Ed. Ludmilla A. Trigos and Carol Ueland. *Literary Biographies in The Lives of Remarkable People Series in Russia: Biography for the Masses.*

Crosscurrents: Russia's Literature in Context. Lanham, MD.: Lexington Books, 2022. x, 352 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. $120.00, hard bound.

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doi: 10.1017/slr.2024.427

The legendary biography series *The Lives of Remarkable People* [*ZhZL* for short] was founded in 1890 by a democratic crusader for popular enlightenment and "man of the sixties," Florenty Pavlenkov, who also independently managed and financed it. Targeted at the mass reader, the original Pavlenkov library was conceived with a goal of spreading knowledge through the production of literary biographies portraying the lives and main activities of their remarkable Russian and international subjects: the long list included artists, statesmen, scientists, religious leaders, religious prophets, and revolutionaries. There were constant issues with censorship, and the then-living greats like Vladimir Solovév rarely if ever contributed (Solovév wrote a short sketch on the prophet Mohammed). At Pavlenkov's death in 1900, the "biographic library," as it was commonly known, boasted more than 200 volumes. In 1933, Iosif Stalin ordained Maksim Gorkii to reinvent the series: The proud owner of the entire Pavlenkov set, Gorkii would reject Mikhail Bulgakov's masterpiece *Life of Monsieur de Molière* for inclusion in his new socialist realist *ZhZL* (he did drop a doomsday quip though about creating a folio for the "remarkable Georgian"). Both Pavlenkov and Gorkii would eventually each become a subject of their own *ZhZL* biography (Gorkii of two). Irene Masing-Delic (Ch. 7, 189–214) masterfully adjudicates between the rival interpretations of Gorkii's legacy by Pavel Basinsky (2005) and Dmitry Bykov (2016).

Rather than a political or publishing history of *ZhZL*, however, this new collection investigates what makes a biography remarkable and such an enduringly powerful magnet for readers. A biography, we find, is especially good if the individual deserving of commemoration is a very contradictory and confoundingly elusive subject (by contrast, Pavlenkov relied on the clear-cut hero models of Thomas Carlyle and the imitation models of Gabriel Tarde). For essential groundwork, look no further than Nikolai Gogol′(see Ludmilla Trigos's contribution: Ch. 3, 91–116). And who is an ideal author? The author need not be a James Boswell to their subjects or a literary star. Successful *ZhZL* authors tend to know the difference between merely "footnotable" storylines and the truly seminal. Let us also keep in mind that no *ZhZL* version after 1933 is ever final: be it political pressure, the weight of new archival discoveries, or simply because there are topnotch biographers awaiting their turn, editors have various reasons and methods by which they decide whose life (and when) may warrant another look and another telling.

The volume under review is a momentous contribution to the existing corpus of North American histories of Russian literary criticism. It provides significant corrections to the study of popular biography as a genre, while situating the role of literary production and the media of life writing in post-communist and contemporary Russia. The eleven chapters and a detailed introduction explore no less than thirty-three *ZhZL* biographies of twelve Russian poets and writers in the longer (so-called "big") and shorter ("small")

series. The chapter by Sasha Smith tackles Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva (Ch. 9, 231–52). Engagement with the Pavlenkov biographies is limited to the editors' introduction and Ch. 4 on Lev Tolstoi by Caryl Emerson (117–42). The WWII and Cold War propaganda lives of Tolstoi 1942, Aleksandr Pushkin 1943, Gogol′ 1945, and Anton Chekhov 1946 are discussed in brief.

Throughout, the authors integrate the distinctly Russian theories of what constitutes a biographical subject and biography writing with a fastidious reading of Soviet-era trends that subscribed to a model of the Nikolai Chernyshevsky life and the attendant univocal patriotism and critique of capitalism forecasting the revolution. Many chapters address the detected "ideological myopias" (see especially Alexander Spektor's chapter on Dostoevskii; Ch. 4, 143–69). Radislav Lapushin's Chekhov (Ch. 6, 169–88) is a "separate" individual unbeknownst to anyone but himself, whereas Emerson's Tolstoi is "free" in his search of new platforms to broadcast his views. It is different with Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva: Smith offers an incisive critique of the epistemic distortions of instrumental "eccentricity" by which the biographies of women writers are cast as if their life stories could become narratable only through the prism of tragic or sexually vagabond "martyrs" (251).

Most chapters compare Russian life writing at home and in emigration. Carol Ueland's contribution on Joseph Brodsky (Ch. 11, 271–99) brilliantly investigates the contrast between Lev Loseff's (2006) cosmopolitan philology and Vladimir Bondarenko's (2015) imperialistic stance [*imperskost′*]. In her Pushkin chapter, Angela Brintlinger (45–68) highlights the timeliness of "the biographical legend" concept introduced by Boris Tomashevsky and countervailing arguments by Leonid Grossman, who resisted novelizing the biography: an epic tension that then nearly guaranteed the popularity in Russia of the *ZhZL* reprint of a two-volume émigré version of Pushkin's life by Ariadna Tyrkova Williams published for the poet's bicentennial (1999). For Dostoevskii, Spektor brings forth the value of foundational biographical historiography of émigré scholars like Vadim Seduro. In explaining the watershed between the work of a deeper traditional scholar raised during The Thaw and the superficialities of younger literary elites from the Vladimir Putin era, J. A. E. Curtis takes a similar approach to Bulgakov and juxtaposes the definitive non-*ZhZL* studies by Marietta Chudakova and the commercially successful *ZhZL* biography told through the history of Bulgakov's three marriages by Alexei Varlamov (2008). Jonathan Stone's contribution on Alexander Blok (Ch. 9, 215–30) shows why the intellectual dilemmas stand out so starkly in his case: only as part of a modernist glut for aesthetic vitas in the *ZhZL* of the twenty-first century could Vladimir Novikov's book (2010) reposition Aleksandr Blok's "aesthetization of life" (230), despite the earlier and unsuccessful attempt by A.M. Turkov (1969).

And yet: The biographies that either downplay or eliminate ideology from their discussions provide no occasion for celebration: such is the verdict Emerson (131–37) reaches on the biography of Tolstoi by Alexei Zverev and Vladimir Tunimanov (2006). Spektor issues a similar judgment on Ludmila Saraskina's Dostoevskii (2011), claiming that Saraskina "overlooks the ideologue" (168) in favor of a religious seeker (163) because her own historical situation is illusorily post-ideological. In short, the post-Soviet *ZhZL* biographies are not ideologically innocent. Describing the Aleksandr Griboedov *ZhZL* by Ekaterina Tsimbaeva (2003), Catherine O'Neill (Ch. 2, 69–90) provides a pithy example of the tendentious ideological commitments: Griboedov is about to be slaughtered in a mob attack on the Russian mission in Tehran. Instead of barricading the door or grabbing a defense weapon, he performs an internal monologue identifying the British authorities as the true sources of Russia's betrayal. In so doing, Tsimbaeva provides "a reading favored by many Russian historians" (81). As Carol Ueland notes, when ideological hype thickens, the experienced Russian reader would do well to start looking elsewhere (294): along with the rest of Russia, *ZhZL* is already migrating to YouTube, Facebook, and reader chatrooms.