

## Two Bloks and One Pasternak: When, How and Why Does One Get into ZHZL?

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The first full biography of Blok in the series appeared in 1969, with a second edition of the same work in 1981. The author was Aleksandr Turkov, a prolific Soviet critic, specializing in the modernist period. By 1981, the poet's image had acquired clear and approved contours, a process which began much earlier since Blok had Gor'kii's approval as a "man of fearless sincerity." He was marked by his upper class culture, but his readiness to accept the "truth of the people" prevented the author of the pro-revolutionary *The Twelve* from becoming "a decadent Narcissist" (215), as so many of his contemporaries, and to "rally under the banner of those who fought for a new world" (228). Unfortunately, he "was fated to die at the very dawn of the future," while civil war and destruction raged. He died of a heart disease, fatigued by administrative duties and hardship.

In Vladimir Novikov's biography of 2010, we meet an "androgynous" poet whose sole goal in life was to create art and who therefore sacrificed normality to the erotic excesses which were the *dominanta* in his brand of life creation. Social issues were not his theme and that is the reason why works like *Retribution* failed. His *The Twelve* is a tragic poem and does not testify to his acceptance of the October Revolution. He suffered from syphilis and his life of sexual excess was certainly a factor in his death. Novikov, unlike his predecessor, refers to foreign scholars, and pays tribute to Avril Pyman, author of a two-volume biography on Blok. Somewhat surprisingly, however, Novikov accepts as (likely) truth that Blok had fathered an illegitimate daughter with a nurse by the name of Chubukova. In general, toward the end of the monograph, Novikov seems to be engaging in a bit of "life creation" himself.

Pasternak had to wait until 2005 to be honored with an inclusion in the series, as could be expected, Pasternak always having been problematic to the authorities even during his most pro-Soviet phase. When he did enter the series he did so with a bang, Dmitrii Bykov being his biographer and devoting 891 pages to him. Bykov is neither out to "idealize" (or sovieticize) his author, nor to sensationalize his life. His vision of Pasternak is that he had to "immerse" himself fully in a view of life to either reject or accept it and that this is the explanation for quite a few literary failures when the poet "forced" himself to accept what was alien to him. The work is deeply sympathetic but not uncritical.

In sum, the series seems to have "improved" both in its selection of "remarkable people" and how to write about them. Reading Valentin Iurkin's advice to contributors to the series (*Letopis' tsvilizatsii*, 2010) to focus on essentials, such as Sakharov's creation of the atomic bomb, one begins to have doubts however. His policy of choice is to focus "on the defenders of the fatherland" (25) since "greedy hordes" have wanted to control Russia since times immemorial, and he does not forget to mention that Putin has high regard for ZHZL. With such choices a turgid style is inevitable and it shows itself in clichés and the worst devices of the *biographie romancee* (as in the recent biography of the founder of the series F. Pavlenkov). Iurkun does

quote Bykov though—his notion that the series is like a “blood transfusion.” Novikov’s and Bykov’s biographies *were* included in the series. ZHZL seems to be in a transitional period.