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[Introduction to] Red Star Tales: A Century of Russian And Soviet Science of Fiction

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RED STAR TALES

A CENTURY
OF RUSSIAN AND SOVIET
SCIENCE FICTION

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RUSSIAN LIFE BOOKS

INTRODUCTION

Red Star Tales: A Century of Russian and Soviet Science Fiction. For most Anglophone readers, the title itself suggests something intriguingly exotic, otherworldly, and as thought-provoking as any trip to an entirely different place. What kind of science fiction was produced in the Soviet Union, which began as a radical experiment in social change, and ended seven decades later in sudden, unplanned political and social dissolution? Why haven't we heard more about Russian science fiction (in translation) before? After all, one of the most salient features of Soviet society was the overvaluation of literature – and the genre of science fiction was no exception – as nearly the only forum for discussion about individual values and the organization of society, as well as about the possible paths society might take in the future.

From 1917 until 1990, the Soviet Union's single political party (Communist) upheld an officially uncontested state ideology (Marxism-Leninism). In this arrangement, there could be no airing of debates about public policy, economic goals, or cultural institutions in the platforms of competing political parties and factions (since there were none), nor would debates about the future of Soviet socialism play out in official newsprint and other state-controlled media. Yet the lack of an outlet for civic debate and the limited possibility of

voicing alternate viewpoints in non-fictional forums did not mean that there was no such discussion at all. Instead, it meant that literature retained the heightened importance it had won in Russia already under the tsars: writers of Russian literature were considered to be Russia's "second government," with an obligation to articulate "the conscience of the people." Literary works were read not just for entertainment, and often not even primarily for entertainment, but for what they could convey to their readers about the state of the collective national consciousness. Throughout the twentieth century, one of the most "exotic" things about Russian literature, from the perspective of most Western societies, was that people read a lot of it, and they read it *as if it really mattered.* Science fiction mattered.

Science fiction itself is a genre that is characterized by two basic principles: *extrapolation* of a rational, plausible scientific premise (*what if* we had this knowledge or technology?) and *estrangement* (*how different* things would seem to be). By virtue of the genre itself, we are already prepared to confront visions of the outside world, or of our inner selves, that are in some way at odds with known reality. Yet science fiction is not fantasy or fairy tale: the motive for the altered reality depicted – or even just hinted at – in these stories is never supernatural, or magical, or nostalgically nestled in a golden age of pre-industrial folk pastorals. On the contrary, science fiction is a genre that arose in response to the completely unprecedented power of new knowledge paradigms, beginning in the latter half of the nineteenth century. As has been endlessly pointed out (because it's so easy to forget), for the great duration of human history, people have lived, as it were, by candlelight and on horseback. The planet-altering discoveries of our geological era – which many people now consider to be the Anthropocene[1] – are startlingly recent. It wasn't until the beginning

1. The Anthropocene is a proposed term for the geological epoch in the late Holocene (which followed the Pleistocene), during which the impact of human activities begins to significantly shape planetary ecosystems. The Russian geochemist Vladimir Vernadsky first coined the term "noosphere" in the 1920s to describe a geological era in which human cognition begins to fundamentally transform the biosphere. In recent years, the term Anthropocene has been popularized by the Dutch atmospheric scientist Paul Crutzen.

of the twentieth century that the widespread use of electricity, radio, automobiles, airplanes, and radiation technology allowed societies in the more developed parts of the world to not only compress unfathomable distances in time and space, but also to control and manipulate the natural and social environment with unprecedented technologies. No wonder the genre of science fiction grew up so quickly in the 1920s, and dominated so much of our cultural imagination during the nuclear build-up and space race of the Cold War; no wonder we now think of a lot of our daily experience with self-guiding vehicles and knowing computational devices as vaguely "science fictional."

But wait a minute! Why would science fiction emerge so early, and so strongly, in late nineteenth-century Russia, of all places? Paradoxically, the precocious flowering of a futuristic genre whose imaginary worlds were not only *estranged* from the present, but also rigorously extrapolated from *cognitive* (plausibly scientific) premises happened in a society that lagged noticeably in almost all indicators of social, economic, and technological development. In other words, science fiction grew most vigorously in a place where one might least expect it: a backward agricultural empire at the outermost margins of Europe. The Russian Empire under the last tsars was only belatedly beginning to industrialize along Western European models, and the vast majority of the Empire's population still toiled in rural landscapes that seemed almost untouched by modernity. The peasants were religious, superstitious, and illiterate. To be sure, a small but influential cohort of educated urban intellectuals was intensely interested in new scientific developments and their potential to transform existing society. As evidenced by the stories presented in the first part of this anthology, the insights of Russian artists, scientists, and intellectuals at the turn of the century derive from an extraordinary vantage point. Russia was at the margins of the industrialized world, belatedly undergoing a process that Leon Trotsky famously diagnosed as "combined and uneven" development. There was something inherently science fictional about this situation: during the Revolutionary decades before and after the Bolshevik coup in 1917, one detects a desire to jump

from behind, over the present, directly into a radically more advanced future. Thus, in the waning decades of the Russian Empire, many of the most renowned artists and intellectuals of the time produced works of fiction that consciously probed a revolutionary new premise: what if the unprecedented pace of scientific and technological discovery is consciously harnessed to utopian ideas of social and even spiritual advancement, so that age-old dreams of peace, plenty, and even immortality are no longer the stuff of fairy tales, but the impetus for rational blueprints to shape the future? It might be a short step from science fiction to Soviet *sputnik*.

PART I: RED STAR RISING
SCIENCE FICTION FROM THE REVOLUTIONARY ERA

One can confidently make the claim that the Soviet space program was born not in the throes of military-technological competition between the U.S. and U.S.S.R., but in the seminal philosophical writings of Nikolai Fyodorov (1829-1903), and in the aerodynamic experiments of his legendary pupil, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky (1857-1935).[2] We include two short pieces by these Russian visionaries, in order to give the reader a sense of the erudition and audacity of Fyodorov's thought, and the degree to which Tsiolkovsky's precocious feats of aeronautical engineering were also exercises in "applied futurism."

Nikolai Fyodorov's 1892 essay, on the "meteorurge" who would use science to orchestrate global weather patterns, rather then just predict them as the meteorologist does, illustrates the expectation of spiritual salvation that was indivisible from the Russian thinker's scientific rationalism. The essence of Christianity itself, according to Fyodorov, is to join all human beings in the common cause of resolving

2. Michael Holquist, "The Philosophical Bases of Soviet Space Exploration." In *The Key Reporter* 51:2 (Winter 1985-6). Tsiolkovsky was the first person to figure out most of the things necessary to make, launch and sustain life in rockets. Working alone, mostly deaf since childhood, he wrote hundreds of reports on, among other things, designs for rockets with steering thrusters, multistage boosters, airlocks for exiting a spaceship, how much fuel is needed to overcome the Earth's gravitational pull, etc.

the *meaning* of the "interdependence between sentient beings and the blind, unfeeling forces of nature." We leave it to each reader to contemplate the powerful oddness and appeal of Fyodorov's vision, as well as the wry commentary on things that remain the same across eras and cultures: in his story, government representatives veto funds that would have supported research to prevent famine-causing droughts, but with a stroke of the same pen, they pour money into a proposal to increase spending on a "zeppelin, capable of carrying enough passengers and explosives to blow up all the fortifications or personnel of the greatest military powers."

Tsiolkovsky's short story "On the Moon" – written in 1893 – is almost devoid of fictional grace or plot tension, although he clearly enjoyed describing (quite accurately!) the physical sensations of weightlessness, low boiling temperatures, disorienting diurnal rhythms, and other things that a human being would encounter during a sojourn on the moon. One anonymous Russian blogger summed up the value of this story over a century later with the quip: "a tiny baby step for Russian literature, but a giant leap towards humanity's era of cosmic exploration."

The story "One Evening in 2217" was written by an almost unknown Nikolai Fyodorov (not related to the first). It stands out as one of the earliest dystopias of its kind. It is remarkable to find most of the essential themes of Evgeny Zamyatin's brilliant dystopian novel *WE* (1924) already present in this under-acknowledged harbinger, written in 1906. The two sketches by Valery Bryusov, a renowned poet and member of the mystical-aesthetic Symbolist movement, were written a few years later, in a time of almost apocalyptic anticipation, just before the onset of WWI and the Russian Revolution. For many Russian intellectuals, the approaching upheaval was not so much a political matter as an expression of a deep shift in the relationship between human beings and the natural and spiritual world. Bryusov's fantasies about machines that suddenly acquire a perverse will (to rebel), and human beings grown so sedentary that doctors issue warnings about

muscular atrophy, were meant as cautionary tales, but today they no longer seem so far from current realities.

Throughout the 1920s, citizens of the young Soviet State read science fiction and clamored for more. One of Lenin's earliest priorities was to "liquidate illiteracy" in a vast population that remained uneducated in tsarist times. "Without literacy," Lenin declared, "there can be no politics – there can only be rumors, gossip, and prejudice."[3] A massive educational campaign rapidly increased rates of literacy, especially in growing urban populations. Moreover, the relatively limber market that resulted from Lenin's New Economic Policy strategy in the 1920s allowed for a burgeoning publishing industry that was quite responsive to consumers' desires. While Party ideologues and literary critics fretted over quality control, the newly literate masses devoured "rumor, gossip, and prejudice" in the form of adventure stories, detective fiction, and fantastic tales about mad scientists, technological wonders, and daring cosmic voyages.[4] One of the most beloved Soviet science fiction writers was Alexander Belyaev, whose exciting yet heartfelt tales of liminal existences (an anguished living head severed from its body; an extraordinary yet sad Amphibian Man) remain popular to this day. Belyaev's 1926 story "Professor Dowell's Head" was the first to use the genre term "science fiction" (*nauchnaya fantastika*) explicitly in its subtitle, and to defend the value of the genre on the shifting terrain of Soviet cultural politics. An editor's introduction pointed out that Belyaev's story is based on the kind of scientific advancement (a head transplant!) that is not yet a reality, but current Soviet experiments in the field might make such advancements possible in the future. Meanwhile, "Professor Dowell's Head" was an instant success – who doesn't like snappy writing, a taut plot full of devious intrigue, fantastic scientific horizons, and a terrible ethical conundrum that must be solved?[5]

3. Joseph Slabey Roucek, *The Challenge of Science Education* (U.S.A.: Philosophical Library, 1971).
4. Matthias Schwartz, "How *Nauchnaia Fantastika* Was Made: The Debates about the Genre of Science Fiction from NEP to High Stalinism" in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 72, No. 2 (SUMMER 2013), pp. 224-246.
5. An earlier English language translation of "Professor Dowell's Head" by Antonina Bouis (NY:

PART II. RED STAR IN RETROGRADE? SCIENCE FICTION IN STALIN'S TIME

Under Stalin, the horizons of scientific discovery were circumscribed by the regime's ideological biases; aesthetic norms were dictated from above; and in a perverse travesty of "communist ideals," ethical discussions were driven out of the public sphere (officially, in public, Soviet society was the freest, happiest, and most moral in the world) into the often heroic, often tortured private spaces of individuals coming to terms with an era of widespread terror, suffering, and – paradoxically – grandiose national accomplishments. Stalinist cultural policy mandated a function for all the arts: to provide inspiring, yet realistically portrayed visions of soon-to-be-perfected Soviet socialism. The key features of the immanent society to be depicted in art were full industrialization, palpable leaps in life expectancy and education, and genuine enthusiasm for a collective future that is *a priori* worth the sacrifices made on its behalf. In practice, these Stalinist literary strictures constrained the range of science fiction to the rather un-science-fictional "near goals" of the "near future." Was Cold War scholarship justified in writing off two decades of Soviet "near" science fiction as worthless? Our Stalin-era selections suggest that the situation was more complicated.

Yuri Dolgushin's novel *Generator of Miracles* was completed in 1938 and published in its entirety in 1939 and 1940, in serial installments of the journal *Technology-Youth*. Oddly enough, the journal publications were never interrupted, despite a ban on the negative portrayal of Germans that went into effect with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a Soviet-Nazi non-aggression treaty that was signed in August 1939 (and abruptly violated when the Nazi Army invaded the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941). Dolgushin noticeably reworked his novel for a book publication in 1958, during the post-Stalinist period of reform. The chapter translated in our volume is from this later book version,

Macmillan, 1980) is based on Belyaev's much-expanded and altered 1938 book-length version of the original story. We are grateful to Matthias Schwartz for providing an authenticated copy of the 1926 source text.

which allows for a suggestion of psychological complexity in the villain Vikling. Dolgushin's 504-page scientific-thriller (in either version) does not stand out for its artistic merits; yet it has stood the test of time (and readability) to a much greater extent than other patriotic literary productions from the same period. Dolgushin wanted to fill his novel with lightly fictionalized, but genuinely exciting information about new discoveries in the biological and physical sciences. He spiced things up with a melodramatic plot involving a nefarious Nazi double-agent, the (implied) rape and murder of an innocent Russian maiden, and the ineluctable moral triumph of both Soviet science and true love. Yet the novel's preoccupation with wireless communication across great distances, and (in the chapter below) medical reversal of death suggests a profoundly ambiguous commentary on the historical moment in which it was written. Dolgushin released *Generator of Miracles* at the height of Stalin's terror (Soviet citizens disappeared into the Gulag in waves of arrests that peaked between 1936-1939), and on the eve of a catastrophic World War, in which the USSR would lose an estimated 25 million people. In this context, something eludes the clichés: the idea that the dead or disappeared might be able to convey their thoughts to their loved ones telepathically through space, as well as Nikolai's aching desire to see Anna literally come back to life.

Alexander Kazantsev's "Explosion" was an instant sensation in 1946. It gave new legs to the theory that the very real – but never fully explained – explosion over the Tunguska area of Siberia on June 30, 1908, could only be the result of an alien visitation. Kazantsev went on to have a long and less-than-admirable career as a cultural conservative and Party hard-liner who pushed back against literary innovations and artistic freedom in the 1960s. Ironically, "Explosion" would have fit easily into the realm of U.S. science fiction in the 1940s. As a Communist Party stalwart, Kazantsev wrote a macho, fun-to-read, mystery-catastrophe in which the figure of the dangerous alien is easily summed up in two words: "female" and "black."

On the other hand, "The Nur-i-Desht Observatory" (1944) highlights some of the most interesting features of the best of Soviet

science fiction: the attractive female protagonist is an interesting person, not a highly sexualized or completely de-sexualized alien. The story unfolds in the recognizable present, in the middle of World War II, and only the vague mystery surrounding an archeological dig in remote Soviet Central Asia allows an opening for the fantastic to creep in. In the end, what seems to be fantastical – the extraordinary sense of vitality and well-being the protagonists experience in the environs of the strangely beautiful ruins of an ancient observatory – is accounted for with an explanation that is not only scientific, it is also quite patriotic (Soviet scientists are working on radium cures!). Nevertheless, "The Nur-i-Desht Observatory" strikes a hauntingly beautiful chord of ambiguity in its resolution, since its underlying premise is primarily philosophical. What causes human beings to experience joy? If we discover that our feeling of joyful well-being is due to some external, material stimulus rather than an internal state of harmony, how does this discovery affect us?

The story is explicitly set in late July 1942, at the outset of the Battle of Stalingrad, one of the bloodiest battles in human history.[6] The protagonist will experience nothing of this, since he has already been wounded and removed far from the front, to recuperate in a Central Asian sanatorium. The entire story of the magical archeological dig seems to take place outside of time, yet our awareness of the historical events that are unfolding in the devastated background make a difference. It is against this background that we see the beginnings of Yefremov's belief in the positive pull of cosmic evolution, which will ultimately lead human beings towards communion with other intelligent life. In Yefremov's groundbreaking 1957 space epic *Andromeda Nebula*,[7] utopian science fictional optimism about this

6. An estimated two million combatants and civilians were killed in this single battle, which halted the German advance into the Soviet Union and turned the tide of World War II in favor of the Allied Forces.

7. *Andromeda Nebula* changed the face of Soviet science fiction, and brought its author international fame. In an epic sweep that would characterize Western science fiction of this period as well, Yefremov imagined a completely transformed universe of the far-future. In this universe, inhabitants of the planet Earth have long since transcended the problems of the twentieth century – racism, gender inequity, material deprivation, the diseases of old age, and so forth are all distant

communion is conveyed in complicated plots and intricately drawn far-future protagonists and technologies; in this story, it is condensed into a single transcendent moment, when two human beings look up and see "piercing the glistening shroud of the Milky Way, [shining] Cygnus the Swan, stretching its long neck out in eternal flight towards the future."

PART III. RED STAR RISES HIGHER, UNTIL.... FROM REFORM TO FANTASY

The Soviet Union after Stalin's death in 1953 was an entirely different place than it had been under his iron rule. The new Party boss, Nikita Khrushchev, was a reformer who openly repudiated the "excesses" of the past and openly (if inconsistently) advocated liberalization. A decade after the end of a devastating war on Soviet soil, the economy was on a rebound, the standard of living for ordinary citizens was going up, the atmosphere of terror was lifted, and for the first and last time, a generation of thoroughly educated Soviet citizens was seized with genuine enthusiasm for the idea that the worthy promises of socialism – enlightenment, education, equality – could be realized. In particular, people placed their hope in science. In the 1950s, a repudiation of the irrational goals and mystical terror that defined Stalin's "cult of personality" was accompanied by a newfound belief in the humane goals of mathematics, cybernetics, physics, and the other exact sciences. It seemed that these objective disciplines, rather than grotesque ideological excesses, would finally usher in the communist future: thanks to science, there would be efficient agriculture, abundant energy sources, a rationalized economy, and even – yes! already in 1957! – a man-made Soviet satellite orbiting outer space.

At this propitious moment, the undisputed kings of Soviet science fiction – Arkady and Boris Strugatsky – made their writing debut. The Strugatsky brothers went on to dominate Russian science fiction,

historical issues that have been overcome – and the action driving future history has to do with the struggle to connect across vast cosmic distances with our fellow advanced civilizations throughout the galaxy.

and in some sense late Soviet fiction in general (most of their novels were what today would be called "cross-over best sellers"), for the next three decades. They became internationally famous and their major works were translated into over two dozen languages, including English. Therefore, in this volume we present only one of their earliest stories in an new translation,[8] and an excerpt of one of their previously un-translated novels from the last phase of their career. The 1958 story "Spontaneous Reflex" exhibits the combination of intellectual curiosity and deftly-drawn, humorous characterization that made the Strugatskys' early science fiction seem refreshingly intelligent and engaging, setting a new tone for a new generation of Soviet readers. The excerpt from *Those Burdened by Evil* (1988), on the other hand, reflects the authors' difficult reckoning with their own assumptions about the power of rational enlightenment and humanistic ideals. *Burdened* is not canonical Strugatsky fare. There are no swashbuckling heroes ready to bring decency and democracy to cruelly oppressed peoples on other planets; there are no wisecracking biophysicists ready to take the "para-" out of parapsychology in a top-secret Soviet research institute; there is no golden wishing ball at the end of a Stalker's long quest through the unfathomably weird Zone.[9] Instead, our readers will encounter the Demiurge, a brooding deity who answers to every name in the world's mythologies for "the Maker, he who fashions the material universe," and his servant Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew. After enduring many deaths "worse than that primitive crucifixion" on multiple worlds, the returning Christ, the would-be spiritual savior of mankind, is back on Earth again for a visit. What will he do with the realization that "nothing has changed..."? The excerpt only raises the question, which is gradually explored in the course of the Strugatskys' darkly compelling final work.

8. "Spontaneous Reflex" was translated into English in 1959 and again in 1960, in the first wave of post-*sputnik* American fascination with Soviet science fiction. Both previous translations feature unauthorized additions, omissions, mistakes, and, in one case, an introductory frame with the question "Do the actions of a wild-running Communist robot reflect the thinking of a Communist master?"

9. *Hard To Be a God* (1964), *Monday Begins on Saturday* (1965), and *Roadside Picnic* (1972), respectively, to mention just three of the Strugatskys' most popular novels.

Michael Ancharov is entirely unknown in the West. "Soda-Sun" (1961) captures a persistent theme in the vast ocean of Soviet science fiction that was produced and read by millions of readers during the last Soviet decades. The narrator of "Soda-Sun" is concerned above all with the phenomenon of genius: where do the Mozarts and Einsteins and Leonardo da Vincis come from? If creative genius springs up occasionally among us normal mortals, why doesn't it spring up more often? Can we change something within ourselves, or within the structure of our societies, in order to bring forth the untapped capacity of human genius? Vladimir Savchenko's "Mixed Up" (1980) can also be interpreted as an extension of this theme. If the brain gets "mixed up" and begins to *hear* colors and shapes, and to *see* sound, how much will our comprehension of the universe around us expand and deepen? Even Sergei Drugal's far-future eco-parable "The Exam" includes a prominent digression on the nature of inventive genius. Drugal (1927-2011) himself was the author of several patented inventions in the realm of railroad engineering. He held prominent positions in rail transportation research and development throughout his life; writing science fiction was a hobby he pursued mainly in the 1970s and 1980s. "The Exam" is one story in a much larger cycle that Drugal devoted to the "Institute for the Restoration of Nature." In this cycle, a far more advanced race of humans resides mostly on other planets, having once upon a time carelessly destroyed the flora and fauna of our home planet. Gradually, the earth is being repopulated with secondary nature and biogenetically engineered animals, many of which are whimsical creations of our imagination. Nevertheless, in Drugal's far-future world, people have learned their lesson, and only the most stringently qualified moral and creative personalities are granted the honor of teaching a new generation of children.

When the great Russian modernist Andrei Platonov wrote "Lunar Bomb" in the late 1920s, he forced the language of peasants to confront the language of the future, so that in Platonov one finds the heart of a sad man "becoming overgrown with the fat of forgetting," even as a Special Committee puts him in charge of a project that will rocket

a manmade sphere ("bomb") to the lunar periphery and back, part of the kind of technological advancement the sad man hopes will "open up new virgin sources of sustenance for life on earth, run[ning] hoses from these sources to the earth, [to] swallow up the meanness and the burdened, cramped feeling of human life."

Platonov's plot may be science fictional, but his language forces us right to the brink of the absurd, or of what the post-war European existentialists would identify as the abyss of meaningless. Platonov's ambiguous depiction of machine-driven progress did not fit the spirit of Stalinist times, nor did it characterize the generally upbeat attitude towards scientific enlightenment that animated mainstream Soviet science fiction until the late 1980s.

The last stories in *Red Star Tales* were written in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's abrupt collapse. Everything had changed: when government censorship of literature was suspended, artistic innovation was no longer propelled by the need to "write around" possible censorship. Instead, artistic choices would now be measured against consumer demand, since for the first time, Russian readers would decide what sells. As it turns out, science fiction would not sell for long. When the official myth that promoted scientific rationalism as a kind of social panacea turned out to be exhausted, other long-suppressed expressions of "how to cope" rushed into the void: a resurgence of interest in religion, money-making self-help schemes, parapsychology and magic, alternative national and folk histories, and a fascination with power for power's sake.

Dalia Truskinovskaya's "Doorinda" charmed readers with its humorous depiction of a working mom's exasperation with notorious Soviet (and post-Soviet) consumer product deficits. In 1990, though, the literary solution is not longer a technological marvel – it's fantasy and magic. Sergei Lukyanenko's 1992 story "My Papa's an Antibiotic" anticipates the tough-guy, weapons-and-morality fantasy genre that has propelled subsequent Lukyanenko novels to blockbuster status in print

and on film.[10] In this story, as well as in all subsequent Lukyanenko productions, the central dilemma concerns the hero's ability to remain strong without losing his essential decency and humanity.

It's a tough dilemma.

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10. Lukyanenko's breakout novel *Night Watch* (Nochnoi dozor, 1998) is the first of a series that chronicles the eternal battle of the "Others," an ancient race of humans divided between the forces of Dark and Light. The novels have been translated into English by Andrew Bromfield.