

Isaak Babel's *Marya*: An antirevolutionary play?

By Sybille Fuchs
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The award-winning director Andrea Breth has staged an outstanding but rarely performed play at the Düsseldorf Theatre, Isaak Babel's *Marya*. Babel (1894-1940), the short story writer and journalist, is perhaps best known as the author of *Red Cavalry*, brilliant stories about the Polish-Soviet war of 1919-21.

Marya was written in 1933-34 and published in 1935. Babel knew it would not appeal to the Soviet Communist Party leadership. Along those lines, he wrote to his mother and sister from Sorrento, where he was staying with his mentor Maxim Gorky: "Difficulties may well arise, because it obviously does not accord with the general Party line, but everyone will be deeply impressed by its artistic qualities".

Gorky was also aware that the play would be mercilessly rejected by the Kremlin bureaucracy. He thought his friend had a penchant for "doomed projects", the play was cold and its meaning vague. Reacting to this criticism, Babel made a number of revisions, but it is unknown whether this led Gorky to change his evaluation.

Nevertheless, the older writer was right to judge the play's fate pessimistically. Although Moscow's Vakhtangov Theatre wanted to stage *Marya* and had even begun rehearsals, and although other theatres were also interested, the play was banned by the Stalinist NKVD secret police.

In the course of the Stalinist purges, the author was arrested on false charges in 1939, executed in 1940 and buried in a mass grave. Although Babel was rehabilitated in 1954, the play was never performed in the Soviet Union. The first performance in Russia was delayed until 1994.

There have only been a few performances in German-speaking countries, and a printed version of the play can at best be obtained from second-hand bookshops. Critical literature dealing with *Marya* is restricted to productions staged by Peter Palitzsch at the Stuttgart State Theatre (1967), Jürgen Flimm in Munich (1975) and Dieter Giesing in Zurich (2000). [An English-language translation is available in Penguin Classics' *The Golden Age of Soviet Theatre*, 1995.]

The reasons for the play's lack of recognition probably have as much to do with the personality of the author and his fate in the Soviet Union as with the work itself. It is certainly one of the finest plays of the first half of the twentieth century. However, the Stalinist bureaucracy with its state doctrine of "socialist realism", the Western policy during the Cold War and post-1989 capitalist triumphalism baying for the collapse of the Soviet Union all conspired to stifle interest in a revival of the play.

"Gloomy forebodings"

In a number of interviews, Andrea Breth has explained why she felt the time was ripe to stage the play.

She told the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* she had been familiar with the play for thirty years, but believed it had only recently become relevant, "because we currently find ourselves in a rather unsettling time of change. I'm no expert on the Arab world, but you can see everywhere there young people who cannot live the life they want and they are entitled to. Besides, we ourselves are confronted with an unfathomable economic situation. I

myself am prey to quite gloomy forebodings: I have a feeling that things just can't continue in the same old way. Maybe it won't happen right now in Germany, because the Germans are rather hesitant when it comes to revolutions. But I'm not so sure that's the case with other countries".

Breth thinks there is definitely something in the air. Her hunch is certainly justified and it is shared by many people.

She goes on to say: "And Babel's *Marya* shows quintessentially how people react very peculiarly in times of disconcerting upheaval. In a play set in 1920 and involving twenty-eight characters and eight quite short scenes, he manages to portray an entire society—which, incidentally, is also strongly reminiscent of today's Russia. But I'll be damned if I rework the play to fit today's context. The historical context is necessary—the cold, the hunger, the forced prostitution of women. There's no other way to do it, even if that means I'm once again going to be labelled old-fashioned".

The director's strong emphasis on "hunger, cold and forced prostitution" hints at the way Breth's production expresses this mood of change, and also the conclusions that might be drawn from her directing.

These negative side effects of the revolution certainly play a major role in Babel's work, especially because it is set during the young Soviet Union's period of greatest danger—the Civil War and intervention from the armies of the Western powers. But the matter is more complicated for Babel. He is not simply concerned to come to terms with the October Revolution and mourn the passing of the good old days. Instead, he sees the negative aspects as the violent birth pangs of a new and better age. His scepticism can surely be attributed to the period in which he composed the play, in the early 1930s, when the Stalinist bureaucracy was consolidating its death grip on Soviet society and especially culture.

Breth (born 1952) is renowned for a faithful rendering of the text in her productions. She refuses to subject her plays to any violent updating. The Düsseldorf staging also reflects this impressive historical authenticity. In the midst of the Civil War in 1920, St. Petersburg's post-revolutionary atmosphere is portrayed with great realism in the opening scenes.

The food supply situation is catastrophic. Formerly rich and prominent families have become impoverished. Nikolai Mukovnin, a former general in the tsarist army, his daughter Ludmila, the housekeeper Katya and an old nurse are freezing and starving. *Marya*, the general's eldest daughter, is absent from the entire play. We are told she is taking part in the Polish campaign as a political commissar. Although she never appears on stage, she is anything but a phantom. She is constantly mentioned. She is a representative of the new society, even though her letter—read out by candlelight in the general's flat—is certainly not uncritical of the country's dire situation, and she is full of love and compassion for her father.

Babel's precise directions are reflected in the staging of the first scenes, set in the hotel room of the racketeer Dimshits and his invalid accomplices, and in the family home of the impoverished old General Mukovnin. The characters reveal how different layers of the population

respond to the overturn of social relations: we witness their difficulties and also the unscrupulous ways they try to exploit the situation to their own advantage.

The old general, by no means hostile to the revolution, seriously tries to confront the old society by writing a book about the cruelty of the tsarist army and playing with the idea of offering his military skills to the Red Army.

Most of the performances given by the ensemble are excellent, and largely succeed in bringing to life the two dozen characters created by Babel to typify the people caught up in the “upheaval”.

Peter Jecklin’s Mukovnin, Christopher Luser’s impoverished, cello-playing Prince Golitsyn and the crooks (Pierre Siegenthaler, Benno Iffland and Moritz Löwe) are particularly well cast. Bärbel Bolle in the role of the old nurse is also impressive. Less convincing are Gerd Böckmann’s former cavalry captain Viskovsky and Klaus Schreiber’s Jewish shyster Dimshits, who tend to overact—something for which the director is probably responsible.

Babel’s eight short scenes—each as sharply defined as a film sequence—rapidly succeed each other without a break, except for short bursts of buzzing, shrill, shrieking, screeching or thundering music composed by Wolfgang Mitterer.

The interrogation

The production begins to slide in the sixth scene. Ludmila, the general’s younger daughter, is questioned by an inspector at a police station. She had prostituted herself, was raped by the former cavalry officer, Viskovsky—one of the most unpleasant characters in the play—and became infected with gonorrhoea. She refuses to give her name. When the inspector grows impatient, telling her he has not slept for five days and nights, she tells him her name.

Breth’s direction invests this relatively brief scene with deep significance by having a militiaman gratuitously shoot at a figure lying on the ground. This addition to Babel’s work is apparently meant to allude to the threat of the Stalinist purges, to which the writer himself was to fall victim a few years after writing the play.

Even if this deviation could perhaps be accepted as an insightful reference to the author’s fears and scepticism about the contemporary political situation, it has to be regarded critically in the light of the director’s interpretation of the play’s ending.

Following the general’s death in the eighth and final scene, his apartment is emptied and freshly painted. The previously dark and tiny stage suddenly wanes large and bright. Agasha, the caretaker, prevents the sale of the general’s elegant furniture because the worker, Safonov, and his heavily pregnant wife, Yelena, are to move into the flat: “People who previously lived in the cellar”.

Yelena thinks the apartment is too large, “too good for us”. But the painter and Agasha buoy her up. “Get used to having the good”, says Agasha. Yelena is due to go next day to give birth in the Mother and Child Palace, one of the former tsarina’s palaces that has been converted into a maternity hospital.

According to Babel’s stage directions, what then happens is as follows: “Yelena opens windows, sun and street noises stream in. She sticks out her belly and carefully moves along the walls, touches them, peeps into adjoining rooms, switches on chandelier and switches it off. Enter Nyusha [the maid], an enormous ruddy girl, carrying pail and clothes to clean windows. She stands on sill, tucks skirt above her knees, sun’s rays stream on to her. She stands out against the spring sky like a statue bearing an arch”. Yelena invites her to her modest housewarming celebration. Then Nyusha strikes up a song about the Red Army soldiers, which ends Babel’s play.

This account of the triumph of the proletariat, modestly conceived by the play’s author, is staged in the current Düsseldorf production as

follows: Agasha wears a fur coat, which she has apparently commandeered, and marches around like a concentration camp warden. When the worker Safonov appears, he roars around the stage and fells his pregnant wife to the floor with a slap in the face. Following the entry of the cleaning lady, loud march music and martial songs are heard from outside. Nyusha responds by dancing and strutting wildly around the room.

Breth thus falsely attributes to Babel a fatuous glorification of the post-revolutionary situation, which she then proceeds to caricature. This, together with the scene involving the militiaman, effectively imparts to the play a meaning diametrically opposed to its content. Breth is obviously capable of understanding Babel’s melancholically ironic, yet compassionate depiction of the downfall of the old society and its proponents, but can only conceive of the revolution inevitably leading to terror and horrendous chaos. She seems to view the proletariat as violent and rather stupid, and its leaders cruel and ridiculous.

Babel does show the social dislocations, inevitably caused by the Russian Revolution and the Civil War. He shows the moral corruption and degradation of the old ruling classes, as well as the opportunism of people who benefit from the chaotic situation. He refuses to deny or gloss over the seamy side of the revolution, the backwardness and shortcomings of the newly triumphant oppressed population, but he affirms the social upheaval.

Babel’s work has to be understood within the context of his own life and times. But his brilliance in so vividly capturing his experiences and this period in literary form makes his prose and his plays so attractive for us today.

Babel’s prose is characterised by its succinctness: not a word is superfluous. Everything is expressed concisely; characters and social conditions are rendered most vividly. This testifies to the meticulous attention the author gave to his frequently revised texts.

These qualities apply not only in Babel’s prose, but also largely to his play *Marya*. The Düsseldorf production is able to profit from Babel’s extremely robust and convincing poetic style, even where it is misinterpreted by Breth.

“Woe to us! Where is the sweet Revolution!”

Isaak Babel, son of a Jewish businessman, was born in Odessa in 1894. He attended a kind of commercial high school, where a French teacher was particularly responsible for awakening an enthusiasm for literature. He read voraciously, and tried to emulate his idol, Guy de Maupassant, in the writing of short stories in French. But he soon abandoned this enterprise and lived in St. Petersburg from 1915. For a whole year, he tried in vain to have his works accepted there by various editorial departments.

In 1916, he came into contact with Maxim Gorky, who recognised his talent and published some of the short stories in his journal *Letopis* [*The Chronicle*]. Owing to a violation of the censorship regulations (Offence against Public Decency), Babel was indicted and, following Gorky’s advice, spent the next years “among the people” in order to gain the maturity and life experience necessary for his writing. The February and the October 1917 Revolutions took place during this period.

According to Babel’s memoirs, he worked variously for the Cheka, the People’s Commissariat for Education and in food expeditions in 1918, and fought with the Soviet northern army against the troops of Nikolai Yudenich (leader of the White movement) in the Civil War. He served with the First Cavalry in the Polish campaign under the command of Semyon Budyonny. He was, among other things, a member of the General Government Committee in Odessa, an editor in the Seventh Soviet Press in Odessa and a reporter in St. Petersburg and Tbilisi. Following his demobilisation, he took up writing again.

Babel became well known and internationally famous with his

compilation of short stories *Red Cavalry*, drawing on his in the military campaign against Poland, which he recorded in a diary. Distinguished by its dense, pictorial, yet very pointed language, the brief episodes describe both the cruelty and the deeply human events of that unsuccessful war.

Being a keen and curious observer, Babel has his eyes on both sides: the Cossacks and the impoverished, war-battered, largely Jewish population of Galicia. The frequently described brutality of the war often acquires at the same time a darkly romantic-poetic charm, or is accompanied by a bitter sense of humour when Babel satirises the backwardness of the fighters or the common people. For example, when worthy veterans try to stave off persistent nurses, who want to undress them and put them in a bath, or when the junk dealer Gedalia welcomes the revolution but is reluctant to give up the Sabbath and can only exclaim: “Woe to us! Where is the sweet Revolution!”

This book immediately earned Babel the implacable hostility of General Budyonny and his political commissar, Josef Stalin, as well as many of their followers. However, his time in the Red Army also enabled him to make many friends among the senior officers. Both adversaries and friends were later to lead to his undoing.

His friends from the officer corps were arrested and executed one after the other during Stalin’s great purge of the military in the 1930s. His enemies relentlessly reviled and slandered him as a “morbid intellectual”. When Maxim Gorky received an “anti-Babel” play, penned by the playwright Vsevolod Visnevski, he returned it to Visnevski with the comment: “*The Red Cavalry* should not be criticised from the heights of a horse’s back”. (1)

Babel’s friend, the highly respected literary critic Aleksandr Voronsky, recognised Babel’s talent and exceptional abilities at an early stage.

Voronsky—a member of the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party from 1904, and a follower of Trotsky and leading member of the Left Opposition from 1923—used his writings and the magazines he edited like *Red Virgin Soil* to defend the so-called “fellow traveller” writers such as Gorky, Babel, Pilnyak and Mayakovsky against representatives of the Proletcult (Proletarian Culture) movement, whose works delivered crass propaganda at the expense of literary quality. (2)

In an essay on Babel in 1924, Voronsky wrote that “Babel plays sly games with the reader. He is not a chronicler, but our passionate contemporary. Babel is cementing the bond between literature and the Soviet Republic and the Communist Party. He is close to us and has a firm sense of what life and our era are about. One can say without exaggeration that Babel is a new landmark on contemporary literature’s tortuous, complex road to Communism. Though some people fail to see this, the content of Babel’s work is absolutely unequivocal”. (3)

Voronsky was expelled from the Party, arrested and banished in 1928. Before visiting him in exile in Lipetsk, Babel noted: “He’s sick, saddened, unhappy. I have to go to him there”. (4) From a short time, Voronsky was allowed to return to Moscow, but was arrested in 1937, convicted and immediately executed. Babel himself was not a Trotskyist, but—like many other intellectuals—he was closely associated with the Oppositionists and increasingly shared their political views. Trotsky’s comment in his autobiography *My Life* that Babel was the “most talented of our younger writers” would certainly not have endeared the writer to his enemies. (5)

In the following years, numerous friends and colleagues of Babel and Voronsky were hunted, arrested, executed or committed suicide. Following the death of Gorky in June 1936, Babel rightly suspected that he himself now faced imminent arrest.

On the occasion of the Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1934, when the doctrine of so-called “socialist realism” was finally deemed the only acceptable form of art, Babel described his contribution to his genre as “continuing to be successful—by being silent”. *Marya* could still appear

in print in 1936. Babel was again permitted to travel abroad and—due to the insistence of the French organisers—spoke at the Paris Congress of Writers for the Defence of Culture in June 1935.

His arrest finally came in 1939. In Vadim Rogovin’s work on the murders committed during the Stalinist purges, *The Party of the Executed*, he writes about how clearly Babel had understood the significance of the events. Rogovin refers to spy reports and interrogation protocols in Babel’s NKVD file that cite his reaction to the hardening dictatorship: “People get used to such arrests just as they do to bad weather. The obedience of party members and the intelligentsia faced with the prospect of finding themselves behind bars is frightening. This is the trademark of a statist regime”. (6)

Another source claims that Babel said of the detainees: “These extremely talented men tower above the mediocre representatives of the present leadership. As soon as such men come close to gaining any power at all, the leadership mercilessly cries: ‘Arrest them! Shoot them!’” (7) Babel was accused of being a “spy for the West” and a “Trotskyite”, and was shot in a Moscow prison in January 1940. In 1954, he was officially acquitted of the charges made against him. A large part of his unpublished work and writings confiscated by the Stalinist secret police has still to be recovered.

Isaak Babel was one of the most outstanding figures in the extraordinarily fertile cultural life of the Soviet Union during the 1920s and early 1930s. A study of his work gives a glimpse of what has been lost to world culture.

Notes:

1) Peter Urban, *Isaak Babel’s Red Cavalry*, Berlin, 1995, 16

2) See Alexander K. Voronsky, *The Art of Seeing the World, Selected Works 1911-1936*, Mehring Books

3) Aleksandr Voronsky, *Isaak Babel*, in *Twentieth-Century Russian Literary Criticism*, edited by Victor Ehrlich, Yale University Press, 1975, 182-197 (Translated from English)

4) Peter Urban, op. cit., 14

5) Leon Trotsky, *My Life*, New York, 1970, 361

6) Vadim Rogovin: *The Party of the Executed*, Essen, 1999, 244-45

7) *ibid.*, 245

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