

## Mikhail Vladimirovich Bezrodnyi

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### Remembering Soviet Literary Study of the 1980s

A few months ago, the literary scholar Mikhail Bezrodnyi died in Heidelberg. Death is becoming habitual in my circle of Russian scholars: Leonid Katsis, Viktor Kelner, and now Misha. Like the other two, Misha sacrificed himself for Russian culture. (In Russia, it is never “contributed”; it is always “sacrificed.”) Bezrodnyi was a familiar type: a scholar more famous for his oration than his writing. He was a prized raconteur in the *Kurilka*, the smoking room in the library. At drinking parties, he would beguile a crowd of PhDs who after ten shots could not distinguish a trochee from an amphibrach.

Born in 1957 in an assimilated Jewish family in Leningrad. As a Jew, he was excluded from the top universities. Most Jews in Leonid Brezhnev’s time understood that they could survive by studying engineering. Few were bold enough to dream of a career in the humanities. With great perseverance, one might acquire a post as a provincial teacher. But a change occurred in the 1960s, when Iurii Lotman, ethnically Jewish himself, opened a school of semiotics at the University of Tartu, Estonia, on the western periphery of the USSR. This was a welcome surprise for Russia’s college-bound Jewish kids, and perhaps had as much to do with KGB (Estonia-Russia) infighting as it had to do with promoting freedom of thought. For several decades, Lotman managed to navigate between the allowed and the forbidden. Meanwhile, he fed and clothed a core group of scholars who taught and researched language and literature. Although French structuralism was all the rage worldwide, Soviet scholars knew that semiotics’s roots lay in Russian formalism. They also received encouragement from cybernetics and other futuristic theories that characterized Soviet science in the 1960s and 70s.

Bezrodnyi studied with Lotman’s wife Zara Mints, a genius in her own right, and became hooked on concrete texts and close reading. After graduating, his first job was with the Cataloguing Department at the National Library in Leningrad. The pay was woeful—around seventy rubles a month. But money did not matter. People in the relevant subgroups felt the cultural renaissance overtaking the city. Avant-garde poets and hipsters performed in the Café Saigon and young academics gave lectures on literature at the famed Pushkin House on the embankment. People published research in the many scholarly journals that flourished at the time. Bezrodnyi’s only book, *Konets tsitaty* (The Quotation’s Ending, 1996) is based on material from that time. The book won prizes—The Little Booker and The Northern Palmira.

Admittedly, this generation loved archival research and accumulating facts. Scholars understood the dangers of ideological deviation, while the state did not care about mountains of detail. Lotman’s *Biography of Alexander Pushkin* might be viewed as the best example of scholarship in the period as he analyzed the complexity of Russia’s Golden Age using ordinary things (material culture): clothing, furniture, documents of all sorts; and spiritual culture: values, social conventions, and ideals. How many details he collected! He then joined them together into an epistemological system, the Semiotics of Daily Life. And Bezrodnyi? As the youngest literary scholar in the archives, he was the most eager to show off his astonishing erudition. His claim to fame was not in the books or articles he wrote, but as the embodiment of an epoch. If this generation expressed passion for Russian literature, Bezrodnyi loved more than the others; if they astounded one another with erudition, he outdid them with the most obscure facts. But beyond that, he did something that no one else

did: just as Lotman had shown in *Pushkin*, so Bezrodnyi joined life and art, and in so doing, made his own life into a text. His way of life consciously reflected literary allusions, the real and fictional blended together. In Bezrodnyi, the values of that generation were thrown into relief and made perceptible.

Ultimately, Bezrodnyi bore the scars of his generation. Although he and that generation had little regard for the powers that be (even if they didn't die on their swords as high-exposure dissidents), their lives were nonetheless shaped by the transformations in Mikhail Gorbachev's Soviet Union. Still a superpower, the Soviet Union's system had trouble filling the shops with consumer goods. The sense of inferiority, embarrassment, humiliation, and blustery bravado made for classic Soviet jokes, but in pensive moments, Bezrodnyi despaired along with his colleagues. When the Soviet Union fell in the early 1990s, he sensed that it was time to leave. He was lucky to have fallen in love with a Slavist from Germany, the inimitable Renata Von Maydell.

Borders were open; why not try one's hand somewhere else? In Germany, however, he broke the rules of academic hierarchy. Instead of praising the powerful, he brought famous professors to their knees with razor-sharp criticism. He fought with everyone. He ultimately found a position teaching Russian language in Heidelberg. Even that job he took too seriously. Were the students learning fast enough? Could a different approach bring greater results? He appeared as a Stakhanovite worker who could not put up with lazy colleagues. Even though he had left the Soviet Union, it had not left him.

In Heidelberg, Bezrodnyi became a paterfamilias, bringing up three boys. To see him in his home was to encounter a workshop where, once again, life and art were combined; this time in the educational project that he imposed on his children. They were instructed not only in Russian language and literature, but also music, art, philosophy, and science—all the dimensions of knowledge that you might read about in Alexander Von Humboldt's enlightenment-period biography.

Although we acknowledge his bodily death, his story does not end here because he was part of something greater and persevering: the Russian intelligentsia. I mean that inclusive, ethnically diverse group which shares values—respect of freedom, individuality, and above all, love for literary expression and creative exploration. That world no longer exists, but it was real and exhilarating for those who experienced the Soviet cultural renaissance of the 1980s, a monument to supra-human achievement in the field of literary scholarship.

## Robert O. Crummey

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Robert Owen Crummey (April 12, 1936–November 6, 2023), a ground-breaking scholar of early modern Russia, died on November 6, 2023, in Davis, California. He was 87 years old. His career was wide-ranging, innovative, and enormously influential on his field. He graduated with a Bachelor's degree from the University of Toronto in 1958 and entered the graduate program in History at the University of Chicago. There he initially intended to study French history, but was drawn to Russian history by studying with the Leo Haimson and Michael Cherniavsky (who became his advisor). He completed his PhD in 1964 and began teaching at