
URSUS SOVIETICUS

R. Bird

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What do we learn from thinking about the USSR through its near anagram: the bear (*ursus* in Latin)? Perhaps not that much: the image of Russia as bear originated in the eyes of the astonished Western spectator, standing in for the dark continent in the coat of arms of the Muscovy Trading company and on early modern maps, and later for the brutal Russian empire in prints and newspaper caricatures. The Russian bear was large, powerful and wild; she was also aggressive and lethally dim-witted. By comparison we note the paucity of Soviet images of Russia as a bear, excepting the mascot for the 1980 Olympics, which was clearly devised to work in the international tourist market.

This contradiction reminds us how central to the Soviet project was liberation *from* the image, understood as the capture of a being, its full identification and taming. The October Revolution freed people to emerge into visibility on their own terms, in their individual identity and difference, mediated but not defined by class, ethnicity and other collectivities [See: 3]. Emerging, that is, as a worker-human, peasant-human or soldier-human. Not as bears, and certainly not as a single collective bear.

Soviet ideology was humanist (in name if not in deed) and squeamishly eschewed bestiality. Sports teams were named for the industries in which people labored, for revolutionary heroes like Spartacus, for elements of a solar mythology, like zenith, or of energeticist mythology, like dynamo. “Remaking nature, man remakes himself”: this paraphrase of Marx, ubiquitous in the 1930s, underscored how little interest there was in public discourse in returning human sociality to totemic tribalism.

Bears abounded in Soviet literary and visual culture, probably originating from folklore of various kinds. There is the bear of Dem’ian Bednyi’s fable “Aid” (“Pomoshch”), who strikes an alliance with the whale and is left helpless when the bear is attacked by an elephant. The moral? Make friends with those who are in a position to help. Lonely colossi have feet of clay.

The bear in Andrei Platonov’s novel *The Foundation Pit* (Kotlovan, 1931) is a blacksmith whom the other characters treat as a human. Even for Platonov this conflation of human and animal contradicts to the realistic hue of Soviet fiction. It suggests satire, but that merely signals our failure to cope with Platonov’s baffling redefinition of humanity.

In the movie *New Moscow* (*Novaia Moskva*, 1938) the main character attends a carnival dressed in a bear suit and becomes confused with another man dressed identically. The director the film was Aleksandr Medvedkin, whose name also means “bear.”

Were these Stalinist bears totems or do they denote something substantial about the emergence of Soviet folk into visibility under the Soviet regime? An answer is suggested by Kornei Chukovsky’s children’s book *The Stolen Sun* (*Kradenoe solntse*, 1936) [1].



When a crocodile swallows the sun the beasts of the forest turn to the bear:

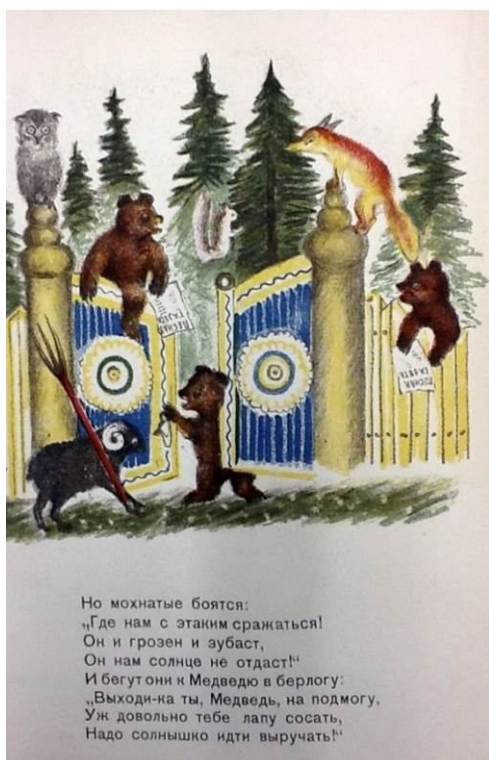
“Come out, bear, lend us a hand!
You’ve licked your paw for long enough,
Now come on out and help out the sun!

But the bear can’t be bothered to budge;
He walks circles, the bear, ‘round the bog.

He cries, the Bear, and sobs.

He calls his bear cubs out of the bog.

“Where have you gone, my fat-pawed sons?
Why have you left me alone?”



Finding himself alone, Chukovsky's bear (unlike Dem'ianBednyi's) rediscovers his ancient ferocity

The Bear arose,
 The Bear roared,
 And the Bear ran
 To the Big River.
 And in the Big River
 Lies the Crocodile,
 And in its teeth
 Burns not a fire
 But the red sun,
 The stolen sun.

And so the bear confronts the crocodile:

“I tell you, you crook,
 To spit out the sun right now!
 Otherwise, watch out
 I'll catch you and bust you in half!



“Then you’ll know better, you dolt,
Than to steal our sun!
The whole world has disappeared
But you feel no sorrow!”

But the arrogant one laughs
So hard that a tree shakes:
“If the mood strikes me
I’ll swallow the moon as well!”

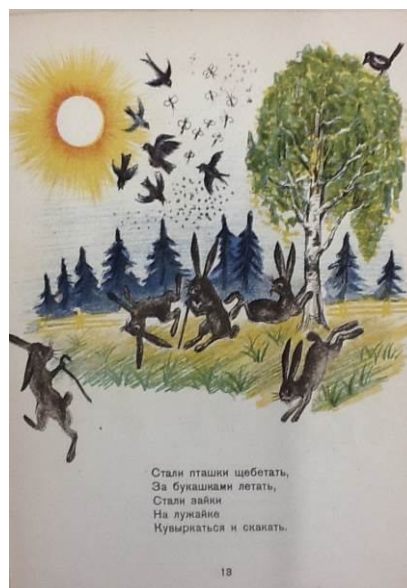
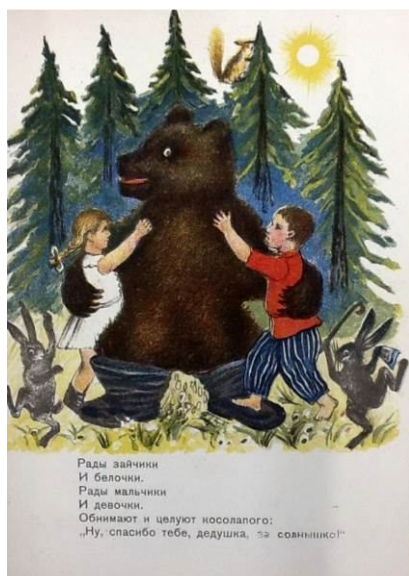
The Bear couldn’t stand it,
The Bear roared out,
And the Bear attacked
The evil enemy.
How he crushed him
And bust him:
“Give me here
Our sun!”
The Crocodile got scared,
Crying out, screaming,
And from his jaws,
From his toothy jaws,
The sun fell out
And rolled into the sky!

Nature exults in its liberation:

The birds began chirping
And chasing after bugs,
The bunnies began
Frolicking and jumping
All over the meadow.

...

The bunnies are glad,
 And so are the squirrels.
 The boys are glad
 And so are the girls.
 They hug and kiss the clumsy—pawed one:
 “Thank you, granddad, for the sun!”



So why a bear? There is no need to see this kindly old bear as standing in for Stalin, as some might choose to do [1]. His role in the text is, by making nature possible again, to bring new humanity into visibility. Concealing the human, the bear makes the human possible, no longer as a given, now as a gift.

Soviet ideology was a brutally blunt instrument of state power, often deployed against the people whom it claimed to represent and to serve in their desire to transform their world and themselves in the process. But it was also a commodity of sorts, given to the Soviet people for their enjoyment. The pleasures of Soviet ideology marked Soviet society as superior to the West, where serious matters were replaced by such diversions as sport and celebrity. On its own terms, the Soviet bear was not an atavistic totem of a constructed tribal identity, but a crucial register of the emergence of the human throughout nature.

We know the end of the story: the mutual transformation of human and nature led only to their mutual denigration. Russia has been left to retrieve national honor through an assertion of tribal identity, politics becoming sport by another name. The Soviet ghost bear remains as a mere ghost, the ghost of a dream of our better selves.

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