

LETTERS

To the Editor:

Would it be possible to inform the reader of the factual inaccuracies in Professor Maurice Friedberg's article "Socialist Realism: Twenty-Five Years Later," published in the April, 1960 issue of *The American Slavic and East European Review*?

Professor Friedberg asserts that the statement

the Party and the Government gave the Soviet writer absolutely everything and took away from him only one thing—the right to write badly (p. 287)

had been made by Isaac Babel at the First Congress of Soviet Writers and not, as Khrushchev indicated, by Leonid Sobolev in his speech at the same Congress.

The fact is that Khrushchev did give the correct source. The statement was first made by Sobolev in his speech of August 22, 1934, which appeared in *Literaturnaja gazeta* of August 23, 1934. Sobolev's words were repeated and acclaimed in speeches by Gorky and Babel (*Lit. gazeta* of August 23 and 24, respectively) as well as in the August 26 editorial of *Lit. Gazeta*. Babel stated:

In accord with Gorky I would like to say that on our banner should be inscribed the words of Sobolev that the Party and Government have given us everything and have taken from us only one right—that of writing badly. Comrades, let's be honest, this was a very important right and not a little is being taken from us. [Laughter] This was a privilege of which we widely availed ourselves.

And so, comrades, let us give up this privilege at this Writers' Congress, and God help us! But then, there is no God; we shall help ourselves. [Applause]

It must be pointed out that Mr. Friedberg's version of this passage suffers from an incomplete and inaccurate translation to the extent that the real meaning of Babel's words is distorted. This stems from the fact that his version was based upon a third hand source, an oral translation of Babel's speech made by Professor Rufus Mathewson for Lionel Trilling's introduction to Isaac Babel's *The Collected Stories*, edited and translated by Walter Morison (New York, Criterion Books, 1955). Mr. Friedberg quotes Babel as follows:

Comrades, let us not fool ourselves. This [the right to write badly, to write incorrectly] is a very important thing, and to take it away from us is no small thing. Let us give up this right, and may God help us. And if there is no God, let us help ourselves. . . . (p. 287)

It is obvious that Babel's unreserved endorsement of Sobolev's views becomes, in Mr. Friedberg's version, a somber observation on the curtailment of creative freedom and loses its original humorous tone.

HERMAN ERMOLAEV
Assistant Professor of Russian

Very sincerely yours,
ALEX SHANE
Instructor in Russian
Princeton University

To the Editor:

Mr. Fred Warner Neal in his review of D. A. Tomasic: *National Communism and Soviet Strategy* (*The American Slavic and East European Review*, October, 1959, pp. 451-52) stated that this kind of writing, perhaps, illustrated "again . . . the difficulties