

Stalin Era Intellectuals

Culture and Stalinism

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Chapter 13

Stalinism, War, and Artistic Representation of Reality

Konstantin Simonov's Critique of the
'System of Silence' in 1956

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13 Stalinism, War, and Artistic Representation of Reality

Konstantin Simonov's Critique of the 'System of Silence' in 1956

Susan Ikonen

Introduction

In this chapter, I analyse the thought of the literary figure and writer Konstantin Simonov (1915–1979) from the largely understudied point of view of de-Stalinization. In his attempts to 'de-Stalinize' Soviet literature, Simonov showed already in 1956 how the literary and artistic representation of the Great Patriotic War was tightly intertwined with the Stalin personality cult, and how this entanglement had caused literature and art either to portray Soviet reality in a distorted manner or to keep silent about any societal difficulties. I refute the claim of Orlando Figes (2008, pp. 615–616) that 'Simonov's own de-Stalinization progressed very slowly' and argue instead that Simonov's role in the de-Stalinization process was greater and took place much earlier than has previously been thought. Although Simonov's 1965 criticism of the Stalinist portrayal of the Great Patriotic War was not published until 1987, as Jonathan Brunstedt (2021, pp. 175–176) has shown, I illustrate that Simonov, in fact, had already criticized it in 1956. My analysis is based on previously untapped archival material, notably from the RGANI Fond 3 (Politburo), and on published texts. Simonov spoke or wrote on four different occasions between 30 October and 6 December 1956. In these addresses, he located the roots of embellishing reality to the Central Committee resolutions on ideology and Andrei Zhdanov's speech (1946),¹ the press attacks on Aleksandr Fadeyev's novel *Molodaya gvardiya* (*The Young Guard*) (1947), and the campaign against theatre critics (1948–1949). A comparative study of these sources reveals how, eventually, Simonov traced much of the need to control the representation of reality in art to Stalin's need to control the representation of the early stages of the Great Patriotic War in the Donbass area. The chapter also tracks the Party's reaction to Simonov's attempts and shows how, even when Simonov's views were rebuked, his name was not mentioned as the initiator of the ideas. This is, perhaps, the reason why Simonov's actual role in the 1956 thaw has largely remained understudied. The chapter thus testifies to some of the problems of 'de-Stalinization' and how some of its key issues could not be openly discussed in the Soviet Union until the late 1980s.

Konstantin Simonov within Soviet Literary Life

Konstantin (Kirill) Mikhailovich Simonov was an important figure in the post-war Soviet cultural and political scene. He became widely known during the war for his poem *Zhdi menya* (Wait for Me). He worked as a war correspondent for *Krasnaya zvezda* in 1941–1944 and was the Editor-in-Chief of *Znamya* in 1944–1946. He is best known as the Editor-in-Chief of *Novyy mir*, where he worked in 1946–1950 and again in 1954–1958 (in 1950–1954 he was the Editor-in-Chief of *Literaturnaya gazeta*). He received six Stalin prizes in literature between 1942 and 1950. He was the deputy general secretary of the Soviet Writers Union in 1946–1954, when Aleksandr Fadeyev held the post of general secretary. Simonov continued his administrative career as the secretary of the board of the Writers Union in 1954–1959 and 1967–1979. At the political level, he was a member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) central revision commission in 1956–1961 and a candidate member for the CPSU Central Committee (CC) in 1952–1956.

These roles gave him direct access to experience the first steps of political de-Stalinization. In the spring and summer of 1953, Simonov took part in several CC discussions, in which the political foundations were laid for the approach to the recent Stalinist past, including the 5 March 1953 hearing about the new leadership and the July 1953 special CC plenum (Aksyutin, 2010, pp. 21–23). Soon after Stalin's death, Lavrentiy Beriya, the head of the NKVD, took the political lead, and he gave the CC members and candidate members a chance to acquaint themselves with documents that showed Stalin's direct involvement in the so-called Doctors Plot (Simonov, 1990, pp. 241–242; Aksyutin, 2010, pp. 45–46). Simonov later stated that reading through those documents already in 1953 made him – until then a staunch Stalinist – better prepared for the moral shock that Khrushchev's speech in February 1956 would cause (Simonov, 1990, pp. 241–242).

It is probably for this reason that, right after the 20th Party Congress and Khrushchev's secret speech in February 1956, Simonov took advantage of the openness of the Party leadership and acted swiftly in his journal *Novyy mir*. During the spring months, its editorial staff prepared several works for publication that would incite fierce discussions in the following autumn. In the April issue, he published Nazim Hikmet's play '*A byl li Ivan Ivanovich?*' ('Was There an Ivan Ivanovich?'), and in the June issue, he published his own essay on Aleksandr Fadeyev, the former Writers Union general secretary, who had committed suicide in May, after Khrushchev's speech (officially his cause of death was alcoholism; the truth was revealed only in 1990).

In August, Simonov's position in the Writers Union rose when the first secretary of the Union's board, Aleksey Surkov, asked the Party CC for a six-month creative leave and to have Simonov replace him (RGANI, 5/36/14, p. 110). However, in a matter of a few months, three Union vice-secretaries (Markov, Smirnov, and Simonov himself) asked the CC to summon Surkov back from his leave and to organize a meeting for the writers, because the Union was facing 'several difficult ideological questions' that needed to be solved collectively (RGANI, 5/36/14,

pp. 141–142). Smirnov had complained that Simonov was taking an improper line of action in *Novyy mir*, and Surkov wanted to exchange opinions with the Party leadership ‘on a number of ideological issues’ (RGANI, 5/36/14, p. 143). What had happened in the three months between early August and mid-November, and why was Simonov criticized by his colleagues?

In August, *Novyy mir* had published Daniil Granin’s short story ‘*Sobstvennoye mneniye*’ (‘A Personal Opinion’) and the first part of Vladimir Dudintsev’s novel *Ne khlebom yedinyim* (*Not by Bread Alone*). In September, Simonov had helped the second volume of the *Literaturnaya Moskva* (*Literary Moscow*) anthology go through the censorship office *Glavlit*. The anthology included some ‘officially forgotten’ authors, such as Marina Tsvetaeva, and a scandalous piece, Aleksandr Yashin’s ‘*Rychagi*’ (‘Levers’) (Vaissié, 2008, pp. 156–157).

On 22 October 1956, after the last part of Dudintsev’s novel had come out, a discussion event about the book turned into chaos. As an unfortunate coincidence, the date and time of the disorderly literary discussion in Moscow coincided with a writers’ meeting in Budapest, which marked the beginning of the Hungarian uprising. This made the Party leadership suspect a joint effort between Hungarian and Soviet writers (Ikonen, 2017, pp. 526–528).

The fears that the Hungarian events might spill over to the USSR and that the literary intelligentsia might be initiators of social upheaval made the Party leadership halt the 1956 literary trends. The thaw would end, but the literary intelligentsia did not know this yet. The discussions around literary works that had taken active social stand continued, as did the discussions about the consequences of the post-war politics on Soviet cultural life. It was at this very moment that Konstantin Simonov decided to speak his mind about what had long been wrong in Soviet literature and how these problems all related to the personality cult of Stalin.

Simonov’s First Act: Attack on Zhdanov and the CC Resolution on *Bol’shaya zhizn*

Towards the end of October (25–30 October 1956), Moscow State University and the Ministry of Higher Education co-organized an All-Union meeting for the heads of literature departments in universities and pedagogical institutes (Fursenko (ed.), 2004, p. 985; Getmanets, 2014, pp. 50–51).

On the last day of the meeting, Simonov spoke about how Soviet literature should be taught after the resolutions of the 20th Party Congress (RGANI, 3/34/191, pp. 108–131). He also told the audience what he saw as the most important problems caused by the personality cult in literature, and how these issues were related to the representation of Soviet life in the media and art. He criticized two of the four authoritative documents from 1946 – the CC resolution on *Bol’shaya zhizn*’ and Andrei Zhdanov’s lecture, and argued about their detrimental influence on Soviet literature. He compared the facts of reality (which he said ‘everyone knew’) with the 1946 official views about reality, and he juxtaposed the

take-home messages of the resolutions with those of the 20th Party Congress. In other words, Simonov blamed the resolutions and Zhdanov's lecture for the ills of post-war literary life.

Simonov returned to 1946 and explained the international situation as the motivation for the CC resolutions. The wartime military alliance with the most prominent capitalist countries had caused 'reconciliation with bourgeois culture', and combined with the ideological offensive from the West (the Marshall plan), this conciliatory approach might have turned into a capitulating position, and it was important that the cultural intelligentsia focused on the ideological struggle and stressed Communist ideological content, said Simonov (RGANI, 3/34/191, p. 111).

However, he continued, the situation in the country in the autumn of 1946 had been difficult, with an unprecedented crop failure following the destruction caused by WWII. All resources had to be allocated to the restoration of industry and the army. This was absolutely necessary, said Simonov,

if we did not want to perish, if we did not want an atomic bomb to fall down on our heads, if we did not want to be presented with an ultimatum in front of which we would have found ourselves defenceless.

(p. 111)

The Party leadership had been right, said Simonov, to appeal to writers to bring up their readers as cheerful, bold, and ready to overcome all difficulties and to fight depressive and whining moods (RGANI, 3/34/191, p. 114).

Thus, Simonov agreed with the social and ideological need for the resolutions. Yet the resolutions had in many ways gone astray. Two issues were relevant: the attitude of Soviet culture's superiority over the bourgeois Western culture and the apprehension of Soviet reality in these official documents.

- (1) One problem with Zhdanov's lecture was that it had evaluated bourgeois literature in an undifferentiated manner and made the mistake of forgetting the progressive writers criticizing bourgeois societies. By denying this, Zhdanov had countered key Soviet interests, which included supporting those progressive writers (RGANI, 3/34/191, pp. 111–112). In his speech, Zhdanov had famously stated that it was inappropriate for representatives of progressive Soviet culture to take the role of pupils or kowtowers (*nizkopoklonniki*) in front of bourgeois culture. Instead, Soviet literature, which reflected a superior social order, had the right to be the one to teach others a new morality for all mankind. For Simonov, this was the source of many mistakes. Simonov said that the claim that Soviet society and culture had nothing to learn from bourgeois culture had led to stagnation in Soviet scientific and technological thought, as Khrushchev and Bulganin had admitted at the 20th Party Congress. Since the Party leadership had so openly talked about it, said Simonov, the cultural sphere had no right to continue using the Zhdanov theses as dogmas, which in the sphere of ideology contradicted the general directives of the 20th Party Congress (RGANI, 3/34/191, p. 113).

- (2) The second was the question of how things were in real life in the Soviet Union and how the official documents had criticized the works of art for depicting living conditions improperly. The appeal to cultural workers was understandable, but it should have been based on an object and honest evaluation of the actual situation in the country (RGANI, 3/34/191, p. 115). Zhdanov's lecture had tasked literature with picking out the best qualities in man, but this had led the writers 'to present the wishes as already fulfilled' (*zhelaemoye vydavalos' za deystvitel'noye*) (p. 115).

By choosing this phrase, Simonov tied his message word for word to a discussion that had started three years earlier with Vladimir Pomerantsev's article '*Ob iskrennosti v literature*' ('On sincerity in literature'), which had brought into Soviet discourse the question whether representation of reality in Soviet art was truthful or untruthful (Pomerantsev, 1953; Kozlov, 2013, pp. 44–87). Two key concepts were used by Simonov: *lakirovka* (literally: lacquering, varnishing, or embellishing), usually used in the form of *lakirovka deystvitel'nosti* (embellishment of reality); and *stremeniye vydavat' zhelaemoye za deystvitel'noye* (literally: a striving to give out the desired as real, to present the ideal as already existing) (Pomerantsev, 1953, pp. 219–220).

What were the roots of the embellishment of reality? For Simonov, although the writers were to blame to a certain degree, the reasons behind these phenomena laid deeper than in mere shortcomings of literary works. For example, Semyon Babayevski's work *Sveta nad zemley* (*Light Above the Land*, 1949–1950) had given the impression that the Soviet people had already reached abundance. The official statistics had proclaimed a grain harvest almost double the real figure. Simonov stated that the distortion of official information exerted pressure upon writers, critics, and editors. Those writers who could close their eyes to the actual situation were in a preferential position compared to those who did not. The literary men who did not want to close their eyes from the facts were put into a very difficult position (RGANI, 3/34/191, p. 116).

Simonov pointed out that this problem was related also to post-war literary theory. The aspiration to have people shown not as they were but as they were supposed to be had caused a need to back this up with varying terminologies, such as theories about the necessity to rise above the reality, or about socialist romanticism. Many serious-minded critics and honest writers had put in theoretical efforts to somehow validate the situation of literature with the gap between the ideal and the real, a gap, which existed 'in an enormous number of the most authoritative documents, speeches, statements and so on' (*v gromadnom kolichestve samykh vysoko avtoritetnykh dokumentov, rechei, vystupleniy i t.d.*) (RGANI, 3/34/191, p. 117).

Simonov said that the 'classical wording' – 'that does not exist in real life' (*v zhizni tak ne byvayet*) – had 'pushed literature into hypocrisy, to a life of double counting'. And it was not only because of the maliciousness of some critics, but for a more serious reason: 'Much of what was hard and difficult, what really existed in life, was customary to be regarded as not existing' (p. 117).

While Pomerantsev had blamed only writers and critics, Simonov straightforwardly pointed out that the political leadership was the source of this harmful phenomenon: the highly authoritative documents had lied. However, Simonov did not specify who exactly was responsible for the resolutions – or even for the lecture Zhdanov gave in Leningrad in August 1946. Throughout his entire speech, he consistently used the passive voice, e.g., ‘It was said in the lecture of A. A. Zhdanov’. Simonov was thus systematically evading the question of actual authorship of the resolutions and the lecture.

Simonov asked what the point was in keeping secrets about well-known facts in literature. Why was it necessary to ‘engage in a system of silence in literature?’ (*Tak zachem zhe togda zanimat’sya sistemoy umolchaniy v literature?*) (RGANI, 3/34/191, p. 118). Post-war literature had often lacked an honest acknowledgement of existing difficulties, as had propaganda, newspapers, the press, and ‘many of the most highly authoritative official documents’ (p. 118). Simonov laid his main thrust of criticism on the CC resolution about the movie *Bol’shaya zhizn*, which portrayed the early stages of the renovation of the Donbass region after the German troops had withdrawn in 1943. Simonov said that while the other 1946 documents (namely, the resolution on the journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad* and the resolution on the repertoire of drama theatres) had also included some correct tenets, the theses of the movie resolution were fundamentally incorrect (RGANI, 3/34/191, pp. 120–127).

The resolution had accused the movie *Bol’shaya zhizn* of depicting the renovation of the Donbass region falsely, as if conducted with primitive technology, not with the progressive technologies created during the Stalinist five-year plans. Simonov underlined that exactly this thesis had pushed literature onto a wrong path in the depiction of actual realities, since after the destruction by fascists of the whole region, there was no more progressive technology left:

This paragraph of the resolution resulted in literature giving the ideal as already existing. Of course, we would have liked to have Donbass renovated already in 1943 [...], but that was not reality yet, and the film reflected this correctly. However, it was precisely the film’s correct depiction that was criticized [in the resolution], and this of course is not about the film *Bol’shaya zhizn*, but about how this unfair norm of requirement would be applied more and more also to other literary phenomena.

(RGANI, 3/34/191, pp. 122–123)

Another point was the resolution’s claim about the film falsely portraying how the mineworkers’ initiatives did not receive support from state organizations. Simonov noted that problems did exist with the workers’ initiatives. He mentioned Nikolai Bulganin’s (the Premier of the Soviet Union) speech in the 20th Party Congress about the defects that still haunted technical progress and rationalization, which contradicted the claims of the film resolution about the state having always supported the workers’ initiatives. Simonov stated that if Bulganin spoke correctly in 1956, then the 1946 resolution must have been written incorrectly (RGANI, 3/34/191, pp. 123–124).

Simonov also paid attention to the inappropriate use of the word ‘Party’. The CC resolution had substituted the concept of ‘Party organization’ with the concept of ‘Party’ and had done so intentionally with grave consequences. When an artist showed mistakes and had criticized one or another Party organization, he was told that he was criticizing the Party, ‘which stroke fear and timidity into him’ (RGANI, 3/34/191, p. 125).

This was the only moment in his long speech when Simonov used the word ‘fear’ to describe the feeling that the normative demands had caused the writers to have, thus indicating that the Party had used scare tactics on its intellectuals. A writer could not point out cases of negative phenomena without being accused of criticizing the Party. Simonov strongly opposed this kind of generalization and mixing up of concepts. This part of Simonov’s critique was analogous to his criticism of Zhdanov’s evaluation of all Western literature as equally bad, which indicates that Simonov considered the totalizing generalizations made by the Party leadership as harmful.

Finally, Simonov tied the cult of personality with the habit of shutting one’s eyes from reality:

The resolution on the film *Bol’shaya zhizn’* and its mistakes are connected not only to the consequences of the cult of personality and the subjectivity displayed in the evaluation of artistic phenomena, but mostly to the incorrect evaluations of the actual conditions of life and in the literature portraying this life, with shutting one’s eyes to the actual situation in the country. All this is tied to the cult of personality and directly to the name of Stalin.

(RGANI, 3/34/191, p. 127)

Simonov was right in suspecting Stalin’s role behind the movie resolution. Katerina Clark and Evgeny Dobrenko have compared the transcript of Stalin’s speech about *Bol’shaya zhizn’* with the official Orgburo resolution and concluded, on the basis of word-for-word similarities, that Stalin not only initiated various decisions but ‘also directly dictated and pronounced them’. In other words, Stalin was fully behind this official evaluation of the movie (Clark and Dobrenko, 2007, pp. 447–454; Artizov and Naumov, 2002, pp. 581–584, pp. 598–602).

After his speech, Simonov answered questions from the audience. His answers testify how difficult it was to re-evaluate one’s own previous actions. Some of the questions dealt with Simonov’s own texts and how he now viewed them. He said that since he had now heard all those ‘things about Stalin and things tied to his name’, things that were ‘impossible to forget or to forgive’, he would not republish some of his own poems. Even though he was not ashamed of the feelings (‘love and trust’) he had felt for Stalin, for example, in 1941, ‘because it had been an honest feeling’, Simonov said that each work was a different case and could be solved in various ways and that it was a matter of the writer’s honour how he chose to resolve the issue (RGANI, 3/34/191, p. 129). Another issue was how to depict Stalin’s role from that moment on, in new works, when writing about the past of the country. This question was ‘not only serious but also difficult’,

said Simonov. A writer had to express his contemporary attitude towards Stalin 'based on all the facts he now knows'. However, he must not have ascribed this knowledge to his fictional characters from the 1930s to the 1940s. 'That would be untruthful' (RGANI, 3/34/191, p. 130). In other words, Simonov demanded a truthful approach and opposed any kind of ahistorical or anachronistic methods.

To the question of his moral right to speak in such an orthodox manner after having himself received a dozen Stalin prizes 'for the personality cult' and of his unauthorized questioning of Party decisions, Simonov stated his 'deep conviction' that the speeches of the 20th Party Congress and Party plenums about agriculture, technology, and the fight against the personality cult had also given the right to criticize the mistakes of the 1946 resolutions from the same Party positions (RGANI, 3/34/191, pp. 130–131).

Simonov had uttered his condemnation of the 1946 official documents to a wide audience. One participant, Mikhail Getmanets, who oversaw the department of Russian and world literature at the Khar'kov Pedagogical Institute in 1956–1986, later wrote about the event. When Getmanets had returned home from Moscow, he told his colleagues about Simonov's critique of the 1946 resolutions. His report had been 'a sensation that had excited the whole collective', and he was asked to speak also at the departments of philosophy and Party history. 'Some people did not believe me, and during a Party organization meeting they blamed me for revising the CC resolutions', Getmanets recalled, stating that public criticism of CC resolutions was an act unheard of, and that it had been a proof of Simonov's civic courage (Getmanets, 2014, pp. 50–51). This is a strong testimony of the impression that Simonov's speech had left on those who had heard him – and about how his views received a wide audience, spreading his message across the USSR.

Simonov's Second Act: Writing to Khrushchev

In mid-November 1956, the Writers Union leaders contacted the CC to have a consultation because of their inner disagreements. One week after their confidential joint letter, 22 November 1956, Simonov wrote his own, long letter to Nikita Khrushchev and the CC (RGANI, 3/23/191, p. 132). Simonov demanded that some things be called by their names and justified this need by the difficulty of teaching Soviet literature after the 20th Party Congress. Simonov wrote that some of the problems were of that calibre that neither he nor any other Communist writer would have the right to present in their own name. He referred to his unpublished article and said that he had cut out from the draft those questions that dealt with the CC resolutions and with Zhdanov's speech; and he asked the CC to look at them and use his letter as they saw fit (p. 132). Simonov referred to his '*Literaturnye zametki*' ('Literary Notes') that he was going to publish in the forthcoming issue of *Novyy mir*.

In the letter to Khrushchev, Simonov also discussed the 1946 CC resolution on the repertoires of drama theatres, which he had not done in his speech three weeks earlier. He accused this resolution, too, for not speaking 'in full voice about all dark and backward things in a fight where light and progress wins'. The resolution

was one-sided because it did not promote a comprehensive description of life (RGANI, 3/23/191, pp. 141–143). Simonov repeated that Zhdanov's words – about all difficulties being 'relics of yesterday' and how literature should choose only the best feelings and characteristics of a Soviet man – had led literature to present the ideal as existing: 'The real content of contemporary [life], the existing combination of good and evil characteristics of a man were often forgotten. As a result, it happened too often that life was distorted by way of its embellishment' (RGANI, 3/23/191, p. 144).

When it came to the *Bol'shaya zhizn'* resolution, Simonov emphasized its unordinary character. Only the Party leadership had seen the movie – no one else could see and evaluate it. If a newspaper article had written about the real weaknesses of the movie, someone could have argued against them. Now, the movie had become the object of a resolution with far-reaching implications, which did not correspond to the content of the film. The press and hundreds of lecturers had transferred the conclusions of the resolution 'quickly and mechanically' to cover all literature. The resolution conclusions had become guides in the evaluation of all literary phenomena, which had greatly damaged literature (RGANI, 3/23/191, pp. 148–149).

Thus, Simonov implied that the whole resolution was itself a manifestation of the personality cult. Stalin's subjective evaluation was given in a form no one could argue against. No discussion was possible. The judgement was dictatorial. An aspect of the 'cult' was how Stalin's view had expanded from the top of the power pyramid down to all spheres of social, cultural, and academic activity.

Simonov had written to Khrushchev at an interim moment when, on the one hand, he had edited his forthcoming essay, and on the other, he and the other leaders of the Writers Union were waiting for the CC to solve their disagreements. It is possible that the grave international situation – the Soviet intervention in Hungary, after the situation had aggravated since 23 October, was taking place in 4–10 November 1956 – made Simonov practice self-censorship, and the official censorship apparatus did the rest: Simonov's essay '*Literaturnye zametki*' was mutilated. The published text does not mention the 1946 CC resolutions at all.

Simonov's Third Act: Publishing a Censored, Yet Critical Essay

As Simonov noted in his letter to Khrushchev, he had decided to take something out. Initially, he had softened his categorical formulations on the 1946 resolutions, and for tactical reasons he had removed the emphasis of his attack from the official documents to Zhdanov's lecture, and then sent the proofs to the CC (Pankin, 1999, p. 136.). After that, the few remaining chapters dedicated exactly to the criticism of the 1946 resolutions were removed at the last minute on the order of the censorship office *Glavlit*. Boris Pankin has underlined that even after being reprimanded, Simonov nevertheless had written and submitted the article for printing (Pankin, 1999, pp. 137–138; Zolotonosov 2013, pp. 397–398). So, Simonov was both courageous and careful.

While his earlier addresses had been intended for limited audiences only, this was something that the Soviet public was able to read:

The personality cult, the cult of Stalin's infallibility created such an official atmosphere in which much was talked about successes and very little about failures and mistakes. Real, concrete difficulties were hushed up (*zamal'chivalis*). Very often the first place was reserved for what was ostentatious, whereas what was shady and difficult was put off. All this resulted in belittling the exploits of the Party and the people who, in incredibly difficult post-war conditions, gradually renovated the country, because the whole scope of the heroic deed can be fully appreciated only when all obstacles before the exploit are given complete account.

However, through embellishment, through representing the ideal as already existing, literature actually summoned to belittling the heroism of the people. It summoned with the help of active and unfair support of works, which were most evidently embellishing reality, or with the help of suppressing some works, which depicted life more truthfully.

(Simonov, 1956, p. 241.)

Simonov cited Marx's theses on Feuerbach and maintained that Marx probably had not meant that it was possible to change the world without first explaining it. Simonov applied Marx's theses to literature, which, wrote Simonov, as if had been left with the function of changing the world (the task to remodel and educate workers ideologically), yet in many cases was relieved of its function of representing the world. That would have included the truthful depiction of existing difficulties.² However, when a writer lost his chance to explain, his work did not have any power to influence life to change anything. This is how *lakirovka* works had come out, and the reader could only grin at these works (p. 241). It was not that Soviet literature had written straightforward lies about post-war life, but that 'it had by and large written half-truths, and a half-truth is the enemy of art. It was as if lies were not written, but the genuine harsh truth was circumvented' (Simonov, 1956, pp. 242–243). He stated, finally, that the main and most serious consequence of the personality cult for literature was the simplified, untruthful, varnished representation of the life of the people, irrespective of whether Stalin was mentioned or not (p. 243).

Simonov practiced self-criticism when writing about the late Stalinist attacks on theatre critics. The aspiration to 'avoid sharp angles of reality', to smooth life and rub off conflicts, had put dramaturgy and cinematography into a difficult position, as it was impossible to avoid portraying the everyday life of the people on the scene. This had resulted in many a superficial play. Some critics had taken a stance towards these feeble plays; and even with some snobbery, wrote Simonov, their articles had included reasonable reflection about flaws and weaknesses of the plays. However, instead of a balanced discussion among the cultural intelligentsia, these critics had been routed first in a heated Writers Union plenum in 1948, then by a *Pravda* article '*Ob odnoy antipatrioticheskoy gruppe teatral'nykh*

kritikov' ('About one Antipatriotic Group of Theatre Critics', 28 January 1949). The critics were accused of harming Soviet dramaturgy and writing from alien and hostile positions, of lacking Soviet patriotism, and 'attempting to discredit progressive phenomena of Soviet literature and art by attacking patriotic and politically purposeful works in the pretence of their allegedly artistic shortcomings' (Simonov, 1956, pp. 248–250).

The main method of routing the critical critics had been the accusation that all critical remarks towards the heroes of the plays were directed towards the whole Soviet society. If a critic had made an ironic remark towards a tame character of a Party functionary, he was accused of slandering the Party. If a critic reproached that the characters spoke in bombastic words about the Fatherland, he was accused of lacking patriotism (p. 249). Once again, Simonov pointed out the generalizing tendency to label all criticism against individual instances as criticism towards the Party or the Soviet social order. And these labels could be very fateful in those days. The anti-Semitic nature of this anti-cosmopolitanism campaign against the theatre critics (most of whom were Jews) was well known to contemporaries.³

Simonov blamed himself, albeit using once again a passive voice:

The then-leaders of the Writers Union, including the author of these lines, and a number of writers and critics, did not find in themselves courage enough even to try showing the one-sidedness and incorrectness of this [*Pravda*] article and to warn about its serious consequences to dramaturgy.

(p. 251)

The repercussions had been serious: many of the writers and critics, accused of being antipatriotic, had been deprived of normal work in the field of literature, and many other writers and critics became afraid that this could also happen to themselves. The *Pravda* article had been initiated by Stalin, and this fact was sufficiently known in literary circles, wrote Simonov. The article had led to very serious consequences in literature, as it had given the impression that the only thing left for writers was to describe grandiose heroism and major successes and that the critic had to be 'first and foremost a fiery patriot and proud of all works on the stage', Simonov had noted (pp. 249–251).

Simonov also accused some critics and scholars of reducing socialist realism to 'a dead doctrinal dogma' (*v mertvuyu talmudicheskomu dogmu*) and claimed that post-war literature had compromised the principles of socialist realism. The problem was that works, which he considered being 'not written from the principles of socialist realism', were often declared as models of socialist realism by the critics. Thus, criticism had adjusted the principles of socialist realism towards *lakirovka* works that had, in fact, betrayed those principles (pp. 252–255).

Simonov tackled the criticism of Fadeyev's *Molodaya gvardiya*⁴ in the same pattern he had autopsied the *Bolshaya zhizn*' resolution. He contrasted the official criticism to well-known realities behind these works – realities, which the authoritative criticism had labelled as non-existing or wrongly depicted.

Simonov discussed the accusations against Fadeyev's description of the older generation of Bolsheviks working underground during the German occupation in Krasnodon, according to which he had given an insufficient role to the Party and Party organization. According to Simonov, the novel showed how, as a result of the *unexpectedly* swift attack of the Germans on Krasnodon and the ensuing hasty evacuation, the underground resistance was organized insufficiently (p. 243). Fadeyev's critics had tried to take the reader away from the truth of life towards *lakirovka*, as it was wrong to represent in hindsight the whole underground in the occupied area as unified and powerful since it undermined the actual exploits of the young heroes in most horrible conditions. The critical article had, in fact, demanded a reduction of those real-life conditions (pp. 244–245). Fadeyev had used real-life examples yet had been publicly accused of describing 'an isolated group of enthusiasts' and of diminishing the role of the Party in the heroic deeds of the Krasnodon youth (p. 246).

Now, in 1956, Simonov wrote that the main problem was how the *Pravda* article of 3 December 1947 had discussed the early stage of the war. *Pravda* had stated that 'not everything went smoothly' (*ne vsyo shlo gladko*) at the beginning of the war. Simonov, appalled by this understatement, recounted that when in 1942 a vast territory with a 70-million population had been occupied, it had demanded a miraculous effort to turn the events of the war. He reproached *Pravda*'s formulation about 'all sorts of unexpected situations' having come up, when the whole war from its very start had been an 'unexpected situation', or at least insufficiently foreseen, when it came to the events in the Donbass area prior to 1942, which was the topic of Fadeyev's book (pp. 244–246). The *Pravda* article had created the conception that only the positive events and successes could be deemed typical, whereas all negative phenomena were not only untypical but also distorted the truth. With this claim the article, and many others, had pushed literature to varnishing of life (p. 246).

Simonov then brought up the role of Stalin behind the criticism of Fadeyev's novel – and thus as the originator of this demand to varnish reality:

Of course, if one thinks that the war from its very first days onwards took an organized character, that we retreated in 1941 to Moscow and in 1942 to Stalingrad according to a plan that had been thought out and delineated beforehand, then there is no need to quarrel. However, Fadeyev knew that this had not been the case, and as an honest artist he described in his novel the truth of life. The demand that he should have written it all otherwise was, however, born out of an attempt to present the ideal as reality with hindsight and thereby protect the authority – not of the people, of course, since the people does not need it – but the infallibility of Stalin.

(Simonov, 1956, p. 247)

By referring directly to the 'infallibility of Stalin', Simonov established a link between the 'consequences of the personality cult', the practice of embellishing reality in literature, and the way WWII could be represented in Soviet art.

Simonov listed the grave consequences of the *Pravda* article. It was interpreted as a Party's point of view about the task of literature especially when it came to the representation of the war. Also, 'the version about the organized character of the beginning of the war and evacuation had led to numerous distortions of historical truth in many works'. Many writers who had witnessed the war themselves abandoned their plans to write about the beginning of the war because of this official version: 'They did not want to act against their conscience and paint the war in its first stage in accordance with the normative requirements that were expressed in this and then other articles' (p. 247). Thus, the article prevented literature to portray the

whole tragic greatness of the Patriotic war and the whole scale of the heroism of the Party and the people. Because one could not do this without showing the enormous distance that we went through from the first defeats to the capture of Berlin.

(p. 247)

Simonov also underlined how the article had put Fadeyev into a very difficult position, and thus showed how 'the personality cult' had functioned within an individual with Stalinist subjectivity. Fadeyev knew, said Simonov, that the directive for the article had come directly from Stalin. 'The writer Fadeyev believed in Stalin and excruciatingly tried to understand where he, Fadeyev, had been wrong as an artist, tried to change his own mind', and ended up spending four agonizing years creating the second version of his novel (pp. 247–248).

Simonov's essay was edited so that the Party, especially the post-war CC, would not be blamed for anything. In his previous speech and letter, Simonov had condemned the 1946 resolutions and Zhdanov's speech and had even complained that official Party documents and speeches had lied about facts about social and economic life. All this was missing from the published text. The only ones who got blamed were Simonov himself, other leaders of the Writers Union, fellow writers, and critics – and Stalin, of course, who had initiated the purges against theatre critics and against Fadeyev's novel. The Party and its Central Committee were not even mentioned.

Simonov's Fourth Act: Expelling the Poison of Stalinism?

The December 1956 issue of *Novyy mir* with Simonov's essay came out on the days when the meeting at the Central Committee, so hoped for by the leaders of the Writers Union (6, 7, and 10 December 1956) took place. During the first day of the meeting, Simonov maintained his convictions. Before the meeting, Simonov's wordings had been cautious and argumentation style very tangled. Now, when he was among his 'own people', he allowed himself to use the most vivid expressions on the role of literature in the process of de-Stalinization.

Simonov admitted that he had made a mistake when he had spoken in front of a non-Party audience at the Moscow State University. However, he repeated his

words about literature having to talk not only about good things but also about difficulties and flaws. He restated his opinion that the 1946–1948 resolutions in part contradicted the 20th Party Congress' decisions. The 1946 documents had been right to summon writers to educate the young in becoming brave, but the resolutions on *Zvezda* and *Leningrad* had not included a necessary summon for writers: to reveal difficulties, show shady sides, and sometimes even give emetic to the people. He defended *Novyy mir*'s publication policies and stated that the journal had published Dudintsev's novel exactly because it fought against the consequences of the personality cult (even if, however, he was hesitant about whether they had done the right thing to publish Granin's story) (RGALI, 2464/1/102, p. 11, pp. 20–21).

Simonov declared: 'When need be, literature has to know how to set both cupping glasses and mustard plasters and give emetic' (*'Kogda nado, literatura dolzhna umet' postavit' i banki i gorchichniki i dat' rvotnoye'*) (RGANI, 5/36/12, p. 210). This expression with reference to traditional medical practices was a tangible and corporeal expression of a symbolic way de-Stalinization should be conducted. According to Simonov, literature had to use cupping glasses to draw the bad blood of Stalinism from the Soviet social organism, and give necessary medicine to make society vomit all the poison out, and finally enhance the healing process with traditional mustard plasters that were used to help with aches and pains.

Unsurprisingly, Simonov got harshly reprimanded by fellow writers and Party secretaries alike. Secretary of the CC, Pyotr Pospelov, scolded him and asked whether Simonov really thought that the main task of glorious Soviet literature was to pump up Soviet readers with books that wanted to make them vomit (p. 210). Simonov was scolded not only for having spoken too freely to a non-Party audience but also for having defended Dudintsev's novel. He was told that in those difficult days, one had to fight not only 'rose-coloured embellishment' but also 'black-coloured embellishment' in literature (*'Nado borot'sya ne tol'ko s rozovoy, no i protiv chërnoy lakirovki'*) (RGALI, 2464/1/102, p. 9; RGANI, 5/36/12, p. 93, pp. 98–99, p. 115). While these reactions were rather understandable, Simonov's criticism of the 1946–1948 resolutions received perhaps the most interesting rejection.

The secretary of the CC, Dmitriy Shepilov, maintained that the Party leadership had never required that every comma in every official document was unquestionable. He stated that the 1946 resolution on the journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad* had some characterizations that needed clarification; that some works of art had been evaluated in 'an unnecessary regulative administrative tone', and that 'shouting and rude remarks' had been made against erred authors. Shepilov admitted that the *Bol'shaya zhizn'* resolution had 'tenets that orientated not towards portrayal of life as it is, with all its difficulties and contradictions, but rather to a representation first and foremost of something that ought to be' (RGANI, 5/36/12, p. 195). In other words, he admitted many points of Simonov's criticism. However, Shepilov stated that

the main content of the CC resolutions is correct, and they maintain their significance to this day; even though individual, isolated claims do need

adjustment, much does not need adjustment, because the resolutions, pronounced in a particular historical setting, after some time lose their significance, thanks to the life itself; life changes and the Party uses new forms and new words when addressing writers and artists.

(p. 195)

In other words, Simonov's criticism was simultaneously both understood and dodged. The question of CC's responsibility for what had taken place was completely avoided, as was the fact that these documents had been programmatic and guiding documents. It was now said, to the contrary, that those documents were never meant to be taken as written in stone.

Another aspect of the criticism Simonov received was tied directly to the international situation of both current (1956) and the early post-war years (1946). This was in tune with Simonov's own words about the situation in 1946: the fear of a nuclear attack. Pyotr Pospelov scolded Simonov and taught him that there was no abstract truth, and in the aggravated international situation of class struggle, there necessarily were different truths (RGANI, 5/36/12, pp. 201–202). Pospelov referred to Simonov's own experiences back in 1946 when Simonov had visited the USA exactly on the days of Churchill's Fulton speech, 'which summoned to a preventive war against the USSR and had [spoken] about the cannibalistic plans of American imperialists, and how American magazines had written about the atomic bombing of Moscow' (RGANI, 5/36/12, pp. 203–204). Simonov had to see the manifestation of the truth of life as it arose in a contemporary international setting, said Pospelov, and when it came to Simonov's publishing policies, he should think about why the class enemy – Western newspapers – kept praising Dudintsev's novel. Pospelov concluded that the other Writers Union secretaries did not share Simonov's views and his publication policies in *Novyy mir* (RGANI, 5/36/12, pp. 203–204, pp. 211–213).

The leaders of the Writers Union had now achieved what they wanted: the Party's point of view towards Simonov's agenda. After the December meeting, the discussions were over. In fact, the Party view had already been set before the meeting. Dmitriy Polikarpov had drafted a report on 1 December, wherein he complained about Simonov's statements. Polikarpov admitted that Zhdanov's speech had 'led some writers and scholars to serious mistakes', but he maintained that the CC had rejected those mistaken theses that had pushed artists to bypass hardships. Yet, since the resolutions had not been clarified in light of the 20th Party Congress, some writers had groundlessly denied the positive nature of the resolutions (Afanas'yev & Afiani, 2001, pp. 576–577). The report's word-to-word analogy to the speeches of Polikarpov and Shepilov at the meeting shows how, in the open discussion with the writers, the Party officials merely reiterated a prewritten script. The views of the writers had no significance.

The message of the Party was disseminated in a letter sent to all levels of Party organizations on 19 December 1956. Polly Jones has noted that this letter was more hushed up than Khrushchev's secret speech and signified a 'crucial juncture in the de-Stalinization campaign' (Jones, 2013, p. 57). Among many other things,

the letter criticized Simonov's speech in front of a non-Party audience, which included 'essentially a revision' of the CC decisions (Artizov *et al.* (eds.), 2003, pp. 211–212).

The Party Acts: The Implicit Criticism of Simonov

The public condemnation of Simonov, however, was much more cautious. The flagship journal of ideology, the chief organ of the CC *Kommunist*, attacked Simonov's essay in January 1957. It accused him of trying to diminish the leading role of the Party in literature and art, which related to both his erroneous opinion on Fadeyev's book and, more vaguely, that 'individual writers' had criticized the 1946–1948 resolutions. Simonov was blamed for trying to bring forth the old and already condemned ideas of 'so called freedom of creation' that 'bourgeois liberals abroad' were shouting about (*Kommunist*, 1957a, p. 13).

The February editorial article of *Kommunist* not only made public the December wordings of the CC secretaries but was also an answer to all the questions posed during the previous autumn; sort of a new program and clearing out of the Party line in literature and art. It was written in very vague terms, it targeted *Novyy mir* once, but, surprisingly enough, Simonov was not mentioned. It not only left the 1946 resolution on the journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad* intact, but revived them into action. It insinuated that the situation of 1946, when ideologically questionable works had been published, was now repeating itself, since *Novyy mir* did not have 'enough responsibility and adherence to principles' (*Kommunist*, 1957b, pp. 15–16).

The irony is tangible. Simonov had both personally (in speech and writing) and institutionally (as the Editor-in-Chief of *Novyy mir*) questioned the rationale behind the 1946 resolutions. As a result, the journal he headed was criticized for not following the 1946 journal resolution. The *Kommunist* article admitted that the consequences of the personality cult had been reflected in literature and art, and that there had been 'administrative tone' and unfoundedly harsh criticism, yet 'that was not the key issue'. The 1946–1948 resolutions had implemented the Marxist–Leninist principles of the guidance of literature and art, the Party had been obliged to correct the kowtowing to bourgeois culture, and the resolutions had developed socialist realist artistic creativity (pp. 14–15).

The article complained that the main methodological instructions of the Party had not been fulfilled properly and sometimes were even misinterpreted. Practically enough, then, the organ of the CC blamed all institutions and individuals except the Party for having misunderstood the 1946 resolutions and themselves created the culture of reality embellishment (p. 20).

Considering Simonov's stature at the time, one can presume that this *Kommunist* article, with wordings identical to those written and spoken in December, was an answer to Simonov's various addresses. Yet not a word indicated that Simonov had been the source of such ponderings. At the same time, Simonov's essay – his only publicly known address – was openly rebuked. *Voprosy literatury* labelled Simonov's view on Fadeyev's *Molodaya gvardiya* as erroneous and blamed

Simonov for not opposing foreign enemies that characterized Soviet writers as dishonest embellishers. No such thing had taken place, said the article, that writers would have used 'lighter depiction of life' and worked against their consciences, something which Simonov had proposed in his essay. It was clear that the enemies, under the guise of criticizing the consequences of the personality cult and the embellishers, tried to tarnish the reputation of honest Soviet writers and books that truthfully depicted Soviet achievements. The article stated that Simonov had realized his mistakes, as he had published his article '*O sotsialisticheskom realizme*' ('On Socialist Realism'), written from correct positions, in the March issue of *Novyy mir* (Dement'yev, 1957, pp. 159–178). In this article, Simonov had returned to more orthodox views after the official attacks he had received (Simonov, 1957, p. 224–234). However, he was still being battered by the press for his publication policies, more specifically for publishing Granin's and Dudintsev's works (*Literaturnaya gazeta*, 1957, p. 3; Ikonen, 2014, pp. 225–227).

The literary situation also received attention from Nikita Khrushchev. In his August 1957 essay '*Za tesnuyu svyaz' literatury i iskusstva s zhizn'yu naroda*' ('For a Close Tie between Literature and Art and the Life of the People'), he reprimanded all those who had called others degradingly as embellishers (*lakirovshchiki*). Khrushchev declared that the Party supported all writers with a correct position in literature and who wrote about the positive in life. And if someone overdid this, they should not be blamed for it (Khrushchev, 1957, pp. 14–15). It is noteworthy that Khrushchev did not mention Konstantin Simonov by name – he criticized only the editorial office of *Novyy mir* and Dudintsev (p. 16). Khrushchev wrote that the Party had condemned the mistakes committed during the personality cult and would constantly rectify them in all spheres of life. But the Party also condemned those who, on the pretence of past mistakes, tried to act against the Party and state guidance of literature and art (pp. 18–19). Khrushchev rephrased what the CC officials and secretaries had been writing in the previous autumn and what was disseminated via the Party channels in December 1956 and formulated in print in February 1957.

The editorial office of *Novyy mir* repented in its October editorial. It admitted that publishing Dudintsev had been a grave mistake and declared many of Simonov's claims in '*Literaturnye zametki*' as erroneous and sounding like an underestimation of Party guidance in literature (*Novyy mir*, 1957, pp. 7–8). Within the CC, the Cultural Department accepted *Novyy mir*'s confession, stating that it had 'categorized correctly the mistakes made by the journal's editorial office' (Afnas'yev & Afiani, 2001, p. 704).

Simonov left *Novyy mir* in early 1958 when he moved to Tashkent. Speculations abounded that he was sent away as a punishment, yet he states in his memoirs (1973) that he had wanted to leave and Khrushchev had allowed him to do so if only he would name his successor; and this is how, according to Simonov, Aleksandr Tvardovskiy came back to guide the journal (Simonov, 2015, pp. 608–609).

The theme of the early war continued to haunt Simonov. Simonov dated the text of his famous war novel *Zhivyye i mertvyye* (*The Living and the Dead*, 1959) to

1955–1959, and he had the first version ready in June 1956 (Karaganov, 1987, p. 147). This timing corroborates the claim, made in this chapter, that the questions Simonov posed to himself and brought into public discussion were all part of a comprehensive reconsideration of the recent past, in which the war had played a crucial role. As Polly Jones says, Simonov pondered upon the ‘double tragedies’ of 1937 and 1941, the impact of the Red Army purges to the devastation of the early stages of the Great Patriotic War (Jones, 2013, pp. 173–211). Simonov also continued commenting on Stalinism behind the scenes. Reminiscent of his 1956 letter to Khrushchev, he personally wrote a letter in 1966 to Leonid Brezhnev and the CC instead of signing intellectuals’ circular letter to prevent Stalin’s rehabilitation; a reaction to attempts of the Georgian Communist Party to purify Stalin’s name (Artizov *et al.*, 2003, pp. 490–491).

Conclusions: Simonov’s Disclosure of the Roots of the ‘System of Silence’

In the last months of 1956, Konstantin Simonov embarked on a discussion about the causes and consequences of Stalinism for Soviet literature. When all of his addresses – speech to teachers, letter to Khrushchev, his censored yet published essay, justifying words to his fellow writers – are combined, a picture emerges.

For Simonov, the personality cult had not been only about the uncritical praise of Stalin but about the distorted way of representing reality. Describing life only in positive terms had downplayed the heroism of the people and the Party. When one kept silent about the troubles, reality seemed much easier than it was. Another key issue was the totalizing tendency that effectively prevented critical remarks, or useful interaction (in the case of international cooperation). An individual Party functionary could not be described as silly or negative, as the artist would be accused of slandering the Party. Similarly, Zhdanov’s words about all Western culture being rotten had not paid attention to the progressive forces in the West.

Simonov tracked the beginning of these tendencies to the years 1946 and 1947, and specifically to the official criticism of the movie *Bol’shaya zhizn’* and the novel *Molodaya gvardiya*. These works that Stalin had personally attacked had something in common. They both were set temporally and geographically in the same location: the Donbass area in 1942–1943. The movie described the Donbass area right after the German occupation, and the novel recounted the heroic underground activities of young people during the German occupation of Krasnodon. This was the area of the greatest industrial successes of the 1930s, and it was there that the destruction and destitution caused by the sudden German attack in 1941 were, perhaps, most visible.

Recent scholarship has established the significance of the Donbass area for the self-understanding of Stalinist culture in the form of a specific ‘Donbass text’ in cinema (Apostolov, 2017, p. 146). On the basis of Simonov’s statements, it seems that the representation of the Donbass area during the war was a personal sore spot for Stalin, and the extent of its wartime destruction had to be tightly controlled. Stalin could not allow its truthful portrayal. As Simonov saw it in

1956, the 'rules' concerning the depiction of Donbass during and after the war (expressed in programmatic Party views) were extended to become the rules to control all portrayal of post-war life in the Soviet Union. As a war correspondent, Simonov had witnessed the realities of the war from its early days onwards, which made him understand how the post-war embellishment of reality was rooted in Stalin's wish to control the public view about the beginning of the war and the destruction caused by the sudden German invasion.

What Simonov was talking about was, in contemporary terms, forging of the past. Simonov testified how Stalin – via criticism against works of art – forged the image of the war into something that had not existed in reality. Of course, Simonov did not have the vocabulary to formulate it as such, as he was conditioned to speak in terms and concepts that emanated from the era and practices he so tried to analyse. In his essay, Simonov used the term 'version' when writing about how Stalin had wanted to represent the issue: 'version of an organized character of the beginning of the war' (Simonov, 1956, p. 247). Thus, Simonov showed how official history was forged, and how Stalin was behind the main version of the war.

Stalin demanded to have the first stages of the Great Patriotic War described not as they were, but as he would have liked them to be: more organized, more victorious, more positive. The embellished claim about the war being well organized from its start, remembered Simonov, was widely propagated by the Soviet press in 1946–1947 (pp. 244–246). These were also the years when this claim and its relationship to reality became the basis for cultural policy, via the CC resolutions and authoritative criticism.

Stalin's view was based on his wish to conceal reality, which was that the German attack in 1941 had come as a surprise to him – with grave consequences for the Soviet people. Truthful representation of the beginning of the war would have revealed this situation and Stalin needed this truth to be concealed. This operation of concealment was conducted via authoritative documents, which became the yardstick for 'proper' representation of Soviet life. These views were understood as programmatic, normative guidelines, against which all subsequent works of art were to be measured. The literary intelligentsia (writers, critics, editors, literary scholars) all took part in this forming of late Stalinist politics of culture. The post-war official information, which, too, distorted the real situation in, e.g., agriculture, further enhanced this embellishment of reality. And the very few who tried to contradict this tendency – the theatre critics who showed the harmfulness of *lakirovka* – were tragically routed in 1948–1949. No further criticism ensued. The years 1946–1949 set the tone, and any questions concerning Soviet life, living conditions, and social relations were tightly controlled. Simonov verbalized this as a 'system of silence', i.e., the habit of keeping silent, if not lying, about Soviet realities. This led to the enormous gap between reality as such and the 'reality' produced by post-war literature and art.

Simonov's criticism came from within the Stalinist culture and, despite his criticism, he did not challenge the Party views. On the contrary, he referred to the latest Party documents as the basis for his criticism. Nor did he contradict the

backbone of the 1946 resolutions; he even justified them like the CC secretaries: the looming of nuclear warfare necessitated the intensification of ideological control.

It was, perhaps, an indication of wider problems of de-Stalinization that Simonov's key addresses were left unanswered. The question of lies having emanated from the Party hierarchy was completely evaded. Ironically enough, Simonov's critique of the 'system of silence' was met with silence. A laconic note that the CC resolutions did not need a revision, as they were not and had never been normative was ostensibly enough – even when Simonov's method of using the latest Party documents to contradict earlier ones alleviated exactly the normative character of the 1946 resolutions. Simonov underlined several times that both formulations (those of 1946 and those of 1956) could not be simultaneously right. However, these claims were ignored. The official response was that after 1946 there had been resolutions and documents that writers should turn to. No mention was made about the contradictions that Simonov had pointed out. As if the Party could not admit that it had ever been wrong.

Perhaps this was because of not only the fear of what even mentioning the past leadership's guilt might lead to but also the generalizing tendency Simonov had so criticized: when saying negative things even about one Party organization, it was an offence against the whole Party. One part of the literary intelligentsia (e.g., Simonov) was willing to engage in self-criticism, but the CC neither let the writers take the blame (for the CC, there was nothing to be blamed for) nor did it use the obvious 'easy way out' and continue Khrushchev's scapegoating of Stalin. Perhaps the reason was the unwillingness of the Party leadership to admit that it had been wrong in 1946. It seems that the Party was now as infallible as Stalin had been.

If we push Simonov's claims further, we could say that the idea of the infallibility of Stalin demanded that the suffering, thus the true scale of exploits, of the people had to be belittled. Simonov's outbursts in October–December 1956 show that Stalin's apprehension of the movie and book about the war in the Donbass region became the program of *lakirovka*. In other words, Stalin had programmed the habit of embellishing reality.

The ensuing fates of the 1946 resolutions, targets of Simonov's criticism, varied. While the movie *Bol'shaya zhizn'*, so criticized by Stalin, came out in 1958 (Zezina, 1999, pp. 206–208), the resolution on the journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad* was officially operative as late as 1988, when the CC annulled it (*Pravda*, 1988, p. 1). Did Simonov's statements have any significance, then?

Without solid references made to Simonov's addresses, there is no direct evidence to verify their influence on the future of Soviet literature. However, considering Simonov's positions in the Soviet intellectual hierarchy, it can be speculated that his criticisms in various arenas back in 1956 did not go unnoticed. His voice was too formidable to be completely ignored by the Party functionaries, who did admit that he was right in at least some regards. And the fact that Simonov was not battered by name by the full might of the Party press in 1957 indicates that he was still to some extent 'untouchable'. If one considers the

incontestable thematic and stylistic broadening of Soviet literature after 1956, especially in the sphere of representation of everyday life and negative sides of Soviet reality (even the Gulag in the early 1960s), it is possible to say that at least some of the ‘promises’ made by the *Kommunist* editorial and Khrushchev became valid: the harshest post-war Stalinist cultural policies were abandoned, at least until the mid-1960s.

It was exactly in the mid-1960s that Simonov came back to the topic he had brought about in 1956. Simonov spoke at the 20th anniversary of Victory Day and turned his speech into an article meant to be published in 1965. He repeated the phrase he had published in his 1956 essay:

Only by way of describing the whole length of our misfortunes at the beginning of the war and the whole measure of our losses can one show the whole length of our road to Berlin and the whole [strength] of the Party, the people and the army.

(Simonov, 1956, p. 247; Simonov, 1987, p. 47)

As Jonathan Brunstedt has shown, the publication of the article was forbidden, and its proofs confiscated (Brunstedt, 2021, p. 176). The fact that Simonov tried again to bring out his 1956 ideas about how official history was forged and how Stalin was behind the main version, and that Simonov’s text was censored in 1965, reveals concretely the Brezhnev administration’s willingness to continue using the Stalinist version (the one emanating from Stalin) of the complete victory of the Great Patriotic War. Simonov’s 1965 article would come out only in 1987, thirty-one years after his first attempts to raise these questions. In 1965/1987, his discussion circled mainly around the issue of the ‘truth’ of WWII and its relation to the personality cult of Stalin. He wrote in 1965 that opposing Stalin would have been fatally serious (Simonov, 1987, p. 46).

However, back in 1956, Simonov saw as the most difficult consequence of the personality cult the simplified, untruthful, varnished representation of the life of the people. This was a matter not only of literature: the press, official speeches, and propaganda in general all represented the actual conditions in the country untruthfully – and this habit stemmed directly from the highest official documents. It might be overstretching to claim that Stalin’s view on the Great Patriotic War was the only reason behind the post-war embellishment of reality, yet there was a link. When one kept silent about the problems, reality seemed much easier than it in fact was. The question of the embellishment of social problems and of the control of the representation of both everyday life and the era of the Great Patriotic War would continue to be at the centre of attention of Soviet authorities. Be it about the need to control the memory of the war or the way contemporary shortcomings are dealt with in media, these issues have not lost their significance to this day. The official sanctions that today’s Russian government has issued concerning the representation of its current war against Ukraine further underlines some of the deep roots that Stalin era politics of culture has left for the country.

Notes

- 1 The CC Orgburo's three infamous resolutions were on the journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad* (14 August 1946), on the repertoire of drama theatres (26 August 1946), and on the movie *Bol'shaya zhizn'* (4 September 1946) (see the published resolutions in Artizov and Naumov (eds.), 2002, pp. 587–602). Zhdanov's lecture on the first resolution (16 August 1946), published in *Pravda* on 21 August 1946, was disseminated as a brochure together with the resolutions. (For the original stenographic record of Zhdanov's lecture, see Druzhinin, 2012, pp. 445–469. For preparatory discussions, see Clark and Dobrenko, 2007, pp. 402–425.)
- 2 '*Tak vot v primeneni k literature delo obstayalo tak, chto yey kak by ostavlyalas' funktsiya izmeneniya mira (v vide pravil'no postavlennoy zadachi ideynoy peredelki i vospitaniya trudyashchikhsya v dukhe sotsializma), no vo mnogom, ochen' vo mnogom u neyë kak by otnimalas' funktsiya ob'yasneniya mira (v vide pravil'nogo izobrazheniya real'no sushchestvuyushchikh trudnostey*' (Simonov, 1956, pp. 242–243).
- 3 On Simonov's actions during the anti-cosmopolitanism campaign, see Kostyrchenko, 2015, pp. 95–113; Figes, 2008, pp. 496–508.
- 4 Simonov referred to the articles in *Kul'tura i zhizn'* (30 November 1947) and *Pravda* (3 December 1947).

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