

PhDr. Jana Kuzmíková, CSc.
Institute of Slovak Literature, Slovak Academy of Sciences,
Bratislava, the Slovak Republic

The Character of the Russian in Slovak War-themed Literature

Russophilia and Pan-Slavism, i.e. the love of Russia and its culture and at the same time the reliance on the firmness and power of this biggest Slavic state and the protector of the Slavic language family, are attitudes deeply rooted in the Slovak past. Especially in the 19th century, when the autonomous Slovak nation and its language awareness were formed in accord with all-European revolutionary movements, looking up to Russia as the hegemonic country of the whole Slavic world was passed on to the masses from the Slovak Pan-Slavic elite.

The main item and goal of the Pan-Slavic political manifesto was unifying all the Slavic nations, which was meant to help the individual Slavic nations defend against the German discrimination as well as Magyarization. It was understandable that in pursuit of self-preservation the Slovak patriots did not pay attention to the drawbacks of the Russian Monarchy, did not take notice of its underdevelopment, poverty and serfdom. The attitude of the small Slovak nation towards great Russia with its glorious past, grand arts and magnificent literature was not challenged until the World War I and the Great October Revolution. As some Slovak writers (e.g. J. Jesenský, J. Gregor Tajovský, J. Augusta) took part in the war on the Eastern Fronts, whether they wanted or not, the Slovaks' traditional ideas of Russia were confronted with their harsh war and revolution experiences. The dreamland images of Russia took more realistic form in the real life stories of the Slovak writers – soldiers. The writers kept diaries, took notes, made observations, even wrote entire cycles of poems or documentary prose (Jesenský's collection *Zo zajatia /From Captivity/*, diary records *Cestou k slobode /On the Way to Freedom/*, Tajovský's *Rozprávky z Ruska /Stories from Russia/*, *Rozprávky o československých légiách v Rusku /Stories of the Czechoslovak Legions in Russia/*).

The Czechoslovak legions in Russia mainly fought for the new organization of whole Europe and the establishment of the independent Czechoslovak Republic. The goal was fulfilled. By the time J. Gregor Tajovský and Janko Jesenský set out on their journeys from Russia home, the Czechoslovak Republic had already been established owing to the after-war peace agreements reached in October 1918. The establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic meant the end to the long lasting, several-century-long efforts to magyarize the Slovaks; the intense Magyar oppression of the Slovak nation ended. The Slovak society and culture could develop in better conditions. The young generation, unbiased by historical obligations, was beginning to emerge. Young artists refused the older conservative branch of Slovak culture (which was also a bearer of the Russophile principles), and systematically got most of the inspiration from modern Western culture, avantgarde manifestos and new, non-traditional works and experiments.

Nevertheless, before long the interest in Russia and its culture was revived, when a new German military threat was beginning to appear in the late 1930s.

Subsequently, in the year 1939 the World War II broke out. When the powerful Russian liberator stood up to the German danger fearlessly and successfully, it necessarily affected the image of the Russian people in Slovak literature. The powerful selfless Russian brother became part of the range of the literary characters again. The Russians (Soviets) were schematically depicted, without conflicts and doubts, especially by the Communist writers. The authors from other political and ideological parties and groups sought within the Russian liberator a human per se, a human with his positive and negative traits, who found himself in real contacts and formed particular relationships with the local people. That way some interesting personal profiles of the Russian man, whose actions and behaviour were set in the context of the whole of Russian culture, were created. Here František Švantner's (1912 – 1950) works should be mentioned.

Jilemnický's (1901 – 1949) novel in the form of chronicle was written soon after the war under the impressions of the great suffering of the Slovak and Russian nations. As a result, all the characters are either distinctly good (partisans, Russians) or completely bad (Germans, the Vlasov's Army). This black-and-white pattern was compulsory to follow for the whole of the official literature produced in Slovakia from the year 1948 on after the Communist regime had been forcefully established. All that was acceptable was the stories based the Communist ideology and written according to the rules of so called Socialist Realism. This includes the books by a significant Communist writer Vladimír Mináč (1922 – 1996).

In the year 1959 Ladislav Mňačko's (1919 – 1994) novel *Smrt' sa volá Engelchen /The Death Is Called Engelchen/* was published. As opposed to Jilemnický and Mináč, Mňačko's characters are not heroes, they are the victims of the world war.

In Mňačko's novel the arrival of the victorious Red Army was celebrated by the inhabitants of the liberated border region with a fanatic gratefulness, so to speak. They believed that they would finally be the masters of their own country. They were not afraid any more that the essential thing – their land - would be taken by the Germans. The liberated Slovaks were certain to keep their land: „*The Russians will leave it to us, we know it, we were told by Nikola and Dmitri and Grishka, whom we trust.*“ (Mňačko, 1963, p. 162)

Well, this after-war faith based on the long-term Pan-Slavic tradition, did not come true, though. The Russian ideal failed. It failed most strikingly in the 1950s by transplanting the cult of personality and political trials into vassal Czechoslovakia and then in August 1968 when the Czechoslovak Republic was invaded and occupied by the armies of the Warsaw Pact led by the government of the Soviet Union. Only the one August night, during which the Czechoslovak land and people were usurped by the Russian tanks, was enough to break the illusions of most Slovaks and Czechs about the selfless and devoted Russian brother.

The politics of the Soviet Union in the after-war decades were not considered peaceful and humane by many inhabitants of Czechoslovakia. Everything was controlled by the power house in Moscow. The machinery of the Soviet Communist power misused the people's fear in a clever psychological way and severely punished those who opposed the oppression. It all began soon after the war when the Communist regime was forcefully established in Czechoslovakia and at the same

time it eliminated any protests and punished disobedient people. Many Slovaks were deported to the Soviet concentration camps, so called gulags. One of such lives was depicted by Pavol Rankov in his novel *Matky /Mothers/* (2011).

The main idea in Rankov's novel is motherhood in extreme circumstances but the aim of the study is to analyze the image of the Russian. It can be assumed that the contemporary writer of the middle-aged generation Rankov will depict the Russians differently from the way the early war literature did. One of the reasons is that Rankov was born in the year 1964, his personal experience with Socialism is totally different from that of the people who really went through the war and the after-war tragedies. The other reason is of literary nature: the contemporary poetics of prose is already post-modernist; the so called style of Socialist Realism, followed by Mináč, Jilemnický as well as Mňačko, is an abandoned thing of the past. Rankov did not have to build directly on the ideological frameworks.

Half a century has passed since then and within the time new generations of Slovaks, Czechs and Russians, who have managed to weigh up the mistakes of their common history, have grown. In conclusion, it can be summed up that the image of the Russian in Slovak literature of the 19th and 20th centuries was mostly positive but also biased. What was behind it was the ideology: first the Russophile ideology, developing the ideal of the great Russian protector of the Slovak nation and then the Communist ideology, which also supported the cult of the powerful Russian brother as the liberator of Czechoslovakia and the after-war developer of the Fairer World. However, if in the late 1940s František Švantner was foresightful enough to think that „*we expect more from the Russians than they are able to do. We have created myths and legends about them, we cannot see them as people with flaws any more*“, today we do not mystify each other any more. This is because true friendly relationships can only be built up on real, equal approaches from both sides.