

# The Secret War and the End of the First Age

ТАЙНАЯ ВОЙНА И КОНЕЦ ПЕРВОЙ ЭПОХЕ  
by  
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# Tolkien in the (former) USSR

The history of Tolkien translations into Russian, and the history of Tolkien's ways of seizing the minds of Russian readers, are really very engaging and could be made into a novel which could easily be written some day, sooner or later. In this article I am just trying to underline the main themes of this hypothetical novel.

Before 1982 there was no Tolkien in Russian except *The Hobbit* and *Leaf by Niggle* - shortened and changed so as to please the censor. That is why Tolkien was read only by rare lucky ones especially marked with destiny: you had to know some foreign language, if not English itself (for example, many people read it in Polish), and to have friends abroad to fetch the books. And there were few people who had foreign friends during the period of the Iron Curtain. But Tolkien's books got through all the same. To give an example: one of our main Tolkien sources in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) was the poet and rock singer Boris Grebenshchikov, who had plenty of friends of the sort required. So friends of his friends made a queue to receive a well-worn copy of *The Lord of the Rings* for a one-night reading ... So let us describe the wild planet where Tolkien had landed, with many difficulties, and even some damage (for both sides as you shall see).

An educated man (or a man who had educated himself because he couldn't enter university for political or national reasons - e.g., Jews in the USSR had extreme difficulties in entering) and, what is more important, an honest and intelligent man, in our country for the most part belonged in those times to some sort of opposition (either organised or not) - at least he didn't approve of the Communists who ruled the country. The consequences of their rule were such that we found ourselves living in a real Mordor - only it was not Sauron who ruled it, but rather Saruman - less strong, more

shallow than Sauron. While reading Tolkien we felt ourselves hobbits who many years ago failed to overthrow Saruman and changed so that it would be almost impossible to recover. But Tolkien was definitely on our side and we were grateful.

Secondly, the hunger for 'fantasy' literature: it was exceedingly cruel. Even now some badly written second-rate book could become a memorable event in our lives. And our lives were dull as a rule, though we tried hard to help it. Books of fantasy were shining for us like mysterious jewels through a misty November night. That is why Tolkien proved to be even *a bit too much for us, just like the rich doll in the shop window for poor Cosette*. It was not just the message of the free world: it was *the Free World Itself*, as in one of the Russian fairy-tales, when you open a little box given you by a fairy - and find yourself in the middle of a great town which you do not know how to put back again. *We* didn't want to put it back though, but the authorities did ...

Thirdly, the lack of general culture and the lack of normal literature to read. The books we could get (with great difficulty!) formed a strange collection. There was the sophisticated poetry of the beginning of the 20th century - but there was no simple trust worthy book on the history of the same century. We didn't know, for example, about the Holocaust during the war. There was Dante, but there was no Bible. We could find a learned book on the history of Byzantium, but we couldn't buy even a little leaflet explaining the rules and traditions of our national church which derived from Byzantium ... and so on. So we learnt how to find out simple things by reading between the lines of more complicated ones. We didn't know what the real world is, what universal good and universal evil are. But naturally one wants to find out about it, so on

opening a book we always asked it to answer the basic questions. Add the characteristic feature of the Russian mentality, that is, to think about basic problems and discuss them at the most inappropriate times and places, and you will guess that prohibitions only doubled this unhappy ability (especially unhappy for the authors, who didn't mean to propose any answers for that sort of question!). As for religion, we were in an extremely strange situation, and it will be enough to say that Tolkien played for us the role of a Christian apostle! Please wait for an explanation and you will understand. We were completely ignorant in the field of religion, but our background was extremely rich. Russian religious culture is an enormous treasure-box, but we had had no access to it whatever. One could live all one's life through without having heard the name of Christ. Churches were ridiculously few. The Old Slavonic language of the church service was not easy to understand. So we had to find out about God in rather crooked ways. For example, we used Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita*, which was published [at last! - ed.] in the 1960s, and which is about a visit of the Devil to the Communist Moscow of the twenties. The Devil retells the gospels from his point of view. One can imagine the result: *The Screwtape Letters* read by a person who had never heard about God! But *The Master and Margarita* is much more complicated than *The Screwtape Letters*, and not so straightforward. All the same, for twenty years it remained the main source of knowledge for the vast majority of the population. When the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar* reached us, it explained many mysteries! The turn of the Gospels came much later .... So we were accustomed to find out the truth through something only slightly related to it: through fiction, through symbols, through images. Those in opposition to the Communist regime were very different from each other. They resisted at different levels: religion, politics, culture, mode of life, but normally all mixed together. The direction you preferred mostly depended on the sort of books you managed to get. For example, Grebenshchikov mirrored this mixture in his songs, such as *Ivan Bodhisattva* (Russian folk motives plus Buddhism), *The Silver of My Lord* (Christianity), *The Victory Song of the Irish National Hero N.*

*who Imprisoned Joseph Stalin (politics?)....*

This was the milieu where Tolkien arrived and was welcomed. He was soon suspected of being a Christian - you remember that we could read between the lines. So when it was learnt that he *had* been a Christian, those who knew it from the first received support for using Tolkien for Christian purposes, and those who just liked Tolkien without knowing much about Christianity received a great shock. It is always a shock when you (being brought up in an atheistic society where even Christmas is not celebrated) learn that in our times you can still find serious people - not just illiterate old women - who do believe in God and go to church! The effect is still more powerful when this churchgoer is your favourite writer, guide and teacher, as Tolkien was for many. For all I know, the consequences were serious. As for me, I received my first *Lord of the Rings* from the hands of an Orthodox monk. By the way, we were surprised, in Britain, not to find Tolkien in Christian literature shops! Tolkien literally had become an apostle in his own special way, because many of his adepts converted under his influence. What is interesting is that Tolkien got in touch not with Catholics, and not with Protestants; he was forced to meet with the Orthodox. And they got on very well together. One can doubt if Tolkien ever visited an Orthodox church in Oxford, but now the hour had struck and the meeting took place. Ancient Orthodoxy helped us to understand Tolkien, and Tolkien helped us to understand Orthodoxy. Perhaps this subject deserves special investigation. For my part, I can suppose that the ancient Orthodox atmosphere, the spirit of freedom from modern times, the Orthodox writers' heritage (they seem to be engaged in deciding the same ethical problems as Tolkien for ages and ages) - all this did nothing but help us to feel Tolkien not alien to us at all. We were glad, for example, to find in Tolkien's writings the concept of nature sanctified by God's grace and man's loving labours (the gift of Galadriel to Sam) and spoiled by evil deeds and unholliness (the mountains near Shelob's lair). Orthodox rites lay great stress on the possibility of sanctifying everything on earth, and this is performed by man as he is a priest for nature.

This is not just an abstract concept of theologians - it is a part of everyday thinking; an Orthodox Christian is surrounded by holy things and spoiled things, blessed lands and cursed lands. He can see only too well that the land of Russia had been destroyed through the years of the godless regime, and he could visit the likeness of Ithilien - the Baltic states where the Soviets only arrived just before the Second World War; they positively preserved some of the blessedness of previous times. We could also go to some old fortress of a monastery which was full of life and beauty inside - just like Lórien; and when one left it, one immediately saw dreary, grey, empty land beyond. And this was not the only concept which seemed familiar to us. So even some of the strictest Orthodox fundamentalists fell in love with Tolkien, and sometimes one could observe funny things. For example, I saw a man who kept his Tolkien under his pillow, but didn't recognise C.S.Lewis, because Lewis seemed to be 'too Protestant' in his eyes! On the other hand, people who hadn't yet acquired the subtleties of Orthodox thinking, just because they never went to church, were drawn there ... by Tolkien. You see, many people do not like entering a church because they do not understand the Old Slavonic language of the church, sometimes they are even angry with it, and they do not understand what on earth is happening during the service. After reading Tolkien they passed to another level of understanding: they felt the meaning of beauty, they longed for the memory of the First Age, and they understood the importance of the White Tree and the importance of courteous speech and behaviour - in short, they took this package to their hearts and changed from modern barbarians to real citizens of Gondor. After that, they felt themselves at home in the Orthodox Church and could not help being converted!

But this strange affinity between a Catholic writer and his Orthodox readers was not decisive for these new converts. *The Lord of the Rings* proved to be a proof of the power and the conclusive force of Christian grace, which changes all things, even a fantasy novel or a fairy tale, but not from outside - from within, without even mentioning God. It has

shown us that Christianity is not just the sullen black robe of a monk, but creativity and freedom (which you can receive, as in my case, with the help of this very monk!). So we went very far in reading Tolkien. But we were few. And the change came only with the first translation of Tolkien into Russian.

The first translation of *The Lord of the Rings* appeared in 1982. These were also the years when the intellectual readers of Tolkien retreated a little, giving place to a younger generation. It was a time when Soviet hippies flourished (a bit late compared with the rest of the world, but it took time to penetrate the Iron Curtain) - mystics, philosophers and travellers from 15 to 25. They seldom if ever knew any languages, so they applauded the translation enthusiastically, though it was far from perfect: shortened, changed (partly through misunderstanding, partly deliberately), and what is more, only the first part (*The Fellowship of the Ring*) appeared. But the text itself was bright, readable, and contained some words and phrases lucky enough to suit slang. Some tricks of translation were approved of even by intellectuals; for example, 'precious' was translated as 'prelest', which is an Orthodox term meaning 'false longing, false joy, the state of the mind when enchanted', but the meaning 'treasure' is also preserved.

Hence the explosion! Tolkien became very popular. Hippies used to go on their ritual hitchhiking with *The Fellowship of the Ring* in their embroidered bags. The elite circles lost their privilege of interpretation. Tolkien went to Siberia, to the Far East, to the Ukraine ... but there was no continuation. The reason was simple.

Mordor, seemingly, had realised that a mistake had been made. All further publication was stopped. The true motives of this are not clear. One can with high probability suppose that the KGB had learned at last about the extreme popularity of Tolkien with the opposition (the opposition was for the most part humble and silent, but no matter - our Lugańsk had a volume with documents and photographs for almost every hippy). Or maybe one of the censors read Parts II and III

and was shocked by the impudent behaviour of Frodo and his friends towards Sharkey's regime, which was ours as well. Even the most stupid of our enemies could discern our realities through Tolkien's sarcastic description. But it was not an allegory. It was probably the same thing, that's all. Western readers must understand that for us Tolkien was never any kind of 'escape'. When hobbits laughed at the absurd 'distribution', we didn't laugh at all, because the same thing caused millions of deaths among the peasants in the USSR in the 1920s. When Aragorn held up the elf-stone at the parting with the hobbits, we felt desperate because we did not have any hope of winning our battle at home without him. But we had to do it. By the way, you probably know that we have our own king in exile who is the heir of the Tsar Nikolai Romanov killed during the Revolution. By some chance or irony this lawful king lives not far from the heir of J.R.R. Tolkien .... So we can be sure that the idea of any king returning could not please the Communist authorities. But let us put it otherwise, in the manner of a fairy-tale. Maybe the evil that ruled our Muppet Show of a government just recognised its deadly peril in that little book - the shadow of utter defeat (and it was right). Fearing the growth of the sense of inner freedom in the hearts of the slaves of Mordor, it gave orders to double the watch at the Morannon. And *The Lord of the Rings* stopped being a book and became a living hero - a part of the Great Creation, and used by it. The myth implanted itself in reality. That is why the movie *The Neverending Story* was a great success with Tolkienists in the USSR.

To read the continuation, deprived readers were even willing to go to Shelob's lair. But professionals officially engaged did not want to translate that huge novel without any guarantee of money. So the task passed into the hands of enthusiasts - more or less skilled. They used their old typewriters, and other people made more copies, and you could buy one at the black market of books. These translations seldom were of high quality. You must remember that additional materials were not available, so it was hard even for some great underground translator to make an adequate text. Also there appeared sometimes a

lack of respect towards the text itself. Translations were shortened, rearranged, etc. I do not mention the names of Tolkien's heroes, because the translation of them is a very subtle matter. But worst of all was the changing of key places: the places which reveal Tolkien's philosophy, links with *The Silmarillion*, etc. So the Evil penetrated the ranks of the defenders. But it proved difficult to spoil Tolkien: miraculously, he was always stronger than the corruption.



*From the cover of the 1989 Raduga edition ... what's the Quenya for "Godfather"? [- Ed.]*

But probably the worst attack of all was the attack of the occult adepts. They knew nothing of Tolkien's biography and equally nothing about his views. So they felt themselves free to declare him a Freemason, a disciple of Hindu teachers, and so on. These people represent a type of thinking which has existed in Russia for ages and ages: people who cannot take literature as literature and always seek a literal truth in its images. These interpreters compare Tolkien with a contemporary who lived in Russia: Danil Andreyev, a mystic who can be compared with Swedenborg.<sup>1</sup> The writings of Andreyev bear some surface resemblance to Tolkien's *Silmarillion*: a great pantheon of evil and angelic powers, their interrelations, etc. But in fact Andreyev is rather the opposite of Tolkien. He writes poems and novels only to give a readable form to real visions and revelations given to him. He also foretells that his mythology will be taught in schools as the only adequate one. He explains all that is happening on earth (remember Tolkien's dislike of seeing an allegory of real events in his books). Tolkien insists that his books belong to Secondary Creation; Andreyev tries to interpret the Primary one. Tolkien does not pretend to create a new religion in his *Silmarillion*, just a new mythology; Andreyev tries to. 'Andreyevists' try to find parallels between these two writers, declaring Tolkien to be a second Andreyev, only a less conscious one: he did not discern the real nature of his inspiration. The Holy Grail is woven into their scheme, and Shambhala of the Hindus, and so on. Of course they pray to the Valar and try to speak with elves telepathically. Without judging this particular opinion, I must add that it is becoming more and more fashionable according to the situation in the country as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

Let us continue our story. We stopped at the point of underground translations. Thanks to the prohibitions, the name of Tolkien became a legend. Then *perestroika* fell from above, and in three or four years we had a number of free publishers who wanted to publish Tolkien and only Tolkien. To publish a legendary author is a profitable affair indeed! It seems that at the end we shall have nearly ten different translations published, but the hope that at

least some of them will be satisfactory is very faint, because those publishers are interested in speed, not in quality - just as most translators are. The decrease in quality is a result of the change that came with *perestroika*. People are tired, hungry and discouraged. They spend all their time struggling to survive and feed their families. The years of oppressive quietness and thoughtful laziness have gone. The opposition companies have ceased to exist. Fellowships have been broken: everyone has taken his particular Ring and gone to his own Orodruin - Christians to reconstruct churches, Buddhists to reconstruct pagodas, Jews - to reconstruct synagogues, politicians - to reconstruct parliaments, entrepreneurs - to reconstruct stock exchanges. Only Boris Grebenshchikov never joined the reconstruction: he made a video with a song which called to go and reconstruct all that it is possible to save - and he went to explore (and conquer if possible) the West. Life stopped being dull but began being rather heavy, and most people began to look for 'escape'. Plenty of second-rate fantasy and detective books appeared in the shops and Tolkien was lost among them. The new reader who is about to appear knows nothing of the legend. He doesn't look for truth under every stone near the road - he just wants to have a good rest. Tolkien societies are being formed, but they also are losing their previous intellectual character step by step. Their main activity at the moment is to involve young people to take part in great costumed performances based on *The Lord of the Rings*. They do not try to follow Tolkien in these performances; they just play. For instance, the first game developed as follows: "Boromir found a Ring lost by Frodo - Denethor claims the Ring - Aragorn perishes - Faramir arrests Denethor - Frodo regains the Ring, but cannot cast it into Orodruin because there are Nazgûls on it - so he casts the Ring into Orodruin ...." (the evidence of a participant). The second game took an unexpected turn: the warriors began to behave a bit too cruelly, and the game was stopped. Very non-Tolkien was the cutting of trees to build fortresses - and this was illegal cutting, too. Well, nobody knows what the Second Age will look like. But let me tell you a few words about the glorious end of the First one.



As I have said before, Tolkien was involved in the real war of Good and Evil in the USSR. It is interesting indeed that the last battle of these two forces (though probably it was not the last one) was really reminiscent of battles in *The Lord of the Rings*. The Siege of the White House in Moscow turned out to be the Siege of the White Tower of Gondor for many young people - or rather the Battle of the Green Fields in the Shire, which haunted Communists long before *perestroika*. Western friends of Russia know what happened in Moscow on 19-22 of August 1991, but I doubt that they were informed that many people remembered Tolkien when they made barricades from trolley-buses (just like hobbits from country wains!). It is important to note that the first [complete] translation officially published went on sale only a few days before. Moscow members of the Tolkien Society spent all those fearful thunderstorm and rainy nights near the White House holding a defence. The war machines got as crazy as Oliphaunts and stamped down three young archers. And Gandalf stood before the King of Angmar saying: "You shall not pass". And the Black Rider went away for some unknown reason. And at three o'clock in the morning the underground radio broadcast (the girl who spoke just wept) that the tanks had gone away for some unknown reason. And what about the fall of the Dark Lord which happened all at once - with all the fortresses and buildings and monuments? Tolkien never meant to describe any real events either in the past or the future. But he certainly *added* something to

earthly events. It just cannot be helped. One can say that it is only natural that chance and a willing fantasy can make miracles, making people see things that do not exist. We do not argue. C.S. Lewis also in his time thought that a myth is just a fruit of the imagination 'breathed through silver' (though Tolkien managed to reassure him if not others). In any case we are dealing here with the *fact* of public awareness. Tolkien helped us to regain freedom and to return to the common sources of the human spirit. He helped us to overthrow the rule of Sharkey (though outside we could possibly find only ruins and desolated land). The First Age ended gloriously. What will happen next, even the Wise cannot tell.

#### Notes

1. See my article on Andreyev in *Frontier: the Keston Research Magazine*, June 1991.
2. See my article 'The Dawn of Magicians in the USSR', in the same issue of *Frontier*.

