

## COMRADE LESKOV: HOW A RUSSIAN WRITER WAS INTEGRATED INTO THE SOVIET NATIONAL MYTH<sup>1</sup>

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### 1.

21/VI–35, Stalinogorsk

To Com. Leskov

My fervent greetings to you and your “Toupee Artist”, which made a powerful impression on me despite its scant number of pages. As a Soviet writer, you have mastered the art, telling a tale that isn’t just about workers of the theater, but which presents the history of the harsh, corrupt oppression of serfdom, which hung as a yoke over the necks of the masses for many centuries. As the centuries passed, like a black vortex, our Rus’ was sucked down and swamped by all the creatures that defaced the Earth with their disease. It’s painful to look at the tortured faces of cultural works, to see their “toupee-ness” in the Revolution (the main revolutionary forces were not the peasants, but the working ‘proletariat’) [Отзывы: Л. 15]<sup>2</sup>.

This was how Sergei Ogurtsov, an 18-year-old electrician from Stalinogorsk, in the Moskovsky Oblast<sup>3</sup>, wrote to Leskov in 1935, in response to his story “The

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<sup>1</sup> This article was written with the support of the Academic Fund of the National Research University The Higher School of Economics.

<sup>2</sup> This is the original version of the text: “21/VI–35, г. Сталиногорск  
Тов. Лескову.

Я горячо приветствую Вас и Ваш образ “Тупейный художник”, который произвел серьезное впечатление несмотря на малое число страниц, Вы, как Советский писатель овладели искусством, дали не историю театральных работников, а историю тяжелого, гноившего крепостнова (права) ига, висевшее ярмом на широких массах, многие века. И шли века, подобно черному вихрю; наша Русь затягивалась, заболачивалась всеми породами, которые разрушали свою болезнь облик земли. Больно смотреть на истерзанные лица работников искусства, на ихнюю “тупейность” в революции (Главные революционные силы не являются крестьянское население, а рабочий “пролетариат”). I have preserved the original orthography and punctuation of the author. Here and henceforth, brackets take the place of struck out words and phrases.

<sup>3</sup> Today, the city of Novomoskovsk of the Tula Oblast’, Russian Federation.

Toupee Artist". At the end of his letter, electrician Ogurtsov apologizes for his 'awkward language' and explains that he is writing from his whole heart, which had been 'boiling over with rage' while he was reading, confessing that his "quill has tilled many a page". This half-literate epistle, whose author didn't harbor a single doubt that Leskov was his contemporary, a Soviet writer, passionately denouncing serfdom, really does bear the stamp of a certain savage literariness.

Sergei Ogurtsov's confusion can mostly be accounted for by the influence of Soviet propaganda. By 1935, the process of transforming N. S. Leskov into a Soviet writer advocating for the system of values relevant in the country where the proletariat revolution had triumphed was in full gear. Having culled a handful of suitable stories from N. S. Leskov's enormous oeuvre, beginning in the 1920s, Soviet publishers were using them as material for creating the new Russian — or, to be precise, the Soviet — national myth. In the post-Revolutionary era, this myth was highly mutable and underwent constant corrections in response to emerging ideological objectives. Various texts by N. S. Leskov were chosen at various times, in accordance with what fit whatever current needs. In cases where not everything in them could be integrated into a given ideological matrix, stories themselves became subject to correction, up to and including the attribution of meanings opposite of what the author intended. This article is devoted to key episodes of Leskov's incorporation into the paradigm of the self-representation of the Soviet people and the Soviet national myth.

## 2.

A catastrophic blow to N. S. Leskov's literary and social reputation was dealt by a the so-called 'fire article' in the May 30, 1862 issue of *Severnaya Pchela* [Лесков 1998: 245–248], which demanded that the police investigate the rumors about the arsonists. In democratic circles, it was seen as a political denouncement; after the publication of the 'anti-nihilist' *Nowhere* and *On the Knives*, the schism between Leskov and this important contingent of the literary community became like a chronic illness. Only partially rehabilitated toward the end of his life, Leskov could barely have been considered in line with the ideological heirs of Pisarev<sup>4</sup> and Chernyshevsky. In Soviet times, he was predictably labeled a 'reactionary', 'bourgeois', and 'controversial' author who 'didn't under-

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<sup>4</sup> See Pisarev on Leskov (Stebnitsky) in 1865, "1. Would a single journal in Russia other than the *Russkij vestnik* dare to publish anything from the pen of Stebnitsky and signed with his name? 2. Would a single honest writer be so careless and indifferent toward his reputation as to agree to work with a journal decorated with the tales and novels of Stebnitsky?" [Илчарев 1981: 275].

stand' many things<sup>5</sup>. Actually, readers had forgotten about Leskov long before 1917. According to S. N. Durylin, by 1912, "no one said or wrote anything about Leskov", and his 36-volume collected works, published in 1902–1903 as a supplement to the journal *Niva* [Лесков 1902–1903], didn't have a readership and sold at the market "for a lot less than 11 skinny little books by Kuprin" [Резниченко 2010: 474].

We will point out that Leskov's being pushed to the outskirts of readers' and publishers' attention between 1900 and 1910 did not eliminate the interest in his work from individual critics, first among them A. Volynsky and A. Izmailov [КОТЕЛЬНИКОВ 2011], as well as a number of writers such as Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Andrei Bely, Alexey Remizov, Mikhail Kuzmin, and later, the Serapion Brothers' group, as has been written about by many scholars [Эйхенбаум 1924; ДАНИЛЕВСКИЙ 1985: 28–34; Лавров, ТИМЕНЧИК 1990: 4; ПИЛЬДА 2000]<sup>6</sup>. Maksim Gorky also held Leskov in high esteem; none of this made an impact on the big picture. In Soviet Russia, until the very beginning of the 1940s, Leskov remained a third-rate writer, marginalized and half-forgotten. This is evidenced by the meager mentions of Leskov in the press and the lack of publication of his work.

One of the most widespread mechanisms of Soviet propaganda which allowed for the restatement of key positions of the national myth was the anniversary commemoration of a historic event or figure. For a quarter century, however, all pretexts to celebrate Leskov in Soviet print were more or less ignored. In 1921, the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, only one article about Leskov was published [Варнеке 1921] in Odessa, a city distant from the literary life of the capital, in an almanac called *Росев*. The essay, written by literary and theater historian B. V. Varneke, is about a lost Leskov story and doesn't even mention the anniversary.

Not long before the next notable date, the 30-year-anniversary of Leskov's death, the writer's son, Andrei Nikolaevich Leskov, complains in a letter to

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<sup>5</sup> "Leskov completely misunderstood the mighty liberation movement of revolutionary democracy in his time and became its enemy. This is especially apparent in his novels *Nowhere* (1864) and *On the Knives* (1870–1871), in which he disparages the progressive movement of the 1860s. <...> Although Leskov was, in many ways, critical toward popery, he nonetheless sought out religion. Thus, Leskov's general views were indubitably reactionary" [Клевланский 1936: 4–5]. "Out of all the writers who, in accordance with traditional terminology, are called the 'classics', Leskov is perhaps the most controversial, and, according to pre-Revolutionary liberal criticism, undeserving of this title" [Цырлин 1937: VII]. Also see the article in the encyclopedia of literature on the bourgeois nature of Leskov's work [Калецкий 1932].

<sup>6</sup> To this we can add that in 1913–1916 there was the almanach of "intuitiv criticism and poetry" which called "The Enchanted Wanderer" (Ocharovannyi strannik) [Альманах 1913].

B. M. Eikhenbaum (from November 29<sup>th</sup>, 1924), “21/II/25 marks the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Leskov’s death. Evidently, it will pass by in silence. If not for the office grind, that feeds me not editorially, but quickly and hurriedly, what spiritual joy I would take in preparing even a small commemorative event! But I have neither the time nor the resources nor any supporters. This name continues to be under the spell of the bad luck that so affected it in life. That’s fate. A bitter feeling” [Письма Эйхенбауму: Л. 6]. Andrei Nikolaevich was almost right, although the ‘silence’ was broken, if only once, in the illustrated journal *Krasnaya panorama*, which did end up printing an item in honor of Leskov [Боряновский 1925]. The silence surrounding the hundred-year anniversary of the writer’s birth, in 1931, was disrupted by the appearance of a collection of Leskov’s stories, which also contained the first comprehensive article on the poetics of Leskov’s prose in Soviet literary history, by B. M. Eikhenbaum [Эйхенбаум 1931], in which it is explicitly indicated that the article is dedicated to the commemoration of Leskov’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday. Eikhenbaum’s article, however, is preceded by an article by L. Tsyrlin, which gives a detailed account of the “scandalous reputation” of the “controversial” classic, neither discussing the anniversary nor Leskov’s artistic innovations [Цырлин 1931]. No other statements about Leskov appeared in Soviet publication that year, while in the émigré press, the anniversary was celebrated rather widely [Столярова: 9–10]. The same silence accompanied the 110<sup>th</sup> anniversary, in 1941, broken only by an article from A. N. Leskov in the Oryol literary almanac [Лесков А. 1941]. In 1928, N. S. Leskov did make a handful of appearances in public discourse in the role of a contemporary and interlocutor of Lev Tolstoy, whose 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary was celebrated that year in grand style [Гудзий 1928: 95–128; Шестериков 1928: 60–189; Столярова 2003: 8].

The number of anthologies of Leskov’s collected works published between 1917 and the beginning of the 1940s can be counted on one hand. The most widely circulated of these was prepared by Academia publishers [Лесков 1931a; Лесков 1937a]; the same publishing house put out *The Enchanted Wanderer* [Лесков 1932]<sup>7</sup>. Unlike the majority of other Soviet publishers, who tasked themselves with fulfilling ideological rather than aesthetic objectives, Leskov’s stylistically mannered stories were a good fit with the rest of Academia’s list.

Still, other Soviet publishers made exceptions for a few of Leskov’s stories which were chosen from 30 volumes of his works. The stories “The Toupee Artist”, “The Man on the Clock”, and “Lefty” were published multiple times

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<sup>7</sup> See also two other anthologies published in the same time: [Лесков 1926a; Лесков 1943].

in the 1920s and 30s, in massive print runs, both in editions for adults and for children [Лесков 1918; Лесков 1922; Лесков 1923a; Лесков 1926b; Лесков 1926c; Лесков 1927; Лесков 1928; Лесков 1928c; Лесков 1931b; Лесков 1934; Лесков 1937b; Лесков 1938a; Лесков 1938b; Лесков 1939]. The story “The Wild Beast” came out twice [Лесков 1926c; Лесков 1931c]. This selection of stories can be easily accounted for: they are the works by Leskov that can most easily be turned into “arms for building the new world”, as it was put in the resolution of the first All-Russian Conference of Cultural and Educational Organizations in 1918. This resolution, proposed by A. A. Bogdanov and ratified unanimously by the conference participants, provided exceptionally clear instructions for how “treasures of old art” should be treated. Subsequent practice shows that it was indeed put into action for many years forward:

The treasures of old art should not be accepted passively, as they would then educate the working class in the same spirit as the old ruling classes and in the same spirit of submission as the way of life that created them. The proletariat should view the treasures of old art through a critical lens, in light of their new interpretation, which reveals their hidden collective foundations and organizing principles. Thus, they will become a precious inheritance for the proletariat, weapons for fighting that same old world that created them as well as arms for building the new world. The transfer of this artistic heritage shall be performed by proletarian criticism [Литературное движение 1986: 27].

“The critical lens” and “new interpretation” as methods for treating old art were fully applied to the legacy of N. S. Leskov.

### 3.

Publishers (and others, as we can see from Ogurtsov the electrician’s letter) considered the Leskov story best-suited to becoming a “weapon” was “The Toupee Artist”, which is about the doomed love between two serfs belonging to Earl Kamensky, an actress in his theater and a hairdresser. For the first twenty years of the Soviet regime, it was published more often than any other work by Leskov. Between 1922 and 1929, for instance, “The Toupee Artist” came out in a separate edition seven times [Аннинский 1986: 282], and even after this, it was published more than once, as well as being a constant feature in the author’s collected works. Publishers were clearly attracted to the “anti-serfdom” pathos of this story. In order to make it all the clearer to readers, one of the publications of “The Toupee Artist”, intended, we will note, for an adult readership, included with a list of special discussion questions (“How were the

serfs' lives under Earl Kamensky? What did the priest that Arkady and Lyubov Onisimovna ran to do when they asked him to marry them?") and others, with explications such as:

The peasant worked with the landowner's livestock. Involuntary labor can only be maintained through cruelty, by the whip. Only the whip can perpetuate cruelty. Sometimes, very rarely, there were landowners who treated individual serfs well, especially at court. Their affection, however, was like the affection toward a pet dog [Лесков 1928b: 46].

Its critical relationship to serfdom provided for a rather rich destiny for "The Toupee Artist". This story was adapted for the stage a number of times, and once for film. In 1923, opera director A. V. Ivanovsky directed a film called *The Comedienne* based on it; in 1929, the Bolshoi Theater premiered the opera *The Toupee Artist* by I. P. Shishov. In 1934, the repertory committee proposed a dramatic adaptation of the story written by an E. E. Karpova to theaters [Карпова 1934; Бухштаб 1958: 538; Аннинский 1986: 289–292], and in 1936, the same script was used for the drama *The Serfs (To Freedom!)* [Ульянинский 1936].

The tragic love story between the serf actress Lyubov Onisimovna and hairdresser Arkady was subject to significant revisions: in plays intended for Soviet audiences, the serfs could never come to terms with their lot. In *The Comedienne*, they set Kamensky's estate on fire, which killed the Earl. Shishov's opera also ends in their uprising. In Karpova's play, the serfs, sent after the fleeing Arkady and Lyubov, do not return them to Earl Kamensky as it happens in the story, resolving instead to run away with them, as far as they can get from their hateful master. Ulyaninsky has Arkady being incredibly bold, "grabbing the Earl by the throat and shaking him", demanding he hand over Lyubov [Ibid.: 21], but, just as in the original, he still ends up murdered, although not by the groundskeeper — the Soviet stage could not bear for a fellow serf to murder his brother — but by Kamensky's butler. Lyubov Onisimovna, learning of the horrifying news, loses her mind rather melodramatically. In both interpretations of "The Toupee Artist", Leskov's text plays second fiddle to the addition of the uprising of Earl Kamensky's serfs.

Fitting a foundational text to the necessary end was not unusual in Soviet film. Another story by Leskov, "The Wild Beast", was also subject to serious editing whenever it was adapted. In an adaptation by N. Zhabankovsky, this Christmas story lost its Christmas theme and its priest with his Christmas sermon. The protagonist's brutish uncle loses his chance at redemption and, in the finale of the new and improved story, he remains where he was in the begin-

ning, while his serf Ferapont escapes to freedom (echoing the motif of uprising and, at the same time, rhyming with Turgenev's "Mumu"). A somewhat more faithful edition preserves a bit of the uncle's humanity: as in the original, he offers Ferapont his freedom, but with that, the story ends abruptly, and the uncle never does turn into a merciful Dickensian character in the Sovietized version. The storyline about Christmas and Father Alexey is also taken out entirely [Лесков 1926c: 47; Лесков 1931c: 47]. In the 1920s and 1930s, it was important to reaffirm revolutionary ideals, justifications of the Revolution, and focus on the battle with the "exploitative classes", which is why the second Leskov story that saw regular publication in this time period was "The Man on the Clock", for its supposedly anti-monarchist bent.

The creators of the opera *Katerina Izmailova*, proceeded down the same path trodden by the publishers. Its 1934 premiere was accompanied by an excellent publication of the libretto written by Dmitry Shostakovich and Alexander Preis. The libretto was illustrated with photographs of the production of the V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko Moscow Musical Theater and included two articles by A. Ostretsky along with testimonies from D. D. Shostakovich, the director, and the actors. In the first introductory article by A. Ostretsky, "Russia in the 1840s", the author provides a concise and maximally partisan historical overview of the domestic political situation in Russia in the 1840s which is, in essence, a political briefing:

The Byzantine despotism of the sovereign running the government and the bureaucratic lawlessness of the governors and police chiefs in municipal government, the gendarme hold of Dubelts and Benkendorffs over national manufacturing, and the police surveillance over "unreliable elements" in the aristocracy (after December 14<sup>th</sup>), the censors' terror and the punitive expeditions in serf settlements — these were the inexorable attributes of the bureaucratic absolutism of the 1840s [Остретский 1934а: 5].

Leskov is presented here as an "enemy of revolutionary thought and progress, which he countered with ideas of moral self-improvement of society in the spirit of Russian Orthodox teaching". For this reason, Shostakovich was faced with the "noble task of doing that which Leskov himself could not — revealing and illustrating the social themes in the tragic story of Katerian Izmailova" [Ibid.: 7]. Ostretsky gives a detailed formulation of Shostakovich's idea in the second article, this one focusing on the opera itself. "The theme of Dmitry Shostakovich's opera is slavery and the oppression of the kulak-merchant order of the 1840s, particularly the position of women in a state of half-slavery half-serfdom" [Ibid.: 8]. Further, the composer himself repeats these sentiments

from the propagandistic articles, explaining that his role “as a Soviet composer consists of preserving the full force of Leskov’s story while approaching it critically and providing an account for the events that unfold within it from our, Soviet perspective”. In order to achieve this, Shostakovich alters Leskov’s plot and turns Katerina Izmailova into a “positive character”, “an intelligent woman, talented and interesting” who is placed in “terrible, nightmarish circumstances” and forced to commit a crime against the “greedy, petty merchant milieu”. Because of this, the murder of the boy Fedya Lyamin, which cannot be justified in this manner, is absent from the libretto entirely [Шостакович 1934: 11].

The two successive introductory articles, the composer’s confession, re-evaluating the story of the bourgeois wife from a class-conscious perspective add up to an insistent wish on the part of the opera’s creators to convince the party leadership of the production’s ideological correctness, its perfect fulfillment of the objectives of Soviet art. As we know, these attempts were only successful for a time. For two seasons (1934–1935), the opera simultaneously ran at two theaters, the V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko Moscow Musical Theater and Leningrad’s Maly Opera Theater (conductor S. A. Samosud), to great accolades<sup>8</sup>. On December 26, 1935, it was premiered in the Bolshoi Theater, but then, the January 26, 1936 show at the Bolshoi was attended by I. V. Stalin, V. M. Molotov, A. A. Zhdanov, and A. I. Mikoyan. Two days after the appearance of the important visitors, the issue of *Pravda* from January 28, 1936 published a denunciatory editorial called “A Mess Instead of Music” [*Sumbur vmesto muzyki*], accusing the opera of ‘leftist deformity’ and petit-bourgeois ‘innovation,’ that leads to ‘a rupture with true art’, and ‘the crudest naturalism’. The incipient war on formalism cut short the staging history of *Katerina Izmailova* for many years. A second production of the opera only premiered at the V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko Musical Theater on December 26, 1962.

The hardships that befell the opera were hard to foresee. In writing the libretto, Shostakovich had approached the original text according to the logic of the time: he used it as an occasion to talk about the truth, which was, in many ways, the opposite of what the author had intended, but correct for the era. It’s interesting that the two-year-long successful run of *Lady Macbeth* had no real influence on the publishing fate of this piece. In the 1930s and ‘40s, after the famous 1930 edition with illustrations by B. Kustodiev [Лесков 1930] that had presumably served as the inspiration for Shostakovich, *Lady Macbeth* was not published on its own until the 1950s, appearing only in editions of Leskov’s

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<sup>8</sup> In 1935, A. Dikiy directed the Moscow Art Theater’s production of *Lady Macbeth*. He had previously (in 1924–1925) directed Leskov’s *The Spendthrift*.



collected works [Лесков 1937а; Лесков 1949]. It's possible that the opera, which, in the end, did not even tell Leskov's story and had nothing to do with his tale, really was taken as its own, separate work.

The war on formalism was not the only reason for the hatchet piece on Shostakovich's opera in *Pravda*. The shift in the Party's ideological paradigm likely played a role, as well. It was the shift from the image of a Russia that was "always being beaten"<sup>9</sup> to the idea of it being a mighty, victorious empire that conquers all. We will point to a fact that has never before been mentioned in the discussion of the production history of *Katerina Izmailova*. Exactly one day before the ruinous article "A Mess Instead of Music" was published in *Pravda*, on January 27, 1936, *Izvestia* published an official report, "From the Council of the People's Commissars of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics and the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party. On the State of History as a Discipline and in Education", accusing the hitherto untouched historical "school of Pokrovsky" of error in its views. The history of Russia, which had previously been analyzed exclusively from the point of view of class war, was now being reconceptualized as the battle for creating a powerful state [Геллер, Некрич 1995: 283]. Denunciations of Russian imperialism, colonialism, and autocrats would no longer fit in with the new mythological model. Without justifying Tsarism or completely rejecting the thesis that "Russia is the prison of the nations", the colonial policies of Tsarist Russia were now put forth as the "lesser evil" [Бранденбергер 2011: 363], and soon, as "absolute good" [Геллер, Некрич 1995: 283]. The Soviet Union — in history textbooks, films, and literature — began to be depicted as the heir of the Russian Empire [Зубок 2011: 19; Бранденбергер 2011: 336; Бранденбергер 2009]; Alexander Nevsky and Peter the Great returned to the pantheon of Russian leader and heroes. The markedly dark portrait of the petit-bourgeois milieu and everyday life as it was presented in Shostakovich's, a narrative that corresponded with the school of M. N. Pokrovsky, exposing the horrors of the "bureaucratic absolutism of the 1840s", now ran counter to the new party line.

The Russian myth was also subject to analogous revision: the myth about the triumph of the Proletarian revolution was no longer in demand, the state was no longer interested in the people as a nation rising up against imperialism, but in Russian patriotism and nationalism. The second World War led to an ab-

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<sup>9</sup> "The history of the old Russia consisted entirely of its constantly being beaten for being backwards. The Mongolian hordes defeated it. Then, the Turkish beks. The Swedish feudals. The Polish and Lithuanian pans. The French and English capitalists. The Japanese barons. Everyone beat Russia for being backwards" [СТАЛИН 1947: 13].

rupt intensification in the significance of the two latter values. Their return also meant the return of a readership for Leskov.

#### 4.

The war with Germany landed Party ideologues and historians in a state of schizophrenia, ultimately breaking them up into two camps: adherents to the idea of internationalism, which had been developing until the latter half of the 1930s, countered by supporters of nationalist propaganda, who soon got the upper hand. During the war, propaganda publications were taken over by Russo-centric rhetoric and panegyrics in honor of “the great Russian people” [Бранденбергер 2011: 353–354].

In this atmosphere, the writer’s son A. N. Leskov rescued N. S. Leskov’s story “The Iron Will” from oblivion. This story, which mocks a clumsy and stubborn German engineer named Hugo Karlovich Pectoralis, was first published in 1876 in the journal *Krugozor*. Following this first publication, the author himself never published it again; nor did he include it in his collected works [Лесков 1889–1896]. In 1942, on the initiative of A. N. Leskov, the story was published in the magazine *Zvezda* [Лесков 1942: 112–152] in a section called “Classics of Russian Literature on Germans”. Leskov’s story was preceded by Mayakovsky’s signature on anti-German caricatures from 1914. Now, during the war with the Germans, the story had been imbued with a relevant and nearly symbolic ring to it. Although Andrei Nikolaevich himself only pointed to the documentary character of this story in his introductory note, not referencing its connection to the “present moment”, even without such hints, the text readily reads as anti-German.

Soon after, “The Iron Will” was included in the slim 1943 volume of Leskov’s selected works [Лесков 1943]. It’s likely that had this story not surfaced during wartime, this collection by a half-forgotten author may have never seen the light of day. From 1945 to 1946, “The Iron Will” was published five more times, all in separate editions [Аннинский 1986: 209–211]. Clearly, in the days when the end of the war was a foregone conclusion, and especially after the victory of the Soviet army, the words of the story’s protagonist, Fedor Afanasievich Vochnev, about the superiority of Russians over Germans (“It’s time for us to stop relying on this filth, and learning to do the work is simple; I am not praising my countrymen, and I’m not judging them, either. All I’m saying is that they will stand up for themselves <...>” [Лесков 1957: 5]) appeared to be a fulfilled prophecy. “Leskov ‘truly pronounces the ‘oracular word’ on the Ger-

man's attempted incursions on Russian soil", Leonid Grossman wrote of the story in a commemorative article about the author [Гроссман 1945b].

We can venture to say that "The Iron Will" played a decisive role in Leskov's Soviet comeback. In any case, three months before the end of the war, in March 1945, the Soviet press unleashed a real avalanche of articles about Leskov on the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death. If previous Leskov anniversaries were passed over in silence or commemorated by a handful of articles, now, central and provincial newspapers and magazines alike rushed to acknowledge Leskov the "wonderful Russian writer" [Бахметьев 1945: 11; Белецкий 1945: 3; Бухштаб 1945: 28; Вальбе 1945: 3; Гебель 1945b: 2; Гроссман 1945b: 4; Гроссман 1945c: 200–203; Гроссман 1945d: 3; Дурылин 1945: 3; Тимофеев 1945; Храбровицкий 1945: 2; Эйхенбаум 1945: 134–136]. The vast majority of these articles were built according to a single framework, as though their authors had written them looking over one another's shoulders. It's not beyond the realm of possibilities that the template for many of them was the first article by V. A. Gebel in *The Moscow Bolshevik* [Гебель 1945b: 2]. However, the more likely explanation for their similarity is that the authors were all-too-familiar with the rules of the game, its limits, and the permitted format.

Almost all of the commemorative texts opened with a quote from Gorky, almost always the same fragment from his 1923 article "N. S. Leskov"<sup>10</sup> in which Gorky places Leskov alongside the acknowledged Russian classics. "As a wordsmith, N. S. Leskov is worthy of a place alongside such masters of Russian literature as L. Tolstoy, Gogol, Turgenyev, and Goncharov" [Горький 1953: 235]. Following the quote from the authority that legitimizes the until-recently dubious author, the articles continued with an ironclad list of Leskov's positive characteristics, which were his "excellent understanding of his country and its ways, its art, and its language" [Гроссман 1945c: 200]<sup>11</sup>. This would be followed by a quote from an earlier piece by Gorky [Белецкий 1945: 3] about how Leskov wrote "not about a man, or a nihilist, or a landowner, but always about a Russian, a person from this country" [Горький 1932: 276]. A brief episode in Leskov's life, his three-year long service in the company of Scott which allowed the writer to visit many parts of Russia, was given a lofty significance:

<sup>10</sup> This article was first published as an introduction to [Лесков 1923b].

<sup>11</sup> See: "A wealth of landscapes and depictions of everyday life distinguish the work of Leskov. The author had an outstanding knowledge of Russian history, art, icon painting, and so on. His expertise on the country is Leskov's chief literary legacy" [Вальбе 1945: 3] and [Лесков А. 1945b].

During his years of service, Leskov traveled often. For this reason, we see the middle of Russia, Ukraine, the Volga, Valaam, and Riga in his works. Leskov used his travels to familiarize himself with many different Russian characters. The wealth of the landscapes and depictions of everyday life distinguish Leskov's work. Leskov had an outstanding knowledge of Russian history, art, icon painting, and so on. His expertise on the country is Leskov's chief literary legacy" [Вальбе 1945: 3].

Leskov's "outstanding knowledge" extended to an expertise on the Russian people and his love of them<sup>12</sup>:

Leskov's love for the Russian people and his homeland made him fix his sharp, intent gaze on the Russian man on all the paths, trails, and crossroads of life and work [Дурьлин 1945: 3];

In the unforgettable images of Russian hero Ivan Severyanich from "The Enchanted Wanderer", Lefty, and the legendary Golovan the Deathless (in the eponymous story), who sacrificed himself in order to put an end to a grand misfortune, Leskov reveals and attests to the positive qualities of Russians that make up the central elements of the national character [Гебель 1945b: 2].

The love for Russians is indivisible from an attention to and understanding of the Russian language. Leskov's "mastery of the language" [Гебель 1945] was infallibly noted by all authors lauding him, always with the same expressive praise:

From here, this utterly close relationship with the people, Leskov extracted the endless treasures of folk Russian language that so impressed L. Tolstoy and Chekhov. Out of all of the Russian writers, Leskov has the most complex and rich vocabulary, incorporating a multitude of the streams and tributaries of the national linguistic wealth [Дурьлин 1945: 3].

In the same triumphant — for Russia and for Leskov's legacy — year of 1945, his son, A. N. Leskov published several biographical articles about his father [Лесков А. 1945а; Лесков А. 1945b; Лесков А. 1945c; Лесков А. 1945d]; a brochure about his life and art appeared [Евнин 1945]; and finally, two monographs on Leskov — by L. P. Grossman and V. A. Gebel' came out at the same time [Гроссман 1945а; Гебель 1945а]. Considering the difficult economic conditions in the USSR at this time, the publication of two books of literary criticism about an until recently half-forgotten author seems like a conscious ideological gesture acknowledging not only N. S. Leskov's rehabilitation, but transforming him into a very direct participant in the construction of the Soviet

<sup>12</sup> See also a later article: "Despite all of the author's mistakes and vacillations, he was always buoyed by his faith in the people, in the beauty and mighty spiritual strength of the Russian man" [Срепанов 1954: 4].

national myth. Leskov the patriot, the lover of the Russian language and people, was now presented as a classic, representing the nation, fully supported by the declaration of A. M. Gorky, in the ranks of L. Tolstoy, Turgenev, Gogol, and Saltykov-Schedrin. In the post-war years, Leskov was published widely and regularly, in large print runs, both by central and provincial publishing houses [Лесков 1946a; Лесков 1946b; Лесков 1947a; Лесков 1947b; Лесков 1950; Лесков 1951; Лесков 1954], although, as a rule, the volumes were slim.

## 5.

When the Cold War and the war on cosmopolitanism was reaching a fever pitch, the appropriation of Leskov by the Soviet ideological machine reached its apex of absurdity. In the 1950s, the composer of one of the versions of the anthem of the USSR (which did not end up making the cut), and a laureate of the Stalin Prize, B. A. Alexandrov, wrote a ballet based on “Lefty” (“The Skilled Hands”); the libretto was written by P. F. Abolimov. The first edition was approved by the Committee on Artistic Affairs of the Council of Ministers of the USSR, but afterwards, the text of the libretto was edited again, and in May 1952, B. A. Alexandrov himself submitted it for approval to the Secretary of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party, M. A. Suslov [ОТДЕЛ].

In the ballet’s libretto, Leskov’s novella is distorted beyond recognition. Now there are mass scenes with the entire Russian people, and new characters: a Russian serf girl, the lace-maker Dunyasha, who loves and helps Lefty, and a conniving “high-placed foreigner”, Lefty’s enemy, who has taken the blueprints for the new machine invented by ingenious Russians out of the country. The flea, fitted for shoes by Lefty and the other Russian masters, maintains its ability to leap, and, frightening the foreigners, it frolics, dancing all over the stage.

Lefty manages to get the blueprint snatched off by the “high-placed foreigner” back to Russia, resist the attempts to be hypnotized or undergo more traditional modes of convincing; he is not seduced by the foreigner’s beautiful mistresses; instead, he returns alive and unharmed to Dunyasha, who has long been awaiting him in Tula. In the final scene of the production, “a general Russian dance begins, which turns into a mass demonstration”:

The people, led by Lefty and the gunsmiths, tighten their ranks, and in this solid formation, advance, illuminated by the rays of the rising sun. Before this monolith of the masses, the merchants, landowners, factory owner, sheriff and constable, and other representatives of the ruling classes of old Russia all appear pathetic.

The music accompanying the mass demonstration transitions into the national anthem [ОТДЕЛ: Л. 107].

As we can see, the adapted libretto of the “The Tale of Cross-Eyed Lefty from Tula and the Steel Flea” takes on a moral that’s the direct opposite of the author’s intention (the flea keeps leaping and Lefty stays alive)<sup>13</sup>, but without these distortions, it would probably be difficult for the creators to get approval for the key “theme of the ballet”, which is the demonstration of the “talent, gumption, and patriotism of the Russian people” [Ibid.: Л. 78]. Lefty himself, as it is indicated in the libretto’s afterword, was the “embodiment of the high moral qualities of the Russian man”: “The purity of his love, his devotion to Dunyasha, his comrades, and his people all speak to the nobility of the Russian soul” [Ibid.: Л. 108].

This attempt to illustrate the ideological maxims propagandized by the government was not met with much success. M. A. Suslov sent the libretto to his assistants — the director of the Department of Propaganda and Agitation V. A. Kruzhkov and the deputy director of the Department of Science and Culture P. A. Tarasov, who proceeded to forward it to a professional expert, music historian and professor of the Moscow Conservatory B. M. Yarustovsky. Yarustovsky responded to the libretto with great reserve, criticizing it for its connecting scenes not being “sufficiently developed”, or scenic, saying that they were impossible to “illustrate in dance”. “Leskov’s central theme, the patriotism of the Russian people and his acrid satire on the cosmopolitan characters is by and large expressed in the ballet’s libretto, that is, outside of the choreography, and not by means of dance” [Ibid.: Л. 76]. Kruzhkov and Tarasov wrote a letter to Suslov where they agree with these arguments and repeat them, while also saying that as far as they know, the composer has already written music for this libretto:

Because of this, it would be best to recommend that the composer and the Committee on Artistic Affairs organize a public discussion on the music and ballet libretto and, contingent on the results of this discussion, decide on whether to stage it in one of the theaters of Moscow or Leningrad [Ibid.: Л. 74].

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<sup>13</sup> The ballet’s libretto has much in common with E. Zamyatin’s “folk comedy” “The Flea”, which was based on Leskov’s story and staged by A. Dikij at the Moscow Art Theater on February 11, 1935, and premiered at the Bolshoi Dramatic Theater on November 25, 1926. In these adaptations, Lefty is similarly granted a female companion, the Chaldean Masha, and he also keeps his life; the populous and brilliant market scene in the ballet is also reminiscent of the Bacchanalian atmosphere of the folk holiday created by Zamyatin (see [Keenan 1980]).

Apparently the public discussion never did occur and in the end, the ballet appeared neither in Moscow nor Leningrad in the 1950s, although it was staged in 1954 at the Sverdlovsky Opera and Ballet Theater, then only in 1976 at Leningrad's Kirov Opera and Ballet Theater.

## 6.

The disappointing production history the ballet version of “Lefty” did not interfere with the canonization of N. S. Leskov. In order to firmly establish the status of the confirmed classic, however, there needed to be clearer signs than the regular re-publication of the still rather limited selection of texts by the author. These signs came in the middle of the 1950s.

At the end of 1954<sup>14</sup>, State Publishing House Khudozhestvennaya Literatura published a biography of Leskov written by his son Andrei Nikolae-*vich* (1866–1953), entitled *The Life of Nikolai Leskov, According to his Personal, Family and Other Writings and Memoirs*. The biography was unusually thick (47 authors' sheets) and the history of its publication was, by then, almost two decades long<sup>15</sup>. Its author didn't live to see the release of his *long-suffering* book<sup>16</sup>. Almost immediately after the publication of the biography, which brought readers significantly closer to Leskov the man, the editorial board for classic literature of the same publisher prepared an 8-volume edition of Leskov's collected works, which included dozens of his tales and stories not previously published in the Soviet era. While working on this collection, in the course of editorial discussions<sup>17</sup>, the 8-volume set grew to 11 volumes [Лесков 1956], in part because of the decision to include the novel *Nowhere*.

The new attention to Leskov was a result of the general cultural policy of the Soviet Union on prerevolutionary Russian art, wherein many prerevolutionary scholars, writers, artists, and composers “were raised up onto the Russified Soviet Olympus” [Бранденберг 2009], which was also the strategy of the Soviet film industry. At the end of the 1940s and beginning of the 1950s,

<sup>14</sup> The book was approved for publication on October 25, 1954.

<sup>15</sup> The history of the publication of this book is detailed at length in the letter from A. N. Leskov to S. N. Durylin from May 24, 1946 [Письма Дурьлину: Л. 1].

<sup>16</sup> See the letter from A. N. Leskov's (1866–1953) wife Anna Ivanovna Leskova to A. Fadeev from March 1, 1955, accompanying a package with the book: “I am fulfilling the request of our long-suffering friend, who worried over the fate of his labor until the last day of his life and was so desperate to see it in print. I implore you to accept this posthumous gift from him” [Лескова: Л. 1].

<sup>17</sup> See the transcripts of these editorial meetings, where the prospectus and plan for the publication of the collected works of N. S. Leskov is under discussion [Авторское дело: Л. 2–53].

major publishers began actively printing large runs of the collected works of the Russian classics (Gogol, Nekrasov, Ostrovsky, Turgenev, Goncharov, L. Tolstoy, Chernyshevsky, V. Korolenko)<sup>18</sup> alongside established Soviet writers (Gorky, A. Tolstoy, Fedin, Gladkov, Furmanov, Leonov) [Справка: Л. 2, 13, 19]. The great country needed great literature, and for the first time, Leskov was called to demonstrate the Soviet Union's literary might. Previously represented by only a small portion of his legacy, the author was now included amongst the literary generals and with this, he won the right to much broader representation. All doubts about the legitimacy of elevating yesterday's reactionary into the pantheon of classics were erased by the bright red of the covers of the 11 volume set, visible proof that Leskov would henceforth be a Soviet writer, a title that had, not so long before his official acknowledgement, already been bestowed on him by an ardent electrician from Stalinogorsk.

*Translated by Bela Shayevich*

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