

À LIRE/PROPOSALS FOR READING

Review of *A Volga Tale*¹ by Guzel Shamilyevna Yakhina Europa Editions, translation from Russian by Polly Gannon, 2023, 512 pp.

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Abstract

The article reviews Guzel Shamilyevna Yakhina's novel "Deti Moi"

Keywords: Guzel Shamilyevna Yakhina; *A Volga Tale*; review

DOI: 10.24818/DLG/2024/41/17

Introduction

Winner of the Big Book literary prize and the Yasnaya Polyana Literary Award, Guzel Shamilyevna Yakhina is a Russian writer of Tatar origin. Her novel's original name is *Deti Moi* (2018) was translated into English under the title *A Volga Tale* in 2023. It was awarded the Bolshaia Kniga Prize (2019) and the Ivo Andrić Grand Prize (2019), being part of the trilogy that includes *Zuleikha* (2015) and *A Train to Samarkand* (2021). All three novels are interconnected by the historical thread that spears the lives of their protagonists, thus revealing their deepest and most delicate forms of humanity.

This paper is a review of *A Volga Tale* and focuses on a series of themes elaborated in the novel, all pointing to the human condition within the small history of the little man – love, hope, despair, and survival – and aggravated by the unavoidable impact of the Big History.

¹ Original title: *Deti Moi*, 2018, AST Redaktsiia Shubinoi, 493 pp.

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1. Catherine the Great's Greatest Child

Following two manifestos (one in 1762 and another in 1763), Catherine II, Empress of All Russia, invites the Germans in the novel (as those in history) to leave Prussia and settle in the deserted territories of her empire in order to initially cultivate the land in the steppe of the Lower Volga, destroyed by the Ottomans' invasion:

'«My children! We gladly accept you under our reliable wing and promise protection and parental patronage! Instead, we expect obedience and zeal, unparalleled diligence, fearless service to the new homeland! And who does not agree — let him go back now! Rotten in heart and weak in hands in the state — not needed!..»'. (Yakhina, 2023)

Later, in the 19th century they were revoked in the military service as the government needed more conscripts for the Russian army. The empress is depicted as a 'mother' who relies on her 'children' to support their new country, setting up 105 German colonies, one of which becomes the village entitled Gnandental in the novel.

Written in magical realism and surrealism, *A Volga Tale* is built on a multitude of layers both historical, chronological and on the lives of the German colonists settled on the lower Volga. The centre however, the intersection of all these layers, belongs to one character only, der Schulmeister (the school teacher) of the village, Jakob Ivanovici Bach. There is also 'a centre of the centre', the protagonist's very thoughts and feelings so majestically expressed by this talented writer.

Bach is an educated individual, sometimes a little eccentric in the eyes of his co-villagers, but also someone who knows that he must do just what needs to be done. His life and conduct demonstrate that taking action does not need too much thinking, but rather trusting unconditional love and lack of egoism. Der Schulmeister, initially portrayed as a rather delicate and lonely bachelor, trained mostly in reading German poetry (Novalis, Schiller, Heine, and 'the great Goethe') rather than for physical hard work, turns out that, forced by life difficulties, he can sail the wild Volga river, cross unknown and dangerous valleys and mountains, he finds food to survive in the wild and during the famine, raises a baby girl by himself, and survives several political regimes with which he finds no affinities. All political and historical references in the novel are indirect but

enough for the reader to make the connections, such as the episode in which Stalin (the Great Leader) and the *Führer* of the *Reich* are depicted as taking part in a duel of billiards.

In the beginning of the novel, Bach is presented as a lonely man with a dusty almost immaterial presence who seems to gain substance and become alive only when strong winds and heavy rains strike the village. On those days, he would go outside only in his shirt and would look for the place where the thunderstorm was most frightening, where the catastrophe was most obvious. I can understand why magic realism, the predominant style used in the novel, 'has been posited as characteristic of post-catastrophic art' (Sharpe 2024). Although there are numerous episodes in which magic fills into real life, I prefer to stay with this one: Bach can only feel alive in the middle of catastrophe, with no fear of death. He survives catastrophe every time, whether it is a real tempest, or famine, or war, or revolution, or tyranny.

Sharpe quotes Polly Gannon, the translator of the novel into English, whom she has interviewed: '«Russian history is so violent and extreme that fairy tale and myth are the only way to cope with it. !..»'³ Sharpe prefers though to look at the magic realism of post-terror and post-colonial literature as being timeless. The catastrophe in 'post-catastrophic art' is linked to Sharpe's phrasing 'post-terror', which I understand as the 'terror' in the Great Terror of 1937 led by Joseph Stalin. Bach was waiting for the thunderstorm (read the Terror) to strike without knowing it.

2. History and Man: going with the flow

The protagonist, Bach, needs to find solutions to always harder and unbearable situations. As the Russian Empire was fast turning into a republic and then building up to become the Soviet Union led by the Father of Nations, more and more non-Russians were leaving Russia and many German colonists were fleeing to Germany and other parts of the globe while others were being exterminated or deported to Siberia. The Red Army had won over the Whites and the victorious Red soldiers were taking their prey as they wished in this huge remote land.

³ See <https://www.ronslate.com/on-a-volga-tale-a-novel-by-guzel-yakhina-translated-from-the-russian-by-polly-gannon/>

It is a very unfruitful time for people like Bach to fall in love, especially with a woman who, although a German colonist herself, did not speak the same dialect as Bach, let alone the fact that she lived with her colony and several Kyrgyz servants on the other shore of Volga. The writer announces that the right shore of the river was inhabited by different German colonies among which the Balzers, the Kutters, the Messers, the Schillings, and the Schwabs. The colonies were coming from parts of Westphalia, Saxony, Bavaria, Alsace, Lorraine, Tirol, Wütemberg, Baden, Hessen, and were speaking different dialects which slowly merged into what is known as *Hochdeutsch*. The school teacher is one day invited by Udo Grimm, a rich German colonist, to tutor his daughter Klara into *Hochdeutsch*. Until then, der Schulmeister has had a somewhat boring life but when he crosses the Volga in a boat rowed by Kaiser, the Kyrgyz man who serves Udo, Bach is confronted with situations and feelings he had never experienced before.

Love is depicted as a pure and delicate feeling in this mostly historical novel. If history brings hardships to the characters, love comes to alleviate the pain. Just like Salman Rushdie's protagonist in *Midnight's Children* falls in love with his wife-to-be behind a bed sheet, discovering different parts of her step by step, like in a puzzle, Bach and Klara are always separated by a folding screen and the silent, almost deaf, yet material presence of Tilda, the old cook.

When Udo Grimm and his family immigrate to Germany, the girl escapes to find Bach in Gnandental. A rather uncommon, yet gentle relationship develops between the two but the villagers' marginalisation of this union forces Bach to take Klara and sail back to her family's house, now deserted, on the other shore of Volga. It does not take long until tragedy strikes their feeble happiness at the same time with the victory of the Red Army. Three of its members stomp one day over their house hidden in the woods on the riverbank opposing Gnandental, and life changes its course for all. Having given birth to a baby girl nine months after the attack, Klara passes away. Her baby, Anntche, is then raised by Bach who decides to keep it away as much as possible from the 'new' world, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (Russian SFSR or RSFSR). Klara's death marks the end of the 'old' world, the Russian Empire led by Catherine the Second, and the beginning of the new, Soviet identity. Following the October Revolution of 1918, the Soviet government signs a decree according to which Volga Germans are given a special status, thus establishing the Labour Commune of Volga Germans.

The reader is abruptly introduced to the new way of things that escapes nothing and no one, not even the remote territories of the Lower Volga. Despite special provisions that have been given to the Volga Germans, the novel presents a different reality. Life in Gnandental is transformed, identities are changed, community roles are turned upside down as the social structure is transformed in compliance with the new social and political structure. After the October Revolution, the new Soviet agricultural system emerges, based on the creation of collective farms called *kolkhoz*, a new form of the Russian *obshchina* “commune” (or farming association). Bach and the colony of the Volga Germans in the novel are presented as taking part in the *kolkhoz* agricultural organisation and later in the forced collectivization campaign starting in 1928 and joined by an aggressive policy of Russification. Stalin’s collectivization campaign did not have many characteristics of a true cooperative, violating the members’ right of free exit and retaining their share of assets when they decided to leave the country.

As der Schulmeister’s only target in life is to protect and raise Anntche, he unwillingly becomes an intermediate ‘agent’ facilitating the passing of society from the feudal organisation to the *kolkhoz* one. During this political and social transformations, he continues to look for milk to feed the baby. Thus, he becomes a story-teller who re-writes old German fairy tales, songs and poems so as to comply with the ‘new’ identity and rule. History is literally re-written by Bach, based on folk tales and children’s rhymes of the German colonists, characters and plots are re-invented assisting the construction of the Soviet identity. Written with an old pencil on re-used pieces of paper, it is being sold against the only source of life for the baby – milk. The author once again points to how the big history eventually relies on all the small stories of the common man.

Human condition for Bach and the community of Gnandental, and even for the rest of the population as it can be glimpsed throughout the novel, is very fragile, with almost no safety or expectations for the future, having to live in tough conditions, such as war, famine, revolution, and intolerant or indolent political regimes. Minority communities such as the Volga Germans are doing even worse, losing the hope of a good living when they first arrived in Russia at queen Catherine’s invitation, a people made up of craftsmen, men of education or of labour, of a different religion, unprepared for the tough weather in the steppe, being frequently attacked by the neighbouring nomad tribes of Kyrgyz-Kazakhs.

Surviving is not the same as living, as it is accompanied by a sort of despair and strain. In this process, it is one's surviving that matters, not the others'. For the protagonist, it is only the baby's surviving that is of worth. Bach's selflessness and dedication for another human being, risking his life and giving up his identity for the sake of another's survival define his humanity.

Conclusion

Guzel Shamilyevna Yakhina has made a reputation for her mastery of embedding the story of the little man into the Big Story – the history of Russia. This novel makes no exception, and as history is peppered with events that transform people's lives to the point at which they must give up all that they had known familiar, re-adapt to new political regimes, and event re-invent their identities, the writing style of *A Volga Tale* is imbued with a taste of sadness: for the hopes that they used to have and now lost, for the folk tales and songs that are forgotten or re-written to comply with the new order, for the people that are lost on the way.

The Volga river becomes the witness of various social and political transformations and of their impact on the Germans colonists' lives in the region of Lower Volga. It witnesses their habits, difficulties, joys and suffering. Volga is no less than a stepmother to them: it feeds them, yet it also flows away uncaringly, cold, sometimes even frightening and dangerous, but always present in their lives.

The end of the novel is a mixture between loneliness and hope, like other novels by Guzel Yakhina. The writer has prepared her readers throughout the book for this uncommon taste she leaves us with, making it addictive for those who crave for cocktails of masses of history, a profusion of suffering, stacks of injustice, endless wilderness, acres of self-isolation, and, over all, a mountain of love.

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