



The mystery of *The Blue Cup*

by **Aleksei Semenenko**

Arkadii Gaidar and socialist realism

From Golikov to Gaidar

Arkadii Petrovich Gaidar (whose real name was Golikov) was born in the town of L'gov in 1904 to a family of teachers, Petr Golikov (1879–1927) and Natalia Sal'kova (1884–1924). Arkadii had three younger sisters. The family moved to Arzamas in 1912 and two years later Petr Golikov was conscripted into the army. After the First World War he joined the Red Army and was a commissar during the Civil War. Arkadii's parents sympathized with the revolutionary movement from the very beginning, and it is no wonder that Arkadii got involved in revolutionary groups in Arzamas quite early. In 1918, when he was just 14 years old, he was a member of the Bolshevik Party and an adjutant in the Red Army. In 1919 he finished the officers' courses in Moscow and became a company commander, and by 1921, a regimental commander. Golikov was wounded twice, which was one reason for the development of a disorder that effectively ended his military career. In 1922 he was assigned to Siberia as the commander

of a special forces regiment (*CHON, chast' osobogo naznacheniiia*) to fight bandits in the Khakassia region. At that time the local Soviets accused Golikov of abuse of power in dealing with the local population, and the GPU (the precursor of the NKVD and KGB) opened a case against Golikov, which, however, was closed with no results.¹ In April 1924, Golikov was discharged from the army when he was just 20 years old, diagnosed with traumatic psychosis and arrhythmia. He never recovered from the illness and was

treated in psychiatric clinics several times. Golikov was married three times: he met his first wife Mariia Plaksina in the hospital in 1921, but their marriage soon fell apart. In 1925, he married Liia Solomianskaia; their son Timur was born in 1926, but the marriage ended in 1931. In 1938 Golikov married his third wife, Dora Chernysheva, adopting her daughter Zhenia.

IN 1924, with the career to which he had devoted all his life completely shattered, Golikov started his second life with a clean slate. Dedicat-

abstract

Arkadii Gaidar (1904–1941) is one of the most popular Soviet children's writers and an undisputed part of the Soviet literary canon. The Pioneer organization used him as a symbol to mold young Soviet citizens, the characters from his books entered Soviet folklore, and generations of Soviet children have been brought up on his books. Nonetheless, his path from military commander to a classic of Soviet literature was far from ordinary. This paper reviews Gaidar's work, focusing especially on the analysis of his short story *The Blue Cup* as the most representative of his oeuvre and of the political and literary context of the 1930s.

KEYWORDS: Arkadii Gaidar, Blue Cup, socialist realism, myth.

ing himself fully to writing, he went to Leningrad and became acquainted with the writers Konstantin Fedin and Mikhail Slonimskii (the Serapion Brothers) and Sergei Semenov, becoming their “protégé.” Here Golikov published his short novel *The Days of Defeats and Victories* (*V dni porazhenii i pobed*) in the almanac *Kovsh* in 1925. Fedin symbolically blessed Gaidar, as he himself had been blessed by Maxim Gorky some years before, saying, “You have no skill, but you can write and you will write. And we will help you.”² It was then that Golikov changed his name to Gaidar and started working as a journalist for various newspapers in Perm, Sverdlovsk, Arkhangelsk, Khabarovsk, and Moscow, the typical hack work of an amateur author. He settled in Moscow only in 1932 and became a close friend of the writers Ruvim Fraerman and Konstantin Paustovskii. Gaidar worked there until war became a reality again in 1941. When his application to be reinstated in the Army was declined, Gaidar became a war correspondent in Kiev. In September 1941, Kiev was surrounded by German troops, and Gaidar joined a partisan squad. On October 26, 1941, he was killed in a skirmish near the village Lepliavo, some hundred kilometers south of Kiev.

GAIDAR'S WORKS FROM the 1920s were mainly semi-autobiographical short novels (*povesti*) about the revolution and the Civil War, culminating in the highly popular short novel *The School* (1930, originally titled *The Ordinary Biography*), which depicts his revolutionary youth in Arzamas and his participation in the Civil War. In this respect, Gaidar's work was no different from the mainstream literature of that period, which was oversaturated with novels and stories, both for adults and for children, mythologizing and romanticizing the Civil War and revolution.³ Furthermore, like Gaidar, quite a few Soviet writers had an army background, including Alexander Fadeev and Nikolai Ostrovskii and Gaidar's close friends Ruvim Fraerman and Sergei Semenov. It is no coincidence that Gaidar's early works did not stand out among other similar stories and were often criticized for the abundance of romantic clichés and the triviality of their plots.

Moreover, it may be argued that Gaidar tried, consciously or subconsciously, to rewrite his biography by literary means and cultivated “romantic” behavior in his everyday life: he wore his military uniform and led an ascetic, even miserable life, occasionally interrupted by lavish spending sprees.⁴ The pen name Gaidar has itself a definite romantic aura. Unlike his real name, it sounds decisive, sharp, and also exotic. Gaidar himself never explained its origin, apparently not even to his own family. There were several explanations of the origin of the pseudonym; according to one of them, it comes from the word “haidar”, meaning “where” in the Khakas language, which Gaidar must have heard numerous times when chasing bandits in Khakassia. The officially accepted version that was reproduced in many books on Gaidar during the Soviet era interpreted the word as Mongolian for “the front horseman, watchman,” which is simply not true, but best suits the mythology of Gaidar's life and work.⁵ There were other interpretations, but Gaidar's son Timur supports a version that explains the pseudonym by his father's affection for the French language and secret codes.⁶ Gaidar thus



The cover of Boris Kamov, *Obyknovennaia biografiia: Arkadii Gaidar*. (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1971.)

appears to be an anagram: **Golikov Arkadii d'Arzamas**.⁷ It is now impossible to definitely establish the correct interpretation, but most importantly, we see a clear romanticizing tendency in Gaidar's image. By the same token, almost all memoirs about Gaidar mention different facets of his romantic behavior, such as, for example, the ideals that he once listed in a company of friends:

To travel à deux (*vdvoem*).

To be accepted as a commander.

To travel fast.

To joke around with people, not offending anyone.

Secret love of a woman (so that the object would not know about it).

Dislike of being alone (not loneliness).⁸

In the 1930s, the romanticism of the Civil War remained central to Gaidar's work and, as I will show, later crystallized into the myth of the Red Army. The change in his literary strategy was also apparent: he consciously chose the niche of a children's writer and focused almost exclusively on adventure stories for children. Later, Soviet literary criticism described Gaidar's literary evolution as the author's maturation over the years, but there was another factor that was much more crucial: the romanticism of the 1920s came to be at odds with the new ideology after the adoption of socialist realism.

As is known, socialist realism was introduced as *the* method of Soviet literature in 1934 at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers. The officially proclaimed criteria of the doctrine

– Party-mindedness (*partiinosť*), people-orientedness (*narodnost*), class-mindedness (*klassovost*), and ideological conscientiousness (*ideinosť*) – together with the demand of constant “critique and self-critique” of one’s own and others’ work were elusive enough to serve as a convenient instrument of control. The “uncertainty principle” of socialist realism meant in reality that any writer, musician, painter or even architect⁹ could be accused of “formalism” or non conformance with the ideals of a “truthful, historically concrete representation of reality.” As Shaitanov put it, socialist realism was a dogma “flexible only in implementation which could stiffen at any moment in response to ideological command.”¹⁰ One consequence of adopting the doctrine was that one of the most common motifs in the novels of this period became the constant, exhausting, and never-ending struggle, full of suffering, destitution, and violence, exemplified in Nikolai Ostrovskii’s *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1936).¹¹ It excluded happy endings but paradoxically brought socialist realism closer to romantic discourse, which was always the problem for the Soviet ideologists.¹² In 1933, Anatolii Lunacharsky placed dynamic socialist realism in clear opposition to bourgeois romanticism, which falsifies the truth and draws people away from reality, replacing it with illusions. Nevertheless, he argued, a certain degree of romanticism can be allowed to depict the “grandeur of synthetic images” because it “shows the inner essence of development.”¹³ In the same vein, Maxim Gorky mentioned both romanticism and myth as components of the socialist realist aesthetic in his speech on Soviet literature at the First Writers’ Congress, because “[romanticism] provokes a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a practical way.”¹⁴ Here we can identify what will become the dominant feature of postwar socialist realist novels that focused almost exclusively on the “grandeur” of images of the utopian present and future.¹⁵

In this situation, more and more criticism was directed towards “bourgeois” and “ideologically faulty” adventure literature, and the only segment of literature that was not judged as severely was children’s fiction. Gaidar’s most popular stories of that period were all oriented towards children: *The Military Secret* (1935), the short story *The Blue Cup* (1936), *The Fate of the Drummer Boy* (1939), the short story *Chuk and Ghek* (1939), and *Timur and His Squad* (1940). Let us take a closer look at some of them.

THE SHORT NOVEL *The Military Secret*, which Gaidar started writing in a psychiatric clinic in Khabarovsk, is set in the prestigious pioneer camp Artek in Crimea. In this story, the protagonist, the little boy Al’ka, dies at the hands of anti-Soviet elements. His death is symbolic, reminding the reader that socialism cannot be built without sacrifices. The story provoked a response from many children who could not accept Al’ka’s death, and Gaidar responded that it would be much better if Al’ka or Chapaev, the

legendary Red Army commander, had lived, but it would be against the truth of life.¹⁶

The readiness to fight and, if needed, to sacrifice your own life for the sake of your country is the idea that appears in almost every work by Gaidar. To emphasize it, *The Military Secret* features an inset tale called “The Tale of the Military Secret, Malchish Kibalchish, and his Solemn Word”, which was published separately in 1933 by the publishing houses Molodaia gvardiia and Detizdat. It was written in a pseudo-folktale style overloaded with inversions and simplistic metaphors in an attempt to create the elevated style of an epic saga. It should be mentioned that this “folklore-orientedness” was characteristic not only of the tale of Malchish but of Gaidar’s style in general.¹⁷ In the story, the evil *bourgeoisins* attack the Soviet country, but a little boy named Malchish calls on other children to stand up and fight. They fight valiantly until one boy, Malchish Plokhish (roughly, “Bad-die Boy”), betrays them to *bourgeoisins*. Malchish is tortured to make him reveal the secret of invincibility of the Red Army. He tells the enemy nothing and is executed, but his memory lives on. The tale finishes with a ritual-like passage that later became one of the sacred texts of Soviet mythology:

**The ships float by and greet Malchish!
The pilots fly and greet Malchish!
The trains pass by and greet Malchish!
And the Pioneers march by and salute Malchish!**¹⁸

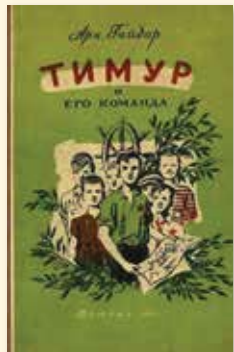
Apparently, the greatest secret of the Red Army was that it did not have any secret; it was the Soviet people’s strength and re-

lentlessness that the enemies could not comprehend. The tale reflected on the plot of the main story and made Al’ka’s accidental death – from a stone thrown by a drunken man – heroic.

Both the inset tale and the story provoked a wave of criticism. The prominent children’s writer Kornei Chukovskii argued that the style

of the tale was false and in bad taste because the revolution required strict language, not “ladies’ affected talk” (*damskoe siusiukanie*).¹⁹ Another distinguished children’s writer, Samuil Marshak, even called the tale “disgusting.”²⁰ There was a special dispute about *The Military Secret* in the children’s section of the Union of Writers in Moscow, followed by a discussion in the newspapers lasting about six months. Gaidar was accused of being a hack writer, and his works were branded sentimental, unclear, and unfinished. Their popularity was explained by the fact that they were nothing but ideologically neutral (*nadklassovyye*) detective stories.²¹ Gaidar took these accusations seriously and even went to Moscow to personally defend the story at the Writers’ Union. This episode was just one in his constant struggle with the critics and literary functionaries, and if it were not for some positive reviews from the big names of Soviet literature, such as Alexander Fadeev,²² his fate as a writer could

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have turned out differently. In a 1939 letter to his wife, Gaidar wrote, “If you only knew how much torment my work gives me! You would then understand a lot, you’d understand why I can at times become wild and unstable. Yet I love my work and even if I curse it, I would not exchange it for any other in the world.”²³

GAIDAR’S LAST ATTEMPT at writing adult fiction was in 1937 when he started a short novel provisionally titled *The Lucky Charm* (*Talisman*) about a man nicknamed Bumbarash who came home from the First World War only to find his beloved had been taken away and his land split between the Whites, the Reds, and different warlords. Interestingly enough, Gaidar left it unfinished because he felt that Valentin Kataev’s *I, Son of the Working People*, published in 1937, dealt with the same topic. Gaidar never returned to this text and even his close friends could not make him change his mind.²⁴

In 1938, he wrote another short novel for children, *The Fate of the Drummer Boy*. The protagonist of the story is the 12-year old boy Serezha, whose father gets arrested for an embezzlement.²⁵ The boy is left to himself and gets mixed up with petty thieves and criminals. One day, his “uncle” appears, who is actually a spy. When the boy finds out about the evil plans of his fake uncle and his accomplice, he courageously attempts to stop them, but gets shot. Suddenly, the Red Army appears in the story as *deus ex machina*: “The thunder roared in the sky, and the clouds, like birds, flew against the wind. Forty lines of soldiers rose and protected with their bayonets the body of the drummer who shook and fell to the ground.” It turns out that the spies were under surveillance the entire time, and the boy’s sacrifice was not really necessary, but most importantly, he did not know that and stood up against them anyway. The happy ending is emphasized by the fact that Serezha survives and his father comes home. Remarkably, this story represents a kind of a distorted (or corrected) reflection of *The Military Secret*, with a more thrilling plot and a happy ending, which Gaidar would previously have considered to be against “the truth of life.” Another important feature of the story was the mythologizing of the Red Army, and the image of the

drummer boy became one of the most popular symbols of Soviet youth ready to sacrifice their lives for their country. The story, after some positive prepublication reviews, was to be published both in the journal *Pioner* and in the newspaper *Pionerskaia Pravda* and later as a book in Detizdat, when suddenly, in November 1938, all preparations froze without any explanation. Moreover, Gaidar found out that his books had disappeared from the libraries.²⁶ In addition to his literary troubles, his former wife Liia Solomianskaia, Timur’s mother, was arrested in 1938 as “a family member of a traitor to the Motherland.” Gaidar made several attempts to obtain her release but she was freed in January 1940 with the few who were rehabilitated at that time

due to an anti-Yezhov campaign. Gaidar prepared for the worst, but in February 1939 he was unexpectedly awarded the Badge of Honor, a minor award but nonetheless a token of official recognition of his work. The publishers again started contacting him, and *The Fate of the Drummer Boy* was published the same year. These worries triggered Gaidar’s neurosis and he again had to be treated in a hospital. “The damned *Fate of the Drummer Boy* hit me hard,” he wrote in his diary.²⁷

“THE WAR ENDED GAIDAR’S RISING CAREER BUT HIS DEATH ONLY ACCELERATED HIS CANONIZATION AS A CLASSIC OF SOVIET LITERATURE.”

We now come to the short novel *Timur and His Squad* (1940), which many consider to be the pinnacle of Gaidar’s work, his most significant creation. It was written as a screenplay for the film by Aleksandr Razumnyi (released in 1940). The novel was first published in *Pioner* and *Pionerskaia Pravda* and then as a book. The sequels, the screenplays *Timur’s Oath* (for the film released in 1942) and *The Commander of the Snow Fort*, were published after Gaidar’s death. The story is about the teenager Timur Garaev who creates an underground organization with the goal of secretly helping the elderly and the families of war veterans, at the same time fighting local hooligans. The very fact that Timur’s squad has to do good deeds in secret is an illustrative manifestation of the discourse of underground struggle that was already prevalent in the official canon of Soviet culture at that time.²⁸ The main message of the story, as in Gaidar’s other works, is the tempering of the spirit and the children’s readiness before the coming hardships (read: war),²⁹ but it also connotes

the idea of justification of illegal activities. No wonder that Gaidar was accused of attempting to substitute the Pioneer organization with some underground activities, and the book was put on hold for some time. However, once the film was released, Gaidar felt that fame had finally arrived. *Timur and His Squad* was a hit and even spawned a whole submovement of spontaneous groups of *timurovtsy* all over the country, which was the greatest possible compliment to Gaidar. Although the protagonist bore the name of the author's son, Timur Garaev was undoubtedly the author's alter ego, the idealized portrait of Gaidar himself.³⁰

THE WAR ENDED GAIDAR'S rising career but his death only accelerated his canonization as a classic of Soviet literature. After Gaidar had struggled to publish his works during the 1930s, the post-war period saw a complete reversal of the writer's previously contentious image. Gaidar was conveniently transformed into a political and cultural icon not only for the Pioneer Organization but for youth education in general. Gaidar's work was used as a symbol of Soviet patriotism and his mythologizing and romanticizing of the war determined the direction of children's literature and film for several generations that followed.

The most telling example of the recognition of Gaidar's work was the 1951 book composed as an homage to Gaidar, which rehabilitated him from all previous concerns. Significantly, Gaidar's method was called "the true method of socialistic realism,"³¹ and Ruvim Fraerman described Gaidar's legacy almost verbatim according to the socialist realist dogma:

[Gaidar] believed that Soviet art is the new art not because this or that novel features planes instead of lacquered carriages pulled by six horses but because it shows new communal relationships, and new personal relationships, and new feelings of people, – in a word, because this is the art of the new socialist society, which means that this society must have new methods, and most important, high ideological conscientiousness [*ideinost'*], life-likeness [*zhiznennost'*], and truth.³²

In Soviet children's literature Gaidar was compared to Mayakovsky and designated "the writer-pioneer leader" (*pisatel'-vozhatyi*) by Marshak.³³ Almost everything he had been previously criticized for was presented as a virtue of his talent. For example, Gaidar's experience as a newspaper journalist was portrayed as the source of his ability to "show the movement of social (*obshchestvennoi*) life in the trivia of everyday life."³⁴ The most common reproach, that his prose was excessively sentimental and romantic, was also explained by "the Soviet child's urge for lofty feelings and the elevated style", which the critics falsely took for sentimentalism.³⁵ The writer Lev Kassil' went further, explaining even the romanticism of Gaidar's work as being in conformity with "the Soviet dream of communism." Kassil' argued that Gaidar was teaching the young people the most important things in their lives:

For the first time in the history of the mankind, the simple, elementary rules of personal behavior that

we teach to children fully conformed with the law of revolutionary discipline, with the requirements of public life, the life of the Soviet man, perfused with the revolutionary idea and the real dream of communism, the features of which can be felt already today. Thus the everyday becomes the romantic.³⁶

Finally, *Timur and His Squad* was called "a pedagogical poem" that became an embodiment of ideal qualities "for millions of children and teenagers."³⁷ In the 1960s, Gaidar's status as a classic of Soviet literature was reaffirmed; he was posthumously awarded honorable titles and also several medals for his participation in the Great Patriotic War, and his life and work were continuously mythologized.³⁸

The Blue Cup

In 1935 Gaidar wrote his most controversial short story, *The Blue Cup*, which produced – and still produces – the most varied opinions and interpretations. For example, Krevsky calls it "the most cheerful and the kindest tale in Soviet children's literature,"³⁹ and Dobrenko calls it "mysterious-romantic."⁴⁰ Gaidar himself valued the story very highly but, against the background of the constant criticism of his works, and especially *The Military Secret*, he had some doubts about his future as a writer. Before publication, he decided to visit Samuil Marshak as the ultimate judge of his talent. Marshak met him amicably and they worked on the story together, effectively rewriting it. Gaidar was at first relieved but then felt that the redacted version was not his text after all and once again rewrote the whole story, also changing the title from *The Good Life* to a less direct *The Blue Cup*.⁴¹ It was first published in the journal *Pioneer* in January 1936 and later that year as a separate book by Detizdat.

The plot of the story unfolds in a dacha near Moscow that the narrator's family – himself, his wife Marusia and their daughter Svetlana – rent during "the last warm month." The narrator pictures to himself a family idyll:

Or maybe tomorrow morning we'll take a boat, – I will row, Marusia will steer, and Svetlana will be the passenger, – and we'll go down the river where they say there is a large forest, where two big birch trees stand on the shore. The neighbor girl found three good ceps under these birches yesterday. What a pity they were worm-eaten.

However, a conflict between Marusia and the narrator creeps into the story. It begins with some petty things: first, Marusia spends some time with her old friend, a pilot (there is a hint of jealousy in the protagonist's tone); second, father and daughter get reprimanded by Marusia for staying up late when they try to install a pinwheel on the roof. Finally, the following morning, Marusia accuses father and daughter of breaking her favorite blue cup in the cellar. Father, deeply offended, decides that life is very bad: "There goes the boat trip!" He and Svetlana decide to run away from home. "Farewell, Marusia! And yet, we never broke your cup."

During their trip, father and daughter meet different people. These meetings constitute miniature inset stories; the first deals with the conflict between San'ka and Berta, the daughter of a Jewish refugee from Germany who escaped the Nazis. When playing, San'ka gets angry and calls Berta *zhidovka*, "jid." Another boy, Pashka, calls San'ka a fascist and threatens to beat him. Svetlana interferes, but they suddenly hear shots somewhere in the forest. Svetlana anxiously asks her father, "Who is fighting whom? Is it war already?" The "war" turns out to be military maneuvers. They meet an old man, the kolkhoz guard. "The fascists are in trouble," Pashka and the old man remark, watching the Red Army soldiers. The episode ends with Pashka and San'ka making peace and the old man showing the path through the forest to his daughter's house.

On their way there they pass a black pit where people are mining white stones. They stop in the forest to have a snack. While waiting for her father to bring some water, Svetlana sings an improvised song about all that has happened to them so far. In this song, she is a drummer in the Red Army, "the reddest army in the world." They start walking again and get stuck in the marsh. Father finds the way out of "that little foul swamp," recalling his fight against the Whites during the Civil War. They swim in the river and wash their clothes, and then head to the house of the kolkhoz guard's daughter, Valentina. They meet Valentina and her four-year-old son Fedor. They rest under the tree and Svetlana asks her father to tell her something about the time before she was born. Father tells her how he and Marusia met during the Civil War: when he was a Red Army soldier, he freed Marusia's town from the Whites, but got wounded in the battle, and Marusia took care of him in the hospital. Since then they had never parted.

Right after that Svetlana worries that they have left their home for good and wants to return to her mother: "She really loves us. We'll just walk around a bit and go home again." Father also no longer has any hard feelings towards her. He gives Fedor their gingerbreads and Fedor reciprocates by giving Svetlana a little kitten as a gift. Svetlana and her father head home and Svetlana sings about the bad grey mice who must have broken the cup in the cellar, but now she is bringing home something that "will tear the mice into a hundred million hairy pieces." When they come home, they see that Marusia has been waiting for them a long time and has even put their pinwheel on the roof. The father looks at Marusia's eyes and thinks that it is indeed the bad grey mice who broke the cup. The three of them sit under the tree and tell each other what has happened during the day. The story ends with "the sly Svetlana" asking her father, "Is our life bad now?" He answers that life is very good.

ONE MAY WONDER why this light, rather lyrical story depicting seemingly insignificant events received such an extraordinary

degree of attention. Boris Kamov argues that it is a poetic reminiscence of Gaidar's first marriage to Mariia Plaksina that did not last very long. The story is about two people who are on the brink of losing each other but manage to overcome their problems. The blue cup thus represents the life of a couple that can easily be shattered.⁴² However, there is much more to it than just a sentimental recollection of the author's first love.

First, let us identify the protagonist of the story. At the first glance, we are dealing with a typical first-person narrative. However, it soon becomes apparent that the point of view of the narrator combines the adult "zoomed out" picture (that of father) and the child's more detailed and "zoomed in" view (that of Svetlana). The reader experiences swift transitions from vast landscapes to the smallest details, from realistic depictions to the fantasy world. That is why the story is full of "insignificant" details, as in the following passages:

We see: here is the mill. A cart stands by the mill. A hairy dog, all covered in burrs, lies under the cart. It looks with one eye open at the swift sparrows who peck seeds on the sand. And the shirtless Pashka Bukamashkin sits on a sand pile and eats a fresh cucumber.

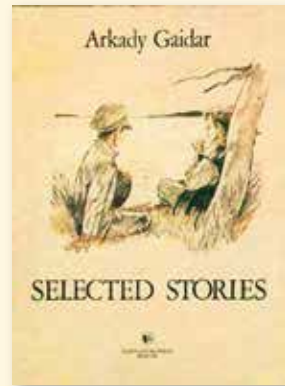
[...]suddenly, the mill shook and began to make noise. The rested wheel started rotating on the water. A startled cat, covered in flour, sprang out from the mill window. Half-awake, it missed and fell on Sharik's back, who was half-asleep. Sharik squealed and jumped up. The cat flung itself to the tree; the sparrows fled from the tree to the roof. The horse raised its muzzle and pulled the cart. Some shaggy fellow, grey from the flour, showed his face from the barn, and, making the wrong call, shook his whip at San'ka who had jumped away from the cart.

It also becomes apparent that it is Svetlana who is at the center of the story. The name Svetlana derived from the word *svet*, light, is an invented literary name from the end of the eighteenth century,

which was popularized by Vasilii Zhukovskii in his poem of 1812. After 1917, the name became quite common, and in 1926, Stalin's third child was named Svetlana. On February 28, 1935, Svetlana's ninth birthday, the children's writer and poet Sergei Mikhalkov, the future classic of Soviet children's literature, published a poem-lullaby titled "Svetlana" in the newspaper *Izvestiia*.⁴³ This sycophantic gesture only reinforced the connection between

the name and the Leader's daughter in the collective memory. Even if Gaidar did not have Stalin's daughter in mind (which is unlikely), his readers would undoubtedly make this connection. Remarkably, Svetlana is always called by her full name, and not by the usual diminutive Sveta, although almost all other children

"THE FOLKTALE MOTIFS HELP INTRODUCE ANOTHER THEME, THE RED ARMY MYTH THAT IS CRUCIAL FOR GAIDAR'S WORK."



and even some adults (Marusia, for example, is a diminutive of Maria) go by pet names.

Svetlana is not just the narrator's daughter, but also represents an ideal female protagonist of Gaidar's stories: honest, direct, compassionate and wise. Interestingly enough, in the first draft of the story, the narrator had a son, Dimka, instead of Svetlana, but Gaidar obviously realized that Svetlana (as an ideal reflection of Marusia) would be more suitable for the plot. Svetlana is the real protagonist of the story; she makes important decisions and sorts out problems. For example, she succeeds in bringing the children to make peace and saves San'ka from a beating: "Dad... Maybe he is not a fascist after all? Maybe he is just stupid? San'ka, isn't it true that you're just stupid? – asked Svetlana and tenderly looked at his face." Svetlana also resolves the main conflict of the story by asking her father to recount how he and Marusia met, after which they decide to come home. Everyone, even animals, acknowledge Svetlana's "authority": the kolkhoz guard "grandly bowed first to Svetlana and then to all of us"; a Red Army soldier who was hiding in a tree patted her on the head and gave her three shiny acorns; even the guard's huge dog Polkan wags its tail and smiles at Svetlana. Svetlana seems to be in full harmony with nature: when she sang her first song about the Red Army, the flowers "silently and solemnly listened to the song and started nodding to Svetlana with their gorgeous buds." Yet when father attempted to sing the same song "in a sad bass," "not a single flower in a million nodded its head," and Svetlana reproached him for the unnaturalness of his voice.

Finally, it is through Svetlana's perspective that the two layers of the story – the myth and the lyrical pseudo-documentary narrative – are merged together. For example, when they come to the black pit, from which people were extracting "stone, white as sugar," Svetlana looks into the hole and sees "a shark with two tails" and "the Scary Thing with 325 legs and one golden eye." In general, the story fits the traditional folktale structure⁴⁴ in which the protagonists have to overcome several hardships on their way to happiness. A misfortune makes them leave home and go *kuda glaza gliadiat*, "wherever chance leads them." They meet a "curious old man," the nameless kolkhoz guard, who looks like a magical hero and gives them instructions like a traditional Helper: he tells them about two paths, the left one, leading through "the bad far away," the cemetery, or the right one, leading through "the best far away" to the guard's daughter's house. They choose the right path and receive a magical agent (a kitten) who will eliminate the initial evil (the mice) from the Donor, the

guard's daughter. In the end the hero gets the Princess, his wife, and the balance is restored. The following passage symbolically sums up the whole journey:

Then we got worried when the sky had gone dark. The clouds came from all directions. They surrounded, captured, and covered the sun. But it would burst through this or that opening and finally broke free and shone even warmer and brighter all over the vast earth.

The folktale motifs help introduce another theme, the Red Army myth which is crucial for Gaidar's work as a whole and is manifested most explicitly in the tale about Malchish. In *The Blue Cup* it is mentioned when the narrator recounts the moment he and Marusia met:

The silly Marusia did not know then that the Red Army never waits until someone calls for it. It rushes to defend those whom the Whites attacked. Our Red platoons are approaching, they are now near Marusia, and every soldier has a rifle loaded with five bullets, and every machine gun is loaded with 250.

Furthermore, the protagonists witness the power of the Red Army during the maneuvers in the forest; Svetlana pictures herself as a drummer girl in "the reddest army in the world," and the whole narrative is perfused with the spirit of the coming war (the Jewish refugees; "the fascists are in trouble"), together with recollections of the Civil War (the fight against "the foul swamp"). The parallels with the tale of Malchish are evident, but Gaidar takes a different approach here. Where *Malchish* tells the Red Army myth in a direct and cumbersome style, *The Blue Cup* introduces it in a very subtle manner as one of the themes of the narrative. Whereas *Malchish* exhibits all the usual traits of "revolutionary romanticism" – the excessive violence, the everlasting struggle, and the glorification of human sacrifice – *The Blue Cup* turns to the "trivial" details of life and introduces a lyrical, sometimes ironic intonation. Children are at the center of both stories; however, in *Malchish* they are characters of an impersonal tale, whereas in *The Blue Cup* the child's perspective is incorporated in the narrative. Finally, *Malchish* is constructed as an epic from the past, whereas the focus on children in *The Blue Cup* projects hope for the future of the Soviet state.

The folktale motifs and recurrent symbolism make it possible to

read the story as a symbolic depiction of the whole country in miniature. Dialectically depicting the general through the particular, the narrative also demonstrates the unity of all Soviet people:

I threw a bouquet of flowers into an old woman's cart. She was startled at first, and shook her fist at us. But when she saw that it was the flowers, she smiled and tossed three big cucumbers on the road. [...]

We saw a priest in a long black robe. We followed him with our eyes and marveled that there are still such strange people in the world. [...]

We were riding on a broad smooth road. It was getting dark. We were meeting people coming from work; they were tired but merry. A kolkhoz truck rattled to the garage. A military trumpet sang in the field. A signal bell sounded in the village. A heavy-heavy steam engine roared beyond the forest. Chooo... Choo! Let the wheels roll, let the wagons hurry; the iron road, the long road, the far road!

In the last example we see the rapid transition between perspectives: the protagonists' view "zooms out" to a wide landscape, and the village road extends to the far corners of the country. In the end, the preserved happiness of an individual family is again shown from the global perspective and thus translates to a bigger picture of the whole country:

**The golden moon was shining above our garden.
A far train rumbled by on its way to the North.
The midnight pilot buzzed by and disappeared behind the clouds.
—And life, comrades... was really good!**

Here again we see direct parallels to the tale of Malchish-Kibalchish: the ending almost identically reproduces the metaphors of grandeur and unity (ships, pilots, and trains / train, pilot) that connects an individual fate with the country's history.

TO SUM UP, *The Blue Cup* appears to be Gaidar's most complex and multilayered work, defying a one-sided explanation and reflecting all the main themes of his oeuvre. It is simultaneously an autobiographical recollection, a lyrical sketch bordering on a fairytale, and yet another version of the Red Army myth as the foundation of the young Soviet state. It is important to note that this myth was of personal importance to Gaidar, who had devoted practically all his youth to building this state by force of arms. The promise of the bright future in *The Blue Cup* serves as a justification of his past, an assurance that he did not fight in vain.

After the publication of the story in *Pioner*, a discussion started in the pages of the journal *Detskaia literatura*.⁴⁵ The story was criticized by writers, literary critics, and teachers as unsuitable for children because it touched upon the taboo topic of family discord; many were also bothered by its "plotlessness"

and unclear conclusions. The discussion of the story continued for three more years and subsided only after 1939. Such a strong reaction is not really surprising if we consider the literary and social context of 1936, and it perfectly illustrates the dual nature of socialist realism as a dogma and a tool of control. *The Blue Cup* produced such bewilderment because it could simultaneously be read as a socialist realist tour de force and an almost subversive text. On the one hand, we spot almost all the components of the "master plot"⁴⁶ of the socialist realist canon: the conflict in which the protagonist overcomes not only himself, but also the forces of nature; the scenes of communist internationalism and the socialist progress and development; the demonstration of the strength of the Red Army in a historical perspective (the connection of the Civil War with the coming war), and, in the end, the ritualistic affirmation that life is very good. On the other hand, the lyrical, subtly ironic account of a trivial family argument allows us to read the story almost as a parody of the socialist realist dogma, which caused a feeling of disorientation among many critics. However, once Gaidar had been canonized, *The Blue Cup* was lauded as "a great contribution to the development of the method of socialist realism," "the lyrical portrayal of Soviet patriotism," and "a hymn to Soviet man, Soviet Fatherland."⁴⁷ Now, exactly eighty years since its publication, it seems that the real "mystery" of *The Blue Cup* is that it remains the most lighthearted and humane depiction of the socialist utopia in the history of Soviet literature. ✕

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references

- 1 Vladimir Soloukhin accuses Gaidar of mass murders during his time in Khakassia; see Vladimir Soloukhin, *Solenoe ozero* (Moscow: Tsitsero, 1994). The book provoked a response by Gaidar's biographer Boris Kamov, who rebuffed many of Soloukhin's claims as undocumented; see Boris Kamov, *Akradii Gaidar: Misha dlia gazetnykh killerov* (Moscow: Olma Media Grupp, 2011). For more on the controversy regarding his biography, see Elena Krevsky, "Arkadii Gaidar, the New Socialist Morality, and Stalinist Identity," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 54 (2012), no. 1–2: 120–121.
- 2 Boris Kamov, *Obyknovennaia biografiia (Arkadii Gaidar)* (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1971).
- 3 See Evgeny Dobrenko, "'The Entire Real World of Children': The School Tale and 'Our Happy Childhood,'" *Slavic and East European Journal* 49 (2005) no. 2: 236. One of the most popular texts in this genre was a short novel *The Little Red Devils* (1923), by Pavel Bliakhin. The film adaptation was released the same year, and in the 1960s it was adapted again, as a series of highly popular films about "the elusive avengers" (*Neulovimye mstiteli*, 1966, 1968, 1971).
- 4 The use of literary models, and the romantic code in particular, to mold one's everyday behavior and/or biography is a well-known phenomenon; see, e.g., Iurii Lotman, "Literaturnaia biografiia v istoriko-kul'turnom kontekste (K tipologicheskomu sootnosheniiu teksta i lichnosti avtora)," in: *Izbrannye stat'i*. vol. 1. (Tallinn, Estonia: Aleksandra, 1992), 373; Iurii Lotman, "The Decembrist in Daily Life (Everyday Behavior as a Historical-Psychological Category)," in: *The Semiotics of Russian Cultural History*, eds. Alexander D. Nakhimovsky and Alice Stone Nakhimovsky (Ithaca, NY, and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 95–149. In the Soviet

- context, another writer who actively used romantic discourse in everyday life was Gaidar's contemporary Ivan Aksenov; see Aleksei Semenenko, "Romanticheskii diskurs' Ivana Aksenova," in: *Aksenov and the Environs / Aksenov i okrestnosti*, eds. Lars Kleberg and Aleksei Semenenko (Huddinge: Södertörns högskola), 231–240.
- 5 See Mikhail Kotov and Vladimir Liasovskij's account about Gaidar during the Great Patriotic War titled *Vsadnik, skachushchii vpered* (Moscow: Voennoe, 1967).
 - 6 See Adolf Gol'din, *Nevydumannaia zhizn': Iz biografii Arkadiia Gaidara* (Moscow: Detskaia Literatura, 1979), 16–19.
 - 7 Timur Gaidar, *Golikov Arkadii iz Arzamasa: Dokumenty, vospominaniia, razmysleniia* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1988), 128–9.
 - 8 Gaidar, *Golikov*, 240. Translation of all Russian sources mine except where indicated.
 - 9 See Dmitrii Khmel' nitskii, *Zodchii Stalin* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2007).
 - 10 Igor Shaitanov, "From Avant-Garde to Socialist Realism: How Writers Adapt", in: *In the Party Spirit: Socialist Realism and Literary Practice in the Soviet Union, East Germany and China*, ed. Hilary Chang (Amsterdam/ Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), 54.
 - 11 On violence as the dominant feature of socialist realism see, e.g., Evgenii Dobrenko, *Politekonomiia sotsrealizma* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2007), 155–183. Elsewhere, Dobrenko notes that no one "was better able [than Gaidar] to blend the violence that saturated the very air of the 1930s into infantile discourse" (Dobrenko, *Children*, 230).
 - 12 See, e.g., C. Vaughan James, *Soviet Socialist Realism: Origins and Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 91–92. For example, in China, romanticism as part of socialist realist art was more explicitly mentioned, and in the 1950s, the name was officially changed to "the combination of revolutionary realism with revolutionary romanticism"; see Lorenz Bichler, "Coming to Terms with the Term: Notes on the History of the Use of Socialist Realism in China," in: *In the Party Spirit: Socialist Realism and Literary Practice in the Soviet Union, East Germany and China*, ed. Hilary Chang (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), 39.
 - 13 Anatolii Lunacharskii, "Sotsialisticheskii realizm," in: *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh: literaturovedenie, kritika, estetika*, vol. 8, *Estetika, literaturnaia kritika: stat'i, doklady, rechi (1928–1933)* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1967), 495, 497–500.
 - 14 Quoted in Irina Gutkin, *The Cultural Origins of the Socialist Realist Aesthetic, 1890–1934* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 65.
 - 15 Boris Gasparov's lectures on socialist realism at Stockholm University, March 2010.
 - 16 Gaidar, *Golikov*, 203.
 - 17 Many of Gaidar's close friends used to mention that he was a very good storyteller and recalled how he would recite his works by heart without a single mistake. Paustovskii explains it by the style of his writing, in which every word is in its place expressing exactly what it needs to express. See *Zhizn' i tvorchestvo A. P. Gaidara* (Moscow and Leningrad: Detgiz, 1951), 6; 163–164. See also Grigorii Ershov, *Glazami druga* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1968), 86.
 - 18 Arkadii Gaidar's works are quoted after the 1986 edition, Arkadii Gaidar, *Sobranie sochinenii v trekh tomakh* (Moscow: Pravda, 1986).
 - 19 Gaidar, *Golikov*, 201.
 - 20 Kamov, *Biografiia*, 295.
 - 21 *Ibid.*, 289.
 - 22 Fadeev praised Gaidar's revolutionary and democratic spirit, captivating stories and simple language, at the same time noting a too simplistic depiction of children's psychology; see Aleksandr Fadeev, "Knigi Gaidara." *Literaturnaia gazeta*, January 29, 1933, 7.
 - 23 Rybakov, N. I. (comp.) *Arkadii Gaidar: Zhizn' i tvorchestvo*. Illiustratsii. Dokumenty. Dnevnik. Vospominaniia. Pis'ma. Portrety. Kn. dlia uchitelia (Moscow: Prosviashchenie, 1991).
 - 24 *Zhizn'*, 89–90.
 - 25 In the first version of the story the reason was actually an anonymous tip to the police, and in the 1955 film, it was a loss of a secret file, which is less discrediting than an embezzlement but enough to justify the punishment.
 - 26 Kamov, *Biografiia*, 311.
 - 27 *Ibid.*, 312.
 - 28 As Elena Markasova persuasively shows, this discourse was only reinforced in subsequent years and was dominant in the Soviet school for several decades; see Elena Markasova, "A vot praktiku my znaem po geroiam Krasnodona...," *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 58 (2008) no. 2: 207–19. Apart from Gaidar's *Timur*, it was central in such canonical works as Valentin Kataev's *A White Sail Gleams* (1936), Pavel Bliakhin's *The Little Red Devils* (1923) and Alexander Fadeev's novel *The Young Guard* (1946).
 - 29 This theme may be considered the counterpoint of almost all Gaidar's texts for children and is much more pronounced in the short stories published between 1939 and 1941, when the war was already a reality. The stories *Marusia*, *Vasilii Kriukov*, and *Tour (Pokhod)* are very short, about 200 words each, and are written in a dry, laconic style. The first two stories were published in the school brochure "Ready for battle," *K boiu gotovy: Sbornik materialov dlia oboronnoogo vecehra v shkole* (Moscow, Leningrad: Detizdat, 1939).
 - 30 Gaidar, *Golikov*, 240–242.
 - 31 *Zhizn'*, 3.
 - 32 *Ibid.*, 90.
 - 33 *Ibid.*, 6. It became so popular that in 1962, a small book with the same name appeared, see Motiashov, I, *Pisatel'-vozhatyi: Gaidar i pioneriia* (Moscow: Znanie, 1962).
 - 34 *Zhizn'*, 114.
 - 35 *Ibid.*, 87.
 - 36 *Ibid.*, 179. Original emphasis.
 - 37 Motiashov, *Pisatel'-vozhatyi*, 9.
 - 38 Margarita Kazachok, *A. P. Gaidar v kritike i literaturovedenii*, dissertation (Volgograd: Arzamasskii gos. ped. inst. im. A. P. Gaidara, 2005).
 - 39 Krevsky, 127.
 - 40 Dobrenko, *Children*, 226.
 - 41 Kamov, *Biografiia*, 292.
 - 42 *Ibid.*, 288.
 - 43 Elena Dushechkina, "Imia docheri 'Vozhdia vsekh narodov'," *Voprosy onomastiki* 1 (2004): 104–105.
 - 44 See Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. by Laurence Scott (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968).
 - 45 A. Terent'eva, "Golubaia chashka," *Detskaia literatura* (1937), no. 5; A. Zhavoronkova, "Eshche o 'Goluboi chashke,'" *Detskaia literatura* (1937), no. 13; A. Derman, "K sporam o 'Goluboi chashke' Gaidara," *Detskaia literatura* (1937), no. 19.
 - 46 Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 255–260.
 - 47 *Zhizn'*, 135–136.

