

## THE IMAGE OF WAR IN A.GELASIMOV'S NOVEL "STEPPE GODS"

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### ABSTRACT

The possibilities of depicting the Great Patriotic War, not based on the writer's personal experience, as well as the dominant aspects of the image and ethico-social and philosophical emphases are studied. Gelasimov's A. novel is interpreted not as a new word in war literature, but as an approximation to potential and fruitful artistic trends in modern literature.

**Keywords:** Gelasimov A. "Steppe Gods", non-battle prose about war, narration, choice of tradition.

### INTRODUCTION

Andrei Valeryevich Gelasimov is a Russian educator and writer, author of novels, novels, short stories and poems, winner of numerous awards and prizes, including foreign ones. Many of his works have been screened.

Andrei Gelasimov has repeatedly received awards and prizes for his works: the prize for the best script at the Russian Film Festival in Honfleur in 2013, the National Bestseller Award in 2009, the Student Booker in 2004, Prix de la Découverte au Salon du livre de Paris in 2005 and others.

According to the author himself, his creative inspirations were Ernest Hemingway, Joseph Brodsky and William Faulkner. The works of these writers were in many ways the impetus for the beginning of Andrei Gelasimov's own creative path.

A. Gelasimov's novel "Steppe Gods" (2008) is rapidly moving away from literature "for children", partly because the central character is a child and the adult world is portrayed through the novel. Gelasimov's novel Steppe Gods (2008) [1] is rapidly moving into the literature "for children", partly because the central character is a child, and the world of adults is depicted through the child's consciousness, in which the accuracy of details is connected with the naive unambiguity of perception, partly because the plot inevitably involves the archaic situation of initiation, the encounter with "adult reality" and with the ambivalence of the natural world, and the author's logic can be reduced to the plot of growing up, to the acquisition of common values. This is how the prize-winning novel was read, by reducing the author's zone to the character's zone, and the novel world to the samples of the Soviet novel about the heroic consciousness of a child expressing the patriotism of the people's consciousness. At the same time, the unambiguity of the child's worldview forces the author to express the artistic logic by predetermined plot moves, pedaling of figurative symbolism, and, ultimately, the "madeness" of the artistic construction, the loss of the organicism of the child's consciousness. However, in Gerasimov's novel, the artistic task is not reduced to the embodiment of the child's "pure" vision, but opens up the potential of a neo-cultured individual who is between the poles of social epistemes and the elements of the massified social environment, the modern popular consciousness destroyed by historical civilization (pre-Soviet and Soviet periods). The anthropology of childhood under the influence of the social

environment is shown in the novel in the destructive consequences of both the environment and the society, which is in a situation of self-defense against the conqueror, when the fullness of humanistic values is inevitably reduced [4].

The key to the modality of the depiction of the people during the war years is given by the title of the story "Where Fathers Go" from the cycle "Atamanovka", which is connected with the novel by material and characters: the depiction of the national locus in the Siberian version, the pre-war life of the village Razgulyaevka, the prehistory of the adult characters of the novel. Corresponding to the mythological basis of the children's consciousness, the fathers, most of whom have returned from the fort, appear as gods. On the one hand, corresponding to the status of mythical heroes, on the other hand, turning out to be pagan people free in their behavior, not constrained by either social or ethical boundaries. In the memory of modern descendants of these heroes, the poles of exalting legend and profaning tale, telling about the ambivalent deeds of their fathers, collide [2, p. 3-28].

The novel "Steppe Gods" provides material in search of an answer to the question whether it is possible to portray a war recognized as the Great Patriotic War, bringing (or at least reintroducing) new accents in understanding the national tragedy that ended victoriously, but left various kinds of trauma in the collective memory [4].

Nekrasova E., defending Gelasimov from accusations of speculating on patriotic themes, converges with them, emphasizing the relics of Soviet ideological patriotism in the novel: Gelasimov "tries to return the unconditional nature of the war that has been lost in our consciousness and to show clearly where are our own and where are the strangers", and believes that the patriotism of the little hero distracts from "the stupidity of the authorities, who send men to the front in packs, while women and children are forced to starve to death in the deep rear" [3]. [3]. It is difficult to explain this only by the author's identification with the character, a teenager, whose ideological clichés are shown by the author as a consequence of the state ideology. The author himself, trying to conform to modern liberalism, points to the social-critical orientation of the novel, to the relevance of the theme of increasing state dictate: "My novel is a reaction to the strengthening of the state" [3].

Meanwhile, if the novel can be evaluated as a notable phenomenon of twenty-first-century prose, including prose about war, it can be evaluated on a different basis - on the basis of transcending the semantic boundaries of both the new patriotism and the new discrediting of patriotism. The focus of the novel is neither to criticize the recent past nor to rehabilitate it. Gelasimov's novel approaches what turns mass literature into a literature of personal and social epistemology, a literature of cognition rather than a manifestation of ideologemes and mythologemes [4].

Unfortunately, the author achieves neither the power of artistry in embodying personally untried experiences, nor the philosophical depth of meanings, but he approaches new aspects in depicting wartime, relevant at the beginning of the new century.

First, there are almost no battle scenes in the novel. Apparently, the poetics of the truth of battle is impossible after the testimonies of the literature of the front generation, and the literature about war will pay more and more attention to the war outside the front [3]. The battle scene, motivated by the participant's recollection, corrects the heroic pathos with a pacifist evaluation. The participant of the battles tells about the highest, in his estimation,

manifestation of heroism - the Marine infantry's going ashore in the battles near Königsberg. However, the details of the theatricalization of the sailors' behavior are brought to the forefront; this gives away not superhuman fearlessness, but an understanding of doom, and therefore admiration is accompanied by compassion for the heroic sailors. The landing at Königsberg is given through the eyes not of a coward, but of a man who evaluates the feat not only by the situation, but within the boundaries of human life, which is long and has many other goals and values: "Well, these are just like devils, they don't even duck when they go into the attack. And they take off their helmets so the Germans can see their visors. "They say we have no trenches at sea. So they killed them in packs. But when these brothers got to the German trenches, it's better not to look there. They tore the Krauts apart with their bare hands. The only thing worse than them were the penalty officers. After those there are no prisoners at all" [1, c. 77]. Let us note in this story about the heroism of the "brothers" the preservation of a human attitude to the deadly enemy, which was sharply reminded by the "trench" prose of the writers of the 1950s-1960s, as well as the return to a human ("peaceful") scale of vision of the battle: "And we could not even crawl ashore. We lie right in the water, and when there is a big wave behind us, we just take in more air in advance. Because suddenly there will be another one after it. And the cold is so cold that you can't even breathe. But then my brothers came from behind. They laughed at us. They said, "What are you doing? It's not bathing season." And then, when we got up, the whole shore was already in black coats" [1, p. 77]. [1, c. 77].

On the other hand, the narrator is not philosophical and the author is not didactic, the individual becomes the measure of evaluation, he is not the bearer of epic or patriotic consciousness, he realizes the value of every human life. Deheroization as an authorial strategy is evident in the collision of this battle scene with the peaceful scene depicted in the perception of the boy, the central character whose point of view determines the main narrative. A train ferrying soldiers to the eastern front (the war with Japan is beginning) stops in the steppe, and black hoods jump out of the cars, as in Odintsov's story, but in everyday appearance and prosaic behavior. Such they are understandable to Petka, moreover, he becomes their assistant not in the accomplishment of a feat (which he dreamed of), but in the profane business of extracting alcohol from the cistern. "Heroes" in the guise of ordinary people behave habitually according to Petyka's experience: creating a spontaneous brief feast. Folk drinking, shown by the author in concrete manifestations, removes the superhuman halo of heroes without profanation on the verge of discrediting (as in V. Voynovich's novel about Chonkin back in the 1960s). The writer of the new generation moves away from a single modality (positive or negative), tries to show the combination of different manifestations of the people in the conditions of war, the multiplicity of values, including private ones, in epic circumstances [4].

The reduction of battles in the novel is also connected with the fact that the author's focus is on the people's peace on the home front, which is also mastered from the tradition of prose about the war of the 1960s and 1970s, from "village prose". However, the focus of the depiction of people's life in the circumstances of war has changed, which should be explained not by the influence of "exposing" anti-Soviet literature, but by the understanding of the complexity of the nation's postwar history. Gelasimov approaches the painful problem of the change or



invariability of the national consciousness of the people in the postwar decades. On the material of the "victorious" year Gelasimov gives a certain model of the people's fate and national self-consciousness. First of all, the terrible experience of war does not change the policy of the state, and the people go to the opened eastern front. Because modern civilization is anti-human and a succession of wars is inevitable, and the superhuman threat of atomic war diminishes man, erases the distinction between the front and the rear. Nagasaki, far from the front, is bombed by an American atomic bomb, and the situation is reversed: it is not the warrior-doctor who dies in a Soviet camp, but his family far from the war. Likewise, the echelons of Soviet soldiers crossing the country from west to east by any heroism cannot stop the killing of people (even though they are people of a hostile country). Undoubtedly, the epilogue shows the author's logic, the author's knowledge of the tragic truth - the victory did not establish peace on earth. That is why in the epilogue the central character, the matured Petka, a geologist, discovers the deposits of ruinous uranium ore, but does not become the heir of the healer, the Japanese Hirota, with whom in his childhood he was brought closer by the struggle for the life of his peer [4].

Gelasimov also approached the equally acute problem of whether there has been a spiritual transformation of the people who have passed the test of selfless defense of the nation (this question entered Russian literature in the prose of F. Abramov, V. Astafiev, and other writers of the 1970s and 1980s). Gelasimov's pessimistic response relies on the authority of these philosophers of national life. It deserves respect that the writer of the new time does not reduce the problem to naked sociality - victory has strengthened the anti-people state). Gelasimov tries to see the antinomies of national folk life in their immutability. We do not see in the novel a reliance on the mythologem of the steppe Cossacks, albeit destroyed by Soviet laws. Razgulyaevka, a locus that undoubtedly models national existence in its Siberian version, emerged on the place left by the natives (without violence). And in the twentieth century, despite 20 years of social diktat (collective farms), the village retains the spirit of liberty, not so much the ethics of duty (this is the concept of Russian Siberians, for example, in S. Zalygin), but the principle of will. Such a principle is the result of disagreement with subjugation as in pre-revolutionary Russia (free-loving people went to Siberia), but free-love had two poles: independence, the duty to build one's own home on one's own land, and will as insubordination in accepting a subjugated position. In the latter case, the ability to deceive circumstances, the authorities, but also the people of one's environment was taken as a value. The central character's grandfather, deprived of the opportunity to provide for his family by labor, smuggles alcohol; Mitka (the protagonist's father), who was not sent to study as a tractor driver, takes revenge on his rival's sister, asserting himself by violating collective morality; but collective morality in the village is also relativistic: women, in the absence of their husbands who have gone to the front, enjoy the attention of the camp guards; Petka's mother, who gave birth to a son out of wedlock, is condemned, leading her to attempt suicide; fights between grandfather and grandmother and grandmother's fights with her grandson are the norm. The deidealization of the village way of life - also in the tradition of Russian literature - is not reduced by the contemporary writer to the destructive consequences of collective farm disenfranchisement. Along with the plight of the village people, Gelasimov shows what I. Bunin called "the idiocy of village life": the treatment of the sick Valerka by a local sorceress;

the triumphant return of Mitka, who lost his leg at the front, as a Hero of the Soviet Union (the village forgives him both the sin of his youth, his alcoholism, and his excitement in front of the village); the contemptuous attitude to Japanese prisoners in the camp, and so on. Nothing changes in Razgulyaevka, and the tragic ordeal is literally "out of sight"; the attitude to the war is regulated by official propaganda – radio [4].

The atmosphere of degenerating folk life (mutations of folk consciousness, not only the birth of freaks) is manifested in the portrayal of children. The spiritual atmosphere in the pre-war and war village is manifested in the children's consciousness (recall that the child is not only the central character, but also the focused narrator who determines the narrator's point of view). The aspects of child characters' behavior that the author introduces into the novel are also important. There is no child labor, there is hunger, poverty and aggression of children towards both adults and peers. The children are abandoned, unloved, because the remaining adults are busy surviving to feed the family. Gelasimov captures not only the depletion of material conditions, but also the deformation of humanity. Children perceive the norms of the environment as natural, but unlike adults, children are more ideologized. State propaganda helps them to create a myth of real life somewhere far away, including at the front, and children dream of war, of heroic death, rejecting the anti-humanity of war. The children follow the principle of ruthlessness towards the enemy, faking Petyka's hanging, in which he is rescued by a Japanese prisoner - an enemy according to the stereotypes of war. The opposition between the enemy and the stranger exists genetically in children, and they evaluate fatherlessness as an alien, requiring ridicule and violence ("brat" Petka is an outcast among his peers, the sick Valerka is accepted in the game as second-rate). Adults do not conform to the norms brought in from the official world and therefore cause contempt (both the villagers and the guards - because they are not at the front; the father, who does not correspond to the image of the hero; and the Japanese enemies) [4].

On the other hand, in the central character-child Gelasimov shows natural ethics, supersocial humanistic attitude to people in distress. Petka does not accept the villagers' contempt for his mother for violating the norms; he feels compassion for her, seeing her lifelessness, and commits an act that to a certain extent diverges from his understanding of the ideal: he searches for her dress so that she can go to the common holiday, although he condemned the norms of adult communication between men and women. Petka accepts the norms of aggression in relations between people (he himself is ready to take merciless revenge on his offenders), but forgives his cheating friend Valerka and becomes his savior when he falls terminally ill. The desire for salvation also overcomes the stereotypes of contempt and hatred of the Japanese Hirotarō, a stranger [4].

The third indicative possibility of contemporary prose about war is connected with the correction of the enemy image, with the development of the tendency to show the preservation of a non-situational, non-determined by the situation of combat as a whole - war - attitude to the enemy as a human being. This emphasis was present in the frontline lyric narratives of the 1950s and 1960s, and it has also entered prose depicting the defeated enemy (prisoner-of-war camps, for example, in A. Kim's novel *Father Forest*).

In Gelasimov's novel, a way out of the military frontier into the cultural frontier emerges. It is not about the ethics of the attitude to the enemy (it is relativistic: the Russians in the village

and the guards despise the "Japs", in order not to cause aggression, the Japanese must play along with the Russians, playing the funny fool, and then will avoid violence and insult. "He had long ago guessed that Russians love a foreigner only if he is a simpleton, and so he tried to be a simpleton at every opportunity [1, p. 125]. In the novel a deeper aspect of the juxtaposition of the two cultures emerges: the fundamental difference and the possibility of understanding; as well as the destruction of native cultures in modern civilization [4].

In the fate of the prisoner of war Hirotaro, the author of the novel is able to discover the difference and commonality of the fate of different cultures. Japanese culture in the novel is interpreted, unlike Russian culture, as a culture of duty, loyalty to the prescribed norms - the samurai code of honor and loyalty. Loyalty makes them the executors of an invasive war. However, the history of the samurai family, to which the character belongs in the novel, shows a tendency to weaken the power of inhuman duty (the samurai law of suicide in case of non-fulfillment of duty). The rule of harakiri is violated already by Hirotaro's ancestor, but Hirotaro himself is left to live after being captured. However, he justifies himself by fulfilling his duty to the son of his benefactor, as well as the need to treat his captive compatriots. Humanization defeats the principle of abstract unfreedom of duty and unites the Russian boy and the adult Japanese. Humanization leads to the fact that society is drawn into relations with other civilizations: Christianity and European habits come to Japan, Hirotaro is sent to Paris to learn European medicine. It should be noted that there is not displacement, but interaction of traditions, when the goal is to save human life (in the absence of European medicines Hirotaro treats with herbs according to the Japanese tradition, and in a critical situation turns to the steppe spirits-gods like the aboriginal pagans) [4].

The temporal perspectives of the formation of national ways of life are comparable: from the 17th century the history of the destruction of the samurai family and the deformation of Russian peasant culture, which was not saved by fleeing from serfdom in Siberia.

The appeal of both characters to the steppe gods is a manifestation of the same genetic spiritual root - pantheism. However, it is possible to explain the immersion in archaism by the feeling of common powerlessness of the characters (representatives of different societies) not only before the society with its Russian element or totalitarian Japanese orderliness, not only before modern civilization, but also before ontology: before the mysterious disease sent from under the ground [4].

The juxtaposition of different cultures, different forms of life organization in an ambivalent existence leads Gelasimov to the idea of the necessity of existential consciousness, a personal consciousness that does not follow organic archaicism, does not submit to social epistemes, and is capable of critically evaluating its own prejudices. It is not military circumstances that form epic consciousness, socially determined, but personal choice in extreme situations (the position of an outcast, a victim) that contribute to the formation of personal consciousness. In the fate of the Japanese adult, his choice of mode of existence (he stayed in the camp because he is a doctor; he writes the history of a family for children in Nagasaki) is not rewarded with results, because the world order is stronger than human efforts; the boy Petka is only on the threshold of understanding the inevitability of opposing the rules given from outside, no matter how powerless an individual person may be. However, the author's logic both in the plot and in the organization of the artistic world seems close to the ethics of existentialism and the concept of



existential personality. Personal consciousness breaks through in the ultimate situation both in the becoming adolescent and in the adult [4].

War is one of the eternal themes of world literature. And it is not surprising - it is in war that the true essence of each person is revealed - whether he is a patriot or a traitor, a coward or a daredevil, whether he is capable of a heroic deed or is cowardly at the most crucial moment.

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