

Non-Target Communist Area Analysis Department
Background Information USSR

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NEKRASOV IN ITALY AND AMERICA

Victor Nekrasov is a 51-year-old Soviet writer who has recently been attacked in the Soviet press for his outspoken travelogues on Italy and the United States which were published, respectively, in the November and December issues of Soviet Mir. Nekrasov's account of his trips to the United States in 1960 and Italy in 1962, entitled "On Both Sides of the Ocean", are noteworthy for their relatively unbiased appraisal of the West and for their critical approach to several aspects of Soviet life. Whereas Solzhenitsin's Lyud and Stasovskiy's People Are Not Angels conform to the Party's aim of exposing the evils of the Stalinist past, Nekrasov directs attention to certain ludicrous aspects of life under Khrushchev--the Party-induced practice of "citizen arrests", the destruction of churches, the restrictions on cultural exchange with the West, the conservatism of the Soviet Academy of Art, and the paternalistic KGB chaperoning of Soviet tourists abroad. On the other hand, Nekrasov expresses enthusiasm for Western modern art (excluding the purely abstract, however), films, and architecture. He also points out the progressive features of the Catholic Church, the economic upsurge in Western Europe and Japan, new forms of capitalism in the West, and the importance of America's role in World War II, including military and economic aid to the USSR.

Nekrasov's travelogues were published some two weeks ago. The campaign for cultural orthodoxy, sparked by Khrushchev's December descent on the Moscow exhibition of modern art, has included onerous attacks on Nekrasov and Soviet Mir which may well cause editor-in-chief Izraelovskiy to refrain temporarily from publishing such controversial works. Similar works will undoubtedly continue to be written, but may be confined to the desk drawer until the current storm subsides.

The most violent attack on Nekrasov's "On Both Sides of the Ocean" appeared as an editorial comment in the 20 January Izvestiya. Accusing Nekrasov of "proclaiming peaceful coexistence in the sphere of ideology--an exceedingly dangerous matter", Izvestiya presented the distorted picture that, according to Nekrasov:

"...one may equate the battle of the Volga with American pork stew (i.e. canned food provided to the Soviets during World War II--r.o.), and the sketches of Le Corbusier with the silhouettes of cities of the Communist future. So, we cannot agree with this!"

Fekreyev is further chastised for failing to see the "striking social contrasts of American life and the war psychosis kindled by imperialist circles", and for "defaming much of what is sacred to every Soviet man. Not to speak of the author's insolent and insulting attitude toward his traveling companions". Such views "lead to bourgeois objectivism and to thoughtless descriptions which distort reality". On 31 January both Izvestia and Kommunisticheskaya Pravda carried the attack to Soviet Mir's editor-in-chief, Aleksandr Ivarkovsky. The latter newspaper complained that "recently the reader has had more and more often to be puzzled by things that are printed in this journal (Soviet Mir--r.c.) from time to time." The reader of the following selections by Fekreyev will find these charges distorted and absurd. The editor of Soviet Mir, however, is likely to consider them more seriously--FOR A TIME.

The first selection of excerpts is from Fekreyev's American tour and appeared in the December 1948 Soviet Mir.

Fekreyev on EGB tourist chaperons:

"Our most dear Ivan Ivanovich most of all feared any kind of digression from the schedule and routine. Being in a state of perpetual strain and nervousness, he was constantly recounting us like chickens, and the most frightening thing for him was to have someone say, 'But I don't want to go to the National Gallery, I'd rather go to the Guggenheim Museum or simply take a stroll on Broadway'. This 'simply take a stroll' particularly scared him.

"On our first day in New York, after our visit to the United Nations building, at the entrance he organized our first 'letuchka' (a short meeting--r.c.). Having requested Tadousa Oisipovitch (the American Express tour guide--r.c.) to stand aside, he gave a short lecture on discipline, the duties and obligations of a small Soviet collective on foreign soil. Mentioning the fact that certain people had been late for dinner on the first day and, having separated themselves from the collective, were required to take a taxi, and this mustn't happen again, otherwise he would have to take corresponding measures, although he didn't explain what measures. We, like school children, stood beside the wall of the spacious building, silently listened to him, when the guilty ones began to make excuses, voices gradually were raised, arguments arose, and Tadousa Oisipovitch stood to the side, observing us ironically. I was rather astounded.

"Poor, poor Ivan Ivanovich. Somehow I understood him and felt sorry for him. He was, after all, responsible for all of us and we were twenty, and he didn't know any of us; we had known each other not more than a day and were not at home, but in the city of the Yellow Devil, where there were gangsters, and policemen, and the FBI...How could one not feel sorry for him? But nevertheless our most kind Ivan Ivanovich had forgotten one thing--the fact that people are drawn to us

Soviets, threat for contact with us and we have no right to fence ourselves off and shut ourselves up in a shell. Our every movement is observed, every word is listened to, and therefore we should behave completely naturally and be ourselves. Excessive caution--let's call it that--does not bring people together but repels them.

"But all the same, in spite of the strict schedule and routine, we managed to learn something about America. Not much, but something."

On America's Role in World War II:

"The whole world knows about America's contribution to the struggle against fascism. The name of Franklin Roosevelt is respected in all corners of the globe. The United States, it is true, did not suffer the horrors of occupation, the destruction and the barbarous bombings, but American soldiers were killed at Pearl Harbor and in the Philippines, in the Persian Gulf and in the Himalayas. Three hundred thousand Americans will never return home again. Americans knew not only the exultation of victory, but the bitterness of defeat--the same Pearl Harbor, the tragedies of Corregidor and Bataan, the frightening days at the beginning of 1942 when it seemed that Japan was about to reach Australia and the very shores of America. The situation in those days was much more difficult for us, and we are in no way inclined to underestimate our own contribution in the war, but nevertheless we Russians will never forget the assistance which was given us in those difficult days--the Sherman tanks, the C-47s and Studebakers, and the pork stew, and that which we didn't see at the front but which our industry received."

On Dali and Surrealist Painting:

"Salvador Dali is one of the most celebrated artists of the West. He is a Spaniard, but he has been living and flourishing in the United States for more than twenty years. Therefore, although I take care not to categorize him as an American artist, I should like to say a few words about him.

"Salvador Dali is a surrealist. This is not a new movement, it is no less than forty years old. Its better known representatives are Andre Breton (he is known as the 'pope' of surrealism), Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Miro, Andre Masson, Yves Tanguy and Hans Magritte. But, of course, the most famous, most sensational, most tumultuous, most extravagant and, I would permit myself to say, the most talented among them is Salvador Dali.

"He is approaching sixty, but he is full of energy. He has a most effective prickly moustache, almost like the one of Wilhelm II, which is known to the whole world because Dali

loves to be photographed. He willingly grants interviews, considers himself a philosopher and even has written two books: The Secret Life of Salvador Dali and Fifty Secrets of Magic Art. He loves sensations and all kinds of stunning pranks. I don't remember exactly--it isn't really important--but somewhere in Italy at some kind of performance, he sat in a box and blew gold powder out over the hall. While working, he wears a paper over his nose because his nose, he says, disturbs his working. At one of his exhibitions in New York he put in the show window a bathtub lined with wool in which a beautiful girl reclined; then he climbed into the show window, upset the bathtub and broke the window glass.

"But all this is relevant. I simply swallowed the bait of the American newspapers which have such a weakness for sensations and for the various eccentricities of celebrities. Speaking seriously, Dali is an artist who possesses a highly sensitive fantasy, and excellent craftsmanship and, looking at his works one can see how much great and difficult work is put into them. This is no slipshod work, no "Dumet of the Adriatic" of the well-known sea, this is labor.

"If one is to believe the Sovetskaya Sovetskaya Entsiklopediya (vol. 41, the article "Surrealism"), then 'the well-known representative of surrealism--the painter Salvador Dali--paints pictures exhorting atomic war'. This is succinctly and expressively stated, but unfortunately it does not quite correspond to the truth. Dali does not extol any kind of war, and in general he neither extols nor passes judgment on anything. Salvador Dali, as is true of all surrealism, is a considerably more complicated phenomenon, although both are completely in conformity with the development of Western art. I don't intend to examine in detail the essence of this phenomenon, the ancestor of which is unquestionably Freud and his cult of the subconscious. I would only like to consider why museums and exhibitions which display abstract art are almost always empty, whereas there are always large crowds in front of Dali's paintings..."

On American Architecture and Modern Art

"The Guggenheim Museum does not resemble anything (although one of our tourists said it looks like a steamship and others said a sewing machine). It is an enormous white reinforced concrete spiral, which expands upwards, resting on an extended horizontal base. The other bases supplement and stress the basic one. This enormous spiral is in fact the museum. One ascends by elevator to the top floor and, following the spiral--which is nothing more nor less than the gallery--one walks down. It is 1200 meters long. I have never in my life seen a more conveniently and rationally constructed museum--both for the viewer and for the exhibits. The pictures are hung in a single row, at eye level. Properly speaking, they are not hung, but are fastened to the wall with brackets which creates the illusion that they are floating in air against the background of the white wall. There is an abundance of air and

light (both natural and artificial, but these are somehow cleverly blended together), much greenery, and even a pool with a small fountain.

"The museum's collection is rich and varied. Cezanne, Medigliani, Mager, Picasso, Paul Klee, Kandinsky, Chagall, the sculptures of Lipicis and Brancusi--in a word, everything that has been most interesting in the West since the end of the nineteenth century. And one must say that the fusion of the architecture and the exhibited works is absolute. The pictures and sculptures are placed in an atmosphere of ease and spaciousness. They are at home."

The following excerpts are taken from Nekrasov's account of his 1962 trip to Italy and appeared in the November 1962 Soviet War.

On Soviet Destruction of Churches:¹

"The Cathedral of St. Sophia (in Kiev--r.e.) has also been renovated--the meticulous restorers worked hard on it. But, if one turns one's back to the cathedral, on the opposite side of the square one sees indescribable fences and roofs. There, at one time, towered the gold-domed St. Michael's Monastery. Now it is no more. It was torn down in 1937. It was demolished in order to build in its place an administrative building which has never been built. And the monastery of the XI century is gone--only fences and roofs remain.

"I would not be recalling this deplorable incident of twenty-five years ago if also today there were not people, on whom the fate of this or that architectural monument depends, who imagine that any church or icon is "opus for the people" in the first place, and a work of art only secondarily. About a year or a year-and-a-half ago in one of the more influential Kiev newspapers there appeared an article which said it was necessary to demolish certain churches and synagogues of the XI and XII centuries. You see, they spoil the landscape. Convincing, isn't it?"

Italian Reaction to Soviet Literature:²

"He spoke about his grudges against Soviet literature. In his opinion it is too sentimental. (Italians, themselves,

¹ Prompted by Nekrasov's visit to the preserved medieval town of San Gimignano in Italy?

² These views were expressed to Nekrasov by the 40-year-old Italian writer Pier Paolo Pasolini, who, according to Nekrasov, "occupies one of the first places in Italian literature today."

are a sentimental people, but they do not tolerate any kind of sentimentality whatsoever in art.) He was referring to A Ticket to the Stars by Arapov, to Pavushenko's poems, and to the film Ballad of a Soldier. "The representatives of Soviet literature", he said, "during the difficult period of crisis which we are watching with great anxiety and sympathy, are trying to escape from a 'call to war'---a consequence of the Stalin era---and are trying to overcome what we would call the experience of decadence. But in attempting to overcome this experience of decadence they are finding, in a certain sense, that which preceded it: romanticism, understood as innocence and purity. This romantic, sweet, good-natured one, which is saturated with humor and is at its best classically innocent and pure, can no longer fully satisfy us. The situation which took place in the Soviet Union and which has an effect on the situation in our country, because we are closely connected with one another, requires something different. The Stalin period was a real tragedy for us all. In its turn, the technical progress in Russia together with the weakened feeling of extraordinary optimism places serious problems before all mankind: the rocket which was sent to the moon, besides being the source of great pride to the Soviet Union, at the same time compels us, I should say, to take a new look at the suffering, ignorance and poverty on earth. Therefore the position is not an easy one. We are waiting for Soviet writers to create a truly tragic work, a work which is bitter and even cruel, if necessary, in which all this would be said."

Remarks on the Stalin Period and Contemporary Soviet Literature:

"We are talking about the tragedy not of just one, two, three, ten, a hundred, well even of a thousand men---we are talking about the tragedy of the people as a whole. And if our literature has thus far not been able to speak of this complicated, bitter and contradictory subject which is connected with what we now call the cult of personality period, then this is only a question of time. Soviet literature, with its great desire to confirm life (perhaps particularly because of this desire), simply cannot avoid the tragic happenings in our life. It cannot, because as Tvardovsky said when concluding his speech (i.e. the editor-in-chief of Novy Mir in his speech to the Writers' Congress in Italy---r.o.), 'in art and in literature, as in love, one can lie only for a time---sooner or later comes the time to tell the truth.'"

On Economic Upurge and New Forms of Capitalism in the West:

"At the present moment Italy is experiencing an economic upurge. This phenomenon is characteristic not only of Italy. A similar upurge is occurring at the present time in West Germany and Japan, that is, in countries which suffered defeat in the last war. The standard of living in Italy has become

noticeably higher--during the past five years the wages of workmen have considerably increased, the number of unemployed diminished, building of living quarters has increased on a large scale, and the products of Italian industry are appearing on the world market more and more. What is the reason for all these developments?

"The reasons are many. Here are the principal ones. First, as a result of the war the country's industrial equipment was almost entirely renewed. The rather difficult process (under normal conditions) of removing old equipment and replacing it with new took place, so to speak, not because of the good life, but because the greater part of factories and plants had been destroyed. At the present time, the technical equipment of Italian production is of a very high standard. Second, the defeated countries lost colonies and therefore the burden of colonial wars. And, finally, there is a comparatively low military budget: there is no necessity to spend money on rockets since these are kindly offered by America through NATO.

"All this is what has brought about the economic condition which is now called in the West the 'economic miracle'. It is necessary to add further that capitalism in its present stage is compelled to seek various new forms of mutual relationship between the producer and the working man ('socialization,' 'national capitalism,' 'social partnership,' Gilvetti's 'paternalism'), but this, however, requires special research for which there is no place in these essays which by no means pretend to be scientific research.

"Where will it go from here? I prefer not to answer this question either. I think that, as far as Italy is concerned, it depends less on what occurs within that country itself than on what happens beyond her borders. The world is in a state of fever. And the future of the Tunis worker, the Roman schoolboy and the farmhand from Lucania depends to a great extent on what happens at the moment in the streets of Algiers, at the Brandenburg Gate, at Cape Canaveral and in the halls of the New York Stock Exchange."

On the Catholic Church:³

"The power and the influence of the Catholic Church are great. I know, and the forces taken by religious manifestations in Italy are often ugly (remember the church scenes in the film *Nights of Cabiria*, which were considerably cut in our country), but compared with what I have seen in Bagdad, the Sunday meeting with the Pope seemed to me simply a happy

³This commentary follows remarks by Sakrakov on the persistence of religious obscurantism in Russia.

spectacle or like one of the numbers in the tourist program of the Grand Viaggi company.

"Incidentally, the 'modernism' of the contemporary Catholic Church is, to a certain extent, also its weapon. Forms of influence on parishioners are changing. Even the Pope has also become different. It is said (I am judging on the basis of what the Italian newspapers write), that the eighty-year-old John XXIII is very democratic, that he sits at table and even drinks wine with his chauffeur. The Pope is an advocate of peaceful coexistence. After the launching of 'testik-j' he arranged that a special service be held in his summer residence of Castel-Gondolfo in honor of Nikolaev. Everything is in flux, everything is changing..."

P.S.