Hard to Be a God: Historians in the Face of Evil

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I. Regarding an Old Science Fiction Novel

Historians very often play secondary characters in novels – strange loners whose knowledge occasionally helps solve complicated cases involving robberies or murders. Only rarely do they appear as heroes. When they do, they explore fundamental issues related to our understanding of history, the interpretation and communication of historical knowledge, and the historian’s responsibility for their activities. They can also show us how contemporary society grapples with the past, history, and memory.

In this text I will discuss the science fiction novel Hard to Be a God (1964), written by the brothers Arkady (1925–1991) and Boris Strugatsky (1933–2012). The novel is worth re-reading for two reasons: first, the protagonist of the novel, a historian living on a distant planet, is trying to resolve painful existential and professional dilemmas that continue to be relevant to scholars living and working in the twenty-first century. Second, the text helps us understand the history of the Soviet Union, Stalin’s Purges, and the rise of a totalitarian regime in post-Soviet Russia.

For almost three decades, the brothers were the most popular science fiction writers in the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. Their work left a distinct mark on late Soviet intelligentsia, with the complex moral dilemmas and actions of their protagonists serving as existential points of reference for several generations of science fiction readers. They distanced themselves from optimistic utopias based on communist ideals, and instead wrote works criticizing the realities of Soviet life, and forging a unique creative method in the process, with science fiction making it possible to explore existential questions, to debate moral dilemmas, and to critique the Soviet system.¹

Hard to Be a God is set in the future, on a faraway planet inhabited by beings that appear indistinguishably similar to humans. The development of these humanoids had reached medieval times. Two hundred and fifty academics from the Institute of Experimental History work on the planet. Armed with theories about feudalism, they have spent twenty years observing processes on the planet, but with no right to interfere in them. The researchers from Earth have successfully integrated within various levels of the planet’s society. They are extremely well-prepared for emotionally and physically draining expeditions, are fluent in the planet’s languages, and possess excellent firearms skills. Indeed, the earthlings are superior
to their research subjects not only intellectually and technologically, but also physically. Any worker from the Institute of Experimental History has the physical power to initiate a coup d’État and remove a ruling dynasty, to start a war or revolution, and to become the leader of a state or empire on the planet. However, such actions are strictly forbidden. Only in extreme circumstances are the researchers allowed to protect the humanoids from repeating the glaring historical mistakes made on Earth. It is not always possible to adhere to the directives of the Institute for Experimental History. After spending decades on the planet, the researchers sometimes become burnt out, and fail to keep a critical distance: they try to rescue the humanoids being persecuted, tortured, or killed; they provoke uprisings against cruel tyrants; they try to establish a new and better political, economic, and social reality. Such historians usually die, or are picked up by the institute’s emergency team and returned to Earth for treatment. As Boris Strugatsky said in response to questions on an Internet forum: “[…] they are basically observers, and EVERY TIME they stop observing and begin to act, they make mistakes.”

The novel’s protagonist – Don Rumata Estoriet (the researcher Anton from the Institute for Experimental History) – is horrified to find that anything even slightly rising above the level of grey mediocrity in the kingdom of Arkanar comes under threat. Arkanar is experiencing a dramatic period of regression.

II. Arkanar as the Mirror of the Soviet Union under Stalin’s Rule

The Strugatskys explained that to write the novel, they did in-depth research on how spiritual degradation and ignorance can lead to violence, and sought to reveal this through the prism of political repression and terror. The persecution and annihilation of intellectuals and artists organised by the novel’s antihero – Don Reba, a genius of mediocrity – inevitably reminds readers of Stalin’s bloody campaigns. This uneducated, evil, and power-hungry ruler of Arkanar had an even more specific alter-ego in the form of Lavrentiy Beria, chief of the People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the Soviet Union (NKVD) from 1939 to 1945, and one of the main organisers of mass repression from the 1930s to the 1950s.

What can Anton do in the face of an evil genius such as Don Reba? Following the Institute for Experimental Psychology’s instructions, he attempts (and usually fails) to rescue scientists and artists from persecution, torture, and death. And with every
failure he experiences more helplessness, despair, and hatred. “I’m a no-god historian,” he declares. “When exactly did I manage to fall into the swamp that Don Condor was talking about? Does a god have the right to feel anything other than pity?” In this moment of weakness Anton admits that the Experiment presents him with an ever-greater existential challenge. Finding himself in a horrific, Bruegelesque reality, the scientist goes from being the subject to the object of his own research.

It is evident that there is no good outcome here. Anton’s situation is further complicated by the fact that fighting Don Reba (who wields unlimited resources of power, fear, and violence) makes him vulnerable not only as a member of the Arkanar elite, but as a human being. It is a publicly known secret that Anton is in love with the humanoid Kira. Her death throws Anton completely off balance; seeking revenge, the historian becomes violent himself, forcing colleagues to intervene and bring him back to Earth.

III. Fundamental questions concerning the historian’s craft

“We were very young and naive when we created him,” Boris Strugatsky once responded to readers’ questions about the protagonist of Hard to Be a God, thus revealing he and his brother’s views about the history of humanity, human development, and the future of Soviet civilisation. Critics of the sibling authors have offered numerous analyses of how faith that history inevitably leads to utopia affected their earlier work, so there is no need to focus on that here.

However, the issues and problems raised by the novel are far from naive. Can a society’s development be influenced from the outside by a predetermined plan or example? Is it right to force people to adopt ideas, values, and conceptual systems they are not accustomed to?

These questions are not new, but have been examined by historians and the West for centuries. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they were explored by visionaries, creators, travellers, historians, anthropologists, and politicians. These same painful questions are being asked in the twenty-first century when looking at the actions of the US and its partners in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other Middle Eastern countries following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. They have also been raised in connection with the victory of the Taliban following the dramatic withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in August 2021.
The novel also raises fundamental questions concerning the work of historians, questions that are being debated by today’s historical theorists. How does a historian (or an anthropologist or sociologist) make contact with people living today in yesterday’s world (to echo Jared Diamond)? When and to what extent can this contact be more than unidirectional (i.e., not limited to observation), but both intense and reality-changing? And how should historians behave with the people – their lives and behaviours – described in historical sources? Should one attentively and respectfully listen to their narratives (or narratives about them), about the noble and beautiful but also pitiful and horrible things that happened to them? Or should one retell these stories, recreating and analysing the connections of causes and effects contained in them, but also engage in an indirect polemic with one’s research subjects, assessing and if necessary condemning their behaviour?

Is it even possible to study the past without falling into the trap of intellectual arrogance? A historian taking on a project knows things that people from the past, who have become his or her subject of study, did not. Can historians refuse the role of judge without betraying their principles and values as committed scientists?

When does it make sense to enter into the fray of events, and when is it better to remain a silent observer? Which choice is the correct one, and which leads to losses or even death? Who will become the victor (and should therefore be supported in every way), and who will be the loser?

IV. What can we do in the face of rising evil?

In returning to this question, we can consider a direct experience of history in the form of Alexei German’s film of the same name (2013), which is based on the Strugatskys’ novel. The film is not a precise illustration of the novel: it is its own, terrifyingly realistic, and therefore emotionally powerful work of art.

The reality created by the director shifts the plot to a second or even third level: what is important here is not so much the action (the plot of the film can barely be grasped), but a visual world submerged in mud and horror. German decided that there was no room for God in the world he created and filmed, drowning Arkanar in stupidity, horror, and despair. Anton or Don Rumata (played by Leonid Jarmolnik) replaces a non-existent God and becomes God himself. His predominant emotion – disgust – prevents him from escaping his fate. “But what can I do? What can I actually do?” he asks, as if directly addressing the viewer.
In German’s film, a Don Rumata who has chosen bloody revenge refuses to fly back to Earth, and takes responsibility for his actions in a world he could not save. As punishment for his choice, he is condemned to eternally wander the Arkanar fogs while playing a homemade saxophone.

German initially tried to bring the Strugatsky’ novel to the screen in 1968, but did not begin the project until 1999, achieving his vision only in the twenty-first century after six years of filming and seven years of editing. According to critics, the filmmaker not only created his magnum opus, but also proclaimed his verdict on the world: his famous phrase, that grey beings are necessarily followed by black ones, serves as the film’s point of reference.

This bleak prophesy, first expressed in the Strugatskys’ novel and repeated in German’s film, has been fulfilled in a new and highly dramatic way with the Russian Federation’s twenty-first century transformation from a budding democracy to authoritarianism and ultimately totalitarianism. To borrow the Strugatskys’ metaphor, when Boris Yeltsin named a KGB lieutenant-colonel, Vladimir Putin, as his successor, the rule of the grey forces began. Observing the dismantling of democracy, the persecution of the free press, the elimination of judicial autonomy, and other destructive processes, Boris Strugatsky repeatedly warned that this stage of the Russian state and society was temporary, a transitional stage between authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation launched the second stage of its war against Ukraine. This presents an enormous professional and existential challenge to Central and Eastern European historians such as me, as we seek to address the complicated questions raised by the war. Do our efforts to conduct science, seek truth, and reflect on lessons from the past have any meaning in the face of the triumph of evil? What can historians do when faced with the fall of democracy and the rise of totalitarianism? Is it enough, in such times, to write texts? How should an academic behave when the past, memory, and history become battlegrounds? In the face of the pain and death of loved ones, is it possible to refuse the temptations of anger and revenge, and to use history as a dangerous weapon?

For historians living in Central and Eastern Europe, these questions have moved from the spheres of historical theory and the history of ideas to everyday life, and even to the battlefield. Some of them, like the Ukrainian historians Borys Cherkas, Volodymyr Birchar, and Akhtang Kipiani, are bearing arms in the fight for their country’s independence, for their society’s right to a free and dignified existence.
Reflecting on the decision of these academics to become soldiers raises the question of similar engagements of historians in the past.

Will the forces of darkness win this time? What can historians do when faced with rising evil?

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Tags: activism / historical profession / moral dilemma

4 Стругацкий, OFF–LINE.
5 “All the evil, all the nastiness, all the creeps and cowards – or so we thought – would eventually disappear, because there would be no more need for them,” (“Между прошлым и будущим (Беседа корреспондента 'ЛО' Евг. Канчукова с Аркадием и Борисом Стругацкими”), Литературное обозрение, 9 (1988), 12.