

THE POSITIVE HERO IN RUSSIAN LITERATURE. 2nd edition. By Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975 [1958]. xxii, 369 pp. \$14.95.

When Professor Mathewson's book first appeared in 1958, this reviewer praised it in *The Polish Review* as "highly valuable both as a compendium of facts as well as a frequently admirable commentary." I also urged that the book "be read by all who are interested in the fate of literature under the rule of those who would turn it into a mere handmaiden of the 'more important' task of politics."

In the nearly two decades that have passed, Professor Mathewson's book has grown in stature and is now generally recognized as one of the most important studies produced by a Slavist in this country. Indeed, its value also extends to the broader field of Russian cultural history. *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature* is, after all, primarily a discussion of the long conflict between partisans of literature's autonomy and those predicating its legitimacy on such "useful" functions as creation of literary models for readers to emulate.

The book's original edition traced the course of the often embittered polemics from the early nineteenth century until Stalin's death. In Stalin's Russia, unlike the Russia of the tsars, those favoring overt utilitarianism were backed by the might of the state. And yet, soon after the dictator's demise, the polemic resumed, if only by innuendo. In a series of five new chapters devoted to Pasternak, Solzhenitsyn, and Sinyavsky, Professor Mathewson discerns a new kind of hero, not a "positive" one in the traditional sense of the term in the lexicon of socialist realism, nor a Western-type "anti-hero," but a "battered survivor." Mathewson writes: "The survivor-hero generates his moral strength out of his personal resources in conditions of solitude and unrelenting adversity. Stretched to the limit in his suffering, he searches out and formulates ideas, but they are ideas born of experience; he is never their puppet or their prisoner. His personal 'ideology' is a function of his character, not vice versa. He is more humanly recognizable, and for this reason, if for no other, is more aesthetically acceptable. What resemblances there are between the two kinds of hero [the "battered survivor" and the official Soviet literary hero] may arise from the absolute oppositions, with extremity set as the norm, that characterize the totalitarian world" (p. xvi).

Professor Mathewson now believes that "the call for positive heroes is no longer the ultimate slogan of socialist realists" (p. 256). It is here that I differ with Professor Mathewson. To paraphrase Mark Twain, the rumors of the positive hero's death are a great exaggeration. Thus, in the mid-1960s, there was a long and heated debate triggered by what some Soviet critics perceived as a tendency among young Soviet authors to avoid the portrayal of positive heroes. Such "de-heroicization" was declared a threat to the very existence of *Soviet* literature. Similarly, a very important work, G. Vladimov's *Vernyi Ruslan*—one of the most impressive novels in all of *samizdat* literature—was correctly identified by Andrei Sinyavsky (in *Kontinent*, no. 5 [1975]) as featuring a classic Soviet-type "positive hero." (That the hero is a police dog is quite another matter.)

Positive heroes will, no doubt, be heard from again. In the meantime, it is good to have Rufus Mathewson's book back in print. Hopefully, libraries will now replace the copies that were stolen over the years by students who found the book's appeal irresistible.

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