

REVIEWS

BOOKS

The Front

Readers of the Soviet press will have found that, during the last few months, one product of Soviet literature has been particularly often extolled in it, namely, the play entitled *The Front*, by Alexander Korneychuk. In the leading USSR daily, "Pravda," it was reprinted and reviewed; in the second most important daily, "Izvestiya," it was deemed worthy of a full-page review; quotations from it appear often in editorials and other articles of the Soviet press; and even in Shanghai the play was reprinted in a pro-Soviet Russian daily and has also appeared in book form (in Russian). Hence one is justified in saying that this play is the most important literary work of the Soviet Union since the outbreak of war.

The *Front* throws such an interesting light on the situation within the Soviet Union and the Red Army that we would like to reprint it in its entirety in an English translation. But as we lack the space for this, we shall content ourselves with analyzing it.

THE PLOT

THE story is extremely simple. It takes place at the end of January 1942 on the German-Soviet front in the staff of the "Supreme Commander of the Front." (As the Soviet army consisted at that time of three fronts, the northern, central, and southern, the play presents a picture of the life of the staff of one third of the entire Red western front, which represents more or less the sphere of command of a Budyonny or Timoshenko.) In this staff a new operation against the Germans is being prepared. A conflict arises between the Supreme Commander of the front, General Gorlov, and one of the army commanders under him, General Ogniov, in which the cliques of officers around these two men also become involved. (Both Gorlov's brother and son belong to Ogniov's clique.)

Then the scene shifts to the staff quarters of Ogniov, who finds himself in a very difficult position because the plan to be carried out by order of his superior commander is faulty. The Red tank corps, which is urgently needed by Ogniov, is destroyed, and the Germans who, unknown to the Red side, have built a new road, are advancing along this road. General Ogniov decides to act against Gorlov's orders and obtains permission from Moscow over the head of his superior to carry out his own plan. (Incidentally, one item of this plan is that part of his troops are put into German uniforms, to deceive the Germans.)

Of course, Ogniov is victorious, although only with great difficulty, since it is too late to make up for Gorlov's mistake. Among the great losses he suffers, there is also Gorlov's son. The last scenes take us back to Gorlov's staff headquarters, where Gorlov celebrates Ogniov's victory as having been his own, until an order arrives from Moscow which relieves him of his post and appoints Ogniov in his place. The curtain falls after an apotheosis

of Stalin who, in his great wisdom, has brought all this to pass.

THE VILLAIN AND THE HERO

The whole play revolves around the conflict between two men, men who are not simply individuals but who each represents his own world.

General Gorlov, the villain of the piece, is a man who, coming from the labor class, has won his military spurs in the Revolution and in the civil war and who has finally advanced to one of the highest positions in the Red Army. He is a self-made man and says of himself:



"I learnt to fight, not in academies, but in battle. I am not a theoretician but an old war horse . . . I am not accustomed to sitting around in an office and worrying my head over maps. War is not an academy. The main thing is—look for the enemy and defeat him where you find him." According to the author's instructions, this speech is received by the officers present with "How true!" and applause.

Gorlov is a tough old fighter, but stupid and lazy. He has never added to his knowledge, not even when he was sent to Germany for a time:

"I didn't care for Germany. It was boring. But then we went to France. Yes, indeed. The things we saw there! It was a pity we were recalled so soon. But it is nice to remember those days."

Concerning this scene, the reviewer of the *Izvestiya* writes: "Gorlov was in Germany. Did he notice what the German general staff was preparing in the way of new methods in the tactics of modern war? No!"

The Chief of Reconnaissance in his staff is an officer who is no use and makes one mistake after another. But Gorlov keeps him on because he was his comrade in the days of the civil war. The Chief of Communications is also useless and, moreover, a

drunkard, and the journalist of a big Moscow paper who is attached to his staff is a chatterbox who says of himself: "My dear fellow, if I were to write about what I see, I couldn't possibly write something every day." *Izvestiya* remarks about these creatures around Gorlov: "These types are not so rare."

Against this unpleasant background, the youthful hero Ognyov shines all the brighter. He is the ideal of the modern, clever, and industrious officer, who can even quote Moltke. He has taken part neither in the Revolution nor in the civil war. "In those days he could still stand up straight under a table," Gorlov contemptuously says of him, so he must be in his middle thirties. When war broke out with Germany, he was a colonel, three months later he was a major general and, by the end of the play, he is made supreme commander of one third of the fighting Red Army.

His superior cannot stand him. "I am sorry to say that the question of whether or not a man has fought in the civil war is still the most important thing in the eyes of our highest officers," says a member of the Supreme War Council of the USSR who arrives from Moscow. "No matter how talented a young officer may be, they do not recognize him if he has not fought at their side in the civil war."

CHAOS

The play presents a gloomy picture of the incompetence and chaos reigning in the Soviet staffs and in the Red Army in general. Their reconnaissance of the enemy is more than weak. While it is reported that in a certain sector the Reds are faced by fifty German tanks, there are actually 420. When the man who is responsible for reconnaissance along the entire front is asked for the name of the general who is in command of the German troops lying opposite, he replies: "I don't know. Before, the fellow in command was . . . I forget, his name was so difficult. Anyway, it was a Major General von something. He has been taken away. I don't know what kind of a 'von' is there now." One sympathizes with Ognyov when he says of this officer: "That man lies like a salesman." The chief of staff of the front expresses his opinion on the reconnaissance methods as follows: "To tell the truth, there is no reconnaissance at all at our front. The foremost detachments can only see as far as the first hill what the enemy is doing; but what is behind the hill they can generally only guess at."

We hear that the commander of a battalion and his commissar have taken on a cook for themselves and that they are behaving like lords. "They eat enough for five. But the soldiers' field kitchen isn't worth a damn. The soldiers have beaten up the cook because he never gives them anything but a filthy broth." We are told that Ognyov's army has only two wireless stations instead of twenty-two and that "all around and even in our army there are spies and people who talk too much."

Denunciations are rampant. An officer who has an argument with Gorlov's Chief of Staff waits till the latter leaves the room and rings up the secretary of the local organization of the Communist Party, to whom he says: "When will you be at the Party office? Today? Good. I have a little matter to clear up and need some information. Listen, do you happen to remember what kind of a family the Chief of Staff comes from? Well,

well, well! The son of a clergyman! That's splendid. No, nothing more. I'll come over."

The field post works atrociously. A noncommissioned officer gets a letter in January which was sent off in his home village on September 1. And when he finally gets it he finds little cause for rejoicing in it. His wife writes: "Our brigadier [title given to the man who organizes the work on a collective farm] has turned out to be a rotter. Hardly had you all left for the front when he immediately became a scoundrel and started to get drunk with the bookkeeper. They are both scoundrels."

And what, after all, is one to think of the discipline of an army in which an officer like Ognyov, who considers the orders of his superior to be mistaken, applies directly to headquarters in Moscow and receives permission to act against the orders of his superior? Or in which the fact that a German plane has made a forced landing behind the Russian lines is reported by the chief of the aviation department of the front to Moscow and, what is more, directly to Stalin, but not to his own superior?

"GIVE US MORE PLANES!"

The following conversation between General Gorlov and his brother, the manager of an airplane factory, throws a revealing light on the quality of the Soviet air arm. Gorlov complains that he does not have enough aircraft. His brother explains that a lot of time was lost recently while experiments were being made with a new, faster type.

Gorlov: "Don't worry so much about the speed. The main thing is, give us more planes! Look at how many planes the Germans have!"

Brother: "Don't start that refrain. We're sick and tired of it. We've heard it enough from you and your kind. Stop talking about it—to hell with it!"

Gorlov: "Why? I don't understand."

Brother: "Some of your military strategists have been writing for years: 'Give us more planes! Speed is of secondary importance. We need numbers.' Well, we civilians listened."

Gorlov: "Well, that's the way it should be."

Brother: "If we had kept on listening to those strategists we would have already been finished by now . . ."

Gorlov: "Nevertheless, numbers are very important today. On land and in the air. Numbers win. They are the body and soul of the military profession."

"SOCIAL COMMISSION," NOT LITERATURE

From the manner in which Korneytchuk's play is being lauded in the highest places, we can deduct with absolute certainty that it was written for a certain purpose in the form of a "social commission" (*sotsialny zakaz*) as is common in the Soviet Union. Hence we would be unjust toward the play if we were to review it from a literary point of view. It must be considered, not as a literary work, but as a political publication written for a definite purpose. It can hardly even be regarded as a drama. It contains no dramatic conflict, since the characters in it do not undergo any development. In the last scene they are the same as in the first; and the denouement is not brought about through those characters or through inner necessity but by the all-knowing *deus ex machina* in the Red Kremlin. Neither the reader nor the onlooker can feel any dramatic tension. From the first scene it is clear who is the scoundrel and who the hero, and for this reason the end can easily be predicted.

The characters of the play are not living people but marionettes. It almost seems as if the author himself wants to draw attention to this by inventing symbolic names for most of them (the journalist is called Comrade "Shouter," the Chief of Communications Comrade "Hoarse," an artist who appears Comrade "Melancholy," etc.). How little the author, this so-called Writer of the Proletariat, is able to speak the language of the people is shown by the fact that in one rough scene among soldiers he has copied a portion, almost word for word, from an ancient letter, humorous and insulting, written by the Dniepr Cossacks to the Sultan of Turkey. This historic letter ended with the words: "The day is the same here as where you are. And you may kiss our" In *The Front* the soldiers discuss the letter which they plan to write to the chief of the mail service and which ends: "The day in the trenches is the same as where you are. And you may kiss our . . . "

THE PURPOSE

In order to understand the true purpose of the play, one must visualize the situation as it was when the play was written. The Red Army, to strengthen which the Soviet population went hungry for twenty years, had suffered defeat upon defeat and had been thrown back a thousand kilometers. Gigantic losses in soldiers and officers were being borne.

In this situation two things were necessary. Korneychuk attempted to do both.

First of all it was necessary to explain to the population of the Soviet Union how such disasters could have occurred. For that purpose a scapegoat had to be found. The role of scapegoat has been assigned to those high officers who had fought in the civil war and are personified by Gorlov and his clique. The men who until yesterday were praised as the heroes of the Revolution, the civil war, and the whole Soviet state, are suddenly to blame for everything. Their old merits are forgotten. Indeed, because of these old merits they are especially dangerous, for through them they have acquired a nimbus among the people and in the army, which makes it difficult to remove them. One must set about this carefully, for, like Gorlov, they are the "darlings of the army." In order to demonstrate how incapable they are of carrying out the tasks assigned to them, even Gorlov's brother and son must go over to the other side. Through the mouth of the brother, the workers who see this play in the theaters of the whole Soviet Union are told that they must not feel any sympathy for the Gorlovs. The brother says to Gorlov: "Day and night we are building machines for the front. The best machines in the world. And for what? So that through your incompetence and backwardness a good half of them are smashed up. What shall I say to the workers and engineers when I go back to the factory? . . . I can't conceal from them that their valuable work, our wealth of engineering, are being used by you at the front incompetently and without expert knowledge." So out with these old men.

THE STORY ABOUT THE TABLE

In a recent newspaper article, Ehrenburg, one of the best-known Soviet writers, told the following story. He once went into a government office and bumped against a table at the entrance. The official there reassured him by saying that everyone bumped against this table. Upon Ehrenburg's

question, why the table was not moved somewhere else, the official answered: "The chief has not ordered it. If I move it, I might suddenly be asked, 'What was your idea? What does it mean?' So it stays where it is. It's safer that way." Ehrenburg comes to the conclusion that in the Soviet Union all the people go around with bruises because they constantly bump into tables which, for no good reason, only from time-honored usage, stand in the wrong place. And he demands: No matter how long a table has been standing like that, nor what its former merits may have been, if it is in the way it must go!

All this sounds very revolutionary, and a revolution which forms within a revolution has commonly been called by history a counter revolution.

Even a revolution needs its tradition. If the Bolshevik Government is now turning against the heroes of its own Revolution, it must be prepared one day to be scrapped itself. Today, Stalin is making a Gorlov the scapegoat and discharges him for being a fool. What is to stop the Ognyovs from doing the same thing one day to Stalin?

COMMISSARS AND NAPOLEONS

The war has torn terrible gaps in the officers' corps of the Red Army. Little has remained of the cadre army which opposed the Germans in June 1941. Young and inexperienced men must now, at a constantly increasing rate, be appointed to higher and higher positions. Compared to the Gorlovs, the old "darlings of the army," they do not yet enjoy the confidence of the soldiers. Hence the second task of *The Front* is to enlist confidence in them. At the same time, it is supposed to show them that Moscow, and especially Stalin himself, is backing them and therefore expects their full support in return.

For those in power in Moscow, the fact that generals are suddenly being found from among the midst of the armies is by no means without its dangers. It is not for nothing that the memory of Napoleon and of what he did to the French Revolution has been recalled frequently and with discomfort in the Soviet Union. With the Gorlovs, one could at least be sure that they were not Napoleons, for those among the old officers who had shown even the slightest talent for becoming a Napoleon were liquidated long ago.

But who can guarantee that no Napoleons will arise from the ranks of the Ognyovs? Although the pretence is maintained in this play that the young talents are to be encouraged by every means, the authorities still prefer the Party functionaries who were until recently attached to the officers' corps as political commissars. This explains the recent edict of Stalin which has made the militarily untrained commissars into officers. Thus by the stroke of a pen a new officers' corps made up of Party men was created. It is to take the place of the professional officers, who have been decimated by one and a half years' of war. But in the long run even they represent a two-edged sword for the rulers in Moscow. Many among them are unscrupulous opportunists and adventurers who possess neither military knowledge nor the moral discipline of the professional officers.

The Front should bear the subtitle "The Crisis within the Red Army." For it shows how more unknown factors are being added daily to Stalin's increasingly complicated calculation.

War and armies have for thousands of years been following their own laws, and for these Marx has no formula.—K.M.