

Title: The Poet and the Leader: A Reappraisal of Pasternak's «Мне по душе строптивый норов...»

Author: Matthew McGarry, University of Wisconsin-Madison

More so than in other countries, the Russian poet has always enjoyed a special relationship with his nation's rulers. Not simply an artist, the poet has consciously assumed a variety of mantles including those of bard, advisor, prophet, revolutionary, and hostile critic. In these capacities, the poet has had the potential to become either his leader's loyal servant whose verse affirmed the legitimacy of his decrees, or his alter ego, the *other* to his *I* with whom he duelled for narrative hegemony over Russia.

If asked to identify on their doctoral examinations the finest exemplars of this phenomenon in Russian literature, most students would probably name Derzhavin, Pushkin, the Decembrist poets, Lermontov, Mandel'shtam, and Akhmatova. Undoubtedly all these poets would be correct; however, if later, perhaps during the examinee's orals, s/he was asked why they did not consider Pasternak, the candidate, perhaps citing Gifford¹ and Hingley², might state that Pasternak's "Stalin" pieces of the early and mid 1930's such as the Pushkinian «Столетье с лишним – не вчера» (1931), «Я понял: все живо» (1936), and «Мне по душе строптивый норов...» (1936) are nothing but jingoistic lyrics that represent at best the poet's feeble attempt to live in "harmony with the times" if not a blatant effort to ensure his own safety.

Although critics such as Fleishman³ and more recently Moryganov⁴ have suggested otherwise, the aforementioned view of Pasternak's "Stalin" poems has generally prevailed, especially in the western academy. Further analysis, particularly of the original 1936 New Year's version of «Мне по душе строптивый норов...» that appeared in *Izvestiia*, however, tells a different story. As I will strive to demonstrate in this paper, the original «Мне по душе строптивый норов» is hardly the self-serving panegyric to the *vozhd'* that readers often dismiss it as, but rather a highly nuanced and sophisticated text in which Pasternak, in the tradition of Derzhavin and Pushkin, highlights Stalin's "accomplishments" while simultaneously challenging him to consider the manner in which his past and future excesses will impact the Russian nation.

¹ Henry Gifford, *Pasternak: A Critical Study*. (London: Bristol Classic Press, 2003) 162-176.

² Ronald Hingley, *Nightingale Fever*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981) 204.

³ Lazar Fleishman, *Boris Pasternak: The Poet and His Politics*. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990)

⁴ А. Ю. Морыганов, «Ленин и Сталин в стихотворных фрагментах Бориса Пастернака 20-30-х годов» в сборнике *Потаенная литература. Исследования и материалы*. Выпуск 2 (Иваново: Ивановский государственный университет, 2000) 171-181.