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Boris beside the Baltic at Merekule, 1910. Portrait by his father, Leonid Pasternak, oil on canvas.

THE NOBEL PRIZE AND RUSSIA

by **Magnus Ljunggren**

Russia's relationship with the Nobel Prize in literature has always been dramatic.¹ This, of course, is connected with the enormous and fundamental role the *Word* has played in Russian society. Contributing to the fascination surrounding the prize is surely the fact that the Nobel family, some of whom even spoke Russian, had such close ties to Russia.²

It all began in 1901, when the first prize was awarded to the French poet Sully Prudhomme. This motivated the Swedish writer Oscar Levertin to summon a group of colleagues and artists to issue an appeal in the daily *Svenska Dagbladet* [Swedish Daily Paper] relayed to Lev Tolstoj that criticized the choice of the Nobel Committee and declared that Tolstoj was the rightful laureate.³ What Levertin did not realize, however, was that the Russian

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Bunin's friends. Members of the Moscow literary group Sreda. Top row from left: Stepan Skitalec, Fedor Šaljapin, Evgenij Čirikov; bottom row from left Maksim Gor'kij, Leonid Andreev, Nikolaj Telešov.



Ivan Bunin was awarded the Nobel prize in 1933. Galina Kuznecova (left), Ilja Trotzky (Il'ja Trockij), Vera Bunina, Andrej Sedych, Ivan Bunin. Shaking hand with the Crowned Lucia of Stockholm at the Nobel prize ceremonies, Stockholm, 1933.

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writer had not yet been proposed. Not nominated until 1902, he was immediately dismissed by the chairman of the Committee Carl David af Wirsén for being something as outrageous as an “anarchist” and “pacifist.”⁴

A few years into the 1920s there was a feeling that finally, after waiting for nearly a quarter century, a Russian Nobel Prize was on the way. That Russia had been forced to wait so long was, of course, an embarrassment. The October Revolution had not made the matter any easier. Now the earlier laureate Romain Rolland nominated three émigré Russians to share the honor: Ivan Bunin, Maksim Gor'kij and Konstantin Bal'mont.

Consequently, Bunin began actively lobbying from his exile in Paris. He established personal contact with a group of translators at the Slavic Department of Lund University which – led by Professor Sigurd Agrell – wanted to translate Russian literature into Swedish expressly to pave the way for a Nobel laureate.⁵

BUNIN'S OPTIMISM grew as translations on a very high professional level began to trickle in. His friend Ivan Šmelev, who had recently arrived in Paris, got his hopes up as well and began sending his dark contemporary prose to the group in Lund and to Nobel Committee member (and poet) Anders Österling. His efforts resulted in a translation of the novel *Čelovek iz restorana* with an appreciative foreword by Österling.⁶ Soon he was pushing for broader Swedish support, also sending his books to Academy member and Nobel laureate Selma Lagerlöf, hoping, of course, that she would nominate him.⁷

Newly appointed Professor of Slavic Studies Anton Karlgren was tasked by the Academy to write expert evaluations of the nominees. He portrayed Bunin as the last link in a powerful manor house tradition, an exquisite painter of mood and portrayer of nature whose works were artistically superior to both Bal'mont's

lyrical “soap bubbles” and the propagandistic tenor of Gorkij's proletarian novels.⁸

In 1928 Gor'kij (who that year would return to the Soviet Union after ten years in exile) was nominated for the prize. Despite Karlgren's assessment, he came close to winning it but only just missed the short list.⁹

For the next few years Sigurd Agrell continued to nominate Bunin and another émigré, Dmitrij Merežkovskij. Karlgren dismissed the latter as high-flown and overrated.¹⁰ On the other hand, he added to his positive report on Bunin, stating that he had to some extent overcome his limitations in his new novellas, where his Russian sense of a passing era had acquired universal dimensions. Karlgren noted his crystal-clear style, descriptions chiseled in every detail, and hypersensitive human portraits.¹¹

When Bunin learned that he was among the leading contenders for the 1930 prize, he declared to people close to him that the time had come to “push all the buttons.”¹² Soon he tried to recruit other Slavist professors to nominate him.

In Paris the competitors followed closely the lay of the land in Stockholm. Šmelev wrote letters discussing in detail how Agrell as promoter and Karlgren as expert could be cultivated.¹³ Karlgren's assessment of him, however, was explicitly dismissive. Šmelev was simply not good enough.¹⁴

In 1931 the Nobel Committee came out in strong support of Bunin, but remarkably enough, when the vote was taken, it was decided to award the prize posthumously to the Swedish poet Erik Axel Karlfeldt. As soon as this became

clear, Bunin, Šmelev and Merežkovskij each began a new push.¹⁵ Merežkovskij got in touch with key individuals in Sweden, including members of the Nobel family, to get a definite idea of his chances. His economic situation was at the time so precarious that he suggested to Bunin that the eventual winner of the prize should commit to ceding 200,000 crowns to the other.¹⁶

“BUNIN WAS AWARDED THE PRIZE AS THE LAST REPRESENTATIVE OF THE GREAT CLASSIC RUSSIAN PROSE TRADITION.”

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Boris Pasternak, Nobel Laureate in Literature 1958. Right a USSR stamp, Soviet Nobel laureates in Literature.



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Michail Šolochov (left), and Nikolaj Belochvostikov, Soviet's Ambassador in Stockholm, at the Nobel Prize ceremonies 1965.

In the runup to the 1932 award a group of young leftist Swedish writers sent a sympathetic telegram to Gor'kij, who had not been nominated, regretting that the Swedish Academy had not dared to give the Soviet writer his “well-deserved prize.”¹⁷ Echoing the 1901 communication to Tolstoj, the telegram was also published in *Dagens Nyheter* [Daily News]. When the honor finally went to John Galsworthy, it was after a tough final round in which Bunin was one of his two main rivals.

In a major 1933 article in the émigré Riga newspaper *Segodnja*, the exile poet Georgij Ivanov complained about the Academy's consistent refusal to acknowledge Russian literature. He wondered how long this was going to go on.¹⁸ His protest was followed up in the Swedish Social Democratic daily *Folkets Dagblad*, which stated that the Swedish Academy was living with a “Russian ghost.”¹⁹

That year Bunin was nominated as before by Agrell, this time, however, together with Gorkij, apparently influenced by the telegram in *Dagens Nyheter*. The time had finally come, and given Karlgren's support, there was no doubt which of the two candidates the Academy would prefer. In 1933 Bunin, supported not least by Anders Österling, became the first Russian writer to win the prize “for the strict artistry with which he has carried on the classical Russian traditions in prose writing.” While it is true that Bunin had lobbied intensely, he had also had the good fortune to have an insightful evaluator in Karlgren and a brilliant translator in Agrell.

THE 1933 CHOICE SHOULD, of course, be viewed not least as an attempt on the part of the Swedish Academy to rehabilitate itself for having ignored Russian literature for three decades. Bunin was awarded the prize as the last representative of the great classic Russian prose tradition. It was a bitter moment for Šmelev and Merežkovskij. They did not participate in the festivities, and rivalry for the prize had destroyed Šmelev's longstanding friendship with Bunin.

The Soviet reaction was vehement. *Literaturnaja Gazeta* declared that the Swedish Academy had rewarded a howling counter-revolutionary wolf.²⁰ The Soviet ambassador to Sweden,

Aleksandra Kollontaj, had attempted through her contacts in Stockholm to prevent Bunin from winning the prize. But she did not get far.²¹

Soon Bunin himself nominated his friend and colleague Mark Aldanov. Karlgren, however, was very cool to his candidacy. It was a friendly gesture on Bunin's part, but in fact thanks to Bunin's proposal, Aldanov, the author of easily accessible political novels, continued to vaguely hope for a prize up until his death in 1957.²²

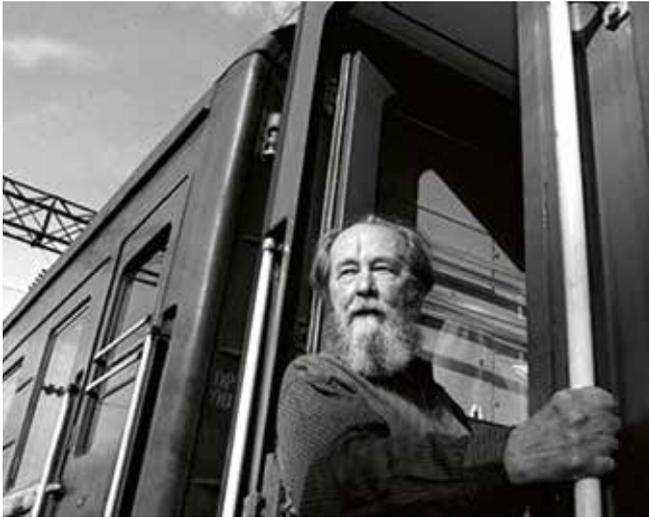
A sensational Russian nominee emerged in 1946 when Professor Cecil Bowra of Oxford University proposed Boris Pasternak, who in the postwar situation was entering a kind of internal exile. His nomination soon prompted the Soviet authorities to advance Michail Šolochov as a counter candidate. Shortly after meeting with Soviet colleagues on a propaganda visit to Sweden, certain leftist Swedish writers let it be known in several newspaper articles that it was disgraceful that both Tolstoj and Gor'kij had been passed over, and that the reason Šolochov had not yet received a prize had to do with the Academy's reactionary attitude toward the Soviet Union.²³

Šolochov had in fact not yet been nominated, but the Academy understood the signals being sent and saw to it that one of their members did so. The two candidates were polar opposites: one an exclusive modernist poet and the other a Socialist Realist prose writer dedicated to revolution and collectivization.

Karlgrén was asked to submit an expert report. His opinion of both candidates proved to be negative, albeit on different grounds. He confessed that despite “months of effort,” he was regrettably unable to get anywhere with Pasternak, whose poetry he described as verbal torrents without substance, “blobs of words” indiscriminately spewed out by an apparently “agitated person.”²⁴

Karlgrén's evaluation of Šolochov was a massive 136 pages. Perhaps he felt he needed to motivate in detail what became an outright condemnation. Šolochov, he maintained, distorts reality in *Tichij Don*. Although it is an exciting and entertaining novel that especially in the beginning shows verve and vigor, it is miles away from the historical truth. The portrayal of collectivization

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Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Russian writer and Nobel Laureate in Literature 1970, looks out from a train, in Vladivostok, summer 1994. Solzhenitsyn returned to Russia after nearly 20 years in exile.

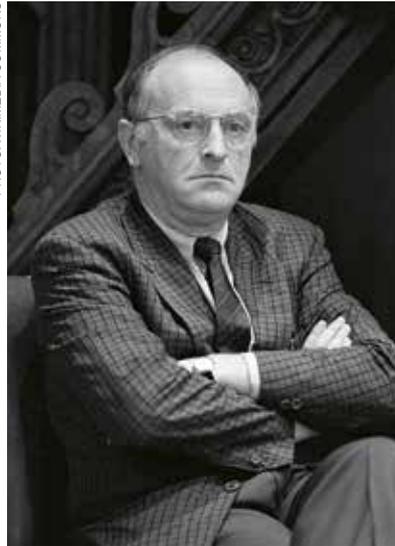
in *Podnjataja celina* legitimizes “the treatment of an entire community in a way unparalleled until the recent world war.” What it presents is the ruthless crushing of the peasantry in the version propagated by the powerful, which consists of “shameless distortions” of historical facts. Consequently, it is a Stalinist work done to order that does not lack literary merits but is basically intended to confuse and mislead.²⁵

Pasternak was nominated again in 1949 by Bowra and also in 1948 and 1950 from within the Academy. Each time, however, he was eliminated prior to the Nobel Committee’s final discussion. The stated reason was that – obviously influenced by Karlgren’s catastrophic evaluation – its members had not been decisively persuaded of his “significance.”²⁶ Naturally, there was also concern about the impact of a prize on “a writer in Pasternak’s especially sensitive position.”²⁷

The Soviets knew nothing about Karlgren’s report, but they evidently had other things on their mind in the sclerotic final years of Stalin’s reign. After his death they began acting in various ways. In 1955, to a certain degree on orders from above, the writer and academician Sergej Sergeev-Censkij nominated Šolochov.²⁸ Docent of Slavic Languages Nils Åke Nilsson, who now was an increasingly well-established expert on Russian literature, wrote a supplementary report on what Šolochov had by this time accomplished beyond the two novels. He was not particularly impressed.²⁹

IN 1957 THERE WAS a bombshell. Pasternak’s novel *Doktor Živago*, which had been rejected by Soviet journals, was smuggled to the

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Joseph Brodsky (Iosif Brodskij), 1987 laureate.



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The suitcase with which Brodsky left his homeland, on June 4, 1972, carrying a typewriter, two bottles of vodka, and a collection of poems by John Donne is today displayed in the Anna Akhmatova Museum, St. Petersburg.

West and published in Italy. This put his candidacy in an entirely new light. A new report submitted by Nils Åke Nilsson finally gave him the esteem he deserved as a seminal poet and the author of a magnificent novel portraying the turbulence of revolution refracted through a poetic sensibility.

In connection with disturbing rumors about Pasternak’s increasingly strong candidacy, the Soviet Central Committee decided to intensify propaganda for Šolochov, especially by enlisting influential “friends” in Stockholm.³⁰ In 1958 he was nominated as though on cue by the Swedish PEN Club. That was

not enough, however, for the Nobel Committee continued to dismiss him on the same grounds as before. The time had come instead for Pasternak, who was awarded the prize for both his poetry and his prose.

The result was an unparalleled Soviet campaign against Pasternak and an international drama about which books are still being written. A couple of days later he was expelled from the Writers Union. The Soviet press declared that he had produced a pu-

trid invective. Letters to the editor showered him with hatred: true, no one had read his malignant works, but everyone was filled with indignation over his “betrayal.” The mood at a writers’ meeting in Moscow rose almost to hysteria. Pasternak was a traitor. According to one speaker, his novel was an “atomic bomb” aimed at the Soviet people.³¹

Pasternak canceled his trip to Stockholm for fear he would be prevented from returning home. But in his own eyes he never renounced the prize and was prepared to fight for his work and his honor. He viewed opinion in the West as a guarantee he would

“THE RESULT WAS AN UNPARALLELED SOVIET CAMPAIGN AGAINST PASTERNAK AND AN INTERNATIONAL DRAMA ABOUT WHICH BOOKS ARE STILL BEING WRITTEN.”



Svetlana Aleksievich was awarded the Nobel Prize in 2015.

not, as in Stalin's day, have to pay with his life. Although he withstood the waves of slander, he died only a year and a half later. The persecution took its toll.

In the summer of 1962 the Swedish librarian and poetry expert Erik Mesterton visited Pasternak's fellow poet and friend Anna Achmatova at her dacha in Komarovo on the Gulf of Finland. He showed himself to be remarkably well versed in *Poëma bez geroja*, one of the two major works just being published in the West in which she speaks on behalf of the entire nation crushed under Stalin's heel. Her guest made a strong impression on her.

From Achmatova Mesterton went on to the next dacha, where he happened to ask what Anna Andreevna might think about getting a Nobel prize. His question immediately took flight all over Leningrad and then throughout the entire Soviet intelligentsia, awakening dormant hopes. Mesterton had been "sent by the Academy." The prize should obviously go to Achmatova to make amends for the persecution and humiliation she had suffered.³² Soon she herself wrote a veritable love sonnet to him, the "faithful friend" from the northerly climes who had aroused such enormous expectations.³³ The truth, however, was that until 1965 Achmatova was never even nominated. She would pass away a year later.³⁴

Šolochov hoped as well, and the Soviet Union continued to lobby for a prize. I interviewed him in 1963 – his visits to Sweden were now becoming frequent. Then something happened: Karl Ragnar Gierow, the newly elected secretary of the Academy, changed his position. Arguments were heard within the Nobel Committee that Šolochov's mighty epic *Tichij Don* was perhaps sufficient. Evidently no one was yet aware of the doubts that had been raised as to his authorship. At this point Karlgren's assessment was overturned.

Nobel Committee Chairman Anders Österling stated explicitly in the course of the discussion in 1965 that the time had come to

remedy historical "omissions" vis-à-vis Russia/the Soviet Union. He probably had both Tolstoj and Gor'kij in mind.³⁵ There is much to suggest that the Academy felt called upon to balance Pasternak's prize politically. The cruel irony was that it was Erik Mesterton who had discussed in a special statement the possibility of dividing the prize between Achmatova and Šolochov. If one of them was to be given priority, however, he thought it should be Šolochov.³⁶ Just to be on the safe side, Österling argued that as he saw it, Achmatova's fate was more significant than her "powerful, elliptical" poem – *Requiem*.³⁷

In the Soviet Union the election of Šolochov was of course greeted with ovations. For the first time an awarded prize could be accepted. It had taken twenty years. Naturally, among the liberal intelligentsia the reaction was the opposite. They viewed Šolochov as a representative of the old power elite that was now taking political revenge after the Thaw years.

IN 1970 ALEKSANDR Solženicyn was awarded the prize "for the ethical force with which he has pursued the indispensable traditions of Russian literature." He had already been expelled from the Soviet Writers Union and branded a pariah. The Soviet Writers Union declared that the Swedish Academy had allowed itself to be drawn into a shameful game that did not seek to benefit literature but "was dictated by speculative political considerations."³⁸ Solženicyn's novels *Rakovyj korpus* and *V krug pervom*, which focused on the crimes of Stalinism as their central theme, were not only viciously anti-Soviet but also "artistically weak" in general.

Gradually – after the publication of *Archipelag GULAG* the campaigns aimed at Solženicyn intensified into a tornado. In 1974 he was arrested and deported, which enabled him in December 1974 to come to Stockholm to accept his prize.

The next Russian laureate had been driven into exile two years earlier: the poet Iosif Brodskij, alias Joseph Brodsky, who was awarded the prize in 1987. Remarkably, in its motivation the Academy did not, as had been the case until then, anchor Brodsky in a great Russian tradition. They could very well have done so, for Osip Mandel'stam and Anna Achmatova were his obvious poetic precursors.

This was during the initial phase of Michail Gorbačev's perestroika. The first Soviet reaction was the same old one: Brodsky was branded an enemy, an American rather than a Russian writer. Just now, however, he began to be published cautiously in his homeland, at the same time as excerpts from *Doctor Živago* appeared for the first time in a Soviet journal. Soon glasnost surged like a tidal wave, and Brodsky was re-evaluated.

The Russian language got its sixth laureate in 2015 when Svetlana Aleksievich – herself Belarusian with a Ukrainian mother – was awarded the prize for the powerful five-part oratorio *Golosa Utopii* she composed around the nameless sufferings of 20th century Russia/the Soviet Union. She lived her first forty-three years in the then Soviet Union. As was the case in the good old days, she was belittled by the currently trend-setting Russian nationalist writers, the heirs of Bolshevism. Remarkably, a few liberal colleagues also found her to be too journalistic.

Thus, the prize has always been surrounded in Russia with drama. In retrospect we can see that Tolstoj, Gor'kij and Achmatova absolutely should have received a prize, as should several Russian writers who unfortunately never were nominated, especially Anton Čechov and Michail Bulgakov. The likewise never proposed Andrej Platonov, Vasilij Grossman, Osip Mandel'stam and Marina Cvetaeva were surely equally deserving.

One thing is clear: of the six Russian-speaking recipients of the world's most important literary distinction, no fewer than five were initially declared unworthy in their native land. That says something about the explosive power of literature in Russia. ✖

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