Spring 1983

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“As exciting as being in hell”: Maxim Gorky in the United States

Judith H. McDowell

The impact of literature upon politics is not easy to confirm or to evaluate. One can usually point out only a tenuous connection between the utterances of an author and the deeds of politicians. But in one instance, at least, there is a definite thread running between a literary work and the tortuous course of international politics. This is the instance of Maxim Gorky, whose book *In America* seems to have had a not inconsiderable influence upon Soviet-American relations.

Gorky, often called the father of Soviet literature, is still a most highly revered author in the U.S.S.R. Four years before he died, his home town of Nizhny-Novgorod was renamed Gorky. His funeral in 1936 was attended, we are told, by 800,000 people. Moscow’s main street and one of the major Soviet film studios also bear the famous name. And one cannot travel in the Soviet Union without encountering numerous parks, institutes, museums, and avenues honoring the writer. More importantly, his books continue to be read and studied, and, of course, believed. For Soviet citizens, almost none of whom ever travel to the United States, Gorky’s early twentieth-century impressions of our country continue to be a significant basis on which they form their opinions of the character of Americans. As Soviet-watchers have discovered over the years, Gorky’s works on the United States are periodically reprinted and distributed among the Russian people as fuel for the ideological fires.¹

Along with numerous references to America in his published letters and a handful of newspaper articles written in the 1930s, Gorky’s works on the United States consist of six essays, frequently collected and published under the title *In America*. Two of these essays were translated and published here during his brief visit in 1906: “The Mob,” printed in the *Cosmopolitan*, and “The City of the Yellow Devil,” printed under the title “The City of Mammon,” in *Appleton’s Magazine*. To these scathing denunciations of
American life, there were, naturally enough, copious protests; Gorky himself admitted, probably understating the case, that he received twelve hundred letters attacking him for the Appleton's piece. American readers were temporarily spared, however, from having to read the other four pieces: "Realm of Boredom," "One of the Kings of the Republic," "A Priest of Morality," and "The Lords of Life." In all these essays the United States is seen as a land where the promise of freedom has been brutally erased from the minds of the people by the rapacity of the capitalists. The people, dulled by their insignificant roles as cogs in the capitalist machine lubricated by the oil of religion administered by the hypocritical Bible-thumpers, are both tragically enslaved and comically self-satisfied. The leaders of the people, the millionaires and the so-called "Kings of the Republic," are consumed by greed, incapable of human affection, completely racist and sexist, and hideously corrupted, themselves slaves also to the "Yellow Devil—Gold." American society is thus divided into two groups: the Mob—a "terrifying beast"—and the Boss—a "madman." The mob lives in stupid, dismally ugly surroundings, frequently, as on the East Side of New York City, in dirt and poverty unequaled on earth. The Boss lives in unspeakable depravity in luxurious surroundings, buying congressmen and hypocritically lecturing the people on their Christian duty to shun worldly goods for themselves, avoid envy and socialism, and labor incessantly to increase the wealth of the capitalist class.

A few excerpts from these essays will suffice to illustrate the tone of them all. In New York, the City of the Yellow Devil, Gorky stresses most of all how the monstrous rapacity of "the ichthyosaurs of capital" have turned the people into zombies:

The people's faces wear an expression of immobile calm; not one of them, apparently, is aware of his misfortune in being the slave of life, nourishment for the city monster. In their pitiable arrogance they imagine themselves to be the masters of their fate; consciousness of their independence gleams occasionally in their eyes, but clearly they do not understand that this is only the independence of the axe in the carpenter's hand, the hammer in the smith's hand, the brick in the hand of that unseen bricklayer, who, with a sly chuckle, is building one vast but cramping prison for all. There are many virile faces among them, but in each face, one notices
the teeth first of all. Inner freedom, the freedom of the spirit, does not shine in these people’s eyes. And their freedomless energy reminds one of the cold gleam of a knife that has not yet been blunted. It is the freedom of blind tools in the hands of the Yellow Devil—Gold.

This is the first time I have seen so monstrous a city, and never before have people seemed to me so insignificant, so enslaved. At the same time nowhere have I met people so tragically satisfied with themselves as are these in this voracious and filthy stomach of the glutton, who has grown into an imbecile from greed and, with the wild bellowing of an animal, devours brains and nerves.

When Gorky turns from the mob to the leaders of society, the millionaires, he can describe nothing but swinish dissemblers. In his interview with one of these “Kings of the Republic,” he has a cunning but stupid capitalist speak on many subjects, including government, religion, art, and science:

A good government is important. It sees to it that there should be as many people in the country as I need, to buy all that I want to sell; that there should be just enough workers to avoid any shortage of them for my purposes. But no more! Then there will be no socialists. And no strikes. The government must not levy high taxes. I myself will take all that the people have to give. That is what I call a good government. . . .

Religion . . . says that everything on earth belongs to the devil. Man, if you want to save your soul, do not wish for nor touch anything here on earth. You shall have all the joys of life after death—everything in heaven is for you! When people believe in this, it is far easier to handle them. Yes. Religion is a lubricant. And the more we use it to oil the machine of life, the less friction will there be among the parts, and the easier the job of the operator of the machine. . . .

Art must be amusing—that is what I want. It must make me laugh. . . . Artistic decorations for the ceiling or walls should stimulate the appetite. . . . Music should be patriotic. A march is always good, but American marches are the best. America is the best country in the world; that is why American music is the best on earth. Good music is always to
be found among good people. The Americans are the best people on earth. They have the most money. . . . Good sciences . . . ought not to teach anything bad. . . . But my daughter's teacher once told me that there are social sciences. . . . That is what I do not understand. I believe that this is harmful. Good science cannot be created by a socialist. Socialists must not have anything to do with science at all. Edison, he is creating science that is useful or amusing. The phonograph, the cinema—that is useful. But many books of science—that is too much. People should not read books which might put all sorts of doubts in their heads. Everything on this earth is as it should be and there is no need whatever to get mixed up with books.  

Why did Gorky, normally a close and accurate observer of truth, write of us with such wormwood and vitriol, page after page not of genuine literature but of monotonously pure grist for the Bolshevik propaganda mills? Part of the answer must surely lie in the events of his visit to this country from April to October 1906.

Gorky came here with high hopes, intending to tour and lecture from East to West Coast to raise money for the Bolshevik cause and to thwart the czarist government's attempt to float loans in this country. Actually there was a good bit of sympathy in America in 1906 for the Russian revolutionary cause. Lenin was not yet seen as a threat, and American intellectuals often drew parallels between the Russian and the American revolutions. Mark Twain, for example, said to a New York Times reporter in answer to the question of why he should help Gorky: "Because we were quite willing to accept France's assistance when we were in the throes of our revolution. . . . It is our turn now to pay that debt by helping another oppressed people in its struggle for liberty." Gorky had been recently released from the dungeons of the Fortress of Peter and Paul in St. Petersburg, to which he had been sentenced after his participation in the abortive 1905 revolution and from which he was freed after worldwide protest. Forcibly ejected from the czar's police state, he was now hailed throughout the West as the spokesman of the revolutionary cause. The American public was well acquainted with Gorky's articles commissioned by William Randolph Hearst's paper, the American, depicting the sufferings of the Russian masses on the occasion of the "Bloody Sunday" massacre in January 1905. Hearst, angling with socialist backing for
a spot as candidate for the presidency, was especially anxious for Gorky to visit the United States, as were numerous liberals and countless radicals, among them both Russian exiles and non-Slavic sympathizers with the socialist cause.

To read the newspaper accounts of Gorky’s stay in the United States from 10 April through 13 October is to witness a melodrama. Arriving at Hoboken on the *Kaiser Wilhelm der Grosse*, Gorky was met and nearly mobbed by thousands who had stood for hours in the rain to greet him. There was no trouble at customs. As Commissioner of Immigration Watchorn reported to the *New York Times*, Gorky replied to the standard question concerning support for law and order, “No, I am not an Anarchist. I am a Socialist. I believe in law and order.” He added that what was then passing for government in Russia was really anarchy, and to all that he was opposed. Accompanied by Madame Gorky and his adopted son Nikolay, Gorky left the pier with cheering throngs running alongside his carriage, and went to a prearranged three-room suite at the Hotel Belleclaire, Broadway and 77th Street.

The next night, 11 April, Gorky was an honored guest at a dinner at the A Club, a small group of writers that met at 3 Fifth Avenue. Seated at his left was Mark Twain, and the two distinguished writers spoke affably through an interpreter. (Gorky, incidentally, never learned English, though he made some stabs at it while he was here. “It’s as difficult as pulling out nails with your teeth,” he wrote to a friend. “You have to memorize the pronunciation and spelling of each single word: these sticklers to rules speak the language of anarchists—there’s not a single rule in it!” Gorky’s adopted son frequently acted as his interpreter, and Madame Gorky helped him too by speaking fluent French and German as well as passable English.) Twain announced to *New York Tribune* reporters, “I am so glad to meet Gorky”; Gorky responded by saying, “It is a happy day that I am permitted to meet Mark Twain. He is world-famous, and in Russia he is the best known of American authors.” At the A Club dinner, it was announced that a committee of prominent Americans, among them Twain, William Dean Howells, and Finley Peter Dunne, had been formed to raise funds for the Russians fighting for freedom. After the dinner, Gorky went to the home of a prominent socialist, Gaylord Wilshire, at 69 West 93rd Street, where a reception for H.G. Wells was in progress. Again Gorky was received tumultuously.
For a few days the New York papers continued to report the Gorky news most favorably; he was interviewed on numerous subjects, from his health and the view from his hotel window to his opinions of Father Gapon, Premier Witte, and other Russian leaders. With what can now be seen as considerable irony, Gorky stated to the Tribune: "I came to America because it is the most democratic country on the globe, and I believe Russia is destined ultimately to stand next to America as the land of democratic ideas. I shall do all I can to arouse American interest and call out American sympathy, and my success in giving it concrete form will determine my course while in the country." Madame Gorky, formerly an actress with the Moscow Art Theater, was also interviewed about her activities, to which she responded demurely, "I appeared in one of my husband’s plays, but I am no longer before the public. I am now simply my husband’s wife." The Gorkys’ tentative plans to tour the country, definitely to visit Chicago and probably to get to California, were announced. An invitation to the White House was thought to be forthcoming. On 13 April Gorky was greeted with a long ovation at the Murray Hill Lyceum, where he spoke briefly. On the same day, the Gorkys held a reception at the Belleclaire, at which guests such as Bliss Carman, Ida Tarbell, and other shakers and movers of American life could be found. After the reception, the Gorkys had lunch with Mr. and Mrs. Edwin Markham and other persons of social prominence. Clearly Gorky had risen to the highest eminence in America.

But then, on 14 April, Gorky’s fourth day in the United States, the tone of the newspapers began to be less favorable. Front-page headlines announced a tremendous gaffe on Gorky’s part. He had sent a telegram to W.D. Haywood and Charles Moyer, the two leaders of the Western Federation of Miners who were then in jail at Caldwell, Idaho, on a charge of conspiring to murder ex-governor Steunenberg. The telegram read:

Greetings to you, my brother socialists. Courage! The day of justice and deliverance for the oppressed of all the world is at hand. Ever fraternally yours.

Maxim Gorky, Hotel Belleclaire.

Some of Gorky’s sympathizers began to fear that this rather rash act would blight his prospects in America, upon which Gaylord Wilshire claimed responsibility for the wording of the telegram and
for persuading Gorky, during a hurried moment, to sign it. But the die seems to have been cast. Though Gorky later repudiated the telegram, public opinion showed the first signs of stiffening against him.

On 15 April the bombshell burst. Once again front-page news, Gorky was revealed to be traveling not, indeed, with Madame Gorky, but with a woman who was not his wife at all! The so-called “Madame Gorky” was found to be Maria Andreyeva, in truth the famous actress but also the wife of General Zhelabushki, a high official in czarist conservative circles, from whom she had separated five years earlier, though it was not known for sure whether this separation had been sealed with a legal divorce. Gorky's legal wife, Yekaterina Pavlovna, was still living in Russia.

It was the New York World, an archrival to Hearst's American, that broke this news, printing along with it a picture of Gorky's legal wife and his two children. Other newspapers quickly picked up the story, and yellow journalism had a field day. Even the relatively stodgy New York Tribune began its front-page story with a vigorous slap at Gorky:

Maxim Gorky, the Russian author and revolutionist, was almost overwhelmed by the warmth of the welcome accorded him on his arrival in this country and deeply impressed by the prevalence of peace and order that is possible in America without the display of military authority, to which he was accustomed in his unhappy fatherland. He has also learned that it is unfortunate to lend his name to expressions of sympathy to those who are held for crime in this country without a clear knowledge of all the circumstances even when it is advised by a new found friend. He is also learning that the laws and conventions in the United States frown on the license that obtains to some extent in Russia affecting the marriage relation.13

Others besides the anonymous reporters now turned against Gorky. Mark Twain, interviewed at his Fifth Avenue home, told the Tribune:

By these disclosures he is disabled. It is unfortunate. I felt that he would be a prodigious power in helping the movement, but he is in a measure shorn of his strength. Such things as have

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been published relate to a condition that might be forgivable in Russia, but which offends against the customs in this country. I would not say that his usefulness has been destroyed, but his efficiency as a persuader is eternally impaired. Every country has its laws of conduct and its customs, and those who visit a country other than their own must expect to conform to the customs of that country.14

Miss Alice Stone Blackwell, the Boston president of the Friends of Russian Freedom, spoke to the New York Times in even stronger language:

We wanted Gorky to speak at our meeting in Faneuil Hall, but since this horrid news has become known, such action on our part would mean the driving away of all Americans who love decency.15

Even Immigration Commissioner Watchorn again became front-page copy as he issued a vague threat to Gorky by reminding Times reporters that "Section 2 of the immigration law of March 1903 provides for the exclusion from the U.S., among others, of any woman brought into the country for immoral purposes."16

For several days, the papers were full of Gorky news. The tentative invitation to the White House was withdrawn. Word from Chicago came that "Chicago women of social prominence are almost a unit in declaring that Gorky and his companion must be repulsed."17 The telegram sent to Gorky by the alleged murderers Haywood and Moyer from their jail cell was given big play in the press. Articles appeared depicting the plight of the real wife of Gorky and her two sons, abandoned as they were in Russia. (In truth, Gorky and Yekaterina Pavlovna, who was ten years his senior, had separated amicably a few years after their marriage; afterwards they kept up a friendly correspondence, and she lived quite comfortably and openly with another man.) Other articles about Gorky's mistress, Maria Andreyeva, her husband General Zhelabushki, and their two children, a boy of twenty and a girl of thirteen, all three still in St. Petersburg, elicited responses ranging from raised eyebrows to overt outrage on letters-to-the-editor pages. The Tribune expressed its indignation by printing a story by Gorky, a particularly brutal description of peasant life called "The Road of Shame," under this headline and bit of editorial comment:
Persons of Delicate Sensibilities Would Better Omit Reading This Painfully Realistic Bit of Russian Peasant Life

Maxim Gorky has come to this country to agitate for a revolution in Russia which shall result in a republic and put self-government in the hands of peasants like those he describes in the following story. Premier Witte believes that peasants like these should be trusted with a very limited form of self-government. Gorky denounces Witte. Americans will make up their own minds.18

The American minds were presumably made up, and expressed by the Times editorial responding to the news that the first Madame Gorky had "remarried" in the same way Gorky had: "Marital mutations of this particular sort remain highly obnoxious to us—our way of accomplishing the same end being different and more formal, if not obviously more virtuous."19

There were some Gorky supporters in the United States, of course, who objected to this laceration of their hero in the press, several of them pointing out that the notorious Sarah Bernhardt was not so treated when she traveled here and that George Eliot and her companion George Henry Lewes were treated with the utmost respect, despite the widespread knowledge that they were not legally married. In the face of the printed accusations of his immorality, Gorky remained calm; one suspects he might even have been vaguely amused, as he issued only one comment about himself and Madame Andreyeva:

I think this disagreeable act against me could not have come from the American people. My respect for them does not allow me to suspect that they lack so much courtesy in their treatment of women. I think this dirt is conspired by the friends of the Russian government. My wife is my wife—the wife of Maxim Gorky. She and I both consider it below us to go into any explanation about this. Everyone may say about us what he pleases. For us remains our human right to overlook the gossip of others. The best people of all lands will be with us.20
But what happened next destroyed Gorky's calm and apparently permanently altered Gorky's attitude toward the American people. Shortly after the news of Gorky's marital condition hit the newsstands, the proprietor of the Hotel Belleclaire requested the Gorky party to vacate the premises. Mr. and Mrs. Leroy Scott, prominent New Yorkers and socialists, immediately booked rooms for them at the first-class Lafayette-Brevoort, Fifth Avenue and 8th Street, and escorted Gorky and Andreyeva to the hotel. When they arrived, on the afternoon of 15 April, the manager explained to them that, in the circumstances, he could not afford to entertain them in the hotel, but would find rooms for them across the street in the fashionable Rhinelander apartment-hotel. They moved with their baggage into a two-room suite at the Rhinelander, rested a while, and then left to attend a socialist rally at the Grand Central Palace. When they returned, exhausted, a little before midnight, they found their trunks stacked high in the lobby of the Rhinelander. The manager explained that they could not stay there and that their luggage had to be removed immediately. As the Times reported, "The actress made a scene, and even the stolid Gorky became nervous." Gorky's adopted son then tried, unsuccessfully, to get them rooms at the Victoria Hotel, and they finally took refuge at the home of the Scotts. For a while at least, they disappeared from public view. American decency had been avenged.

For a few more days, Gorky was still front-page copy, as reporters speculated on his whereabouts and added whatever juicy tidbits came to hand. But then, on 19 April, the Gorky news, along with almost everything else, was relegated to the back pages, as the news of the San Francisco earthquake hit the papers. From then on, the coverage of Gorky's activities in the United States was minimal and always buried in the back pages. Though he spoke for the revolutionists' cause from time to time at various occasions and was apparently well received each time, he never managed to accumulate a substantial amount of money for the Bolsheviks, the great appeal originally sponsored by Twain and others having fizzled out. After leaving the Scotts', Gorky and Andreyeva traveled briefly to Boston and to Philadelphia, from which he wrote to his first wife, Yekaterina, "I do not have it easy here, but then it's as exciting as being in hell." Finally, they moved in with Mr. and Mrs. John Martin, the recognized leaders of the Fabian movement in this country, at first at the Martins' home on Staten
Island and then, during the summer of 1906, at their summer cottage near Keene, New York, in the Adirondacks, where Gorky wrote his famous revolutionary novel *Mother*, as well as his six scathing essays on the United States. On 13 October, he sailed on the *Princess Irene* for Naples. He never got to see Chicago, let alone the West Coast.

The newspapers reported his departure as a minor item. The *Tribune* claimed that he said he did not regret his visit here and he had enjoyed his stay. "I have nothing to say of Americans," he is quoted as saying, through an interpreter, "other than that they did not understand us. My impressions of America and its people will appear in full in my next book."^{23}

Part of these impressions had already appeared in American journals, as we have seen, and accounts of the other articles were soon to appear from Naples. By the fall of 1906, however, the Gorky material was old stuff, and the yellow press had long since turned to juicier scandals. Writing of Gorky's impressions of the U.S., a *Tribune* editorial summed up what by then was apparently the general sentiment toward Gorky:

No distinguished visitor has gone back so free as Gorky from that bias toward flattery which hospitality imposes. . . . So there is no reason why he should not say what he pleases, and feel the better for saying it. . . . We did not lionize him. . . . There was a time . . . when Americans used to feel hurt when a literary visitor, his pockets full of our dollars, wrote of us with unkind candor. But now we feel bored if it is a serious effort to indict the whole people or amused if it is a mere ebullition of bad temper.^{24}

Thus the American people dismissed Gorky, relegating his essays on them to the dustbin as uninteresting and unimportant. And so they would be, were it not for the fact that Gorky's Bolshevik cause was ultimately successful in 1917. When we consider the enormous significance of Gorky in Russia, and the fact that millions of Soviet readers even today believe his essays on the United States to be interesting, important, profound, and true, then not only a few individuals but also two entire nations are involved in the results of the disastrous 1906 visit. It is not to stretch the imagination too far to believe that not only Maxim Gorky and Madame Andreyeva but also future Soviet-American relations suffered to some extent from
the yellow journalism of 1906.

NOTES

3 All six essays may be found in Maxim Gorky, The City of the Yellow Devil: Pamphlets, Articles and Letters about America (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972).
8 Gorky to K.P. Pyatnitsky, The City of the Yellow Devil, 128.
9 New York Tribune, 12 April 1906, p. 4, col. 2.
22 Gorky to Y.P. Peshkova, The City of the Yellow Devil, 130.
23 New York Tribune, 14 October 1906, p. 3, col. 5