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## Eugenics in Russia

The beginning of the XXth century was marked by increasing interest in eugenic theory introduced by F. Galton. According to him the main goal of this branch of science was to study the factors which can either improve or worsen physical and mental abilities of human race. The development of these ideas was peculiar in different countries and much influenced by the political ideology of the time. Soviet Russia presents a striking example of such interaction of science and ideology which also found its reflection in literature.

Many prominent Russian scientists welcomed eugenic ideas though being from the very beginning aware of certain moral challenges involved.

The history of Eugenics in Russia starts with the foundation of Russian Eugenic Society in 1920 headed by a prominent biologist N.Koltsov. One of the major directions of its work was accumulating data about famous artists and scientists with the purpose of studying their heredity, thus one of the peculiarities of Russian eugenics was its interaction with genetics. There was also founded a journal titled “The Clinical Archive of Ingenuity and Talent” edited by a prominent eugenicist Grigory Segalin, which was published from 1925 to 1930 in Sverdlovsk (Ekaterinburg). This journal comprised works of different psychologists and psychiatrists who communicated with and studied the activity of people of art and literature. This branch of eugenics was titled *eureko-pathology*, nowadays sometimes also termed “*ingeniology*”.

The editors of this journal tried to trace talent to certain mental disturbances running in the family. In 1930 the journal was closed together with The Russian Eugenic Society. Having studied a solid bulk of genealogical trees the scientists came to the conclusion that there are no great personalities at least among representatives of art and literature without hereditary mental disturbances, while about 30% of mentally deficient people may not have such heredity. In one of his essays “Main Goals of Eureko-pathology” published in

1922 in the Journal 'Uralskii Vrach' Grigory Segalin developed the idea that talents are born from the parents one of whom is the bearer of inherent artistic qualities while the other has a marked psychopathological heredity. This branch of eugenic research actually went counter to the theory and practice of the so-called *psycho-hygiene* which had many supporters in the West and in Russia as well.

The other peculiarity of Russian eugenics was its close affiliation with Marxist ideology. The connection between knowledge and improving human condition was a crucial aspect to the ideology of post-revolutionary Russia, where people began to consider themselves actual masters and creators of history: 'We have been born to make fairy tales come true!' read the lyrics of a popular song. This was in fact the motto of the day, and to realize it the Russians changed the natural course of rivers, drained swamps and irrigated deserts, among other projects designed to manipulate the natural environment. In 1926 the "connoisseur of all science" Joseph Stalin declared: 'We should straddle nature' and his political comrade in arms Pyatakov continued: 'The expansion of the boundaries of the possible, turning what seemed impossible into possible – that is the main characteristics of the Communist party. That is the spirit of true Bolshivism'<sup>1</sup>.

But most challenging to the Bolsheviks was the basic idea of the new society, which was to mold a new man. Therefore Soviet eugenics took a different turn. While the founders of this science in Russia regarded eugenics as an aspect of genetics, for the new generation of Marxist scientists it was the means to implement the ideas of socialism in terms of building a new society. By 1925 there had been spread the opinion that genetics was incompatible with dialectical materialism as it seemed to exclude the possibility of complete social control over the development of human beings. Later on it resulted in complete rejection of genetics and persecution of its followers.

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<sup>1</sup> Zerkalo Nedeli (2004:5). This and all subsequent quotes are my own translation

At the same time some Marxist eugenicists started exploring the possibilities of eugenics to achieve concrete practical results in improving human faculties. In 1924 Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Soviet State died. It was commonly accepted that his premature death was caused by the great strain and exhaustion with hard work for the benefit of the people. Moreover, he died childless. The leaders of the country were greatly concerned with this problem as they also exhausted themselves with work and did not have much strength left for procuring children. Lenin's personal physician Rosanov, who tried to solve the problem of rejuvenating Party leaders applied to Stalin in 1925 asking to provide two healthy gorillas for the operation of transplantation of their sexual glands to humans. Two high ranking party officials were selected as candidates for this operation. It is not known exactly who they were, but most regular Rosanov's patients were Stalin and Zinovyev. However the operation did not take place.

The other concern which made the Party support bold experiments was a global one. "The father of the nation" as well as his comrades in arms favored the idea of crossbreeding humans with apes. Such hybrids would have good health, possess superhuman strength and endurance and be obedient. They could live in special reservations, feed on food waste, work from morning till night and follow any order without questioning. Such creatures would not need Gulag. This task was entrusted to a very talented scientist Ilya Ivanov the one who developed the method of artificial insemination, and managed to breed different hybrids, such, for example, as zebra and donkey, but his final goal was using this method to crossbreed human beings with apes. Ivanov's major argument was that it could prove the materialistic theory about the origin of man and the theory of evolution. The Soviet government considered his arguments quite convincing and allotted a handsome sum of money for his expedition to French Guinea in 1926, where he hoped to find volunteers among native women, who would do it for money. However he failed and was sent to continue his

experiments to the famous ape arboretum in Sukhumi. In 1927 the newspaper *Krasnaya Gazeta* in its article 'Future Sukhumi Arboretum' wrote: 'It is projected to carry out artificial insemination of apes of different types as well as crossbreeding of apes with human beings. There will be experimental insemination of women from apes and apes from men according to Professor Ivanov's method.'<sup>2</sup> This publication caused a row abroad and just accusations of immorality. After that the experiments were continued in top secrecy. We still don't know whether the scientist managed to create a "new man", but there is a hypothesis, that yetis are nothing but off springs of such experiments, which according to some evidences were secretly continued in GULAG.

Post-revolutionary Russia at large resembled a huge laboratory where all means were good as long as they were justified by the needs of the proletariat. Still the so-called "molding" of a "new man" seemed dubious to many representatives of Russian intelligenzia. Maxim Gorki, before the revolution wrote in his 'Untimely Thoughts' that revolutionaries 'treat people as quack scientists treat dogs and frogs meant for cruel scientific experiments, with the only difference that even a quack scientist torturing animals does it for the sake of mankind while not every revolutionary is sincere in his experiments on people'<sup>3</sup>. His criticism became even sharper in the post-revolutionary period, when he said about the Bolsheviks: 'I know that they are performing a most cruel scientific experiment on the body of Russia'<sup>4</sup>. As if developing the same idea Russian poet M.Voloshin wrote: 'They want to give it (Russia) a new soul with a help of surgery'<sup>5</sup>. Another Russian writer Korolenko in his letter to the Narkom (People's Commissar) of Culture Lunacharski again uses the word *experiment* : 'I love our people not less than any Bolshevik...But I love them not blindly, just as a material suitable for different experiments, I love them the way

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Fedotov (2006: electronic resource)

<sup>3</sup> Gorki (1991:38)

<sup>4</sup> Kalashnik (2004:19)

<sup>5</sup> Voloshin (1920:electronic resource)

they are...You have light-heartedly started your schematic experiment...'<sup>6</sup>. Commenting on this correspondence another prominent Russian man of letters Soloukhin wrote: 'You may only wonder at the naivety of the wonderful Russian writer, a human and a citizen, who having misunderstood the essence of Leninist Bolshevism continues talking to these maniacs, beast-like ogres in human language.'<sup>7</sup> Thus we see that in all above mentioned quotations the key word is *experiment*. The theme of experiment becomes the main subject of the famous long-short story by M.Bulgakov *The Dog's Heart*, where eugenic experiment acquires symbolic meaning.

M.Bulgakov though perhaps one of the greatest XXth century Russian writers for a long time remained an outcast in Soviet literature, all his major works being published long after his death. The reason for it was his grave doubts about the bright future of the Soviet Russia and the propriety of the challenging social experiments. On May 7 1926 there was a search in Bulgakov's flat and only one manuscript was withdrawn - it was the manuscript of his long short story *The Dog's Heart*. Why should NKVD (former KGB) get so interested in this particular work? The answer is self evident – it bares a very close resemblance to the secret experiments carried out in Russia.

*The Dog's Heart* is set in Moscow of the 1920s. The main character is professor Preobrazhenski – a genius eugenicist who is famous for his transplantation of monkey's ovaries for the purpose of rejuvenating humans. He manages to keep his big flat because he has mighty protectors in the echelons of power. It should be noted that it was recently disclosed that such operations were actually performed in those days in the Soviet Russia, and several party officials underwent them. So it is understandable why the figure of Preobrazhenski resembles two famous scientists of those times – the leader of Russian eugenics Koltsov who carried out similar eugenic experiments and the

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<sup>6</sup> Korolenko (1992:electronic resource)

<sup>7</sup> Soloukhin (1992:electronic resource)

famous physiologist Pavlov, who was famous for his experiments on dogs which seemed to prove materialistic theory.

The professor decides to perform an operation on a stray dog Sharik to convert him into a human being. He transplants the hypophysis of recently deceased Klim Tchugunkin – a drunkard and a hooligan - and as a result creates an ugly and vile creature, a vicious parody of a man. Still this creature easily becomes a rightful member of the new society. He takes the name of Sharikov, procures documents, claims his proletarian background and even finds a job, which he eagerly and faithfully performs – clearing Moscow streets of homeless cats. Though he remains nothing more than a street dog in his essence for the Bolsheviks he is one of those, who as the famous anthem *International* goes ‘were nothing and have become everything’. Being unable to learn the ways of normal human behavior he quickly adopts popular Bolshevik slogans and ideas like taking everything from the rich and distributing it equally. He reads Engels’ correspondence with Kautsky and ideologically attacks his creator by claiming that the latter is a bourgeois capitalist. In fact he becomes a true speaker for the new society in which, according to Lenin, every cook would be able to govern the state. Thereby Sharikov is turned into a bitter parody of Russia’s new people, no wonder the book remained under the ban until after Perestroika, first officially published in 1987.

At the end of the story professor Preobrazhenski realizes his failure and says to his assistant: ‘Here you are, doctor, that is what happens when a scientist instead of going step by step and parallel to nature, forces the issue and draws up the curtain: have a Sharikov and eat it with porridge’<sup>8</sup>. And further: ‘It is possible to transplant the hypophysis of Spinoza or somebody else and make up something valuable out of a dog, but the question is, what for? <...> Doctor,

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<sup>8</sup> Bulgakov (2004:96)

mankind takes care of itself and in the course of evolution year after year produces out of a mass of filth tens of outstanding geniuses adorning the globe'<sup>9</sup>.

It is notable that Bulgakov makes professor Preobrazhenski his mouthpiece. It becomes evident when we read the lines from his letter to the USSR government of March 28, 1930, where he describes his literary method which is characterized as he puts it by "...dark and mystic colors <...>poison saturating the language, deep skepticism about the revolutionary process in my retarded country and the opposing to it of my beloved Great Evolution <...>'<sup>10</sup>.

Though the story can be referred to science fiction in fact it represents the genre of social satire where fantastic is used as an artistic device to bring to the foreground important social issues, and the biological experimentation acquires a more general meaning. Bulgakov was a physician by education, so it was only natural for him to interpret social issues in biological terms. It is possible that this was suggested by the fact that the two great books that brought about radical changes in the minds of people – Darwin's *The Origin of Species* and *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* by Marx and Engels, written about the same time, actually paralleled each other. Both developed the theory of evolution, be it biological or social, which could lead to the emergence of qualitatively new phenomena – Homo Sapience in the case of Darwin and new society – in the case of Marx. Yet, Bulgakov's hero voluntaristically interrupts the chain of evolution, willing to accelerate the natural process. It was exactly what Lenin did with Marxism – he justified his social experiment, actually running counter to Marx by creating the theory of the possibility of building socialism in one single separate country, which represented "a weak link" as he called it in the world of capitalism. The results as shown by Bulgakov were disastrous.

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<sup>9</sup> Bulgakov (2004:97)

<sup>10</sup>Quoted in Beznosov (2004:25)

Though Russian Eugenic Society was closed in 1930 the idea of improving human nature still remained very attractive and was more than once addressed in the works of another writer of the period – Alexander Belyaev.

A. Belyaev at first sight seems to be far from politics. Son of a clergyman he studied at the seminary and though did not follow his father's views and developed atheistic world outlook was considered in Soviet Russia as ideologically “unreliable element” Being for long periods bed-bound due to the incurable spine disease he actually depended on the development of medical science, which could perfect human nature and dreamt of the times when scientists could conquer illnesses and even death. Commenting one of his most popular novels *The Head of Professor Dowell*, - Belyaev wrote, - ‘is to a great extent an autobiographical piece. Illness once laid me down for three and a half years into a plaster bed. All this time the lower part of my body was paralyzed. And though I could move my hands it was basically life of the head without the body, which I didn't feel at all...It was then that I thought and felt all that a head without body can experience.’<sup>11</sup>

So unlike Bulgakov he didn't mean to create allegories and was interested in the development of science as such and its fate in the modern world. In one of his best-known novels “Amphibious man” he features a young man with transplanted gills, which was done by a genius scientist Professor Salvator to save his life – the boy had a fatal lung disease. Professor Salvator successfully carried out experiments in transplantation of animal organs to save dying people. As a result Ichtander was able to breathe both on land and in the water. It is a beautiful romantic story of a young man enjoying unbounded freedom in the sea, making friends with dolphins, playing with fish, helping drowning people. He is perfectly happy until he falls in love and wants to join the world of people – a kind of remake of the famous Anderson's mermaid tale. Finally he falls prey of the greed of people who want to use him for fishing pearls, and after being

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<sup>11</sup>Quoted in Bugrov (1984:461)



kept in custody loses his ability to stay on land for a long time. So he has to return to the sea, from now on he is doomed to freedom and loneliness.

Though the plot is mainly that of an adventure and love story at the end a very important conflict is introduced – it is a conflict of science with religion. Professor Salvator is prosecuted for the operations that according to the bishop undermine religion. ‘Didn’t our Lord find his creation beautiful, - spoke the archbishop with inspiration? <...> And our Salvator assumes that something needs to be corrected, improved, distorted <...> Is it not blasphemy?’<sup>12</sup> (133). As a matter of fact the scientist’s name itself hints at his wish to adopt the role of the Savior. In his answer to the accusations Salvator declares: ‘In 1915 before my departure to the front I had to introduce a small correction into the organism of our respected bishop – cut out his appendicitis <...> lying on the operation table my spiritual patient didn’t protest to this distortion of the God’s image...’<sup>13</sup> (140). ‘The problem is not that man originated from animal, but that he hasn’t stopped being an animal... Rude, aggressive, unreasonable. <...> As a surgeon I had to help people, heal them. Operating on people I often had to transplant tissues, organs, glands.’ – he continues. Speaking about the phenomenon of amphibious man Salvator speculates: ‘<...> man is imperfect. Having gained in the course of evolution great advantages over his animal forefathers man also lost much of what he had at lower stages of development. Thus, ability to live in water could give human beings great advantages. <...> If man could live in water the exploration of the ocean and its depths would go rapidly. Sea would stop being an ominous element demanding human victims. We wouldn’t have to lament the drowned.’<sup>14</sup> (145). This declaration infused with the spirit of bold discovery and firm belief in the possibility of happy future for mankind echoes the words of a real person – the famous Jacques-Ive Cousteau who declared: ‘Sooner or later mankind will dwell at the sea bottom: our experience is the

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<sup>12</sup> Belyaev (1986:133)

<sup>13</sup> Belyaev (1986:140)

<sup>14</sup> Belyaev (1986:145)

beginning of a great intrusion. There will appear cities, hospitals, theatres...I envision a new race *Homo Aquaticus* – a new generation, born in underwater villages and completely adjusted to the new surrounding.<sup>15</sup>

Explaining why he did not make his discoveries public doctor Salvator remarks: ‘I was afraid that within our social system my discovery would incur more evil than good <...> it is possible that generals and admirals would take Ictiander over to make the amphibious man drown military vessels. No, I couldn’t make Ictiander and ichtianders public in the country where fight and greed turn the loftiest discoveries into evil increasing human suffering.’<sup>16</sup> (146).

The theme of developing human abilities becomes the main subject of his last novel *Ariel* published in 1941. The protagonist of the book is a young man who due to a special operation is able to fly. This character is very similar to Ictiander – the amphibious man. Like him Ariel developed superhuman abilities but he is unfit for living in the world where human behavior is mainly motivated by greed and ambitions. Like Ictiander he becomes an object of manipulations.

It should be noted that in this and other Belyaev’s novels and stories the forces which are trying to use science and scientists for mean goals are always connected with capitalist world, it is understandable that otherwise his books would not have been published. Still though Belyaev makes an evident ideological accent – the action of *Amphibious man* is set in a capitalist Argentina , the action of *Ariel*– in England, America and India - the message is definitely larger: human world is imperfect and best achievements of mankind can be easily used for evil purposes and the history of the 20-th century gives many a proof to this. Thus, being written in the 1930s his novels haven’t not lost their topicality nowadays. Moreover, although Belyaev rejected his religious background and developed materialistic outlook it seems that deep in his heart

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<sup>15</sup>Quoted in Bugrov (1984:460)

<sup>16</sup>Belyaev (1986:146)

or somewhere in the unconscious he had this strong moral imperative which made him again and again question the righteousness of the man's endeavor to take over the role of God. That is why most of his stories are sad, they speak about the power of human mind which can equal God and the imperfection of human nature which doesn't allow the great scientific achievements serve people and make them happy. Nowadays many of Belyaev's bold fantasies have come true and many of the scientists who now successfully perform most audacious operations used to be his readers. But at the same time the warnings suggested by such authors as Bulgakov and Belyaev serve as compelling reminders of the horrors that irresponsible experiments with nature can bring about.

Eugenic issues seem to have disappeared from Russian science fiction of the second half of the XXth century, their place was taken by endless descriptions of space travels and encounters with the aliens. But at the beginning of the XXI century there appeared at least two notable books addressing eugenic issues.

One of them is written by a very popular modern writer Boris Akunin which is the pen name of Grigory Shalvovich Chkhartishvili (born May 20, 1956) a Russian essayist, literary translator and author of fiction. *Akunin* is a Japanese word which means *villain*. In his novel *The Diamond Chariot*, set in Japan the author translates *akunin* as 'someone who creates his own rules'. The pseudonym *B.Akunin* also has a direct reference to the Russian anarchist Bakunin, who actually stood for the right of an individual to create one's own rules and to *Akuna*, the home name of the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova.

Already in this playing around with the name we can trace the main principle of Akunin's writing – he is playing with everything – literary texts, genres, styles, traditions, history and first and foremost with the reader thus presenting a perfect example of a postmodern writer. He himself calls his books

– projects, thus implying that they are not the fruits of inspiration or revelation but carefully calculated and structured pieces.

One of his latest novels *Quest* (2008) is set Russia of 1930, exactly the time when Russian Eugenic Society was disbanded. A young talented American biologist by the name of Galton Nord (a notable allusion) and two of his colleagues go to Moscow in an attempt to disrupt Soviet eugenics experiments. His boss a demonic and powerful P.J. Rotveller entrusts him with the mission of getting into the *Brain Pantheon*, where the brains of great Russian people are kept and studied, the brain of the great proletarian leader Lenin in the first place. Rotveller suspects that studying the great brains the Bolshevik scientists are working on creating the elixir of ingenuity, which can in the nearest turn retarded Russia into a great superpower. So the main action takes place in the *Institute of Proletarian Ingeniology* where the biologists are working on extracting the substance of ingenuity from Lenin's brain. According to Akunin the activity of Communist leaders largely depended on this elixir.

The novel abounds in different allusions to the books referred to above. The chief professor of the Institute Gromov definitely reminds professor Preobrazhenski, both in appearance and in habits – like him the latter is constantly singing a tune from his favorite opera. We learn about rejuvenating experiments by means of transplanting chimpanzee's sexual glands and see a living dog's head (reference to Belyaev's *The Head of Professor Dowell*). There are also references to other cult books both of Russian and foreign origin – we can't fail to trace reminiscences from Tolstoy, Strugatski brothers, Lukyanenko and Den Brown.

The book is structured as a computer game. The second part of the narrative, called *Codes to the Novel* is set in 1812, during Napoleon's invasion of Russia, so that to pass from one level of the game (reading) to the other you have to travel in time from the XXth century to the beginning of the XIXth,

from the Soviet Russia to the period of the war with Napoleon and it the story of the past that finally explains the present.

Though the novel as it is typical for Akunin combines the elements of different genres – a spy novel, thriller, adventure story, history novel and ends up in a metaphysical assumption that human history is an everlasting confrontation of Good and Evil, there are many real facts having direct reference to the subject of our discussion that the author alludes to.

In 1926 an outstanding German neurobiologist Oscar Vogt was invited to Moscow Institute of Brain to study Lenin's brain. In this institute they collected and kept the brains of outstanding people to study and later to clone their brains. In 1928 the Soviet government adopted a Decree according to which the brains of all outstanding people were to be handed over to the Institute. Among the brains collected there were the brains of Lenin, Stalin, Andropov, Brezhnev; men of letters – Gorki, Mayakovskii, Bulgakov; scientists – Korolev, Tupolev, Ilyushin etc

Johan Richter in his book “Race, Elite and Pathos” writes that in the 1960s they carried out research in the field of cloning the cells of the brains with the purpose of “perfecting mankind” and creating socialist elite. The last to reach the Institute was the brain of academician Sakharov in 1989. The Soviet scientists did not achieve the goal but the brains kept coming until the disband of the Soviet Union. After that all documents were directed to the Central Archive and made secret (restricted), and the objects of research disappeared<sup>17</sup>

The other reference to eugenic experiment we find in the 3 part novel by Henry Lion Aldee (a pen name of two Ukrainian authors Dmitri Gromov and Oleg Ladizhenski) titled *Acumen*. The authors themselves subtitle it ‘cosmic symphony’. It features different races inhabiting the Universe the way different nations inhabit the Earth. Each nation possesses specific qualities which make

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<sup>17</sup> Torno (2009-electronic resource)

them special in their own way. They interact with each other in different ways from fighting and enslaving to friendly cooperation and love relationships.

Different planets described bear the archetypal features of the prototype countries. We see a kind of Roman Empire inhabited by *Pompilians* with their ambitions and arrogance, cozy world of planet *Sechen* definitely reminiscent of the Russian XIX century province, with its landlords and serfs, and a nameless planet attacked by *Pompilians* which reminds of West Ukrain in the times of the World War I. All the races are also divided into two big groups – races with high energy and low energy potential. There exists The League which can accept some retarded planets into its union to provide help in their development-overt allusion to the European Union.

Although eugenic experiment occupies only a small part of this polyphonic book it bares probably the major message. It concerns the director of eugenic center *The Future* professor Shtilner who insists that mankind can be improved by cross breeding representatives of high and low energy potential races. His project has many opponents as well as supporters and finally Shtilner proves his righteousness on his own example. As a result of his experimental love affair with a woman-scientist belonging to the high energy race of *Gematres* genius twins are born. And by way of conclusion I may say that this is probably the most optimistic and life-confirming perspective for the development of eugenics.

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