

VISSARION BELINSKY—Soviet Union Observes Centenary of His Death Anniversary Meetings

Great Russian Literary Critic and Revolutionary Democrat

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VISSARION BELINSKY (1811-1848), great Russian thinker and philosopher, literary critic and publicist, was one of the most progressive men of his time. All of his writings were a passionate protest against the system of feudal serfdom that dominated Russia in that period and all his dreams were of a better future for the Russian people. His utterances directed against slavery and oppression expressed the sentiments of the masses of Russian people. The fervor with which the critic fought for his progressive ideas on more than one occasion forced his ideological opponents to retreat. "Vissarion the Furious," his friends called him.

Belinsky's significance soon transcended the narrow bounds of literary criticism and his work became part of world culture, contributing immeasurably to the development of both Russian and European esthetic thought. Belinsky succeeded in resisting the influence of idealistic philosophy, which was much in vogue in the Russian society of his time, and embracing materialism and revolutionary democracy. This evolution in Belinsky's outlook was aptly described by the distinguished Soviet statesman S. M. Kirov. "Turgenev," wrote Kirov in an article entitled "The Great Seeker," "called Belinsky the 'central figure,' but it would be more correct to call him the Moses of Russian social thought who led it out of the dark labyrinths of pure abstraction onto the high road of realism. Throughout his brief life he traversed the rugged path from fruitless metaphysics to the scientific world outlook which illumines the path pursued by our own generation."

Associated With Liberation Movement

Belinsky's political and philosophical development was closely associated with the emergence of the liberation movement in Russia.

The reign of Nicholas I was a period of "dark reaction," an epoch of "gloom, violence and despair." For every courageous word they uttered people paid with imprisonment, hard labor and exile. But notwithstanding all the censorship obstacles and the brutal punishment the bold words were uttered. The tsar and his accomplices did their best to "build mental dams," to paralyze the development of the liberation movement in the country. "If I succeed in setting Russia back 50 years... I shall have done my duty and can die in peace," said Count Uvarov, Minister of Education.

All his life Belinsky fought for the spread of enlightenment and the emancipation of the enslaved peasantry. His loyalty and persistence inspired others to join the struggle against serfdom. Few men in the history of Russian literature and journalism have had such a powerful influence over the minds of men as Belinsky, or so effectively awakened their civic consciousness, impelling them to fight the autocracy for a democratic revolution, as he did.

Belinsky longed to devote himself fully to social and political activity but circumstances thwarted his desire. Being deprived of the possibility of expressing his political convictions openly owing to tsarist censorship, he cleverly utilized his articles on literary questions for this purpose. Working with his hands tied, so to speak, Belinsky was obliged to make his articles on literary criticism the vehicle for propounding his political philosophy. The literary journal was the political platform from which inspite of censorship difficulties he flung his impassioned challenge to Russian society to fight tsarism and march forward to a brighter future.

For Belinsky journalism was a means of arousing civic consciousness. "It is our humble, plebeian opinion," he wrote, "that a journalist ought to make it his sacred duty indefatigably to hound the windbags of ignorance."

BELINSKY did not live long. Born in 1811, he spent the early years of his life up to 1829 in Penza gubernia, first in Chembar and later in Penza. The following 10 years (1829-1839) were spent in Moscow and the last 10 years (1839-1848) in St. Petersburg.

The chronicle of Belinsky's literary career usually begins with his article entitled "Literary Musings" which appeared in the newspaper "Molva" in 1834.

This was the literary manifesto of the new, rising Russia. It raised the question of realism and the folk element in literature and was permeated with the virile, optimistic spirit of a young courageous critic out to blaze new trails in Russian letters. Belinsky's social views at this period were those of the enlightener. He called for the spread of education among the popular masses. "Believe me," he wrote, "the Russian people have never been a sworn enemy of enlightenment, they have always been willing to learn; only they were obliged to start with the ABC, and not with philosophy, not with high schools, not with the academy."

The historical optimism contained in "Literary Musings" arose from Belinsky's belief in the future of Russian literature. "Yes, The seeds of the future are ripening in the present! And they will sprout forth and bloom in luxuriant magnificence..."

The 40's of last century marked a sharp turn toward the ideas of materialism, Socialism and revolutionary democracy. That was a significant period in the development of Russian culture, it saw the emergence of a rich crop of geniuses, among them Glinka, the composer,

Shchepkin, the actor, Herzen, Nekrasov, Turgenev, Goncharov, Saltykov-Shchedrin, the writers. The peasant movement was spreading throughout the country inspiring revolutionary ideas and aspirations among the finest people of Russia. It was this spirit of the times that Belinsky had in mind when he wrote that "fresh forces were seething and striving for expression (in Russian society—N. B.) but, crushed by a heavy weight of oppression," were unable to find an outlet and "only in literature, notwithstanding the... censorship, is there still life and progress."

These years saw the advent of literary works which have since become recognized masterpieces of world letters. Russian literature became replete with profound social ideas and Belinsky supported this tendency with all the force of his convictions and his prestige.

In 1839 he moved to St. Petersburg, where the contrasts between luxury and poverty showed Belinsky that "real life... is moving not at all according to the ideal plan of the Hegel system." In a letter written on July 13, 1840, Belinsky stated: "I was prostrated by this spectacle of a society in which scoundrels and common nonentities play their parts while the noble and talented lie in shameful inertia."

It was in the 40's that Belinsky's activities as a literary critic were unfolded to the full. His best articles about writers—Pushkin (11 articles), Lermontov, Gogol and Krylov—his exhaustive annual reviews of literature (from 1840 to 1847) were printed in the magazines "Otechestvennye Zapiski" and "Sovremennik."

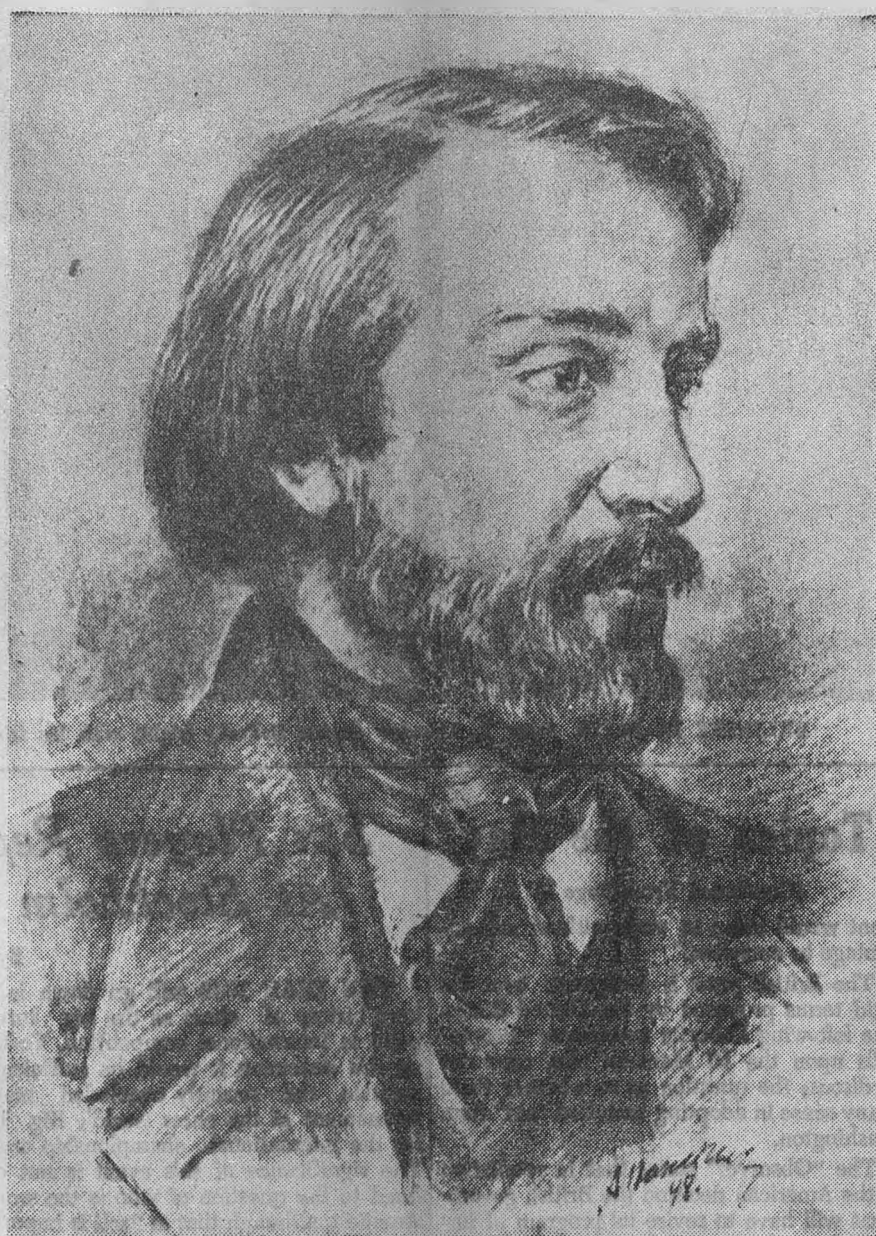
His popularity assumed unusual proportions as did his prestige among wide circles of the reading public. He held sway over the minds of the young generation and of all progressive people of his time.

Championed Realism in Art

Belinsky explained to the reader the significance of the great Russian writers. His thorough analyses of the Russian classics—Pushkin, Lermontov and Gogol—have in many respects retained their value to this day. In his later articles he spoke of the grandeur and beauty of the realistic depiction of life in the works of the Russian classic writers.

To Gogol Belinsky gave the following important piece of advice: "Draw on the life around you for your canvases and do not embellish it, do not remake it, depict it as it is, look at it through the eyes of the living present and not through the dimmed glasses of a moral that was correct at one time but which has since become a platitude."

Speaking of the originality of Russian culture, the critic supported its progressive democratic elements. He upheld realistic art replete with fiery wrath against feudal oppression. He believed that the progressive factor must triumph both in art and in



VISSARION BELINSKY

—Drawn by A. Panfilov

life itself. "Russia is the land of the future... Russia, in the person of the educated people of her society, bears in her soul an indomitable presentiment of the greatness of her predestination, the greatness of her future."

Belinsky regarded service to society as the supreme goal of all art and literature. Art not only reproduces life, it pronounces judgment on phenomena. "That which formerly moved and developed, but slowly and with difficulty, now moves and develops rapidly and easily. And this is possible only when literature is not the amusement of idleness, but the conscience of society; when it will not indulge in couplets and stories about love and marriage, but will be the true mirror of society, and not only the faithful echo of public opinion but its auditor and controller."

This explains Belinsky's opposition to the theory of "pure art." "Many good people, imitating others, still naively claim that art exists for itself, and life for itself, that the one and the other have nothing in common, that art would degrade itself by descending to the level of 'contemporary interests.' If by 'contemporary interests' one means fashions, stock exchange quotations, gossip and trivialities of society, then art would indeed play a miserable role... Now we know that art, as the expression of the consciousness of one or another nation and mankind as a whole in

a given epoch, is, as it were, the pulse beat of its life, and hence the development of the history of a nation or mankind." A writer must have his finger on the pulse of society, he must be "primarily, a son of his country, a citizen of his homeland, who takes its interests passionately to heart."

Belinsky, as I. S. Turgenev aptly put it, "was close to the core of his people."

Having every right to speak on behalf of his people, Belinsky correctly maintained that the best art is that which is recognized by the people. "The highest praise a poet can merit in our day, the grandest title his contemporaries or descendants can confer upon him, would be that of people's poet."

"The people," wrote Belinsky, "are to their great men what the soil is to the plants it produces."

Belinsky pondered much on the fate of his people. He realized the inevitability of the development of capitalism in Russia and said that progress in his country would begin only when the nobility had become the bourgeoisie. But he understood that capitalism could not be the true source of progress, and he scoured the evils of capitalism in Europe. Belinsky sharply criticized the bourgeois conception of equality and freedom, pointing to France as an example. "The domination of the cap-

italists has covered contemporary France with eternal shame," he wrote in 1847. "Everything is petty, negligible, contradictory, there is no feeling of national honor, national pride."

He predicted a gloomy future for the bourgeoisie of Britain where the tradesmen had taken over the reins of government. "A tradesman is a creature whose aim in life is gain; it is impossible to set any limits to this gain... and what can be said of a state when it is in the hands of capitalists," he wrote. "And now I add: woe to the state that is in the hands of capitalists, these men without patriotism, without the slightest exaltation of emotion. For them war or peace means only the rise or drop in fortunes—beyond that they see nothing."

But while condemning capitalism, Belinsky did not advocate a return to the past epoch of economic relationships. He envisioned the future in the form of a new, more perfect system. And in that future, Belinsky predicted, Russia was destined to play an important role. "Russia," he said, "will be better able to solve the social problem and put an end to capital... than Europe."

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Persecuted by Autocracy

One of his contemporaries said that "Belinsky was nothing but a literary rebel who, having no possibility to raise a rebellion on the square, rebelled in magazines." And it is not surprising that the tsarist government tried to isolate Belinsky by putting him under arrest. After the revolutionary events of 1848 in the West, the alarmed tsarist government sent a gendarme to the home of Belinsky, who was already ill, summoning the critic to the 3rd police department Skobelov, the commandant of the Fortress of Peter and Paul, meeting Belinsky on Nevsky Prospect one day. said: "When are you coming to us? I have a nice cosy little cell waiting for you."

Death which followed at 5 a.m. on June 7, 1848 saved Belinsky from the dungeon.

BELINSKY's ideas prepared the ground for the acceptance of Marxism. Lenin called him one of the forerunners of Russian Social Democracy.

Belinsky's influence had a beneficial effect on the best people of the fraternal peoples of Russia. Many writers of different nationalities—Kazakhs, Georgians, Armenians, Belorussians and Ukrainians—felt the creative influence of his ideas and views. The salutary effect of Belinsky's ideas spread far beyond the boundaries of our country.

Belinsky's remarkable words that "in the future, in addition to the victorious Russian sword, we shall lay on the scales of European life Russian thought as well" have come true.

Vissarion Belinsky was one of the architects who laid the cornerstone of this edifice of the future.

Belinsky's Appraisal of Eugene Sue's 'Les Mysteres de Paris'

To acquaint readers with the work of Vissarion Belinsky we publish here excerpts from his article on the novel by the French writer Eugene Sue "Parisian Mysteries." The article was written in 1844 on the occasion of the publication of the Russian translation of the novel. Although the article appeared more than a century ago many of the ideas expressed by the great Russian critic about bourgeois culture and society hold good today.

"THE HISTORY of European literatures, especially in recent times, is replete with examples of brilliant success that has attended some writers or some works. Who does not remember the time when all England, for example, avidly bought up all the poems of Byron and the novels of Walter Scott, so that the entire edition of any new work by these authors was sold out in thousands of copies in the course of a few days. This popularity is quite understandable: apart from the fact that Byron and Walter Scott were great poets, they laid entirely new paths in art, created new forms and gave it a new content; each of them was a Columbus in the realm of art, and amazed Europe set full sail to the newly-discovered shores of the creative world, no less rich and wonderful than those of America. And so, there was nothing surprising in this. Neither was it surprising that ordinary talents, too, enjoyed a similar, albeit evanescent success: the crowd must have its geniuses, as humanity has its. Thus, in France during the latter period of the Restoration, there appeared on the literary arena under the banner of romanticism a phalanx of writers of medium magnitude which the crowd looked upon as its geniuses. They were read and marveled at throughout France, followed, as usual, by the whole of Europe. Hugo's novel "Notre Dame de Paris" had a success which should have only been due the great works of great geniuses who come into the world with the living message of revival and regeneration. But barely 14 years have elapsed and this novel is now regarded as the *tour de force* of a purely extrinsic and spectacular though admirable talent, as the product of an imagination that is at odds with creative reason though powerful and stirring, as a brilliant but overwrought work compounded

of exaggerations, filled with pictures of the exceptional and not of reality, egregious without grandeur, vast without symmetry and harmony, morbid and absurd. Many people today simply do not regard it in any light, and nobody is concerned in dragging it up from the waters of Lethe in whose depths it lies resting in sweet and eternal sleep. Such is the fate that overtook the finest work of Victor Hugo, the *ci-devant* world genius: what then can be said of the fate of all his other, especially his later works? This writer's fame, recently so great and wide, can now easily be fitted into a nutshell. Is it so long ago that the stories of Balzac, those scenes of salon life with their women of thirty, were a source of general delight and a subject of all talk? Is it long since our Russian magazines flaunted them? Three times the reading world avidly read, or rather devoured, "Histoire des Treize," in which it hoped to find the "Iliad" of modern social life. Yet who now would pluck up the courage and patience to re-read these three long tales? We do not mean to say that nothing good could now be found in the works of Balzac or that he was an untalented man: on the contrary, his works can be found to contain much that is beautiful, though transient and relative; he possessed a talent, even a remarkable talent, but one that was good for a given time. That time has passed and the talent is forgotten—and the very crowd that raved about him is today not in the least concerned whether he exists or ever existed.

For all that, there is hardly an epoch in any literature which affords an instance of such amazing success in any way comparable to the success which in our day has fallen to the lot of the notorious "Les Mysteres de Paris." We shall not dilate on the fact that this novel, or rather this Euro-

pean "Arabian Nights" published in feuilleton scraps in a daily newspaper, engrossed the public of Paris and consequently the public of all the world where French newspapers are read (and where are they not read?), that on its publication in a separate edition the book was immediately bought up, read, re-read, thumbed and worn bare at all points of the earth where French is spoken (and where is it not spoken?), translated into all European languages, that it stirred up a discussion more unliterary than it was literary and provoked an intense desire to imitate it, nor that a sumptuous new edition with illustrations by the best artists is being prepared in Paris. All this in our day is not yet a measure of true and real success. In our day the scope of genius, talent, learning, beauty, virtue and, consequently, success, which in our age is considered to be above genius, talent, learning, beauty and virtue—this scope is easily measured by a single measure which conditions and comprises all others—by MONEY. In our day there is no such thing as genius, learning, beauty or virtue that has not made good and enriched itself. In the good and ignorant old days genius ended its great career at the stake or in the poorhouse, if not in the madhouse; learning died a hungry death; virtue shared the fate of genius, and beauty was regarded as a dangerous gift of nature. Not so today: all these qualities sometimes find it difficult to begin their career, but having begun it they end it happily: dry, skinny and pallid in youth, in manhood stout, fat and ruddy-cheeked, they recline in proud and carefree ease on bags of gold. At first they are misanthropes and Byronicists and later they become philistines satisfied with themselves and the world, Jules Janin started his career with "L'ane mort et la femme guillotinee" and ended it with mercenary feuilletons in the "Journal de Debats" where he established a profitable business in the sale by auction of praise and censure. Eugene Sue at the beginning of his career regarded life and mankind through dark-colored spectacles and tried to create the impression that he belonged to the satanic school of literature: he was not

rich at the time. Now he has put his hand to moralizing because he has grown rich... In addition to having received a large sum for his "Les Mysteres de Paris," he is offered one hundred thousand francs for his next unwritten novel by a new publisher who wishes to raise the fortunes of his magazine. There is success for you! He who wishes to outdo Sue in greatness would need to write a novel for which a publisher would pay two hundred thousand francs: then anyone who is able to count, but not necessarily to read, would understand that the new novelist is twice as great as Eugene Sue... The esthetic criticism, as you see, is very simple: any Russian contractor complete with beard and abacus can be the greatest critic of our age...

This, it seems, would suffice to settle briefly and satisfactorily the question of "Les Mysteres de Paris," but, true to our convictions, which may strike all people possessing a considerable fund of morality as being prejudices, we wish to look at "Les Mysteres" from another point of view and take its measure by a gauge other than that of its success, i.e., the money paid for it. We even consider that to be our duty, since "Les Mysteres de Paris" had a great success in Russia, too, as everywhere else. Thanks to Mr. Stroeve's good though incomplete translation, that part of the Russian public which is unable to read foreign works in the original has now been able to acquaint itself with this novel. "Les Mysteres de Paris" is mooted and disowned with us in the provinces and some of our magazines in the capital even bruit the discovery of Eugene Sue's genius and his novel's immortality, leaving, however, the reasons for that genius and immortality an inscrutable mystery for their public. We have already expressed our opinion concerning "Les Mysteres de Paris" and quoted in the Foreign Literature column the opinion of one of France's best contemporary critics. This might be considered sufficient; but could we have expected at the time that this novel would rouse the interest of the Russian public to such an extent? It is the business of a magazine to treat of matters of general

interest. So let us say some more about "Les Mysteres de Paris."

The underlying idea of the novel is genuine and noble. The author wished to present to a depraved and egoistic society worshipping the golden calf the spectacle of the sufferings of wretched people doomed to ignorance and poverty and condemned by ignorance and poverty to vice and crime. We know not whether this picture, which the author painted as best as he could, drew a shudder from this society amid its industrial and commercial orgies; but we do know that it irritated that society which accused the author of immorality! The words "morality" and "immorality" have become very flexible in our day and can be applied indiscriminately to anything you like. Look, for example, at that gentleman who carries with such dignity his fat paunch that has glutted itself on the tears and blood of helpless innocence, that gentleman whose face is expressive of such smug self-satisfaction that your first glance will leave you in no doubt as to the fullness of his deep-bottomed coffers in which lie buried the gratuitous toil of the poor man and the lawful legacy of the orphan. He, that gentleman with the head of an ass and the trunk of a bull, most frequently and with special pleasure speaks of morality and passes judgment with special severity on youth for its immorality, consisting in a lack of respect for worthy (i.e., rich) people, and for its freethinking, consisting in a disinclination to believe in words that are not upheld by deeds. One can find thousands of such examples, and it is not the least matter for surprise that there are people in our times who call Socrates a cheat, a rogue and a madman dangerous to the morality of youth. It is a specific feature of our time that for every expression of truth, for every noble impulse, for every honest action spontaneously and actually explaining the meaning of morality and unintentionally exposing perverted moralists, you will promptly be called an immoral man. With

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