

Maxim gorky

Profession, Writer



Russian short story writer, novelist, autobiographer and essayist, whose life was deeply interwoven with the tumultuous revolutionary period of his own country. Gorky ended his long career as the preeminent spokesman for culture under the Soviet regime of Joseph Stalin. Gorky formulated the central principles of Socialist Realism, which became doctrine in Soviet literature. The rough, socially conscious naturalism of Gorky was described by Chekhov as " a destroyer bound to destroy everything that deserved destruction. " LIFE

Maxim Gorky whose real name was Aleksei Maximovich Peshkov, was born on March 16, 1868, in the Volga River city of Nizhny Novgorod, which in 1932 was renamed Gorky in his honor. His father, a cabinetmaker, died when Gorky was 4 years old, and the boy was raised in harsh circumstances by his maternal grandparents, the proprietors of a dye works. From the age of 10 Gorky was virtually on his own, and he worked at a great variety of occupations, among them shopkeeper's errand boy, dishwasher on a Volga steamer, and apprentice to an icon maker.

At a very tender age he saw a great deal of the brutal, seamy side of life and stored up impressions and details for the earthy and starkly realistic stories, novels, plays, and memoirs which he later wrote. He was self-taught in many areas, including literature, philosophy, and history, both Russian and Western. In 1884 Gorky moved to Kazan, dreaming of entering university. That didn't come to happen because of lack of money. Instead he enrolled in the " revolutionary underground school. " He attended gymnasium and university populist clubs, reading the relevant literature and fighting with police.

At the same time he earned his living doing menial work. In December 1887 a series of misfortunes led him to a suicide attempt. After that, Gorky traveled around Russia in search of a job and experience. He traveled to the Volga Region, the Don, Ukraine, Crimea, South Bessarabia (now part of Moldova) and the Caucasus. He worked as a labourer in a village, a dishwasher, a railroad guard and a worker at a fishery, a salt-works and a repair workshop. At the same time he managed to get acquainted with people from arts circles, take part in clashes with police and earn an overall reputation as an “untrustworthy” individual.

In his travels, he collected prototypes for his future characters, which can be seen in his early works, where the characters were people from the “bottom” echelons of society. In 1895 he was appointed at the “Samara Newspaper” (“Samarskaya gazeta”), where he wrote daily articles for the gossip column “By the Way” (“Mezhdu prochim”), signing them as legudiil Khlamida. While at the paper he met Ekaterina Volzhina, an editor, whom he married a year later. In 1897 he suffered from aggravated tuberculosis and moved to the Crimea together with his wife. Later they moved to the village of Maksatikha in Ukraine’s Poltava Region.

That same year, his son Maksim was born. At the beginning of 1898 Gorky returned to Nizhniy Novgorod and in April 1901 Gorky was detained in Nizhniy Novgorod for having taken part in student unrest in St. Petersburg. Later he was expelled to Arazmus. Gorky was elected an honorary academic of polite literature. However, under Emperor Nikolay II’s order, the result of the election was annulled. In 1903 he broke up with his

wife and in 1904, the Moscow Theatre Actress Maria Andreeva became his common law wife. In 1905 Gorky was an active participant in the revolution.

He was a close associate of the social-democrats but at the same time, on the eve of “ Bloody Sunday” (a key moment in Russia’s history, which served as a trigger for the 1905 Revolution) he visited Sergey Witte, the author of the October Manifesto of 1905, and together with a group of intellectuals he tried to prevent the tragedy. After the revolution Gorky was arrested on charges of preparing a coup d’état, but both Russian and European cultural figures rose up to defend the writer. He was released and at the beginning of the following year, emigrated from Russia.

He went to America to collect funds to support the Russian Revolution. In 1913 Gorky returned to Russia. After the 1917 Revolution his position became ambiguous: on the one hand, he was supportive of the new authorities, but on the other hand, he kept to his own beliefs, thinking that mass culture is more important than class struggle. At the same time, he started working at the “ World Literature” (“ Vsemirnaya literatura”) publishing house, founding the newspaper “ New Life” (“ Novaya Zhizn”). Gorky’s relations with the authorities gradually aggravated.

In 1921 he left Russia, officially going to Germany for medical treatment, but in fact escaping Bolshevik retribution. He lived in Germany and Czechoslovakia until 1924. During this time he actively wrote articles for German magazines (“ The Acknowledgement of a Poet and the Russian Literature of Our Time,” “ The Russian Cruelty,” “ The Intellectuals and the Revolution”). All the articles show his rejection of what had happened in Russia. Gorky actively strived to unify Russian artists working abroad. In the

mid-1920s Gorky moved to Sorrento, Italy, where he started work on the novel “ The Life of Klim Samgin” (“ Zhizn Klima Samgina”).

The novel was never finished. In 1928 he journeyed to the USSR and spent the summer traveling around the country. His impressions on the trip were published in the book “ Around the Union of Soviets” (“ Po Soyuzu Sovetov”). Three years later Gorky moved to Moscow. Having seen the results of Bolshevik rule while traveling, he set as his goal the promotion of the new “ cultural construction” of the country. He initiated the creation of literary magazines and publishing houses. Later he organized and chaired the first all-Soviet meeting of Soviet writers. In May 1934 Gorky’s son was killed.

Some suspected the NKVD (the People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs) was responsible for the killing. Two years later Gorky died himself. Speculations continued to surround his death for years; one popular theory suggested he was deliberately poisoned. Gorky is buried in Moscow.

LITERARY CAREER Gorky rose to prominence early in life and made his mark as a writer, playwright, publicist, and publisher in Russia and abroad. His literary career began in 1892 with the publication of the story “ Makar Chudra. ” His articles and stories were soon appearing in provincial newspapers and journals.

His ideas of the writer's involvement in the social, political, and economic problems facing Russia were close to those of Leo Tolstoy and Vladimir G. Korolenko, who became his mentor and friend. Some of his literary works had important political significance, such as the poem Burevestnik (The Stormy Petrel), which in 1901 prophesied the oncoming storm of revolution. While visiting the United States in 1906 on a mission to win friends for the

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revolution and raise funds for the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (RSDWP), he wrote the novel *Mat* (Mother).

Gorky's revolutionary ideology lay in his insistence on the inevitability of radical change in Russian society. He started to write for newspapers, and his first book, the 3-volume *Sketches and Stories* (1898-1899), established his reputation as a writer. Gorky wrote with sympathy and optimism about the gypsies, hobos, and down-and-outs. He also started to analyze more deeply the plight of these people in a broad, social context. In these early stories Gorky skillfully mixed romantic exoticism and realism. Occasionally he glorified the rebels among his outcasts of Russian society.

In his early writing career Gorky became friends with Anton Chekhov, Leo Tolstoy, and Vladimir Lenin. Encouraged by Chekhov, he composed his most famous play, *The Lower Depths* (1902), which took much of the material from his short stories. It was performed at the Moscow Art Theater under the direction of Konstantin Stanislavsky. *The Lower Depths* enjoyed a huge success, and was soon played in Western Europe and the United States. Gorky was literary editor of *Zhizn* from 1899 and editor of *Znanie* publishing house in St. Petersburg from 1900.

Foma Gordeyev (1899), his first novel, dealt with the new merchant class in Russia. The short story *Dvadsat' shest' i odna* (1899, *Twenty-Six Men and a Girl*) was about lost ideals. "There were twenty-six of us - twenty-six living machines locked in a damp basement where, from dawn to dusk, we kneaded dough for making into biscuits and pretzels. The window of our basement looked out onto a ditch dug in front of them and lined with brick

that was green from damp; the windows were covered outside in fine wire netting and sunlight could not reach us through the flour-covered panes.

Our boss had put the wire netting there so we could not give hand-outs of his bread to beggars or those comrades of ours who were without work and starving. " (from 'Twenty-Six Men and a Girl', 1899) The joy in the lives of the bakers is the 16-year old Tania, who works in the same building. A handsome ex-soldier, one of the master bakers, boasts of his success with women. He is challenged to seduce Tania. When Tania succumbs, she is mocked by the men, who have lost the only bright spot in the darkness. Tania curses them and walks away, and is never again seen in the basement.

Gorky became involved in a secret printing press and was temporarily exiled to Arzamas, central Russia in 1902. On leaving Russia in 1906, Gorky spent seven years as a political exile, living mainly in his villa on Capri in Italy. Politically, Gorky was a nuisance to his fellow Marxists because of his insistence on remaining independent, but his great influence was a powerful asset, which from their point of view outweighed such minor defects. He returned to Russia in 1913, and during World War I he agreed with the Bolsheviks in opposing Russia's participation in the war.

He opposed the Bolshevik seizure of power during the Russian Revolution of 1917 and went on to attack the victorious Lenin's dictatorial methods in his newspaper *Novaya zhizn* ("New Life") until July 1918, when his protests were silenced by censorship on Lenin's orders. Living in Petrograd, Gorky tried to help those who were not outright enemies of the Soviet government. Gorky often assisted imprisoned scholars and writers, helping them survive hunger and cold. His efforts, however, were thwarted by figures such as

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Lenin and Grigory Zinovyev, a close ally of Lenin's who was the head of the Petrograd Bolsheviks.

In 1921 Lenin sent Gorky into exile under the pretext of Gorky's needing specialized medical treatment abroad. In the decade ending in 1923 Gorky's greatest masterpiece appeared. This is the autobiographical trilogy *Detstvo* (1913-14; *My Childhood*), *V lyudyakh* (1915-16; *In the World*), and *Moi universitety* (1923; *My Universities*). The title of the last volume is sardonic because Gorky's only university had been that of life, and his wish to study at Kazan University had been frustrated.

This trilogy is one of the finest autobiographies in Russian. It describes Gorky's childhood and early manhood and reveals him as an acute observer of detail, with a flair for describing his own family, his numerous employers, and a panorama of minor but memorable figures. The trilogy contains many messages, which Gorky now tended to imply rather than preach openly: protests against motiveless cruelty, continued emphasis on the importance of toughness and self-reliance, and musings on the value of hard work.

Gorky finished his trilogy abroad, where he also wrote the stories published in *Rasskazy 1922-1924* (1925; "Stories 1922-24"), which are among his best work. From 1924 he lived at a villa in Sorrento, Italy, to which he invited many Russian artists and writers who stayed for lengthy periods. Gorky's health was poor, and he was disillusioned by postrevolutionary life in Russia, but in 1928 he yielded to pressures to return, and the lavish official celebration there of his 60th birthday was beyond anything he could have expected.

In the following year he returned to the U. S. S. R. permanently and lived there until his death. His return coincided with the establishment of Stalin's ascendancy, and Gorky became a prop of Stalinist political orthodoxy. Correspondence published in the 1990s between Gorky and Stalin and between Gorky and Genrikh Yagoda, the head of the Soviet secret police, shows that Gorky gradually lost all illusions that freedom would prevail in the U. S. S. R. , and he consequently adjusted to the rules of the new way of life.

He was now more than ever the undisputed leader of Soviet writers, and, when the Soviet Writers' Union was founded in 1934, he became its first president. At the same time, he helped to found the literary method of Socialist Realism, which was imposed on all Soviet writers and which obliged them—in effect—to become outright political propagandists. Gorky remained active as a writer, but almost all his later fiction is concerned with the period before 1917. In *Delo Artamonovykh* (1925; *The Artamonov Business*), one of his best novels, he showed his continued interest in the rise and fall of prerevolutionary Russian capitalism.

From 1925 until the end of his life, Gorky worked on the novel *Zhizn Klina Samgina* (" *The Life of Klim Samgin*"). Though he completed four volumes that appeared between 1927 and 1937 (translated into English as *Bystander*, *The Magnet*, *Other Fires*, and *The Specter*), the novel was to remain unfinished. It depicts in detail 40 years of Russian life as seen through the eyes of a man inwardly destroyed by the events of the decades preceding and following the turn of the 20th century.

There were also more plays—*Yegor Bulychov i drugiye* (1932; " *Yegor Bulychov and Others*") and *Dostigayev i drugiye* (1933; " *Dostigayev and*
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Others")—but the most generally admired work is a set of reminiscences of Russian writers—*Vospominaniya o Tolstom* (1919; *Reminiscences of Leo Nikolaevich Tolstoy*) and *O pisatelyakh* (1928; "About Writers"). The memoir of Tolstoy is so lively and free from the hagiographic approach traditional in Russian studies of their leading authors that it has sometimes been acclaimed as Gorky's masterpiece.

Almost equally impressive is Gorky's study of Chekhov. He also wrote pamphlets on topical events and problems in which he glorified some of the most brutal aspects of Stalinism. Assessment. After his death Gorky was canonized as the patron saint of Soviet letters. His reputation abroad has also remained high, but it is doubtful whether posterity will deal with him so kindly. His success was partly due, both in the Soviet Union and to a lesser extent abroad, to political accident.

Though technically of lower-middle-class origin, he lived in such poverty as a child and young man that he is often considered the greatest "proletarian" in Russian literature. This circumstance, coinciding with the rise of working-class movements all over the world, helped to give Gorky an immense literary reputation, which his works do not wholly merit. Gorky's literary style, though gradually improving through the years, retained its original defects of excessive striving for effect, of working on the reader's nerves by the piling up of emotive adjectives, and of tending to overstate.

Among Gorky's other defects, in addition to his weakness for philosophical digressions, is a certain coarseness of emotional grain. But his eye for physical detail, his talent for making his characters live, and his unrivaled knowledge of the Russian "lower depths" are weighty items on the credit

side. Gorky was the only Soviet writer whose work embraced the prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary period so exhaustively, and, though he by no means stands with Chekhov, Tolstoy, and others in the front rank of Russian writers, he remains one of the more important literary figures of his age.