

How the Steel Was Tempered

Как закалялась сталь (Kak zakalyalas stal)

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How the Steel Was Tempered (Как закалялась сталь), by Nikolai Ostrovsky, is one of the most widely read novels in literary history and a cornerstone of political literature in the Soviet Union. The first part of the novel was published in serial format in 1932, and the second part in 1934, just a few months before the First Congress of Soviet Writers would adopt socialist realism as the official doctrine and method of literature in the Soviet Union. In 1936, the novel was published in its entirety, following significant revisions. Over the following decades, How the Steel Was Tempered was translated into most world languages, printed in tens of millions of copies, and adapted for film and television multiple times.

Largely autobiographical, the novel follows the life of Pavel Korchagin, starting from his early youth in the vicinity of the town of Shepetivka, in present-day Ukraine. At the age of twelve, Pavel is expelled from school for minor mischief, at the insistence of the local priest, and subsequently finds work as a dishwasher in a railway station inn. Alongside gruelling labour, young Pavel endures various forms of humiliation, which awaken in him a rebellious spirit. At sixteen, while working in an electric power depot, he comes into contact with Bolshevik ideas through a sailor named Zhukhrai. Zhukhrai teaches Pavel about Lenin and the goals of the Bolsheviks—but also how to fight. In a clash with the son of a local official, prompted in part by Pavel's relationship with his first love interest, Tonya Toumanova, the daughter of a wealthy landowner, Pavel puts both of Zhukhrai's lessons into practice.

After witnessing the German occupation of his hometown, followed by the violence and pogroms perpetrated by Ukrainian nationalists under Symon Petliura, Pavel joins the Red Army and fights as a cavalryman in the Russian Civil War. Thanks to his bravery, capability, and self-sacrifice, Pavel rises through the ranks. During the war, he also begins reading socialist literature, particularly novels. However, in one of the battles, he is severely wounded and sustains a serious back injury. After lying unconscious in a hospital for thirteen days, Pavel awakens "reborn", but his injuries force him to shift his focus to political and propaganda work. After the war, he moves to Kyiv as a prominent member of the Komsomol (the Communist youth organization).

Pavel's injury marks the end of the first part of the novel, which is written as a narrative whole. In contrast, the second part is composed as a series of short stories or episodes in which Pavel faces various challenges in building a socialist society. In each episode—whether it be the construction of a railway under extremely harsh conditions to deliver firewood to a city before winter, or the struggle against bureaucratism and passivity within the Party, Pavel stands out as an idealized member of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks), ready to make any sacrifice for the cause of socialism.

And indeed, he does make sacrifices. Through continuous hard work and personal renunciation, his already fragile health deteriorates further until he is almost completely paralyzed and blind. Nevertheless, Pavel overcomes even this, concluding that writing about his life experience is the way he can still contribute to the building of a socialist society.

How the Steel Was Tempered is a paradigmatic example of Soviet political through personal sacrifice, moral integrity, and overcoming his own limits. The narrative of young people transformed by the experience of revolution or the early stages of socialist construction is a near-ubiquitous theme in Soviet, and more broadly, socialist, literature where the didactic function is fulfilled through a schematic structure built around the conflict between positive and negative heroes who personify the triumph of socialism over the old world.

In addition to this, *How the Steel Was Tempered* fulfils another demand placed on socialist realist literature: accessibility to the broad masses. Ostrovsky's novel is one of the most widely read works of world literature and was required reading in most socialist countries throughout the twentieth century. The novel, along with its various adaptations, remains especially popular in China to this day. literature in the first half of the twentieth century. In line with the core idea of socialist realism, Ostrovsky's novel represents reality in its revolutionary development, and this form of realism is combined with the ideological task of remoulding and educating the working class in the spirit of socialism, of the new socialist man. Pavel Korchagin is a model of this ideal: a man who, despite a lack of formal education and a troubled youth, becomes an exemplary communist through hard work, effort, and devotion. In the first part, Pavel is "tempered" through physical struggle, warfare, and an initial understanding of socialism, while in the second part, his transformation is achieved

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This title was not censored before publishing