

Title: “Pikuliada” of Our Time: “Pulp” Literature as an Aesthetic and Ideological Choice of the Last Soviet Generation

Volodymyr Chumachenko, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

The last two decades of Soviet cultural life were marked by the growing popularity of novels defined by some Western literary critics as “pulp” literature. Such literary works were a certain abnormality for a political and cultural system in which the artistic method of “socialist realism” was the only prescription for all literary and cultural productions. Writings of Valentin Pikul’, Yulian Semenov, and Edward Radzinskii in the traditionally “safest” genres of Soviet literature – historical novel and historical detective – gained tremendous popularity among mass readership. The historical novels of Valentin Pikul’ were, in a literary sense, neither *history*, nor *literature*, but rather “jokes about history” or “historical journalism of low quality.” His novels about the Russian imperial past are notoriously biased to the West and often blatantly xenophobic toward non-Russians. At the same time, they remain among the most popular books in Russia up to the present time. As the former Russian defense minister and close friend of Vladimir Putin, Sergey Ivanov confessed in one of his interviews in 2005, Pikul’s books were always among his favorites.

Pikul’s success was determined to a large extent by his ability to respond to his readers’ common cultural perceptions of their country’s past and the non-Russian “other” on a very basic primitive level with the usage of a simple and often reckless form of artistic language. His novels could be seen as fictional legitimizations of all negative stereotypes about the non-Russian “other” which existed in Soviet society as part of the so-called “lower culture.” In the light of Pikul’s popularity the novels speak not so much about the writer but about the identity of his readers and their cultural expectations. Not only readers of this last Soviet generation were affected by the phenomenon of the Soviet “pulp” literature, but many writers as well. The epigones of Pikul’ flooded the Russian book market in the 1990s with texts that often interpreted the national past, relying upon the eclectic mixture of Eurasianism a-la Nikolai Gumilev and nostalgia for the “Great Fatherland”.