

Title: A Red *Jungle*: Boris Pilnyak's *Miaso* (1936)

Author: Ronald LeBlanc, University of New Hampshire

A little-known narrative, *Meat: A Novel (Miaso: Roman)*, co-authored by Boris Pilnyak (1894-1938) and serialized in *Novyi Mir* during the winter and spring of 1936, appeared in print just two years before this troublesome fellow traveller was “liquidated” (as an enemy of the people) at the height of the Stalinist terror. As its title indicates, Pilnyak’s novel traces the rise of the meat trade and food industry in late imperial Russia as it inventories the various obstacles that had to be overcome before meat products could be provided – with relative efficiency and health safeguards in place – to a wide market of consumers in early twentieth-century Russia. Reading very much like a Russianized version of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906), *Miaso* documents the various unfavorable conditions that accompanied and retarded the development of the meat trade in modern Russia. Sinclair’s well-known American novel, as we know, focuses on exposing and condemning the corrupt, heartless capitalist system that is responsible for all the hardship, injustice, and suffering Jurgis Rudkus and his extended family of Lithuanian émigrés must endure while living and working in Chicago’s infamous Packingtown district. Pilnyak’s novel has a similar anti-capitalist bent, but it attempts to show, in addition, that under a socialist system these negative features of the modern meat business (most notably, the substandard labor conditions for workers) can be eliminated without having to sacrifice industrial efficiency and high productivity.

The main protagonist in *Miaso* is Misha Rogozhin, who in 1905 is taken from his native village as a fourteen-year-old boy to apprentice with two butchers at the Lukianov meat factory in Moscow, where he soon develops political consciousness and revolutionary zeal. Following his arrest and exile (for protesting terrible working conditions at the slaughterhouse), Misha joins the Communist Party, fights valiantly for the Red Army, and then returns to the meat industry at the end of the Civil War, when he attempts to get the old slaughterhouses up and running again in order to provide meat for struggling workers and poor peasants. Tirelessly battling bourgeois specialists, corrupt bureaucrats, and unscrupulous foreign investors, Comrade Rogozhin in the end succeeds in modernizing and socializing the meat industry in Soviet Russia, constructing clean, efficient, and gigantic meat *kombinaty* (as part of Stalin’s Five-Year Plans) that are the envy of industrialists in the West. In short, *Miaso* begins as a muckraking exposé of pre-revolutionary slaughterhouse practices in Russia, but ends as a Socialist Realist utopia about industrial progress, social justice, and material abundance attained under the Soviets during the Stalinist 1930s. If, as some scholars have suggested, Pilnyak spent the 1930s attempting to distance himself from the kinds of stylistic and thematic experimentation that had characterized his prose works of the 1920s (a poetics that had severely alienated the Bolshevik regime) and to transform himself into a mainstream Soviet writer, then *Miaso* provides us with an edifying example of the kind of novel of socialist construction he was now seeking to write, mainly in an effort – ultimately unsuccessful – to stay in the good graces of the authorities.