

Title: The Obshchina on the Soil of Provence. Berberova's *Poslednie i pervye* (1930)
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In September 1928, returning to Paris from southwest France, Nina Berberova carried with her a document of Russian oral creativity abroad. Chancing upon a Cossack minstrel performing a *duma* of his own composition, she transcribed it on the spot. The lyrics were of historic moment, for they urged Russia to regrowth on new soil. Soon after, Berberova put the transcribed song to novelistic purpose. The *lirnik* would become a figure important to the inception and resolution of the plot and fictional carrier of the message of a portable Russia.

Poslednie i pervye takes on the issue of economic survival for the post-World War I White émigrés. To assembly line and furnace at Renault, first labor abroad for many newcomers, Berberova narrates an alternative vision: that of an urban entity on the land of the Vaucluse Valley, become farmers and entrepreneurs of subsidiary agriculture ventures. Berberova's epic appeared a decade after Knut Hamsun's *Markens grøde* (1917, *Growth of the Soil*) won the Nobel Prize. However, unlike Hamsun, who celebrates the single farmsteader, Berberova valorizes the group enterprise. Her epic is at once an essay in agronomy thick with feuilletons on asparagus cultivation, at once a salute to *narodnoe tvorchestvo* of Cossack Russia abroad, at once a novel, of *agape* and of "lasts" becoming "firsts" – crafted within a tense kidnapping plot to foil the new economic project. Central to the farming enterprise is a social policy identified with the economics of Tsarist Russia, the "*obshchina*" a form of communal decision-making that had characterized peasant agriculture beyond the era of Great Reforms well into the reign of Nicholas II. In Berberova's narrative this cooperative concept reflects the reality of assistance agencies that sprung into being in Paris, making possible the growth of agricultural and side industries as employ for the refugees of the 1920s. Key to the plot resolution is a policy of communal governance, of re-distribution of land, and an ethos of cooperation identifiable with the *obshchina* 'transported' into these new circumstances. Berberova's mixed literary praxis is the focus of my paper.

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