from him something beyond the ordinary. Like a match, he told himself, it had flared—and gone out. What had happened?

A touch of pink came into the grey sky; in one corner appeared a brighter patch, like the oily shine of threadbare cloth. Then a chunk of moon appeared, the air turned fresh and damp; mist crept like thin smoke over the river.

It is beyond the scope of this review to provide a full accounting of Gorky's remarkable life. Suffice it to say, his artistic career was closely intertwined with the course of Russian history and his supportive, though often strained, relationship with the socialist movement.

Gorky, born Alexei Maximovich Peshkov in 1868, grew up in a working-class family at the dawn of Russia's industrialisation. His childhood was a hard one. At seven, he was raised and beaten regularly by his tyrannical grandfather. Orphaned at nine, he went to work as a child labourer and travelled the breadth of Russia, finding jobs as a shoemaker's apprentice, a dishwasher on a Volga steamboat, a baker's assistant, a railway worker in Georgia, and dozens of others. At 19, he shot himself in the chest but miraculously survived.

Adopting the pen-name Gorky (meaning "bitter"), his first short stories were published in various magazines and papers throughout the 1890s and brought him instant fame. Stories such as "Chelkash" and "Makar Chudra" stood out for their portrayals of the urban poor: tramps, casual labourers, Gypsies, wandering fishermen, outcasts of all kinds, whom Gorky elevated into heroic figures taking arms against a cruel system. His proletarian origins helped him to introduce a "bitter" new element into

Russian literature, while his most celebrated contemporaries, Tolstoy and Chekhov, largely depicted members of the upper classes and rural peasantry.

Gorky burned with a desire to record the painful truth as he had seen it, “that truth,” as he said, “which must be known down to the very roots, so that by tearing them up it can be completely erased from the memory, from the soul of man, from our whole oppressive and shameful life.” Other unforgettable stories from this time include “An Autumn Night,” “My Fellow Traveller,” and “Twenty-Six Men and a Girl.” His famed play, *Lower Depths*, was produced by the Moscow Arts Theater in 1902, directed by Konstantin Stanislavski.

Gorky’s early “romantic” stories inspired a whole generation of young revolutionaries, who were being drawn not just to the overthrow of tsarism, but the prospect of a socialist society free of class oppression. “Old Izergil” and “The Song of the Stormy Petrel” were especially popular for their images of courageous self-sacrifice.

In *Literature and Revolution*, Leon Trotsky noted that at the time

Gorky was imbued with the romantic individualism of the tramp. Nevertheless, he fed the early spring revolutionism of the proletariat on the eve of 1905, because he helped to awaken individuality in that class in which individuality, once awakened, seeks contact with other awakened individualities.

In the years before the 1905 Revolution, Gorky became politically active and grew increasingly sympathetic to the Bolsheviks. His stories at this time shifted focus to the lives of conscious workers and their revolutionary activity. Georgi Plekhanov described these works as “a revelation” from which “the most learned sociologist can learn a great deal,” and that in Gorky’s treatment of workers and their psychology, “there is nothing that has been invented, everything is real.” This was the era of his famed novel, *Mother* (1906), a tale of socialist factory workers and their brutal persecution by the government, which became a bestseller and launched his reputation as the chief “proletarian writer.” Despite certain artistic weaknesses—Gorky himself was unhappy with its construction—it remains a shattering work.

In the reactionary period after the defeat of 1905, Gorky fell into the confusion of “God-Building,” a philosophy that sought to combine Marxism and Christianity. It must be noted that, his support for the Bolsheviks and friendship with Lenin notwithstanding, Gorky was politically unstable and never fully grasped the program of Marxism, being susceptible to shifting moods in the bourgeois intelligentsia. This was shown most clearly of all in the heat of events in 1917, when Gorky opposed the October Revolution. Kamenev and Zinoviev infamously went to Gorky’s newspaper, *Novaya Zhizn*, to publish and expose the Bolsheviks’ plans for insurrection. In 1921, he moved to Italy and followed events from afar with great interest.

With the Red Army’s victory in the Civil War, and in the general popular mood of triumph, a new artistic environment began to take shape in the first workers’ state in history. New tendencies and schools in art were spawned by the dozen overnight. Young artists experimented with the formal possibilities of depicting the new world unfolding before their eyes. From the avant-garde wordplay of the Futurists, to the proletarian writers and their more mundane and rugged approach, a literary searching for new paths had begun.

As the WSWs recently wrote, the October Revolution “cracked open the existing social organism, laying it bare to the most observant and sensitive eyes. It created the basis for a new and more objective, firmer and more piercing vantage-point from which to examine the entirety of human activity.”

It is impossible to fully grasp the changes in fictional literature in the 1920s without considering the crucial figure of Alexander Voronsky. A towering Marxist literary critic and Left Oppositionist, Voronsky edited the greatest literary journal of the decade, *Red Virgin Soil*. It gathered together the most talented young Soviet authors, many of them were known as “fellow travellers”—artists who supported the revolution but had not adopted the standpoint of a Marxist. Among those whom *Red Virgin Soil* published were Gorky himself, short story writer Isaac Babel and novelist Boris Pilnyak.

In his essays, Voronsky critically assessed the new writers as they emerged, attempting to uncover what was the concrete impact of the revolution on their work. “Everything is so strained, unstable and lively!” he wrote. “It is obvious that these works are written and created with heaving chest, pounding heart and a rapid pulse.” The new literature, Voronsky added, was “atheistic and pagan literature,” with a healthy love for “flesh, blood, muscles, health and strength.” He said, moreover, literary language had become “more democratic,” imbued with “the lively, rich and strong language of the common people in the villages and workers’ neighbourhoods.” These new qualities all owed a considerable debt to Gorky’s stories from the 1890s.

In fact, Gorky was taking an active part in Soviet literary life from overseas. In his role as a member of *Red Virgin Soil*’s editorial board, he established a close correspondence with Voronsky and supported the journal with enthusiasm. The old master became a personal mentor to many of the most gifted young Soviet authors, above all Babel, and did whatever he could to foster the burgeoning literary scene. It is a wonder that in these productive years Gorky had any time for his own work.

Gorky both influenced and was influenced by the post-1917 literary flowering. One gets the sense from his work of that era, his “classical” period, that the revolution lifted him to new artistic heights. He finished his autobiographical trilogy—*My Childhood, My Apprenticeship, My Universities* (1913–23)—and its panoramic vision of pre-revolutionary Russia and all its sufferings. He also produced his memoir, *Reminiscences of Tolstoy* (1920), a reflection on meeting the titan of Russian literature. This turn back to the world of classic realism culminated in *The Artamonov Business*, which was first published in the Soviet Union in instalments by *Red Virgin Soil*. His next and final novel, the monumental *Life of Klim Samgin* (1927–1936), was an equally ambitious social epic, left unfinished at his death, that also recounted the decades preceding the Russian Revolution.

The new literary generation had the benefit of critical guidance by two of classical Marxism’s finest representatives: Voronsky and Trotsky, whose aforementioned *Literature and Revolution* (1924) outlined the different groupings provoked by the revolution, analysed their limitations, and directed artists on the way forward to creating a new art.

Voronsky observed that prose fiction writers seeking to express Soviet reality and reach new literary peaks needed to combine the realist method of Tolstoy—natural, sensitive, with a sharp-sighted view of human society in all its detail—and the romantic method of Dostoevsky—dark, fantastical, imbued with the brutality of modern city life. He wrote:

Art of the revolution must be able to organically merge Tolstoy’s realism with the romanticism of Gogol and Dostoevsky by freeing the former from an excessive bowing down to reality, and the latter from its gloomy misanthropy, pessimism and scepticism. In the final analysis, Tolstoyan realism is closer to us; it is full-blooded and more succulent; it exudes joy and good health; therefore we must take it, as we now say, as the foundation.

Gorky, said Voronsky, had done “more than most” writers in achieving

this task.

This appraisal, that the best achievements of pre-revolutionary writing must be the “foundation” of a new art, was viciously attacked from 1923 onwards by the proponents of “proletarian culture.” The proletcultists held that the old art must be “thrown overboard from the steamship of modernity,” and that the fellow travellers were “counter-revolutionaries.” Gorky came to the defence of Voronsky and *Red Virgin Soil* against these reactionary arguments. The “literary debates” were a reflection in the artistic sphere of the political conflict opening up between the emerging Stalinist bureaucracy and Trotsky’s Left Opposition.

To list some of the fellow travellers, the most distinguished Soviet fiction authors of the 1920s, is to evoke a constellation of extraordinary figures: prose writers such as Gorky, Babel, Pilnyak, Vsevolod Ivanov, Leonid Leonov, Yury Olesha, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Lidiya Seifullina, Artyom Vesyoly, Nikolai Nikitin, Konstantin Fedin, Fyodor Gladkov, Mikhail Prishvin, and poets such as Vladimir Mayakovsky and Sergei Esenin. Many of these individuals had fought for the Red Army in the Civil War, and many were in circles with close ties to the Left Opposition. The cultural riches embodied in this group were deliberately targeted by the bureaucracy and suppressed. All those listed above (nearly all were born between 1894 and 1899) either faded into artistic silence as the bureaucracy strengthened, succumbed to despair and suicide, or were executed by Stalin in the Great Terror of the late 1930s.

With the expulsion of the Left Opposition and the consolidation of the bureaucratic regime, Gorky eventually adapted to the Stalinists and was utilised by the state to promote “socialist realism,” the bureaucracy’s repressive policy on art and the effective codification of “proletcult.” Gorky’s relationship with Voronsky necessarily came to an end. To what extent Gorky was a willing participant in the Stalinisation of art remains somewhat unclear and certainly warrants further study. Some historians believe his death in 1936, at age 68, may have been a poisoning on the orders of Stalin. Nevertheless, his image as Stalin’s “socialist realism” figurehead is the one that prevails in literary “public opinion” today.

Gorky’s artistic achievements and legacy, however, will endure regardless. His rich works are at total odds with those of “socialist realism,” the drab, lifeless, one-sided productions commissioned by the narrow-minded philistines of Stalin’s bureaucracy.

Trotsky stated that the new revolutionary art could only be created by those who were “at one with their epoch.” Riddled with contradictions though it was, Gorky’s whole life was marked by a relentless striving to be at one with his own tumultuous epoch, with all its ecstatic highs and crushing lows. He was utterly sincere in seeking to capture objective truth in his writings, and he had a profound conviction that truth was a potent weapon in the cause of the working class and human liberation.

Gorky’s body of work badly needs rediscovery today. Novelists and other writers of the present, who are witnessing an unprecedented breakdown of world capitalism, must acquaint themselves with these works, and must turn to a study of the Soviet literary culture of the 1920s, one of 20th century art’s true glories. *The Artamonov Business*, his crowning achievement, deserves a new translation and far greater attention.

Let us give Voronsky the final word, from his “Meetings and Conversations with Gorky,” a moving record of their friendship and collaboration which he wrote on the occasion of the author’s death:

Despite his years, he still had an unusually strong thirst for life, and he particularly wanted to live in the land of socialism, to take the most active and intimate part in building a new society. He thought about life, not about death. He loved art with a jealous love. He was a man of great thoughts, great faith and a great heart.

Schopenhauer once made the remarkable comment that a genius

is man *to the highest degree*. Alexei Maximovich Gorky-Peshkov was just that: a man *to the highest degree*.



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