

Soviet Heroes: Commitment in Gorky's *The Mother*

Maxim Gorky's 1906 novel, *The Mother*, became the foundation of Socialist Realism. This literary canon was instituted under Stalin in order to reinforce a clear literary model for writers, and to provide readers a prototype of the ideal Soviet citizen. The character of 'the Mother,' Pelageya, embodies the ideal Stalinist hero despite being written long before the advent of Stalinism. Through the Writers' Union, the Soviet government made the novel a core text of the Soviet canon in the 1930s. The protagonist embodied the desired trajectory and human evolution for both Soviet citizens and Soviet society. In the novel, an ignorant peasant woman is transformed into a committed socialist under the mentorship of her politically conscious son, Pavel.

Pelageya lives with her abusive husband and her son in a Moscow suburb during the revolutionary decade of the 1900s. After her husband's death, all she has left is Pavel, who is increasingly involved with strange folks who call each other 'comrades.' Pelageya hears seditious rumors about the comrades and is horrified that her son is keeping the company of such people. Even though she does not fully understand the political terms being introduced, she can't help but notice her son's commitment to these ideas. She watches with a blend of admiration and fear at Pavel's stern and growing commitment to the cause. She also notices that the comrades respect her son's courage and dedication. Pavel and his fellow socialist begin agitating for workers' rights. They organize a rally for the factory workers where Pavel publicly waves a socialist banner. When he is arrested, Pelageya takes up the cause herself. Although she worries about Pavel's imprisonment, Pelageya commits herself to the realization of universal socialism. During the trial, she watches with fear and pride as Pavel and other incarcerated comrades refuse to accept the legitimacy of the Tsarist court. They are all sentenced to exile for their seditious behavior. With her son gone, Pelageya is now entirely devoted to the cause. She decides to distribute the leaflets of Pavel's speech in court to the people, but a government spy recognizes her at the train station. As Pelageya is being arrested, she feverishly hands out leaflets and gives a moving speech to the bystanders. As the gendarmes beat her, choke her, and drag her away, Pelageya spends her last breaths speaking truth to power.

It is not entirely by chance that *The Mother* became the basis for Soviet Socialist Realism. Pelageya's commitment provided an ideal model for the political commitment of Soviet citizens. It taught them how to uphold the socialist revolution, heroically and without questioning its norms. Later Socialist Realist novels refined this concept further, having heroic characters be committed to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union rather than the cause of socialism. This newer development played an important role in establishing unquestioning support for Stalin's authoritarianism.

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