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No Conflict on the Stage: The Theory of *Beskonfliktnost'* in Post-War Soviet Drama

Introduction

At the second All-Union Soviet Writers' Congress held in December 1954, Aleksandr Korneichuk, the Ukrainian dramatist and five-time Stalin Prize laureate, stood on the podium and issued a resounding critique of his own work. He acknowledged that he had failed to write about the real problems in the countryside and instead had 'retreated into the soft heart of his *Kalinovaia roshcha*' (The Vibernum Grove, 1950).¹ Plays of recent years, he said, had become little more than manuals for the industrial or agricultural sectors. All the humanity had been drained out of them and he was just as culpable as anyone else. The problem, Korneichuk insisted, lay in the 'theory of *beskonfliktnost'*' ('conflictlessness'): an idea that had hindered the development of Soviet drama and diminished its artistic quality. Korneichuk's speech was not the only one at the congress to renounce the theory of *beskonfliktnost'*, but it was perhaps the most significant. As first deputy to the Prime Minister of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, Chairman of the Ukrainian division of the Soviet Writers' Union and the author of canonical Soviet plays such as *Platon Krechet* (1934) and *Front* (1942), Korneichuk's act of self-criticism set a considerable precedent and reflected the shift in atmosphere following Stalin's death and the first stages of the Thaw.²

The theory of *beskonfliktnost'* is one of the most notorious examples of the stagnation of the cultural sphere under Stalin. Yet although it has been mentioned in survey works of Soviet literature and drama, the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* has not yet been the subject of detailed study itself.³ This

¹ *Vtoroi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1956), pp. 193- 194.

² Korneichuk was also a member of the USSR Communist Party Central Committee, the UkrSSR Central Committee, a deputy in the Supreme Soviet, and had been Chairman of the Ukrainian Parliament until 1953.

³ See for example A.O. Boguslavskii and V.A. Diev, *Russkaia sovetskaia dramaturgiia: Osnovnye problemy razvitiia 1946-1966* (Moscow: Akademiia Nauk SSSR, 1968), pp. 31-33; *Istoriia russkoi literatury XX veka 20-50-e gody: Literaturnyi protsess* (Moscow: Moskovskii universitet, 2006), pp. 64 and 564.; Harold Segel, *Twentieth-Century Russian Drama: from Gorky to the Present* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1993 2nd edition), pp. 329-32; Nicholas Rzhevsky, *The Modern Russian Theatre* (Oxon: Routledge, 2009), p. 114.; Victor Terras, *A History of Russian Literature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1991), pp. 507-8; Gleb Struve, *Russian Literature under Lenin and Stalin 1917-1953* (Norman: Oklahoma UP, 1971), p. 393.

article addresses that gap and seeks to outline the origins and evolution of the so-called 'theory' in Soviet cultural discourse, tracing its roots back to the utopian idealism of 1930's Stalinism, the Stakhanovite narrative of 'surpassing' (*peregnat'*) and the Soviet Constitution of 1936 which proclaimed an end to class conflict in the USSR. If the goal of socialist realism was to present 'reality in its revolutionary development', then the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* represented, in some respects, that development come to fruition.⁴ In the contrived world of the 'conflictless' play, the socialist arcadia was finally born on stage. However, pinning down exactly what *beskonfliktnost'* entailed is to some extent a Sisyphean task. The so-called theory was never adequately defined and remained vague and poorly-understood for the duration of its brief history in the spotlight of Soviet society. In fact, the rise and fall of *beskonfliktnost'* tells us far more about the troubled cultural climate of late Stalinism than it does about a particular stage in the development of Russian literature.

The following discusses how the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* left its mark on plays and theatre productions in the post-war period. But although the theory became known predominantly as a dramatic concept, it also influenced prose, fine art and cinema: in the novels of Semen Babaevskii, films directed by Ivan Pyr'ev and Sergei Gerasimov, and paintings by Tatiana Iablonskaia and Andrei Myl'nikov. This greatly extended the theory's reach and as its influence spread across the cultural sphere after the Second World War so too did the number of critical voices opposing it. The final part of this article analyses the press campaign against *beskonfliktnost'* which began in 1949 and lasted into the mid-1950s. This campaign bore many similarities with the attacks on 'cosmopolitanism' that also began in 1949. Both campaigns saw specific concepts turned into generalising labels that were used to purge the cultural sphere and target individuals, relying on a whipped-up media frenzy to imbed the terminology into public discourse. Here Alexei Yurchak's notion of 'performative shift' can be helpful in understanding how the term *beskonfliktnost'* lost much of its original meaning and was used instead as a catchall for past mistakes that abrogated

⁴ 'Ustav soiuza sovetkikh pisatelei SSSR', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 3 September 1934, p. 1.

responsibility and eschewed the need for a more nuanced understanding of the Stalinist cultural system.⁵

What was the theory of *beskonfliktnost*?

The theory of *beskonfliktnost* proposed that Soviet drama, as an accurate reflection of everyday life, should no longer portray serious conflicts, since Soviet society was now supposedly free of class and social antagonism. Instead of the typical literary dichotomy pitting enlightened socialist heroes against the vestiges of the old capitalist world, plays should now depict the less antagonistic struggle of 'good versus better', where good citizens compete with better citizens in fraternal rivalry. Rather than decreed by the party 'from above', it would seem that the theory emerged spontaneously as part of literary debate within Soviet cultural discourse. During the 1930s, Soviet writers felt increasingly compelled to depict a varnished reality rather than an accurate one; but in the fearful climate of the post-war *Zhdanovshchina*, the implausible claim that conflict had been completely eradicated from Soviet society gained a certain currency. A number of factors have been suggested for this development, from 'numbing caution' amongst writers to the frustration of party functionaries within Soviet industry who resented the negative depiction of their domains in 'production' plays and novels.⁶ At its root was likely a combination of fear, industry pressure, genuine optimism and a desire amongst writers to out-do one another in service to the party – a kind of 'working towards the führer' mechanism that led to a new strand of propagandistic literature initiated 'from below' rather than from top down.⁷ This meant that from the start the theory of *beskonfliktnost* was both poorly understood and aroused the suspicions of the party. The party's

⁵ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was Forever, Until it was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 20-3.

⁶ Segel, *Twentieth-Century Russian Drama*, p. 330.; Victor Terras, 'The Twentieth Century: the era of socialist realism 1925-53', in Charles Moser (ed.) *The Cambridge History of Russian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989), pp. 458-519 (p. 516).

⁷ Although Ian Kershaw used this term as a way of contrasting the bureaucratic models of the Hitler and Stalin dictatorships, it can be usefully applied to this particular cultural context. Ian Kershaw, 'Working Towards the Führer.' Reflections on the Nature of the Hitler Dictatorship', *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Jul., 1993), pp. 103-118.

displeasure with this new trend was certainly evident in a rebuttal of the theory published in *Pravda* in 1949 by Konstantin Simonov, then a minister of the Supreme Soviet, and in the aggressive press campaign which picked up speed in 1952.⁸ By this point, *beskonfliktnost'* was being characterized in the press as a complete and logically developed theory; whereas in fact it was more a collection of 'badly thought-out and chance statements from individual dramatists'.⁹ Furthermore, the absence of any clear manifesto in the pages of the literary press during the 1940s meant that the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* became known chiefly through those who lined up to refute it, rather than from those who sang its praises.

One of the earliest recorded discussions of the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* took place during a two-day open meeting of the party organization of the Soviet Writers' Union in February 1941. In a report on the quality of Soviet literature over the last three years, the writer Petr Pavlenko and critic Fedor Levin were dismissive of a new 'theory about conflictlessness' (*teoriia o beskonfliktnosti*), which suggests that 'in our newly created classless society, conflicts have disappeared and been replaced by chance or temporary misunderstandings'.¹⁰ The authors blamed this new phenomenon on a fear amongst writers 'of doing something negative, harmful and criminal' and suggested that it may have derived from 'fully honourable intentions'. Nevertheless, they named a number of writers apparently guilty of this trend including Ruvim Fraerman with his novella *Dikaia sobaka dingo* (Wild Dog Dingo, 1939) and Aleksandr Tarasov's *Krupnyi zver'* (Big Beast, 1939).¹¹ These writers, according to Pavlenko and Levin, had failed to depict the true conditions of soviet society in which the struggle against 'the remains of capitalism in the minds of people' was still very much alive and real. Their analysis was praised by critic Vladimir Ermilov who underlined the importance of 'sharp dramatic conflict' in Soviet literature and picked out Iurii Krymov's *Tanker Derbent* (1938) as a good example

⁸ Konstantin Simonov, 'Zadachi sovetskoi dramaturgii i teatral'naia kritika', *Pravda*, 28 February 1949.

⁹ Boguslavskii and Diev, *Russkaia sovetskaia dramaturgiia*, p. 31.

¹⁰ 'Obraz sovetskogo cheloveka v sovremennom proze' iz doklada P. Pavlenko and F. Levin, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 4 February 1941, p. 4.

¹¹ Other works criticized for a lack of genuine conflict included: Aleksandr Mitrofanov's *Irina Godunova* (1939) and Konstantin Fedin's *Sanatorii Arktur* (1940).

for other writers to learn from.¹² However, four months later Germany invaded the Soviet Union and debates about a conflict-free society were suspended as literature was mobilised for the war effort.

One of the first critical voices against the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* in the post-war period was the theatre critic Efim Kholodov, who discussed the issue in the Moscow journal *Teatr* in 1947. Accepting that the old class antagonism of the past had indeed now vanished from Soviet society, Kholodov nevertheless insisted that conflict was intrinsic to drama and that Soviet plays should depict the 'struggle with one's own people' (*bor'ba mezhdru "svoimi"*) in the process of building communism.¹³ Soviet dramatists should escape the 'blind alley of "conflictless" drama' (*tupik "beskonfliktnoi dramy"*), he insisted, by portraying the clash between progressive communists and those elements of society that hold the rest back.¹⁴ Refusing to accept that these negative characters could be defined as 'good', on the scale of 'good versus better', Kholodov's argument boiled down to a semantic one. Although he accepted that the only truly 'antagonistic' conflict now facing the Soviet Union was with the West, he insisted that the way to construct conflict on the stage was by showing the struggle to reform those pernicious citizens who had not yet seen the light. A stronger rebuttal came a year later with an article by the dramatist Aleksandr Kron. Like his predecessors, Kron provided no direct source for the theory, stating only that he had more than once happened to hear a voice in literary circles asserting that the typical conflict of today is 'the struggle between good and even better' (*"bor'ba khoroshego s eshche luchshim"*).¹⁵ The writer dismissed this 'unfortunate formula', arguing that a play that compared a group of school children who received grade fours to a group who received grade fives would hardly be dramatic.¹⁶

Although there were no overt statements of support for the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* published in the press during the 1940s, its influence could be discerned in certain fragments of argument

¹² 'Obraz sovetskogo cheloveka', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, p. 4.

¹³ E. Kholodov, 'Dramaticheskii konflikt: zametki o sovremennykh p'esakh', *Teatr*, 8 (1947), 6-16 (10)

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Aleksandr Kron, 'Replika dramaturga', *Teatr*, 9 (1948), 48-50 (49).

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 50.

following the end of the Second World War. Buried in the middle of an article on contemporary Soviet drama published in 1945, Nikolai Pogodin observed that ‘drama reflects the fundamental collisions of life’, but noted that ‘if the stratum of human relations changes, then the old dramatic forms begin to crack and break down’.¹⁷ He went on to claim that he had tried to elevate the ‘crude shortcomings of conflictlessness to something of merit’. Hardly a ringing endorsement, nevertheless another article co-written by Pogodin and Boris Lavrenev in 1951 again appeared to offer muted support for the theory. In it the authors criticise the circulation of ‘farfetched, impractical and unrealistic conflicts’ in drama such as that between ‘backward leaders and innovative workers’, which are becoming ‘clichés’ (*shtamp*) and which are ‘no longer typical of life’.¹⁸ Although scant, the evidence suggests that Pogodin may at various times have been influenced by the theory. It should also be remembered that it was Pogodin who wrote the screenplay for Ivan Pyr’ev’s popular film *Kubanskie kazaki* (Cossacks of the Kuban, 1949), which was later widely accused of depicting a ‘conflictless’ reality.¹⁹

The origins of the theory of *beskonfliktnost’*

The widespread opposition to the theory of *beskonfliktnost’* was unsurprising. After all, the very idea of a ‘conflictless’ play seemed to contradict the fundamental principles of drama²⁰ and, perhaps more importantly, Marxist-Leninist dialectics, which saw development as the struggle between

¹⁷ Nikolai Pogodin, ‘O sovremennom p’ese’, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 22 May 1945, p. 3.

¹⁸ B. Lavrenev and N. Pogodin, ‘Dramaturg i teatr’, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 15 May 1951, p. 2.

¹⁹ Although none of Boris Lavrenev’s plays written in this period could be described as ‘conflictless’, his name was subsequently linked with the theory of *beskonfliktnost’* possibly on the basis of this article. Lavrenev’s other critical writings from the period however are consistent in their support for the role of conflict in drama. His article ‘Razgovor o professii’ (first published in *Teatr*, 8, 1951) criticizes a ‘certain theory’ and insists that conflict is ever present in people’s lives and therefore must underpin drama. This suggests that it was Pogodin rather than Lavrenev who was responsible for any advocacy of *beskonfliktnost’*. See Boris Lavrenev, *Sobranie sochinenii*, tom 6 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965), pp. 358-62 and 402-415.

²⁰ In his essay ‘The Sociology of Modern Drama’ (1909), George Lukacs affirmed the integral place of conflict in the evolution of drama. He argued that by taking on a social dimension the new bourgeois drama had affected a shift from the Elizabethan conflict of passions to a conflict of ideologies, most evident in the depiction of generational struggle – the collapse of the old and rise of the new. Trans. Lee Baxenhall, *The Tulane Drama Review*, 9:4 (Summer, 1965), 146-70.

opposites.²¹ In social terms the dialectical struggle was between the old capitalist world and the new progressive socialist one, as Stalin reiterated in his speech at the XV Party congress in 1927. The application of this dialectic to the arts was championed particularly in the Soviet cinema, by figures such as Sergei Eisenstein, who wrote in 1929 that ‘the basis of art is always conflict’ when theorising the use of montage in cinematic technique.²² Before working in cinema, Eisenstein had been a student of Vsevolod Meyerhold, who used the principle of the ‘grotesque’ to structure his theatre productions via fragmented sequences that aimed to defamiliarize the spectator. Meyerhold defined the art of the grotesque as ‘based on the conflict between form and content’, seeking to subordinate psychological emotion to the mise-en-scene and basing the actor’s performance on rhythm and movement.²³ At the same time, the urge to mould literature according to Marxist doctrine led members of the proletarian organisation RAPP to devise their own literary version of ‘dialectical materialism’, an early precursor of socialist realism, which asserted the primacy of existence over consciousness and viewed the world in terms of social types.²⁴ Soviet literature during this period generally conformed to the binary view of history articulated in Lenin’s Civil War cry ‘Kto kogo?’ (Who will beat whom?) which, Sheila Fitzpatrick has noted, framed Bolshevik thinking during the Cultural Revolution.²⁵ Contemporary plays such as *Temp* (Tempo, 1930) by Nikolai Pogodin and *Khleb* (Bread, 1930) by Vladimir Kirshon documented the struggles of Bolshevik cadres in the countryside against industrial saboteurs and kulaks at the time of the First Five Year Plan and Collectivisation. From the mid-1930s, however, there was a shift in official discourse as the ‘Great Retreat’ took hold.²⁶ The 1934 ‘Congress of Victors’ ushered in a new triumphalist tone, despite party divisions,

²¹ V.I. Lenin, ‘On the Question of Dialectics’, *Collected Works*, 4th Ed., Volume 38, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), pp. 357-361.

²² S. M. Eisenstein, ‘Za kadrom’ (1929), in *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moskva: Iskusstvo, 1964), p. 283.

²³ V. Meyerhold, ‘Balagan’ (1912), reprinted in V. E. Meierkhol’d *Stat’i, pis’ma, rechi, besedy: Chast’ pervaiia 1891-1917*, ed. A. Fevral’skii, (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1968), pp. 207-229.

²⁴ Herman Ermolaev, *Soviet Literary Theories: 1917-1934: The Genesis of Socialist Realism* (Oakland: UC Press, 1963), pp. 120-22.

²⁵ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1992), pp. 2-7

²⁶ Nicholas Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York, 1946)

that suggested the major ideological battles had now been won, at least nationally. This was emphasised by the 1936 Soviet Constitution which was designed to reflect the dramatic changes the country had undergone in the industrial and agricultural spheres. One of the key stipulations of the new constitution was that all citizens had equal rights regardless of background. The official justification for this change was that class enemies had now been eliminated; class became deemphasised and citizenship came to the fore.²⁷ In theory this meant fewer privileges for the industrial proletariat and greater tolerance for those of dubious social origins, although in practice having a suspect background certainly did prejudice your standing in society, especially during the purges. The question of whether social conflict had thus been eradicated from the new 'classless' Soviet society was debated in journals up until the Second World War.²⁸ While some argued that conflict between workers and bosses was inevitable within the hierarchical structure of Soviet industry, others saw it as theoretically impossible now that the working class was in power (since it could not be in conflict with itself).²⁹ This led one scholar, A. Kovalev, to conclude that the lack of an exploiter class meant the inevitable cooperation of workers in a society that was united internally and free from 'inner contradictions' (*vnutrennye protivorechiia*).³⁰ Although such debates were interrupted by the war, with its clear demarcation of 'the enemy', the idea of a society free from conflict re-emerged after 1945.

The principle of *beskonfliktnost'* can therefore be said to have evolved out of the utopian idealism of 1930's Stalinist culture. As Spencer Golub has noted, 'Stalinist culture ascribed to time a final, universal value, effectively freezing it as in an eternal utopian and iconic present.'³¹ Stalinism claimed to be speeding up the journey to utopia and realising it in the present. When translated into

²⁷ David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), pp. 148-54.

²⁸ 'Obzor postupivshikh v redaktsiiu statei po voprosu o sootvetstvii proizvodstvennykh otnoshenii proizvoditel'nym silam pri sotsializme', *Pod znamenem Marksizma*, 8 (1940) 47-60.

²⁹ Vlasov, Blinderov and Gulin argued that conflict was inevitable, whereas Kashchenko, Britvin and Babaev saw it as theoretically impossible. Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 51.

³¹ Spencer Golub, *The Recurrence of Fate: Theatre and Memory in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), p. 162.

the literary method of socialist realism, this juxtaposition of temporalities created a jarring contrapuntal form, which Katerina Clark has described as the combination of ‘two diametrically opposed time-value systems’ (what is and what ought to be).³² The theory of *beskonfliktnost’*, then, could be described as socialist realism followed through to its (il)logical conclusion, one in which its fundamental tensions end in a void, in the absence of dramatic action. The future is now, arcadia is reached and all suffering and conflict has ended. It is a state that Evgeny Dobrenko has described as the ‘chronotope of a timeless myth’: a ‘post-utopian consciousness’ in which the future is continually frozen in the form of the present.³³

As a dramatic device, *beskonfliktnost’* can also be traced back to the early 1930s and the work of Georgian dramatist and theorist Sergo Amaglobeli, whose ‘Theatre of Social Optimism’ rejected the notion of ‘pessimistic and individualistic theatre’ as the art of ‘antagonistic societies’.³⁴ Amaglobeli described the task of the dramatist as not to expose enemies on stage, but to expose them in the auditorium *through* the stage by bringing back to theatre its ‘celebratory, life-affirming, optimistic character’.³⁵ A similar structure of feeling could be found in Vsevolod Vishnevsky’s contemporary play *Optimisticheskaia tragediia* (Optimistic Tragedy, 1933). Vishnevsky believed that in contrast to classical tragedy, the new tragedy of Soviet literature would be optimistic, since tragic events would disappear as Russia moved towards a classless socialist society. This optimism was a key facet of the utopian world-view that socialist realism reproduced. The removal of conflict from the stage thus reflected Stalinist society’s idealised self-image; reifying the eternal utopia inside theatres while outside the country was suffering from collectivisation and the purges.

³² Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3rd edition (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 39.

³³ E. Dobrenko, ‘Ampir vo vremia chumy, ili Lavka vnevremennosti’, *Obshchestvennye nauki i sovremennost’*, 1 (1992), 161-172 (71).

³⁴ Sergo Amaglobeli, ‘Teatr sotsial’nogo optimizma’ in *Dramaturgiia*, ed. B. Alpers et al. (Moscow: Sovetskaia literatura, 1933), pp. 129-146.

³⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 129 and 134.

The play *Dalekoe* (Distant Point, 1935) by Aleksandr Afinogenev could be considered a progenitor of later 'conflictless' dramas.³⁶ Set in a small wayside railway station on the Trans-Siberian line in Eastern Siberia, seven thousand kilometres from Moscow, the play explores the idea of building socialism as a pan-national event through a cast of exclusively positive characters. A train transporting General Matvei Mal'ko is held up by chance at the station overnight for repairs and his brief visit galvanises the local workers to better serve the state by taking pride in their work locally rather than aspiring to leave for Moscow. The play's epiphanic moment comes with the revelation that General Mal'ko is suffering from a terminal illness and his words to the local inhabitants turn into a rejection of death and an invocation to build the socialist utopia here on Russian soil: 'We all have one wish – communism... We think about it, we live for it... to the last second of our last hour... And when death comes – we'll die alive...all right?'³⁷ The play's title references the 'distant future' (*dalekoe budushchee*) of the socialist utopian vision, brought nearer by the revolution and attainable now in the present. Mal'ko's belief in eternal life consists not of some intangible spiritual existence but in the idea that his work will live on 'in the minds of the people'. Building utopia allows the Soviet individual to transcend death as part of the eternal socialist project.

The emergence of 'good versus better' as a dramatic device should also be viewed within the context of the Stalinist narrative of surpassing or over-taking (*peregnat'*).³⁸ The idolisation of Soviet hero-figures, such as the pilots Valery Chkalov and Georgii Baidukov, the Cheliuskin arctic explorers or record-breaking shock workers like Alexei Stakhanov, enshrined a spirit of individualism and self-improvement that was reproduced in socialist realist literature of the 1930s.³⁹ When in December 1935, delegates at a plenary session of the Central Committee attacked the 'Theory of Limits'

³⁶ Other examples include Konstantin Finn's *Synov'ia* (Sons, 1937) and Viktor Gusev's *Druzhiba* (Friendship, 1938). *Dalekoe* was staged at the Vakhtangov Theatre in Moscow in 1935, directed by Iosif Tolchanov.

³⁷ A. Afinogenev, *P'esy* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1956), p. 207.

³⁸ The phrase 'догнать и перегнать' (catch up and overtake) was used first by Lenin in 1917 and later repeatedly by Stalin to encourage the Soviet Union to surpass the West in social, economic and military terms.

³⁹ See Katerina Clark, 'Utopian Anthropology as a Context for Stalinist Literature', in *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, ed. R. C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), pp. 180- 198; Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, pp. 124-129.

embodied by technical norm determination and called for the burning of norm manuals which set weight and speed limits, they were acting as part of a broad social trend that rejected the scientific constraints of the 1920s (embodied by Taylorism) and which embraced the mythopoeic optimism of 1930's Stalinism.⁴⁰ In this sense, the Stalinist narrative of *peregnat'* and the emergence of 'conflictless' drama, in which good socialists competed with one another to be better, were both products of the same utopian idealism.

Post-war 'conflictless' drama

Despite the opacity surrounding the origins and meaning of *beskonfliktnost'*, there is no doubt that certain plays in the post-war period bore the marks of its influence.⁴¹ One example is *U nas na zemle* (With us on the Earth, 1947) co-written by the poet Ol'ga Berggol'ts and her husband Georgii Makogonenko, which was published in *Zvezda* in December 1947 before being staged at the Bolshoi Dramatic Theatre in Leningrad in 1948, directed by Natalya Rashevskaiia. The play is set in a Leningrad steel factory located next to the newly constructed Park Pobedy and depicts the efforts of those workers who survived the war to rebuild the country and remember their fallen comrades. The factory has been commissioned to build the wheel for the reconstruction of the Dnieper hydroelectric power station, which is achieved ahead of schedule thanks to the innovative plan of expert engineer Petr Sivachenko who is given timely encouragement by his friend and boss Ivan Arsen'ev.⁴² With no conflict between the workers, or saboteurs attempting to wreck the project, tension is created through a mishap with the smelting and a love triangle involving Arsen'ev and two younger workers: Vasilii and Galia. In a review of the play, Konstantin Rudnitskii complained that the characters were mostly engaged in disentangling their complex love lives and paying each other

⁴⁰ On the 1935 plenary session of the Central Committee see Lewis H. Siegelbaum, 'Soviet Norm Determination in Theory and Practice, 1917-1941', *Soviet Studies*, 36 (January 1984), 45-68 (60).

⁴¹ Examples of 'conflictless' plays from this period include: Nikolai Asanov, *Almazy* (1947); Iaroslav Smeliakov, *Druz'ia Mikhaïla Iugova* (1947); Oizer Gol'des, *Drugie liudi* (1948); Nikolai Vinnikov, *Chasha radosti* (1950); Anatolii Sofronov, *V nashi dni* (1951).

⁴² Arsen'ev convinces Sivachenko that his one idea will 'replace tens of the best experts who died during the war'. Ol'ga Berggol'ts and Georgii Makogonenko, 'U nas na zemle', *Zvezda*, 12 (1947), 120-61 (127).

endless compliments, criticising the decision to give the play an award at the All-Union Competition as a 'strange delusion'.⁴³ Berggol'ts motivation for writing the play, which presents a harmonious and uncontroversial vision of Leningrad life, was most likely the furore caused by the August 1946 Central Committee Resolutions on literature and art, which marked the start of Andrei Zhdanov's clampdown on the cultural sphere. In the year prior to the publication of *U nas na zemle* both Berggol'ts and *Zvezda* came under fire from the Leningrad authorities: Berggol'ts was removed from the board of the Leningrad Writers' Union, while the editors of *Zvezda* were sacked and replaced.⁴⁴

U nas na zemle contains many of the tropes of earlier socialist realist factory dramas: an industrial project is completed ahead of schedule to the benefit of the Soviet state, a brilliant worker is helped to fulfil his/her potential thanks to the guidance of a mentor figure; but gone are any characters that might traditionally be defined as 'villains'. The great social clashes of the past between positive heroes and those hostile to the new regime (whites, kulaks, bourgeoisie, industrial saboteurs etc.) are no more. Citizens do not need to be converted into communists, although some may still require a degree of fine tuning. Such is the case in Iulii Chepurin's play *Sovest'* (Conscience, 1950), the third in his 'Stalingraders' trilogy, which won a Stalin prize (third degree) and was staged at the Central Theatre of the Red Army in Moscow in 1951, directed by Aleksei Popov.⁴⁵ In the play, set in a tractor factory in post-war Stalingrad, Maksim, a young Stakhanovite, is discovered to have borrowed his girlfriend's quality control stamp in order to speed up his output rate. This attempt to continue his run of success on the honours' board backfires when a fault is found in the iron rods leading to the tractors falling apart. Maksim is found guilty at a comrades' court, but Iulia, his girlfriend, is vindicated and praised for her belief that people should start taking personal responsibility for their work. The factory director Sergei Klimov announces a change to the factory culture based on Iulia's

⁴³ Konstantin Rudnitskii, 'Na zemle i na stsene', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, n. 60, 28 July 1948, p. 3.

⁴⁴ Katherine Hodgson, *Voicing the Soviet Experience: The Poetry of Olga Berggol'ts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 26-7.

⁴⁵ *Sovest'* was also staged that year at the Gorky Drama Theatre in Stalingrad, directed by Firs Shishigin. The first and second plays in the trilogy, *Stalingradtsy* (1943) and *Poslednie rubezhi* (1947) were also staged jointly at this theatre and the Central Theatre of the Red Army.

thinking: from now on quality control will be ensured on the basis of each individual's conscience. From a practical point of view, Klimov's solution seems misconceived; transferring all responsibility onto the workers' shoulders is likely to make mishaps such as Maksim's more common. But from the totalitarian perspective of post-war Stalinism, the shift in thinking makes perfect sense: workers should internalise the ethos of the system so that they become their own panopticon.

In plays such as *Sovest'*, good characters are moulded into better ones in a world free from class antagonism. But that is not to say that drama is entirely absent. In the space vacated by social conflict, love plots and relationship intrigues come to the fore. Tension is produced through themes of unrequited love, unexpected revelations, and comic mishaps. Comedy often takes the place of melodrama and epic: conflict is reduced to the level of simple misunderstandings and miscommunications, accidents, errors and mistaken identities, within a world that is reassuringly positive and knowable. Differences between characters in these plays can be measured in shades of red, rather than by the polarities of good and evil. This is certainly the case in Aleksandr Korneichuk's Stalin-prize winning *Kalinovaia roshcha*, which he criticised himself at the Second Writers' Congress in 1954. In this play, Ivan Romaniuk, the chairman of the Vibernum Grove *kolkhoz* in Ukraine, is encouraged to increase the productivity of his workforce following a visit from the Stalin prize laureate Sergei Batura. The writer is keen to learn what factors prevent an average *kolkhoz* from becoming 'progressive'. Romaniuk, a decorated war hero, is by no means lazy or uncommitted to the socialist cause. Instead his single flaw seems to be a willingness to settle for mediocrity rather than pushing to become the best. Urging Romaniuk to be more ambitious is former deputy chairman of the *kolkhoz*, Karp Vetrovoi, who in an implausible twist, turns out to be Batura's former war-time comrade. By the time Batura departs in Act 4, Karp has succeeded in winning over control of the *kolkhoz* from Romaniuk, who is to be sent to an academy where he can study new methods of labour organisation. In one key exchange, Karp tells Romaniuk: 'you may be a member of the

communist party but you are not a true communist'.⁴⁶ A true communist, according to Karp, is someone who has parted company with the 'peasant' (*muzhik*) mindset forever.⁴⁷ Romaniuk finally acknowledges to Batura that a new time has come. 'There is a law', he says, 'often mentioned by Comrade Stalin'. 'The law of dialectics?' Asks Batura. 'Yes that's right', replies Romaniuk, 'such a dialectic has passed through us'.⁴⁸ In Korneichuk's play the Marxist-Leninist dichotomy of new against old remains – but diluted into the competition between good and better citizens.

Kalinovaia roshcha premiered at the Malyi Theatre in Moscow in May 1950, directed by Aleksei Dikii.⁴⁹ A former actor at the Moscow Art Theatre and director at the Second MAT with Mikhail Chekhov, Dikii had been sent to the Gulag during the purges on falsified charges, but returned to play the role of Stalin in a number of successful films in the post-war period.⁵⁰ In his production of *Kalinovaia roshcha*, Dikii maintained the realist tradition of the Malyi Theatre and was praised by critics for the production's 'life-like truthfulness' and the authenticity of the characters.⁵¹ In his time as a director at the Second MAT and at the Theatre of the Revolution, Dikii had become known for a non-psychological directing style that drew on folk (*balagan*) influences and experimented with stylized crowd scenes.⁵² But in the late 1930s and 40s, experimentation with such 'formalist' devices disappeared from the Soviet stage, scenic naturalism became standardized and a simplified version of the Stanislavsky system was used in theatres across the country. The grotesque, conflict-based stylization of directors such as Meyerhold was now taboo (and Meyerhold himself purged), but this did not necessarily mean that conflict was now absent from production methods. From the mid-1920s onwards, Stanislavsky had been developing the system away from emotion and towards

⁴⁶ A. Korneichuk, 'Kalinovaia roshcha' in *Sovetskaia dramaturgiia 1950* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1951), pp. 275-346 (p. 231).

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 231.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 343.

⁴⁹ In 1953 it was made into a popular film, directed by Timofei Levchuk.

⁵⁰ *Tretii udar* (The Third Blow, 1948), directed by Igor Savchenko, and the two-part *Stalingradskaia bitva* (1949), directed by Vladimir Petrov, with screen play written by Nikolai Virta.

⁵¹ N. Abalkin, 'Liudi kalinovoi roshchi', *Pravda*, 14 June 1950, p. 4.

⁵² For example in the productions *Blokha* (The Flea, 1925) and *Pervaia konnaia* (First Cavalry Army, 1930), see Konstantin Rudnitsky, *Russian and Soviet Theatre: Tradition and the Avant-Garde*, ed. L. Milne, trans. R. Permar (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), pp. 193-4, 199.

action, placing more emphasis on the 'through-line of action' (*skvoznoe deistvie*), which connects the different tasks posed to each character in the play. This eventually led to the Method of Physical Actions in which action becomes the basis of the whole production. Stanislavsky now instructed his actors to work out the underlying actions and counteractions of the role prior to working with the text, which brought him much closer to Meyerhold's approach.⁵³ The necessity of action and counteraction (i.e. conflict) in the actor's interpretation of the role was thus a vital part of the Stanislavsky system and there is no evidence to suggest that directors such as Dikii were attempting to devise a new 'conflictless' approach in their work on these plays. Overall therefore, what these texts and their productions show is that the idea of *beskonfliktnost'* was to some extent a chimera. Drama cannot exist without conflict of any kind, indeed in the Russian system the actor's interpretation of the drama is typically predicated on an understanding of its underlying conflicts. However, at the level of plot these conflicts can be reduced from epic social clashes to petty squabbles and mishaps between people that share the same fundamental ideological outlook.

Nikolai Virta and *beskonfliktnost'*

Although the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* became known predominantly in relation to drama, it also influenced prose, fine art and cinema. Semen Babaevskii's Stalin prize-winning novels *Kavaler zolotoi zvezdy* (Cavalier of the Golden Star, 1947-8) and *Svet nad zemlei* (Light Over the Earth, 1949-50) were accused of *beskonfliktnost'*, as was Ivan Pyr'ev's *Kubanskie kazaki* (screen play written by Nikolai Pogodin). In a vigorous defence of Babaevskii's *Kavaler zolotoi zvezdy*, the critic Ivan Riabov insisted that conditions in the countryside had improved so much that it would be churlish to complain about a lack of serious conflict.⁵⁴ In the article, Riabov then proceeded to criticise other literary works for describing conflicts and clashes that are 'not characteristic of a *kolkhoz* village'.⁵⁵ Although not citing the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* directly, the article is a good example of the spread

⁵³ Robert Leach, *Stanislavsky and Meyerhold* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), pp. 175-76.

⁵⁴ I. Riabov, 'Liudi sorokovykh godov', *Oktiabr'*, 4 (1948), 185-191.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p. 186.

of its influence in Soviet literary criticism in the late 1940s. Pyr'ev, on the other hand, came out against the theory early on despite the fraternal tone of his *Kubanskie kazaki*. In an article of 1948, Pyr'ev criticized other film directors 'who are afraid of showing complexity and conflict in the depiction of life'.⁵⁶ Another notable 'conflictless' film from this period was Gerasimov's *Sel'skii vrach*, released in 1951 with a screenplay written by Mariia Smirnova. The film tells the story of a young doctor, Kazakova, who arrives at a hospital in the country and endeavours to win the trust and confidence of the hospital manager, Arsen'ev, an older doctor. Arsen'ev has become mistrustful of young people as a result of Kazakova's predecessor, another young doctor who had a slack attitude to work. Kazakova eventually wins over Arsen'ev and the two become good friends.

In a review of the film, the playwright and novelist Nikolai Virta gave one of the clearest affirmations of the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* that still exists in print. Virta wrote that 'for all those working in the dramatic and film industries, it has become clearer and clearer that the understanding of conflict, which over the course of a number of years has defined the essence and method of drama, has become outdated'.⁵⁷ He argued that while conflicts still existed between socialism and the 'decaying' forms of capitalism, the lack of any competing classes in the USSR meant there could be no serious internal conflicts. Virta praised *Sel'skii vrach* for having no 'antagonistic conflicts' but acknowledged that it did have 'some life-like collisions' (*otdel'nye zhiznennye stolknoveniia*) between people, collisions that could be called 'bloodless', based on either a misunderstanding of a point of view or an 'aversion to something that halts our march towards communism'.⁵⁸ In his apparent support for the theory Virta compared *Sel'skii vrach* favourably to one of his own plays, the Stalin prize-winning (2nd degree) *Khleb nash nasushchnyi* (Our Daily Bread, 1947) which had offered a much bleaker depiction of the Soviet countryside. Having spent the last two years living in the provinces, Virta

⁵⁶ Ivan Pyr'ev, 'Bol'shie tvorcheskije zadachi', *Kul'tura i zhizn'*, 11 April 1948.

⁵⁷ N. Virta, 'Proizvedenie bol'shoi zhiznnoi pravdy', *Sovetskoe iskusstvo*, 16 January 1952.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

insisted that the corruption he had shown in his play no longer existed and that *Sel'skii vrach* was a far more accurate account of rural life.

Nikolai Virta, a journalist turned writer from Tambov, was one of three dramatists to be promoted by the Soviet Writers' Union after the war, along with Anatolii Sofronov and Anatolii Surov, in response to the call for more plays on contemporary Soviet themes in the second of the Central Committee resolutions issued in August 1946.⁵⁹ The new plays commissioned by the Writers' Union to depict contemporary Soviet life tended to maintain distinct conflicts, typically between good workers and bad/corrupt ones. Anatolii Sofronov's play *V odnom gorode* (*In One Town*, 1947), staged at the Mossovet Theatre in 1948, evoked a clear dichotomy between two forms of governance, contrasting the municipal government with the Party and encouraging audiences to view in party secretary Petrov a paradigm of good Soviet leadership.⁶⁰ Virta's play *Khleb nash nasushchnyi*, staged at the Moscow Art Theatre by Mariia Knebel' in 1948, also set up a distinction between good and bad workers, this time in an agricultural setting.

The play is set across two grain-harvesting *kolkhoz*: the Virgin Soil *kolkhoz* run by Sila Tikhoi, an alcoholic who siphons off grain from the harvest to sell on the black market, and the New Way *kolkhoz* run efficiently by Maria Rogova, who is implementing new agricultural methods. Tikhoi is caught siphoning grain by Aleksei Rogov, Maria's husband and local party secretary who was assumed to have died during the war, but arrives at the start of the play as a returning saviour figure. The play's Christian motif, suggested by the title with its paraphrasing of the Lord's Prayer, is evident in Rogov's quasi-messianic persona and also in Virta's use of biblical quotation in the characters' dialogue.⁶¹ In Act 1, Tikhoi sings his own version of the Lord's Prayer to an angry worker: 'and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil! From Rogov, from Aleksei Zotach, deliver

⁵⁹ On the promotion of these three figures see Inna Solovyova, 'The Theatre and Socialist Realism, 1929-1953', trans. by Jean Benedetti, in *A History of Russian Theatre*, ed. by Robert Leach and Victor Borovsky, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 325-57.

⁶⁰ Boguslavskii and Diev, *Russkaia sovetskaia dramaturgiia* (Part 3), p. 26.

⁶¹ N. Virta, *P'esy* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1950), pp. 139-210 (p. 143).

us my God!⁶² Later in Act 3, Natasha, a local journalist, warns Tikhoi's wife Fekla of the commandment 'thou shalt not steal' (*zapoved' – ne vorui*) in reference to her husband's suspected grain speculation.⁶³ The merger of Christian and Communist mythology culminates in the 'conversion' of Tikhoi's nephew Zotov to the party cause. Just as in the story of Pavlik Morozov, Zotov agrees to betray his blood relative in service to the party, exposing his uncle and escorting him to the cells on Rogov's orders.⁶⁴

Minutes from a meeting of the secretariat of the Writers' Union show that none of the members believed Virta's play to be of high artistic quality. The chairman Aleksandr Fadeev considered the main characters 'schematic', stating bluntly: 'I consider it to be simply a bad play'.⁶⁵ Vladimir Chicherov recalled that when Virta had read the play to them at consultation stage it had also been heavily criticized and Leonid Leonov dismissed it as 'lacking art'.⁶⁶ In the end, however, the secretariat decided to approve the work because of the need to deliver plays on contemporary Soviet themes for the new quotas. Following ratification by the Writers' Union, the play text received a number of glowing reviews in the press.⁶⁷ Writing in *Kul'tura i zhizn'*, Vera Smirnova commended Virta for having 'bravely portrayed the conflict taking place in our lives between the new, progressive and socialist, and the backward, old and petit bourgeois'.⁶⁸ Although schematic and tendentious, Virta's play certainly did not subscribe to the emerging trend of *beskonfliktnost'*. Nor did his next work, *Zagovor obrechennykh* (*Conspiracy of the Doomed*, 1948), contain anything

⁶² Ibid, p. 161. ('...И не введи нас во искушение, но избави нас от лукавого! От Рогова, от Алексея Зотача, избави нас, хоссподи!')

⁶³ Ibid, p. 194.

⁶⁴ One possible reason for Virta's direct use of biblical lexicon, unusual for socialist realist drama, was his appointment in 1943 as censor for a new edition of the Bible published with Stalin's approval in return for the Orthodox Church's support during the war. Virta found no deviations in the text from Soviet ideology and approved publication without any changes. See Donald Rayfield, *Stalin and his Hangmen*, (London: Penguin, 2005) p. 405.

⁶⁵ Protokol n. 24, Zasedaniia Sekretariata Soiuza Sovetskikh Pisatelei SSSR ot 3 iunია, 1947. RGALI, f. 631, op. 15, d. 811.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ L. Kanevskii, 'P'esa o sile i zhiznennosti kolkhoznogo stroia', *Bol'shevik zaporozh'ia*, 23 May 1948.

⁶⁸ Vera Smirnova, 'Khleb nash nasushchnyi', *Kul'tura i zhizn'*, 1947 (issue number missing), RGALI, f. 1362, op. 2, d. 70, l. 3.

approaching a 'conflictless' plot.⁶⁹ In fact, this spy thriller, later made into a popular film by Mikhail Kalatozov, delighted audiences by pitting communists in Western Europe against an international capitalist conspiracy led by the shady figure of Sir Henry Mac-Hill, a teetotaler vegetarian in league with Wall Street and the Vatican. The end of friendly relations between the allied powers and the onset of the Cold War had seen a new axis of conflict emerge that turned the Anglo-Saxon West into the 'Other'. Soviet writers were encouraged to depict this new enemy in their work and Virta's play chimed with such directives, often phrased in terms of increasing 'Soviet patriotism' in literature.⁷⁰ Like many of his contemporaries, Virta followed the official line and ensured that his plays delineated clearly the enemies of the day.⁷¹ This consequently made his scapegoating as chief architect of the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* during a vitriolic press campaign all the more unfortunate.

The campaign against *beskonfliktnost'*

A campaign against *beskonfliktnost'* began in earnest in the spring of 1952 with a series of articles criticising the theory as part of the discussion around the Stalin Prize winners announced for the previous year.⁷² One key article published in *Pravda* on 7 April condemned the theory for leading to 'an anti-realistic, distorted, one-sided depiction of reality'.⁷³ The article insisted that 'not everything is ideal in our country' and called for dramatists to place conflict at the heart of their work. Although in many ways a product of the idealism that socialist realism had sought to engender in art and literature, the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* was now being criticised as too excessive a distortion of

⁶⁹ This play won a Stalin prize (first degree) and was staged in 1949 at the Vakhtangov Theatre, directed by Ruben Simonov and at other theatres in Moscow including the Moscow Art Theatre.

⁷⁰ Aleksandr Fadeev reported to the Writers' Union that during a meeting between the heads of the Writers' Union and Stalin in May 1947, the party leader had called on Soviet writers to pay more attention to the theme of 'Soviet patriotism' and to stop being in awe of foreigners. Stenogramma zasedeniia SSSR ot 21 Maia, 1947. RGALI, f. 631, op. 15, d. 808.

⁷¹ Other examples include Konstantin Simonov's *Russkii vopros* (The Russian Question, 1946) and Boris Romashov's *Velikaia sila* (A Great Force, 1948).

⁷² K. Simonov, 'Iarhe i polnee izobrazhat' nashu sovetskuiu zhizn'', *Pravda*, 17 March 1952, p. 2; I. Bol'shakov, 'K novym uspekham sovetskoi kinematografii', *Pravda*, 18 March 1952, p. 2; 'Preodolet' otstavanie dramaturgii', *Pravda*, 7 April 1952, p. 2; 'Soveshchanie rabotnikov literatury i iskusstva Leningrada', *Pravda*, 25 April 1952, p. 2; V. Frolov and V. Sitov, 'Bol'she zaboty o tvorcheskome roste pisatelei', *Pravda*, 21 July 1952, p. 2.

⁷³ 'Preodolet' otstavanie dramaturgii', *Pravda*, 7 April 1952, p. 2.

Soviet reality. Of course, one of the ironies of this campaign was that in the last three years 'conflictless' plays, novels and films had been routinely awarded Stalin prizes for their correct representation of life in the USSR. Later that year in a speech at the XIX Party Congress, Mikhail Suslov, secretary of the Party Central Committee, also criticized the idea of *beskonfliktnost'* as unreflective of the true process of achieving communism. He declared that the building of a communist society was not taking place 'in the form of a planned "conflictless" advance forward, without difficulty and without struggle'.⁷⁴ By this point most figures within the party and the Writers' Union had positioned themselves in line with the stance adopted by *Pravda*, including Ivan Riabov, who had recanted his former support for the idea and now publicly criticized the absence of conflict in stories such as *Na beregu Kaspiia* (On the Banks of the Caspian) by Suleiman Ragimov and *Sukhaia iula* (The Dry Top) by Georgii Sholokhov-Siniavskii.⁷⁵ However, Nikolai Virta's affirmation of *beskonfliktnost'* in the film *Sel'skii vrach* had been published as recently as January of that year and so he became a convenient scapegoat for the theory.

In an article published soon after the XIX Party Congress in *Pravda*, critic Galina Nikolaeva questioned how it was possible that the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* had managed to become so widespread and 'to cause so much harm'.⁷⁶ She criticized Virta directly and described his attempts to explain why he had supported the theory as inadequate. As the campaign against *beskonfliktnost'* gathered momentum that autumn, the drive to apportion blame led to the tarnishing of Virta's reputation. Writers and critics closed ranks to blame him and the fact that others had expressed similar sentiments at one point or another was conveniently ignored. Virta's scapegoating was also carefully orchestrated by the Soviet Writers' Union. A year later, at the XIV Plenum of the board of the Writers' Union in October 1953, Virta was invited to speak first at the morning session and reaffirm the importance of conflict for the work of Soviet dramatists. Recanting his former position,

⁷⁴ Quoted in *Pravda*, 13 October 1952, p. 5.

⁷⁵ In essays dated 28 January 1950 and 28 June 1951, RGALI, f. 1484, op. 2, d. 2.

⁷⁶ Galina Nikolaeva, 'Vdokhnovliaiushchaia programma tvorchestva', *Pravda*, 22 October 1952, p. 2.

Virta announced that 'life dictates to the writer complex conflicts in which a tremendous diversity of characters and fates should be developed.'⁷⁷ Most of the speakers who followed went on to criticize *beskonfliktnost'* as responsible for recent failings in drama and the other arts. Virta's public humiliation culminated in his expulsion from the Writers' Union in April 1954 on the charge of 'amoral and anti-social behavior'.⁷⁸ Two years later Virta's marriage broke up and he found himself ostracized and alone. Virta's status as a relatively minor figure in the Writers' Union was no doubt one of the crucial factors in his fall. By this point the Writers' Union had grown into an elite club in which nepotism and cronyism were rife. Those high up in the Union enjoyed the same social prestige and material benefits as a colonel or lieutenant-colonel in the Soviet army and many members were not even writers but party bureaucrats because of the generous privileges membership brought.⁷⁹ A more influential figure in the Union would most likely have managed to avoid direct blame, just as Aleksandr Korneichuk and Nikolai Pogodin did, despite writing 'conflictless' works.

In his speech at the Writers' Congress in 1954, Korneichuk accepted that he had been unduly influenced by the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* when writing *Kalinoiaia roshcha*. He told delegates that the theory had spread 'like a foul weed amongst us quite freely, while we paid no attention to the party press', but he insisted the real question should be how it spread, not who started it.⁸⁰

Unfortunately, Korneichuk was unable to provide a sufficient answer to this question, instead referring vaguely to 'systemic processes' that had been at fault. Korneichuk's act of self-criticism was possible because of his position within the Ukrainian government and Writers' Union. It enabled him to question how the theory had spread without fear that the finger would be pointed at him. At the second Soviet Writers' Congress, the new chairman Aleksei Surkov and secretary Konstantin Simonov both joined Korneichuk in criticizing the theory of *beskonfliktnost'*, as did film director

⁷⁷ 'Preiia po dokladu K. Simonova i sodokladu B. Lavreneva, utrennee zasedanie 22 oktiabria', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 24 October 1953, p. 3.

⁷⁸ 'V prezidiume pravleniia SSP SSSR', *Pravda*, 6 May 1954, p. 2.

⁷⁹ John and Carol Garrard, *Inside the Soviet Writers' Union* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990), p. 107.

⁸⁰ *Vtoroi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei: Stenograficheskii otchet*, pp. 193- 194.

Sergei Gerasimov, whose film, *Sel'skii vrach*, had been hailed by Virta as an exemplar of the concept.⁸¹ Virta's bad timing and low status within the Writers' Union led to his ostracism ahead of others such as Korneichuk and Gerasimov. While they had created the actual works, Virta had conveniently shouldered the blame.

Another factor likely to have enabled Korneichuk's act of self-criticism was the change in atmosphere following Stalin's death in March 1953. The fact that there was a Soviet Writers' congress at all was significant, since it was only the second congress in the Union's history.⁸² The entrenchment of bureaucracy in the Writers' Union over the previous twenty years had led to stagnation within the Soviet theatre and a system in which Stalin prizes were awarded on the basis of reputation and cronyism. Oleg Efremov, who trained at the Moscow Art Theatre School in the late 1940s before returning as Artistic Director in 1970, having set up the innovative *Sovremennik* theatre in between, looked back on this period as a time when all artistic principles were surrendered: 'every year the Moscow Art Theatre received a Stalin prize and quite a few actors and stage directors lived "from prize to prize".'⁸³ A case in point was Virta's play *Khleb nash nasushchnyi*, which was awarded a Stalin prize despite being panned by the heads of the Writers' Union in private. In his speech at the 1954 Writers' Congress, Valentin Ovechkin claimed that the awarding of prizes and bonuses to certain writers had become a scandal and criticized the nepotism within the reward system, something unthinkable prior to Stalin's death.⁸⁴ But although the change in atmosphere brought on by the Thaw enabled a certain revision of attitudes towards literary styles and cultural practices, the discourse on the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* did not reflect this shift. Those who spoke out against *beskonfliktnost'* increasingly used the term to criticize the past in a general

⁸¹ Ibid. pp. 197-216.

⁸² The statutes, drawn up at the first congress in 1934, had declared that a congress should be held once every three years in order to elect a new presidium. *Inside the Soviet Writers' Union*, p. 45.

⁸³ Anatoli Smeliansky, *Oleg Yefremov: Masters of Soviet Art*, trans. Mikhail Nikolsky (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1988), p. 15.

⁸⁴ *Pravda*, 20 December 1954, p. 2.

sense, incorporating all the problems of the preceding years into a neat label that eschewed the need for detailed explanation or investigation. The campaign against *beskonfliktnost'* had begun over four years before Stalin's death and its denunciation at the congress represented less an opening up of literary discussion and more a continuation of previous modes of cultural labeling.

The surge in press articles attacking *beskonfliktnost'* in 1952 was matched in 1953 with another ten articles in *Pravda* devoted to its critique and then another twelve that appeared in 1954. Over this two-year period the term was used as a catchall for anything that invoked disapproval in the cultural sphere and as an explanation for all the mistakes of the past. In various issues of *Pravda*, *beskonfliktnost'* was blamed for the poor state of contemporary drama, the lack of good quality satire, low standards of musical comedy, bad short-story writing and errors in film-making.⁸⁵ The tendency was not confined to Soviet Russia either: in a short news piece regarding the state of Kyrgyz literature, the correspondent N. Lukin noted that Kyrgyz drama had still not managed to free itself from the harmful theory.⁸⁶ Criticism of *beskonfliktnost'* was not even limited to the arts. In a speech on the state budget in August 1953, the minister M. Gedvilasa referred to the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* as one of the key problems affecting the Soviet Union as a whole.⁸⁷ The term's usage across many varying sectors of society indicated both its saturation in popular discourse and its growing function as metonym for the consequences of the Stalinist 'cult of personality'. As such, the term *beskonfliktnost'* became a tool for obfuscation rather than clarification. Alexei Yurchak has argued that authoritative discourse in the Soviet Union became increasingly normalized and citational from the late-1940s onwards. Eventually, he notes, 'the replication of the fixed and normalized forms of discourse became an end in itself, and the constative meanings of these

⁸⁵ 'Soveshchanie rabotnikov literatury i iskusstva Leningrada', *Pravda*, 25 April 1952, p. 2.; V. Frolov, 'Iskusstvo oblicheniia', *Pravda*, 8 February 1953, p. 2.; G. Koniakhin, 'Vystavka sovetskoi satiry', *Pravda*, 23 October 1952, p. 3.; V. Frolov and V. Sitov, 'Bol'she zaboty o tvorcheskome roste pisatelei', *Pravda*, 21 July 1952, p. 2.; D. Zaslavskii, 'Zametki ob ocherke', *Pravda*, 7 June 1953, p. 3.; I. Bol'shakov, 'K novym uspekham sovetskoi kinematografii', *Pravda*, 18 March 1952, p. 2.

⁸⁶ N. Lukin, 'K dal'neishemu pod'emnu kirgizskoi literatury', *Pravda*, 7 May 1953, p. 3.

⁸⁷ Quoted in *Pravda*, 8 August 1953, p. 2.

discursive forms became increasingly unimportant'.⁸⁸ Yurchak describes this process as 'performative shift', because what the words do (their performative function) becomes more important than what they mean (their constative function).⁸⁹ Looking at the way in which the term *beskonfliktnost*' began to be used in cultural discourse in the early 1950s one can identify a similar 'performative shift' in its constative and performative dimensions. As the label was reproduced more and more frequently, the word itself began to lose its specific referent and it became more important for what it was used for (criticizing the past), than what it meant (realizing the future).

Conclusion

The concept of *beskonfliktnost*' developed in haphazard fashion out of the debates and discourses of the Stalinist 1930s, rather than as a clearly articulated and comprehensively applied theory. Marx and Engels had predicted the end of class conflict following the proletarian revolution and this idea became a corner stone of the 1936 Soviet Constitution and a key facet of the Stalinist utopian ideal. In an attempt to reflect this new social situation, writers began producing plays, novels and film scripts in which conflict was diluted into fraternal competition between 'good and better' citizens in an overwhelmingly positive environment. Even so, only a handful of plays subscribed to this new formula – most literary output continued to depict distinctive conflicts either on the domestic front or, increasingly, in the international arena as the Cold War began to reset strategic alignments and provide a new symbolic enemy in the form of the capitalist West. Moreover, identifying a 'conflictless' play was by no means a simple matter; the difference between degrees of conflict was often slight and criticisms were frequently based on personal opinion or pre-existing feuds between writers. With no authoritative guide or party input to help writers understand what constituted

⁸⁸ Yurchak, *Everything was Forever*, p. 26.

⁸⁹ In his argument, Yurchak employs Derrida's critique of J. L. Austin's speech-act theory, and, specifically, his idea that the citationality of a speech act and the indeterminacy of context posit that the meaning of any given speech act can never be completely determined in advance. Yurchak uses this idea of indeterminate context to support his argument that a 'drifting' of constative and performative elements in soviet discourse occurred as a result of the specific and changeable contexts in which these discursive forms were reproduced. *Everything was Forever*, pp. 20-23.

genuine conflict and what were mere 'collisions' between characters, the theory was shrouded in confusion and opacity from the beginning. That being said, certain examples of *beskonfliktnost'* did emerge. In these works, love plots often come to the fore and the comic genre tends to dominate with its subtler codes of conflict: mistaken identities, errors of communication, and clumsy mishaps. These softer clashes replace the great social conflicts depicted in works of the previous era between socialist progressives and the vestiges of the old order. Nevertheless, such an idealistic and carefree representation of Soviet reality not only jarred with public experience but was deemed tantamount to 'capitulation' by the party hierarchy in the face of Western aggression.⁹⁰

As opposition to the theory grew, the term *beskonfliktnost'* was seized upon as a useful label to mark out certain individuals and artistic practices as undesirable. Nikolai Virta became a convenient scapegoat while others who had penned alleged 'conflictless' works escaped censure thanks to their high status within the Writers' Union. Up until the mid-1950s the term *beskonfliktnost'* continued to be used as a catchall to avoid real introspection and abrogate responsibility for the decline of artistic standards. In this respect, the theory of *beskonfliktnost'* is more significant for what it reveals about the destructive workings of the Stalinist cultural system – in which fear, paralysis and cronyism stunted literary innovation – than as an important moment in the evolution of Soviet literature. The Thaw brought with it moments of greater clarity of argument: essays by Vladimir Pomerantsev, Mark Shcheglov and Alexander Kron called for a reorientation of Soviet literature away from the assembly-line of political pamphlets and towards the real-life themes of ordinary people.⁹¹ This meant shifting focus away from Stakhanovite over-achievers towards the rank and file. However, the call to depict the 'ordinary person' (*riadovoi chelovek*) was less to do with a character's social class or profession, and more to do with the quality of their speech; writers and film makers were encouraged to depict

⁹⁰ Simonov, 'Zadachi', *Pravda*, 28 February 1949.

⁹¹ Vladimir Pomerantsev, *Ob iskrennosti v literature*, *Novyi mir*, 12 (1953); Mark Shcheglov, 'Realizm sovremennoi dramy', *Literaturnaia Moskva II sbornik vtoroi*, ed. M. I. Aliger et. al, (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1956), 681-708; Aleksandr Kron, 'Zametki pisatel'ia', *Op. cit.* pp. 780-790.

characters that spoke like normal men and women, rather than in ideological clichés.⁹² Socialist realism had already made the worker central to literature and art, and so the focus on the ‘ordinary person’ reflected a concern for authenticity (*dostovernost’*) rather than the Western notion of the ‘common man’. Crucially, authenticity meant depicting people as individuals rather than as cogs in society’s ‘great machine’.⁹³

A new group of playwrights came to the fore in the 1950s, including Viktor Rozov, Aleksei Arbuzov and Aleksandr Volodin. In their plays these writers strove to foreground human relationships and minimise political lecturing. Often focusing on the lives of young people trying to make their way in the world, dramas such as Rozov’s *V dobryi chas* (*Good Luck*, 1954) and Arbuzov’s *Gody stranstvii* (*Years of Wandering*, 1954) can be considered the theatrical analogue of the ‘Youth Prose’ movement.⁹⁴ The increased popularity of family melodrama in literature and cinema also influenced this new direction in playwriting – Alexander Volodin’s *Fabrichnaia devushka* (*Factory Girl*, 1957) employed the theme of an illegitimate affair to great success.⁹⁵ Volodin’s next play, *Piat’ vecherov* (*Five Evenings*, 1959), became an unlikely standard bearer for the Thaw era thanks to its deliberately ambiguous characters and downbeat depiction of Soviet life after the war. Criticised in the press and by the Ministry of Culture for being too pessimistic, the play nevertheless struck a chord with audiences when staged at the Leningrad Bolshoi Dramatic Theatre and the Moscow Sovremennik in 1959.⁹⁶ As Soviet playwriting moved away from the varnished realities of Stalinist socialist realism, the question of whether a play depicted conflict between heroes and enemies or between good characters and even better ones became moot. Focus switched to the everyday conflicts of urban

⁹² Anatolii Smelianskii, *Oleg Efremov. O teatre i o sebe* (Moscow: Moskovskii khudozhestvennyi teatr, 1997), p. 58; Josephine Woll, *Real Images: Soviet Cinema and the Thaw* (London: I.B Tauris, 2000), p. 22.

⁹³ Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, pp. 91-92.

⁹⁴ Harold Segel has described this style of playwriting as the ‘romanticism of the everyday’, *Twentieth-Century Russian Drama*, p. 360.

⁹⁵ Susan Costanzo, ‘Conventional Melodrama, Innovative Theatre and a Melodramatic Society’, in *Imitations of Life: Two Centuries of Melodrama in Russia*, ed. By Louise McReynolds and Joan Neuberger, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 232-258 (p. 236).

⁹⁶ L. Zhukova, “‘Sovremennik’ i sovremennost’”, *Sovetskaia kul’tura*, 13 August 1959.; ‘Novoe v novom teatral’nom sezone’, September, 1959. RGALI, f. 2329, op. 6, d. 422.

life: unsuccessful careers, failed relationships, cramped living quarters and wasted lives.

Khrushchev's new party programme of 1961 may have assured the public that the radiant communist future would be achieved by 1980, but now there was a growing disconnect between the party's utopian vision and the representation of reality on the stage.