

Zina Gimpelevich. *Vasil' Bykov: Knigi i sud'ba*. Moscow: Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, 2011. Index. Photographs. 400 pp. (cloth)

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*Vasil' Bykov: Knigi i sud'ba* is a Russian version of Zina Gimpelevich's *Vasil Bykaŭ: His Life and Works*, the first English-language biography of the famous Belarusian writer Vasil Bykaŭ, which was published by McGill-Queen's University Press in 2005. It is important to underscore the fact that *Vasil' Bykov: Knigi i sud'ba* is not a translation of Gimpelevich's 2005 monograph. Whereas *Vasil Bykaŭ: His Life and Works* was conceived as an introduction of a Western reader to the work of a great Belarusian writer and one of the major European writers, *Vasil' Bykov: Knigi i sud'ba* is written for the audience who has been well familiar with Bykaŭ's prose about the Great Patriotic War.

Indeed, starting with his first works about the war, written in the Belarusian in the 1940s and 1950s, Bykaŭ acquired a multi-million readership and became truly popular across the former Soviet Union thanks to the Russian translations of his works published either in the literary journals (most notably in *Druzhba narodov*) or in the book format. Most of Bykaŭ's prose about the war has been turned into films by the major Soviet film studios such as Mosfilm, Lenfilm, the Gorky Film Studios, Belarusfilm, and also commissioned by Soviet television (*Al'piiskaia ballada*, *Tretia raketa*, *Dozhit' do rassveta*, *Voskhozhdenie*, etc). With a sole exception of *Krugliansky most* (1989), in the Soviet period all of these were shot in Russian. Because of such encompassing inclusion of Bykaŭ (known in Russian as Bykov, i. e. by the name that looks perfectly Russian) into the Soviet cultural canon, most Russian readers have perhaps so far made little of the fact that Bykaŭ is representative of more than the so-called *lieutenant prose*

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that showed the war from the perspective of soldiers and junior officers, as opposed to its panoramic representations in the late 1940s. The works he wrote during the *perestroika* period and in the post-Soviet period appeared in the Russian translation very quickly upon their appearance in the Belarusian original in several editions by several Moscow-based publishers. Bykaŭ's inclusion into the canon of Russian-language literature and culture has been so complete that his novella "Oblava" (1989), for example, which tells of the tragedy of the collectivization and de-kulakization has been translated by Rachel Polonsky as "The Manhunt" for *The Sacred Generation* published in the Glas's "New Russian Writing" book series.

Understanding the familiarity of the Russian-speaking readers with Bykaŭ, Gimpelevich, as she writes in the Preface to her book, did not try to "show her readers a completely new" Bykaŭ (p. 6). Despite the "modest" goals she had set for herself when reworking her 2005 monograph for the Russian-speaking reader, her work has proven to be quite original. The book has a flavor of a post-colonial re-reading (certainly a welcome one) of Bykaŭ, which reclaims his work for the Belarusian literary and cultural tradition, represents Bykaŭ first and foremost as a Belarusian writer with a great sense of the Belarusian national identity, "the conscience of the nation," and a spokesman for the human rights and freedom in contemporary Belarus of the same caliber Solzhenitsyn used to be in the Soviet Union. Bykaŭ's dissent against Lukashenko and his self-imposed exile from Belarus in the years preceding his death (2003) are placed in perspective of Bykaŭ's entire life.

The structure of *Vasil' Bykov: Knigi i sud'ba* is generally the same as in *Vasil Bykaŭ: His Life and Works*. Following the introduction, the first two chapters tell of Bykaŭ's childhood, youth, his military service during and after World War II, and his first literary works following his demobilization. Gimpelevich focuses on the Belarusian cultural tradition that influenced Bykaŭ in his formative years as well as on the circumstances of Bykaŭ's life in Belarus that sharpened his critical viewpoint of the Soviet power, which only subtly was expressed in the works of the Soviet period

and informed his late prose. Extensive quotations from Gimpelevich's interviews with Bykaŭ or Gimpelevich's summary of what she had learned during the years of her friendship with Bykaŭ and his wife Irina enliven the narration with details of the deprivations Bykaŭ went through in the 1930s, of his witnessing the repressions against peasants and intellectuals, of his admiration about the co-presence of many cultures in towns and cities of Belarus (most notably of the Jewish, Polish, and Belarusian ones), and of his disgust for war and for military service after the war. Bykaŭ's moral growth is represented as a process of his discovery of the true humanitarian values (embodied, for example, by Marc Chagall) and of his realization he needs to work against totalitarian institutions in order for the names and legacies of true artists be returned to Belarus. In chapters 3 through 8, the purely biographical approach gives way to analysis of Bykov's literary works. Gimpelevich examines them in chronological order.

True to the task of presenting Bykaŭ as a Belarusian writer, in her analysis of Bykaŭ's military prose Gimpelevich gives less attention to the possible connections between Bykaŭ's works and other Soviet authors' prose about the war than to the discussion of the links between Bykaŭ's worldview as captured in his novels and novellas and European existentialism. Likewise, Gimpelevich also discusses translation issues, the problems with accurate rendering of Bykaŭ's style in the Russian translations as well as the issue of how Bykaŭ's prose about the war explores the Belarusian identity. All of Bykaŭ's main characters, Gimpelevich rightly notes, are Belarusians. According to Gimpelevich, the question of what it means to be a "Belarusian" was always important for Bykaŭ. As Gimpelevich's narration progresses from one chapter to another, it becomes clear that Bykaŭ's concern with the questions of Belarusian identity truly links his early prose and his later works whose subject was collectivization or the Afghan war and which varied in genre increasingly including non-fiction. Given such perspective, the reader understands why Bykaŭ turned to the genre of parables in the years before his death and the tone and polemical stance of his autobiography *Dolgaia doroga domoi* (A Long Way Home, 2003), which are discussed in Chapter 8). Chapter 9 is a complete text of

Gimpelevich's last interview with Bykaŭ conducted in 2001. Excerpts from this interview appeared as quotations throughout Gimpelevich's monograph. Yet, the reader would certainly appreciate reading these in their original context while simultaneously giving credit to Gimpelevich's tactful use of this primary source in the analysis she presented in her Introduction and Chapters 1-8. The epilogue tells of Bykaŭ's funeral in Minsk in 2003, which became a political event, an expression of Belarusians' protest against Lukashenko's Belarus, the "last dictatorship in Europe."

Although Gimpelevich hardly provides any in-depth literary readings of any one of Bykaŭ's works, her survey charts the ways for further scholarship. The indisputable value of her study lies in her extremely informative account of the writer's life, the account that is precious for any student of Bykaŭ' prose, for it is based on first-hand information. Gimpelevich's narrative is inspired by her love for Bykaŭ, her admiration for his honesty, courage, and talent. This fascination with Bykaŭ makes the book a pleasure to read.

It is regrettable that unlike a comprehensive and extremely helpful index of the English version of the monograph, the index at the end of the book's Russian version does not include the titles of literary works, scholarly concepts, or names of the historical periods discussed in the monograph, which makes it harder for the reader to retrace the author's argument. This small drawback notwithstanding, *Vasil' Bykov: Knigi i sud'ba* is a valuable contribution to literary studies, which will be of interest to scholars, students, and general public in the former Soviet Union and beyond.

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