

Maxim Gorky vs Tsarist Russia: The Literary and Ideological Path to Revolution

Summary

Maxim Gorky was not only one of the leading European writers of the turn of the twentieth century but also a figure with considerable influence on socio-political change in the Russian Empire. Due to his popularity in the USSR, he is now remembered as a symbol of the Bolsheviks' rise to power, despite having condemned both the October Revolution and Vladimir Lenin's line during the Civil War. This book presents the ideological, social and political views of Gorky as they evolved in conjunction with the writer's personal growth and the changing situation in Europe.

The main focus is on the evolution of Gorky's worldview and his attitude to tsarist Russia between 1884 and 1918: from his move to Kazan and first contacts with the Narodniks to the shutting down of Gorky's newspaper *Novaya zhizn* and his coming to terms with the usurpation of power by the Bolsheviks. In terms of sources, the monograph is based on the writer's oeuvre – his novels, dramas, short stories, journalism and other literary pieces. Much use is also made of his correspondence and material from Russian archives.

The book shows that Gorky arrived at his views gradually. In the 1880s, he was seduced by the Kazan intelligentsia and the Narodnik ideas it promoted. He followed his mentor Mykhailo Romas to Krasnovidovo, where he attempted to educate and help the villagers. After the idealized peasants tried to burn him alive and lynch him, Gorky was successfully dissuaded from Narodnikism. The following four years (the so-called vagabond/bosiak period) he spent roaming through Russia, taking up odd, mostly seasonal jobs. At that time he was inspired by Tolstoism (which included a visit in Tolstoy's estate at Yasnaya Poliana). Disappointed in Russia's peasant majority, the writer turned his attention to factory workers, while continuing to study the essential works of philosophy and catching up on high literature.

Dreams of a revolution, not only political and social but also anthropological, first dawned on Gorky at the beginning of the twentieth century. By that time he had become a rising star of Russian literature. Just four years after the 1898 publication of his first book, he was offered a seat at the Imperial Academy of Sciences, alongside Russia's greatest men of letters: Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov and Vladimir Korolenko. With each passing year, he was increasing critical of tsarism, moving gradually from passive resistance to active struggle and gaining the moniker "Harbinger of Storm".

The 1905 Revolution was a key moments in Gorky's life. The Bloody Sunday, followed by full-scale riots on the streets of Moscow and repression against the protesters reaffirmed his belief about the necessity to oppose tsarism. The writer was directly involved in the revolution, as he partook in mediation with the government, the harbouring of Georgy Gapon, and the worldwide publicization of the unfolding events. His popularity guaranteed his safety, sheltering him from long-term arrest and exile.

The book provides a detailed account of Gorky's émigré activities: his trip to America to raise funds for the revolution, disillusionment with American capitalism, return to Europe, and educational work, including a school for Russian workers on Capri. This was the period of his greatest rapprochement with the Bolsheviks, though he often emphasized he supported all anti-imperialist forces fighting against tsarist autocracy. The monograph puts great emphasis on Gorky's idea of God-building and his conception of the development of man. His ever-growing popularity meant that cooperating with him was a dream for all political groups, even if many politicians took issue with the God-building ideas he professed at the time. Despite his clear objections and constant pleas for unification in the struggle against autocracy, Gorky was dragged into factional conflicts between social democrats. His attempts at mediating between Aleksandr Bogdanov, Vladimir Lenin and Anatoly Lunacharsky fell through.

The 1913 amnesty allowed Gorky to return to Russia. There, he was among the few writers consistent in their criticism of the First World War, deeming it a suicide of European culture. The monograph stresses his journalistic peace activism, especially the founding of the pacifist journal *Letopis*, and his struggle against antisemitism. The last two chapters of the monograph are devoted to Gorky's activities during the 1917 revolutions. The writers welcomed the long-awaited fall of tsarism, but was deeply apprehensive of the Provisional Government and the Council/Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. In a series of articles entitled "Ill-Timed Thoughts", published in *Novaya zhizn*, he warned of the dangers looming over Russia (anarchy, pogroms, antisemitism) and explored ways to salvage the revolution's achievements (education of peasants and workers, increased funding for culture and the arts). After the October coup, he became a bitter critic of the Bolsheviks, deeming their actions dangerous, too radical and as such conducive to reaction. Yet his beliefs evolved rapidly. Once again, he decided to adapt, seeing this as the only way to help artists and prevent the return of autocracy. After October, the writer became a problem for Vladimir Lenin: on the one hand, he was a symbol of the revolution; on the other, he kept criticizing Lenin's actions. In 1921, Gorky was forced to emigrate. Nonetheless, he never stopped working with the Bolsheviks, and after a couple of years made the decision to come back to the USSR.