

BORIS PIL'NIAK: A SOVIET WRITER IN CONFLICT WITH THE STATE.

By Vera T. Reck. Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1975. xii, 243 pp. \$12.50, cloth. \$6.00, paper.

Professor Reck's book is political and historical in emphasis rather than biographical or literary; it is a meticulous, carefully documented study of the two major official assaults on Pil'niak, in 1926 and 1929. The lion's share of the text is rightly devoted to 1929, when an organized campaign of vilification became the instrument of state policy rather than a political counterpunch, as was the case in 1926. Scholars have long recognized the goal of this campaign at a great turning point in Soviet history: the final suppression of potentially divisive elements in the traditionally nonconformist creative intelligentsia and the mobilization of the intelligentsia in service to the state, initially during the First Five-Year Plan. What Reck's book provides is a wealth of interesting detail and judicious assessment of the sometimes clumsily orchestrated campaign and the policies and decisions that shaped it. The same thoroughness characterizes her treatment of the 1926 scandal.

It would be useful, however, to know more than is provided (on page 200, note 2) about the 1927 Sofia edition of "The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon." This severely abridged, simplified version of the original, suppressed *Novyi mir* text has served as the original for English translations, including Reck's own (*Mother Earth and Other Stories* [Garden City, N.Y., 1968]). If an anti-Soviet, perhaps émigré, tendency is discernible in the suppression of all passages (and entire episodes) that gave "the unbending man" (Stalin) a degree of humanity and ambiguity in the first version, the systematic removal of the strong antiurban bias found in the original can not be so explained. Some exclusions seem to result from aesthetic considerations alone. But who was behind the revisions? An answer to this question—if it is answerable—might add significantly to our understanding of this affair. I also think that no complete understanding of Pil'niak's side of the 1929 debacle is possible without careful analysis of his novel, *The Volga Falls to the Caspian Sea*, allegedly written as an act of political self-rehabilitation. (This I have attempted to do elsewhere [*Slavic and East European Journal*, 18 (1974): 271–98].) Despite her own discussion of Pil'niak's repeated assertion that he was an artist, not a politician, Reck in a sense mimics the regime's practice of reading this work and its predecessor *Mahogany* primarily as political documents. This skewed apprehension of literary art is symptomatic of an unequal weighting given almost everywhere to the two sides of the conflict described in the title of the book (although Reck is far from sympathetic to the state). For example, after detailing Pil'niak's "defeat" by the state in 1929, Reck devotes only twelve pages to Pil'niak's work during the thirties, as if the "writer's side" merits no more. Yet the writer's complex, losing battle was continuing. This imbalance is to some extent inevitable, given the book's political and historical emphasis. If that emphasis precludes much literary analysis, it is nevertheless disappointing to find rather little here about Pil'niak the man, even though Reck had the extraordinary good fortune to interview people close to him. Pil'niak remains for me an elusive, rather enigmatic figure, although I am grateful for the pieces of information that are provided.

I am grateful as well for the book itself. The author has amassed and distilled a body of data, much of it difficult to obtain, which is indispensable to aficionados of Pil'niak and useful to scholars of this period. The book draws new attention to a writer who deserves still more.

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