The Ethics and Politics of Diet: Tolstoy, Pilnyak, and the Modern Slaughterhouse

Abstract: The modern slaughterhouse has figured as an important ethical and political issue in many developed countries. In late imperial and early Soviet Russia, the ethics and politics of industrialized slaughterhouses are illustrated in sharply contrasting ways in the fates of two prominent writers. Lev Tolstoy wrote an essay in 1892 describing the gruesome slaughter of terrified oxen at a local abattoir that was lauded as a “bible of vegetarianism” for the way it presented what many readers viewed as a highly cogent ethical argument against the use of meat in the human diet. A few decades later, Boris Pilnyak was commissioned by the Soviet Food Commissar to write a Socialist Realist novel that would glorify the achievements of his country’s newly modernized meat industry. Meat: A Novel (1936), however, failed to please Party officials and led to the writer’s execution during Stalin’s Great Terror of 1937–38.

Keywords: slaughterhouse, meat, animal, vegetarianism, industrial

The modern slaughterhouse has figured prominently as both an ethical and a political issue in many developed countries during the past two centuries. In the English-speaking world, such distinguished writers as J. M. Coetzee (The Lives of Animals, 1999) and Jonathan Safran Foer (Eating Animals, 2009) have recently written works that prompt us to reconsider our relationship to the animals raised on factory farms, sentient creatures who live in bleak confinement until their slaughter in order to provide meat for the human diet. In late imperial and early Soviet Russia, several writers addressed the wonders as well as the horrors of the new industrialized form of animal slaughter that had made its appearance in Europe and America. In “Fabrika smerti” [The factory of death] (1896), for example, Vladimir Korolenko provided a gruesome sketch of the Chicago stockyards, luridly depicting the foul-smelling, disgusting meat-processing facilities of Armour and Swift. Vladimir Mayakovskiy likewise wrote about his visit to the Chicago stockyards, and he, too, described in unflinching detail the horrors of the modern American system of animal slaughter. In “Svinoboi mira” [Hog butcher of the world] (1926), he writes, “The Chicago slaughterhouses were one of the most hideous spectacles of my life” (355). But the Futurist poet at the same time marvels at the tremendous economic and industrial might of the mercantile city that he considers the true capital of the United States.2

The ethics and politics that have surrounded modern slaughterhouses are illustrated in even more edifying (and sharply contrasting) ways, however, in the personal, literary, and cultural fates of two other well-known Russian writers: Lev Tolstoy (1828–1910) and Boris Pilnyak (1894–1938). Tolstoy, who wrote an anti-slaughterhouse essay, “Pervaia stupen” [The first step] (1892), was soon acknowledged as the “father” of the Russian vegetarian movement. Tolstoy’s essay, which describes the slaughter of terrified animals at a modern abattoir newly constructed in the town of Tula, not far from his family’s country estate at Yasnaya Polyana, was lauded for the highly cogent ethical argument it made for swearing off the use of meat in the human diet. Pilnyak, on the other hand, was commissioned by Food Commissar Anastas Mikoyan to write a Socialist Realist novel that would endorse the modern slaughterhouse. Pilnyak’s Miaso: Roman [Meat: A novel] (1936), however, turned out to displease greatly the Soviet authorities and soon led to the author’s arrest, conviction, and execution as an enemy of the people during the height of Stalin’s Great Terror.3 Pilnyak’s novel, which was supposed to glorify the achievements of the Soviet meat industry by illustrating the efficiency of modern slaughterhouses in Stalinist Russia, was rebuked by literary critics and government officials alike for its failure to depict Soviet reality in an ideologically and artistically correct manner. As this article will show, however, there were political issues involved in Tolstoy’s essay in support of ethical vegetarianism, as evidenced by the subsequent rift that developed between rival factions within the vegetarian movement in Russia. And there

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were ethical issues involved in Pilnyak’s fate as a political victim of the Stalinist reign of terror of the late 1930s, particularly for a writer who chose to collaborate with the Soviet regime and thus risked sacrificing his artistic integrity. More importantly, however, this article will show that, beyond their respective attitudes toward meat and animal slaughter, both Tolstoy, with his Christian anarchism, and Pilnyak, with his literary modernism, were destined to run afoul of repressive political regimes in Russia that could not tolerate the broader ethics and politics of either of these two heretical writers and thinkers.

The First Step Toward a Moral Life: Abstinence and Vegetarianism

It has become a commonplace among Tolstoy scholars to trace a trajectory in the famous author’s life, as well as in his literary art, from an early hedonism to a later asceticism. After the mid-life spiritual crisis that he experienced in the late 1870s and early 1880s, Tolstoy’s increasing feelings of guilt over the enjoyment of bodily pleasures led him to renounce, quite categorically, the pleasures of the flesh that he had once celebrated so memorably in his fiction.

The gastronomic pleasures of the table were graphically on display, for instance, in the famous restaurant scene depicted in Part One of Anna Karenina (1877), where Anna’s hedonistic brother, Stiva Oblonsky, goes to dine with his future brother-in-law, the largely autobiographical Konstantin Levin, at the Hotel Angleterre in Moscow. As I have pointed out elsewhere (LeBlanc 2009), the hedonistic philosophy of life championed by Stiva, “whose eyes actually become moist and glisten with delight as he dines” in this fancy restaurant and whose sensual body is “in ecstasy as he swallows quivering oysters from his silver fork and sips Chablis from his wide-lipped champagne glass” (115), is made to contrast sharply here with the rustic Levin, whose gustatory preference is instead for the simple peasant foods of bread and cabbage soup, nutritious foods that provide him with the fuel he needs for the manual labor he undertakes in the Russian countryside.

Only a few years after Anna Karenina appeared in print, however, Tolstoy began to advocate a rigorous brand of Christian asceticism that rigorously condemned such bodily pleasures as base, vulgar, and selfish pursuits. His readers, as well as his fictional characters, were now being strongly encouraged to subdue the desires of the body, to subordinate their corporeal urges to their moral sensibilities and spiritual aspirations, and to transcend their base animal nature in order to allow the divine element that lies buried deep inside them to emerge. Tolstoy now advocated abstinence as a way to tame the swinish, pleasure-seeking “animal” that threatens to debase each human being if it is allowed to pursue freely its own selfish desires. In the essay “O zhizni” [On life] (1887), for example, Tolstoy presented a bifurcated view of the self, whereby humans are seen to possess two diametrically opposed dimensions: an “animal personality,” concerned primarily with the welfare of the egoistic self, that strives instinctively for the gratification of the body’s desire for physical pleasure, and a “rational consciousness,” concerned most of all with the welfare of others, that aspires to the morally good and the spiritually sublime. The post-conversion Tolstoy preached that people must learn to overcome their “animal personality” and develop instead their “rational consciousness.”

It is when trying to find ways to overcome carnal appetite that Tolstoy became initially attracted to vegetarianism: he was searching for some practical steps that would lead him and others to a morally good and spiritually satisfying life. As Tolstoy increasingly saw the carnal pleasures of the flesh as sinful and highly addictive temptations that lure people—especially people from the privileged classes—away from the straight and narrow path of moral righteousness and spiritual
self-perfection, he tended more and more to regard the gastronomic delights of the table with the same sense of moral revulsion and disgust that he felt toward human sexuality. His advocacy of such radical ideas in sexual matters as celibacy, chastity, and conjugal continence were now matched by his adoption of such extreme dietary measures as fasting, abstinence, and vegetarianism.

Eating meat and other rich food items, Tolstoy came strongly to believe, actively stimulates carnal appetite. He now considered “warming” foods to be harmful stimulants that—much like alcohol, tobacco, and other addictive drugs—“stupify” human beings by arousing their base sensuality and clouding their moral consciousness. By removing meat and other culinary luxuries from one’s diet, Tolstoy suggests, a person would thus be able to reduce the incidence, as well as the intensity, of concupiscence. Not unlike Sylvester Graham, John Harvey Kellogg, and a number of other health reformers with a religious bent who were engaged in a crusade for moral and physical purity in nineteenth-century America, Tolstoy late in his life adopted a series of dietary practices that were designed to reduce significantly, if not to eliminate entirely, sexual desire. He thus proceeded, much like these “Christian physiologists” from the diet-conscious United States, to wage an ascetic battle against the desiring body, launching an anti-carnality campaign that operated on the assumption that diet can help to shape morality.

Tolstoy’s conversion to vegetarianism during the 1880s was prompted largely by this “holy war” that he had begun to wage against bodily appetites. Highly instrumental in solidifying his conversion to vegetarianism was a book that his close friend and colleague, Vladimir Chertkov, gave him to read upon his return from exile in England: The Ethics of Diet (1883) by the British vegetarian activist Howard Williams. Subtitled A Catena of Authorities Deprecatory of the Practice of Flesh-Eating, Williams’s book consists of short biographical essays that summarize the dietetic theories and meatless eating practices of sixty-nine famous historical figures, ranging from Porphyry, Plato, and Pythagoras in classical antiquity to Rousseau, Shelley, and Schopenhauer in the modern period. R. F. Christian (1993: 8) maintains that The Ethics of Diet, which acquainted Tolstoy with the vegetarian beliefs and eating practices of many philosophers, poets, and thinkers with which he had not been entirely familiar, effectively resolved any lingering reservations he might have had about adopting a meatless diet himself. Tolstoy was so impressed by The Ethics of Diet that he insisted on having two of his daughters translate Williams’s book into Russian and he volunteered to write an essay that would serve as the preface for the translated version. The essay that Tolstoy promised to write, “Pervaia stupen’,” was completed in 1891. In this introductory essay, which Janet Barkas (1975: 158) has characterized as one of “the most thorough, soul-searching modern treatments of the moral reasons for vegetarianism,” Tolstoy describes in graphic detail the bloody scene he had witnessed during his recent visit to a slaughterhouse in the nearby city of Tula.

In the opening section of “Pervaia stupen’,” Tolstoy explains that he had long wished to visit a slaughterhouse, but he kept putting it off because he felt uneasy about going to observe the animal suffering that he knew awaited him there, even though the Tula slaughterhouse was a modern facility “built on the new and improved system practiced in large cities, with a view to causing the animals as little suffering as possible” (78). When Tolstoy finally does visit the Tula slaughterhouse, he spends most of his time standing at the door that leads into one of the slaughter chambers—the rooms with overhead contrivances for moving and suspending the animal carcasses—where a small group of butchers, working as a team, perform the killing and subsequent evisceration of the livestock. From this vantage point, Tolstoy describes in disturbing detail how the slaughter begins: an ox is dragged by a rope tied to its horns from an outdoor enclosure into the chamber where it is stabbed in the neck by one butcher (its four legs give way and it falls heavily on its belly), then has its throat slit by another butcher, while a young boy, smeared in blood, catches the animal’s blood in a tin basin as it flows out of its body. All the while, the dying ox twitches its head as if trying to get up and waves its four legs spasmodically. When the blood ceases to flow, a butcher raises the animal’s head and begins to flay its skin, starting from the head and working his way down the torso. During the skimming process, the dying ox continues to writhe in pain, twitching its head and wildly waving its legs. Another butcher holds one of the legs, breaks it, and cuts it off; then the remaining three legs are likewise cut off. Finally, the carcass is dragged over to the hoist and suspended on the overhead contrivance. The oxen that resist entering the slaughter chamber have their tails grabbed and twisted so violently that the gristle in the tail cracks; this prompts them to advance through the entrance into the chamber, where they soon suffer the same fate as the poor ox that the author has been watching. Tolstoy concludes his visit by observing how smaller animals—pigs, sheep, and calves—are slaughtered in a larger chamber with only two butchers, one of whom is smoking a cigarette and conversing casually with an acquaintance as he nonchalantly slits the throat of a black yearling ram.

Scenes of cruelty to animals, such as the one that Tolstoy witnessed personally at the Tula slaughterhouse and that he describes in such gruesome detail here in “Pervaia stupen’,”
also appeared in many of his works of fiction. Indeed, critics today who theorize an animal-centric (or animal-standpoint) approach to fictional texts (Donovan 2009; Andrianova 2016) frequently select literary works by Tolstoy, especially “Kholstomer: Istoria loshchadi” [Strider: The story of a horse] (1886), for their close readings of narratives that are told from the point of view of animals and that focus on how cruelly they are treated by humans. Several Tolstoyan works of fiction, such as “Kholstomer,” comment in an indirect way upon the cruelty to animals that the author of “Pervaia stupen” condemns so directly and explicitly in his anti-slaughterhouse essay.

Tolstoy’s essay, however, not only depicts the inhumane and unnecessary suffering that animals undergo at the slaughterhouse as they are stabbed, skinned, and eviscerated as part of the process of turning them into food for human consumption. He also decries the terribly dehumanizing effect this cruel process has upon the human beings who perform the slaughter of these defenseless creatures. “The aversion to all kinds of killing is very strongly rooted in people,” Tolstoy notes in his essay, but various factors—such as the example of others, greed, and, most of all, habit—lead people to “lose completely this natural feeling” (79). The inherent moral aversion to killing appears to have been completely destroyed in the butchers at the slaughterhouse, who no longer feel any sorrow or pity for the animals they routinely kill. The immoral animal slaughter that Tolstoy witnesses at the Tula abattoir, he reminds the reader, is entirely due to the carnal diet that most people mistakenly feel they need to follow in order to preserve their health.7 Eating meat is not only unnecessary, he asserts, but serves to develop “bestial feelings” within people and to arouse “lust, fornication, and inebriation” (84).

“What is it that I wish to say?” Tolstoy asks as he concludes his essay. “That for people to be moral they need to stop eating meat? Not at all. I simply wished to say that for a good life a certain sequence of good actions is necessary” (84). The indispensable “first step” in this sequence of steps leading to the attainment of the morally good life, he reiterates, is abstinence:

If he earnestly and sincerely strives to lead a good life, the first thing that a person will abstain from, while fasting, will always be the use of animal food, because, not to mention the arousal of passions produced by the food, its use is directly immoral since it necessitates killing, an act that is repugnant to moral sensibility, and it is provoked only by avarice and the desire for tasty food. (84)

Tolstoy thus condemns the use of fleshly food in one’s diet on ascetic as well as humanitarian grounds: eating meat is wrong not only because it involves the slaughter of animals (and the dehumanization of the people who perform that animal slaughter), but also because it stimulates in human beings their base animal personalities and excites their sinful carnal desires. Tolstoy, in short, advocates abstinence from meat in large part because it will facilitate abstinence from sex.8

**Tolstoy and the Vegetarian Movement in Russia**

“Pervaia stupen,” which constitutes Tolstoy’s best-known piece of writing on the issue of vegetarianism, actually consists of two very unequal parts: a rather lengthy sermon preaching against the sin of gluttony (and advocating the virtue of abstinence), and the brief narrative account of the author’s visit to the Tula slaughterhouse, which was widely distributed as a separate pamphlet, succeeded in recruiting numerous converts to the vegetarian cause.9

The essay in its entirety, however, is actually a moral tract that preaches the need to practice abstinence in matters involving both diet and sex. Indeed, in his diary entries and correspondence during the summer of 1891, when he was fully engaged in writing “Pervaia stupen,” Tolstoy repeatedly referred to his essay in precisely those terms: either as an “article about gluttony” or an “article about abstinence.”10 In “Pervaia stupen,” he asserts that there is a direct prophylactic connection between abstinence from fleshly food (vegetarianism) and abstinence from sexual activity (chastity). Despite what some of his Tolstoyan followers at the time may have claimed, Tolstoy himself seems to have understood vegetarianism mainly to be one of the moral means, along with fasting, of diminishing one’s sinful, lustful appetite for the pleasures of physical life.

In their proselytizing and propagandizing efforts to convince people to adopt a meatless diet, however, Tolstoyan activists within the vegetarian movement in early twentieth-century Russia chose to highlight the moral and humanitarian aspects of Tolstoy’s essay, rather than the ascetic and religious ones. As a result of their efforts, Tolstoy’s name soon became nearly synonymous with ethical vegetarianism during the course of the twentieth century, both in Russia and internationally.11

A number of Tolstoyan colonies, in which vegetarianism was widely practiced, were founded at the turn of the century not only in his native Russia, but also in several other countries around the world.12 Indeed, vegetarianism eventually came to
serve as one of the essential tenets of “Tolstoyism,” the ideology of radical Christianity that shaped the thinking and lifestyle of thousands of people who became converts to the social, moral, and religious teachings of the apostle from Yasnaya Polyana. Along with pacifism, temperance, chastity, anarchism, antimilitarism, and nonviolent resistance to evil, vegetarianism came to constitute a basic component of the message of selfless Christian love that Tolstoy’s followers sought to incorporate into their daily lives (Edgerton 1993; Roginsky 1989). As a result, the famous Russian author has had his name added to the long list of philosophers, writers, artists, and celebrities who are regularly singled out in vegetarian literature as wise and enlightened historical figures preaching abstinence from meat.

When organized vegetarianism finally emerged in Russia in the mid-1890s, it appeared in the immediate wake—and under the unmistakable influence—of Tolstoy’s “Pervaia stupen,” which was lauded as a veritable bible of vegetarianism. Tolstoy’s name, along with the title of his seminal essay, initially adorned the covers and appeared on many of the pages of such journals as Vegetarianskoe obozrenie [The vegetarian review] and Vegetarianskii vestnik [The vegetarian herald]. Leading Tolstoyan activists, such as Vladimir Chertkov, Ivan Gorbunov-Posadov, and Iosif Perper, exploited Tolstoy’s famous name and his celebrity status as a way to advance the cause of their “ethical” or “philosophical” brand of vegetarianism, which opposes the use of meat in the human diet because of the need to slaughter animals.

As we have seen, however, Tolstoy was initially prompted to adopt and advocate a meatless diet more by a deep commitment to a rigid brand of Christian asceticism than by the compassion he felt for creatures from the animal kingdom. Tolstoy’s ethical reasons for avoiding flesh-eating remained secondary to his search for moral and spiritual self-perfection as well as his Christian desire to realize the Kingdom of God on earth. The ascetic and religious motivations that led Tolstoy to adopt a meatless diet did not escape the attention of competing groups within the Russian vegetarian movement for very long. Soon after his death in 1910, a heated dispute ensued over the true nature of Tolstoy’s vegetarian beliefs, an ideological dispute that created a deep rift in the movement and produced much factional infighting.

FIGURE 2: Tolstoy family at table.

The ideological dispute emerged over the central issue of why one should abstain from eating meat. Rifts appeared not only between those who advocated a meatless diet on rational and scientific grounds (for reasons of health and hygiene) and those who avoided eating meat out of moral and humanitarian convictions. They also arose between those members of the latter group who were vegetarians on ethical grounds and those who abstained from meat-eating mainly for religious and ascetic reasons. In an article titled “Vozmozhno li vegetarianskoe mirosozertsanie?” [Is a vegetarian Weltanschauung possible?] (1913), a vegetarian activist named G. G. Bosse not only described accurately the parameters of the two main opposing camps in this ideological dispute, but also provided the terminology that would figure prominently in the polemics that ensued during the next few years. The basic difference in the understanding of vegetarianism among proponents of the cause in Russia, Bosse asserted (402), is one between what he calls vegetarianstsy-gigienisty [“hygienic” vegetarians] and vegetarianstsy-nравственiki [“moralistic” vegetarians]. Members of the former group, influenced by recent findings in medicine and physiology, were attracted to vegetarianism by the promise of leading a natural, healthy, and rational lifestyle, while members of the latter group took very seriously the moral imperative, advocated by Tolstoy and his followers, to respect all living creatures by leading their lives according to the commandment: “Ne ubei!” [Thou shalt not kill!]. The “hygienic” vegetarians, led by Dr. Aleksandr Zelenkov and his wife, Olga Zelenkova, advocated vegetarianism on medicinal and scientific grounds: a vegetarian diet, to their minds, made one healthier and more cheerful. The “moralistic” vegetarians, led by Vladimir Chertkov and other Tolstoyan followers, advocated vegetarianism on moral and humanitarian grounds: a vegetarian diet, they maintained, accords with their leader’s core principle of nonviolence (“Ne ubei!”) and honors his injunction not to weaken one’s spirit by indulging one’s carnal appetites.

Despite Chertkov’s best efforts to highlight the moral and humanitarian aspects of Tolstoy’s essay, the “hygienic” vegetarians succeeded in painting the Tolstoyan brand of vegetarianism as a gloomy, cheerless, life-denying Christian asceticism. The “hygienic” vegetarians presented their own brand of vegetarianism as a progressive, life-affirming practice that promoted a cheerful, voluptuous joie de vivre. In a lengthy article titled “Beseda literatora, vracha i sel’skogo khoziaina o vegetarianstve” [A conversation between a writer, a doctor, and a farmer about vegetarianism] (1909), for instance, Dr. Zelenkov spells out the numerous health benefits to be derived from a meatless diet and distances his own rational and scientific brand of vegetarianism from the “fanaticism” of the moralists and sectarians within the movement. In the article’s final installment, the fictitious doctor in this conversation vehemently denies the charge that he, as a vegetarian, is necessarily practicing Tolstoyan asceticism. “I beg you not to call me an ascetic,” he pleads.

After all, can the striving for pure, non-toxic, health-promoting food, the striving for spiritual and corporeal well-being as well as moral contentment, the striving, in short, for what the ancients expressed with the words mens sana in corpore sano, can this have anything in common with asceticism? An ascetic refuses all human pleasures and withholds to the wilderness, to solitude—he feeds almost exclusively on roots and does not wish to have anything to do with people, whom he despises. We vegetarians, on the other hand, are in the full sense of the word (vegetus) cheerful, even voluptuous, since we sacrifice many things for this passion; we are true followers of the calumniated Epicurus, who did indeed indulge in pleasures, but pleasures of a higher order than food and drink. We feed not on roots but on the sweetest and most wonderful of nature’s gifts: fruits and berries, milk and honey, just like the genuine inhabitants of a “Promised Land.” Every meal is for us a holiday celebration. (22)

Dr. Zelenkov’s description here of a cheerless asceticism that seeks to mortify the flesh captures quite effectively the bleak evangelical tone and renunciatory Christian spirit that permeates most of Tolstoy’s “Pervaia stupeni,” an essay that in its entirety—contrary to what Chertkov, Perper, and the other Tolstoyan leaders of the fledgling vegetarian movement in Russia wanted people to see in it—offers primarily a religious and ascetic rationale for vegetarianism rather than an ethical and humanitarian one.

Vegetarianism and Soviet Meat Production during the 1930s

The efforts made by some of Tolstoy’s more zealous followers immediately following his death to downplay the old-fashioned religious features of their leader’s vegetarian beliefs and to highlight the more modern, ethical, and humane ones were not entirely successful. They ultimately failed to protect him from the charge of preaching a cheerless Christian asceticism that was being rejected outright by a growing number of advocates of a more life-affirming and health-promoting brand of vegetarianism. It is not difficult to understand why the “hygienic” vegetarians were ultimately victorious over the “moralistic” vegetarians in the struggle for leadership within the vegetarian movement in turn-of-the-century Russia: clearly the pleasure-seeking Epicurus made a much better poster child for the recruitment of new young members to the fledgling vegetarian movement in Russia than did the geriatric, pleasure-denying Count Tolstoy.

Tolstoy’s image in Bolshevik Russia immediately following the October Revolution was even further diminished by the caricature of him and his Tolstoyan followers provided by the great leader himself. In his essay, “Lev Tolstoy kak zerkalo russkoi revoliutsii” [Lev Tolstoy as a mirror of the Russian
revolution] (1908), Lenin had characterized the “Tolstoyan” as “the haggard, hysterical sniveler called the Russian intellectual, who publicly thumps his chest and says, ‘I am foul, I am vile, but I am striving for moral self-perfection; I no longer eat meat and I now live on rice patties’” (209). The Bolsheviks were more inclined to tolerate the rational and scientific arguments in favor of a meatless diet that were advanced by the “hygienic,” “ethical,” or “moral-religious” vegetarians, rather than the philosophical opposition to a carnal diet voiced by the “ethical” or the “moral-religious” vegetarians, since the government was intent upon enlightening its largely illiterate populace about the advantages of a healthier diet through food reform. All in all, however, vegetarianism—whether it be mainly “hygienic,” “ethical,” or “moral-religious” in nature—did not fare particularly well in Leninist, Stalinist, or post-Stalinist Russia. Indeed, it would soon die out as a movement in Tolstoy’s homeland, only to be revived with the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s.

Not only did vegetarianism fail to receive official government approval and support in early Soviet Russia; the Party actively sought a dramatic increase in meat production (and thus meat-eating), which was given a very high priority as an economic goal for the country as it strove to construct socialism rapidly. In Yury Olesha’s novella, Zavist’ [Envy] (1927), Andrey Babichev, the fictional Commissar of the Food Industry Trust, believes that the creation of an inexpensive, yet nutritious and tasty brand of salami will provide the means for feeding properly those workers who are expected to build socialism in the young Soviet Union. Anastas Mikoyan, who was appointed the People’s Commissar of the Food Industry in 1934, became, in a sense, the real-life equivalent of Andrey Babichev in Stalinist Russia of the 1930s. Stalin assigned Mikoyan the task of rapidly industrializing and thus modernizing the meat industry in the Soviet Union during the second Five-Year Plan.

In August 1936, a Soviet delegation, headed by Mikoyan, went on a two-month-long visit to the United States to explore, in part, which of the marvels of American meat-processing technology could reasonably be transplanted to Russian soil. During this trip, the Food Commissar fell in love with two particular marvels: the American hamburger and the self-service method of dining he saw being used in many U.S. cafeterias and automatsones. Indeed, Mikoyan believed that the Soviet Union needed to copy, adapt, and develop this efficient method of self-service dining as a socialist way of feeding a large population of workers. Mikoyan ordered the machinery that could prepare up to two million of these high-protein gorachye kotlety [hot cutlets] each day and a number of braziers that were to be used by the Moscow street vendors who would sell the cutlets for a few kopecks each. The outbreak of World War II, however, prevented Mikoyan from following through with his plans to popularize hamburgers on a large scale in the USSR during the Stalin years. Soviet citizens, as a result, would have to wait until the late 1980s—when Gorbachev’s reformist economic policy of perestroika [restructuring] was in full swing—for McDonald’s franchises finally to arrive in Russia’s capital, bringing with them fast-food hamburgers in large quantities to feed hungry, meat-craving Muscovites. The relatively high price of these McDonald’s hamburgers, however, prevented many born-again carnivores in Moscow from being able to afford purchasing them.

The motivation behind Stalin’s mandate for the rapid modernization of the Soviet meat industry was not only to nourish and fuel a labor force engaged in socialist construction, but also to demonstrate the enormous success of his first two Five-Year Plans. The period of the second Five-Year Plan (from 1933 to 1937) has come to be called a time of “triumphalism” in Stalinist Russia because socialism was officially declared to have achieved its irreversible victory. Stalin suddenly launched an ambitious program for kulturnost’ [cultured living and consumption], characterized by a new ideological orientation that celebrated—rather than condemned and stigmatized—images of abundance, pleasure, and material well-being. These images of economic prosperity were designed to offer graphic proof that the Communist utopia had now been achieved in Soviet Russia, vindicating Stalin’s famous line from 1935: “Life has become better, comrades. Life has become more joyous.”

Soviet authorities exerted tremendous effort and committed enormous resources toward dramatically increasing the production and distribution of new consumer goods, including luxury food items—such as caviar, cognac, champagne, chocolate, and especially meat—which had been largely unavailable just a few years earlier. As Anton Masterovoy (2011) has noted, meat became one of the symbols of a newly achieved material well-being and economic prosperity in Stalinist Russia: it was now one of the primary symbols of the “good life” in the USSR. According to Jukka Gronow (2003: 3), Stalin believed that success in revolutionizing the consumer goods industry in the USSR (by increasing the quantity and improving the quality of luxury items) so that it could rival Western standards would validate the socialist state and demonstrate that the Soviet Union could compete economically on the world stage. The availability of new luxury consumer goods such as meat acted as a visible sign that the joyous, prosperous, and cultured way of life promised by the October Revolution (and increasingly being depicted in works of Socialist Realist art) had indeed been reached after two decades of Soviet workers making painful sacrifices and denying themselves almost any pleasure or enjoyment while diligently constructing socialism.
As Commissar Mikoyan asked rhetorically in his annual report on the Soviet Food Industry in January 1936, “How can we expect to live better and live more joyously, comrades, if we do not have sufficient quantities of meat, sausage, and frankfurters?” (1936: 5).

In an effort to bolster the “triumphalism” that signaled the official victory of socialism in Stalinist Russia, Mikoyan turned to recruiting the assistance of literary artists who, in works of Socialist Realist literature, would glorify the recent successes that had been achieved in the Soviet meat industry.

Mikoyan especially wanted something written about the crowning achievement thus far: namely, the ultra-modern meat-processing plant in Moscow that had been constructed in late 1933 and was subsequently named after Mikoyan. Boris Pilnyak was one of the few writers at the time who came forward to answer Mikoyan’s sotsial’nyi zakaz [social mandate] to write a Socialist Realist novel about modern Soviet slaughterhouses when he published Miaso: Roman in serialized form in the thick journal Novyi mir [New world] (in the February, March, and April 1936 issues).

![Mikoyan meat-packing plant today.](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0)
Although earlier in his career he had expressed publicly his serious reservations about the value of “social mandates,” Pilnyak had been strongly encouraged to volunteer for this particular assignment not only by Mikoyan himself, but also by Ivan Gronsky, the editor of Novyi mir and a longtime patron of the author, who saw this gesture as a way for Pilnyak to remain in the good graces of Soviet government officials, commentators, and literary critics. Pilnyak had weathered a vicious campaign of public vilification in 1929 for having written “Povest nepogashennoi luny” [Tale of the unextinguished moon] (1926), a story that strongly insinuated that Stalin was responsible for the suspicious death of Commissar Mikhail Frunze, and for publishing abroad, in an émigré journal, the story “Krasnoe derevo” [Mahogany] (1929), which painted a less than sympathetic portrait of life in a provincial Russian town under Soviet rule. Some scholars (for example, Max Hayward, V. V. Novikov, and Marc Slonim) claim that Pilnyak spent a large part of the 1930s trying to make amends for what he had done during the 1920s: that he attempted in his Pilnyak’s novel, as we shall see, would be roundly criticized for its highly unorthodox style and heterogeneous composition.

One reviewer, Zel’ Shhtenman (1936: 2), gives the following sarcastic breakdown of the novel’s content: history (15%), chemistry and medicine (10%), statistics (5%), official citations (7%), unofficial citations (8%), Europe (5%), war (8%), and landscape paintings and philosophy (2%). The remaining 40% of the text, he adds, includes, among other things, a minor plot, a visit to a collective farm, an overview of the Stakhanovite movement, and excerpts from newspapers. In fairness, Miasso may be said to provide mainly a colorful, if rather disjointed, history of the meat business—and the development of slaughterhouses—in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Russia.

As I argue in an article that appeared in an earlier issue of Gastronomica (LeBlanc 2016), Pilnyak’s Miasso could well be considered a Soviet version of Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle (1906) because of the way it chronicles the many safety hazards, health violations, and instances of worker exploitation that had become commonplace features of the meat industry in tsarist Russia under a largely unregulated capitalist system of private enterprise. “Much of the same corruption and lack of hygiene that plagued the Chicago stockyards and slaughterhouses described in Sinclair’s muckraking novel,” I pointed out, “can be found in Pilnyak’s depiction of the meat industry in tsarist Russia” (12). Pilnyak’s “Russianization”—or, more accurately, “Sovietization”—of The Jungle also extends to the central thematic oppositions established in Miasso as well as to its narrative structure, which provides readers with a proletarian (and decidedly anti-capitalistic) perspective on the dangerously unhealthy and blatantly dehumanizing conditions that had existed in the Russian meat industry.

Pilnyak’s young hero, Misha Rogozhin, a fourteen-year-old butcher’s apprentice who rises to become the head of the meat industry in Stalinist Russia, obviously enjoys a much more benign fate than does Sinclair’s main character, the poor Lithuanian immigrant Jurgis Rudkus. This is only to be expected, of course, for Comrade Rogozhin inhabits a Socialist Realist novel that is expected to conclude with the obligatory “happy ending.” As I observe in my article,

Tirelessly battling “Red merchants,” bourgeois specialists, corrupt bureaucrats, “wreckers” (i.e., saboteurs), and unscrupulous venture capitalists from abroad, Comrade Rogozhin in the end succeeds in modernizing the meat industry in early Stalinist Russia and placing it upon a solidly socialist foundation. Through the introduction of a wide array of workplace amenities and the application of the very latest technological advancements in refrigeration, Rogozhin spearheads the construction of several clean, efficient meat-packing plants that become the envy of industrialists in the West. (36)

Miasso, which begins as a muckraking exposé of capitalist slaughterhouse practices in tsarist Russia, thus ends as a Socialist Realist fantasy.

In the process of the narrative shift from Russian to Soviet slaughterhouse conditions, Pilnyak’s novel parts company with Sinclair’s model by championing—rather than protesting against—the slaughtering of animals and the eating of their meat. The author of Miasso repeatedly emphasizes the important and necessary role that the meat from slaughtered animals plays nutritionally in the human diet. Early in the novel, after Pilnyak has deployed the decadent culinary excess and excessive gastronomic indulgence exhibited over the centuries by various tsars and grandees in imperial Russia, the author laments the systematic starvation of the Russian common folk that made possible all of this royal and aristocratic feasting and gluttony (29). Pilnyak later points out that the clergy contributed to this malnutrition of the Russian people, not only through their own gluttony, but also through the series of weekly fast days and the numerous as well as lengthy periods of abstinence, such as Lent, that Orthodox peasants and workers observed religiously (3:22). He also provides empirical data taken from scientific studies of food budgets that show how Russian peasants and workers received most of...
their intake of protein and carbohydrates from grain rather than meat products (3:23). Indeed, Pilnyak even includes a chart that spells out the specific caloric and protein content of meat and then compares it favorably to the energy provided by other kinds of food (3:21). In an effort to show that blue-collar workers in imperial Russia starved according to scientific standards, he includes another chart that lists the amount of caloric energy needed for labor in various professions (3:22). The author’s argument for the high nutritional value of meat in the human diet is augmented by repeated narrative digressions on the digestion of food that detail the body’s physiological response to eating meat, explaining how proteins split into amino acids and how a person is nourished by the body’s absorption of these amino acids (3:23, 4:100).

The author of Miaso argues for the high value of meat not only in a biological and nutritional sense (by indicating what benefit it can bring to the human body), but also in a socio-economic sense (by indicating what benefit it can bring to the body politic). The increased energy that peasants and workers would receive from a diet not so heavily dependent on grain would translate, of course, to higher productivity in their physical labor as participants in the socialist construction mandated by Stalin’s Five-Year Plans. The project for industrializing such a backward country as Russia and building it into a modern socialist state would obviously benefit enormously from a better nourished and more energetic workforce. But the various by-products resulting from the slaughter of cattle, Pilnyak asserts, have turned out to be even more valuable than the meat itself. For centuries, the author observes, many parts of the carcasses of slaughtered animals were simply discarded, thrown away into garbage heaps. But now, as part of standard Soviet slaughterhouse practices, they are converted into a number of beneficial consumer goods that enrich the country’s economy. The hide of cattle, for example, is now being used to make a whole series of leather goods: from boots, suitcases, and saddles to watchbands, dog collars, and cigarette cases (3:24–25). Animal organs, which previously were merely discarded, are now being used as part of a program of organ therapy that is designed to cure a variety of human illnesses (3:24).

The argument in support of eating meat—and thus in support of the necessity of animal slaughter—that is advanced in Miaso makes repeated reference to the importance of applying modern scientific knowledge and the very latest foreign technology in order to bring about the most efficient and effective methods in the country’s industrial production of food (4:102, 105). The novel’s main villains—those “class enemies” from the merchantry and bourgeoisie who cling stubbornly to traditional religious values and feudal ways and who seek everywhere to obstruct progressive change by preserving outdated methods—not only oppose and suppress any call for regulation and reform in the Soviet meat business. They also resist and reject modern, scientific ideas, especially those in such burgeoning new fields as nutrition, endocrinology, and veterinary medicine (3:41). The progressive Soviet leadership in the meat industry, on the other hand, establishes a State Central Scientific Institute of Meat, where dozens of young scientists study the substances in the organs of animals that might prove beneficial to humankind (4:106), and a series of Special Raw Materials Shops, located on the grounds of several of the new slaughterhouse combines, where raw materials, such as waste matter and the heads, legs, and entrails of cattle, can now be deposited (4:106).

Near novel’s end, when readers are given a tour of the Mikoyan meat-packing plant in Moscow and are allowed to witness firsthand the conveyor-belt operations on the (dis)assembly line at this new, state-of-the-art facility, they are able to observe how the most efficient methods of modern, mechanical slaughter have been implemented and are now being employed: stunning the cattle, draining the blood, removing the hide, separating the head from the torso, slicing off the horns, crushing the teeth, breaking the jaw, removing the brain, and so on (4:111–14). And in the final section of the novel, at the Swine Breeding Trust on the collective farm where Comrade Rogozhin and a high-ranking member of his staff visit on the eve of the New Year 1936, the reader sees how the very latest practices in animal husbandry are being incorporated by young, highly trained zoological technicians (4:125). As Comrade Rogozhin’s travel companion observes, it is thanks to modernizing efforts such as these that Soviet workers are now consuming much more meat in their diet than tsarist-era workers ever did (4:125). Pilnyak’s Miaso thus ends on a highly upbeat note, seeking to validate Food Commissar Mikoyan’s optimistic assessment of the productive capacity of the burgeoning meat industry in the Soviet Union during the mid-1930s.

The Reception of Miaso and the Fate of Its Author

Since it strives to present such a positive picture of Soviet industrialization and socialist construction, one would have thought that Pilnyak’s pro-slaughterhouse novel would greatly please the Soviet authorities. The reception that Miaso received in Stalinist Russia, however, was neither favorable nor kind. Reviewers complained that Pilnyak often has recourse in his novel to lengthy citations from statistical records, and digresses frequently, straying from his central story line to discuss at some
length peripheral topics ranging from chemistry and veterinary medicine to municipal government and economics. To their minds, this narrative hardly qualified as a bona fide “novel” at all. It was seen instead as an odd hybrid experiment in form, which in seeking to combine traditional belles lettres with a historical documentary, manages to bog the narrative down in boring statistical details.

The harsh judgments rendered on Miaso by Soviet literary critics were echoed and amplified in the responses made by various Party leaders and government officials during the months that followed its appearance in print. Commissar Mikoyan and other high-ranking Soviet authorities felt that Pilnyak had failed abysmally in his attempt to produce the kind of literary work they had envisioned, expected, and anticipated in their call for a great Socialist Realist novel about modern Soviet slaughterhouses. Official criticism of, and displeasure with, Pilnyak’s novel was voiced in a number of venues during the six months that followed its serial publication in Novyi mir in early 1936. In May of that year, for instance, a meeting was held in the office of the Director of the Mikoyan Meat Packing Plant. Several officials from the Mikoyan plant, two editors of Novyi mir, and an editorial assistant at the plant newspaper, Za miasnuia industriu [For the meat industry], were invited to attend this meeting with the author of Miaso and join in the discussion of his novel. Pilnyak, who seems to have anticipated that the plant officials, whose expertise, after all, lay in the area of slaughterhouse operations (not literary or ideological matters), would likely have found some factual (technical) inaccuracies in his novelistic account of meat-packing operations, was greatly surprised to find that their main feedback came instead in the form of widespread criticism of the novel’s putative lack of ideological correctness and artistic quality. Apparently, the genre expectations of these slaughterhouse officials, considered as middle-brow readers of Socialist Realist novels who had fully anticipated encountering a predictable, conventional story about the Soviet meat industry, were disappointed by the extreme unconventionality of Pilnyak’s hybrid experiment in form and narrative structure.

Less than a month later, the leaders of the Soviet Writers Union held a discussion of Miaso, confirming the harsh judgment that literary critics and meat industry officials had already made: namely, that Pilnyak’s novel was khaltura [a “hack work” of poor-quality literature]. Four months later, yet another discussion of Pilnyak’s novel (primarily its low level of ideological correctness and artistic quality) was held at a meeting of the Presidium of the Writers Union. Pilnyak’s son has characterized this meeting as the opening event of the final campaign launched against his father. It featured devastating attacks upon—and fatal accusations against—the embattled author by his literary brethren. His latest novel was said to testify to the fact that Pilnyak was still being held captive by the decadent bourgeois aesthetic views regnant in the capitalist West. Those present at the meeting concluded that Pilnyak was the type of non-Party writer who simply refused to heed the constructive criticism and friendly advice that Soviet readers and critics had long been offering him; instead he stubbornly persisted in producing literary works that did not fulfill the new “disciplinary” function of art in Soviet Russia.

At this point, the writer’s fate seems to have been sealed. As Pilnyak himself recognized in the report on his creative activity that he presented in the fall of 1936, all of his works—“from Golyi god [The naked year] to Miaso”—were now being labeled “unsuitable” and “inappropriate” for Soviet literature (Pilnyak 1997: 150). The lead article in the November 11, 1936 issue of Literaturnaya gazeta [Literary gazette], titled “O tvorcheskoi pomoshchi” [About assistance to creative work], not only emphasized the importance of developing ways to ensure that the Party provided effective guidance for the creative activity of Soviet writers. It also singled out Pilnyak in particular as a writer who was sorely in need of such guidance, because he “systematically deviates from the general themes of our reality in his literary works and reveals a lack of understanding of that reality” (1). The article voiced the Party’s and, ostensibly, the People’s final judgment: “Boris Pilnyak has lost respect for his literary work; therefore, both critics and readers have lost respect for the literary work of Boris Pilnyak” (1).

It is difficult to determine with any degree of certitude exactly why Miaso elicited the strong aesthetic and ideological disparagement it received from critics, readers, and Party officials soon after its publication in Novyi mir. Was the novel’s poor reception due to the lingering presence of some modernist features of Pilnyak’s style left over from the 1920s, an unorthodox use of language and fractured composition that likely undermined the average reader’s genre expectations of a neatly constructed Socialist Realist novel? Did readers sense that Pilnyak incorporated the mandatory features of Socialist Realism only half-heartedly (perhaps even ironically and parodically) in a production novel that he did not wish to write in the first place and that he felt pressured into writing? Or did the novel simply fail to mention the names of Stalin and Mikoyan frequently enough in work that was commissioned to laud the recent achievements of the Soviet meat industry under the leadership of these two high-ranking Party officials? Whatever the cause ultimately might have been for the novel’s poor reception, the language that was used to excoriate Miaso—terms such as “hack work,” “formalism,” and “naturalism”—was “Soviet-speak” for a politically unreliable and unacceptable work by an author who must be purged. Pilnyak, who was not only
attacked openly now by critics and readers but also abandoned by his patrons in the Party and his fellow writers, was arrested a year later (in October 1937) and then summarily tried, convicted, and executed as an “enemy of the people” the following spring (in April 1938). After Pilnyak’s death, his works were removed from all Soviet libraries and his name disappeared from all Soviet textbooks. As an unorthodox writer who had stirred up considerable controversy in the past with his modernist aesthetics, his publication of allegedly anti-Soviet texts abroad, his several trips to capitalist countries (such as England, the United States, and Japan), and his penchant for fancy cars and other bourgeois creature comforts, Pilnyak had managed to make a number of enemies over the years. The debacle over Мясо—specifically, his failure to meet successfully the “social mandate” for a Socialist Realist production novel about modern Soviet slaughterhouses—appears to have been the proverbial last straw, and Pilnyak thus became yet another Soviet writer who fell victim to the Stalinist terror of the late 1930s.

Although Pilnyak was killed in 1938, the “social mandate” for a Socialist Realist novel about modern Soviet slaughterhouses did not die with him. In July 1939, just over a year after Pilnyak’s execution, Commissar Smirnov, who succeeded Mikoyan as the head of the meat industry, met with a small group of loyal Soviet literati and enjoined these writers to depict artistically some of the great achievements that had been reached thus far in the Soviet food industry.28 Commissar Smirnov’s meeting with loyal Soviet literati took place just four months after the official opening of the twin art exhibitions, Industry of Socialism and Food Industry, both of which were being held in Moscow. The latter exhibition, which had been organized by Mikoyan himself, was conceived as a celebration of the achievements of the Soviet food industry. Commissar Smirnov’s recruitment of writers in July can perhaps be seen as the literary (novelistic) equivalent of the recruitment efforts that preceded the Food Industry art exhibition.

Just a few months later, in October 1939, Commissar Smirnov met individually with Aleksei Tolstoy, a distant relative of Lev Tolstoy and the so-called patriarch of Soviet literature at the time, and sought (unsuccessfully) to convince him to head up a team of younger writers who would put together a literary history of the meat industry in Russia, from its primitive, corruption-filled early years in late tsarist Russia to its glorious present-day achievements in Stalinist Russia.29 The following year, a relatively unknown writer named Pavel Kazmichev provided Comrade Smirnov with the outline for an epic novel about meat production and slaughterhouses in Russia that he proposed to write, but nothing ever materialized out of this project either. In short, the great Soviet novel about the modern Mikoyan slaughterhouse, which Pilnyak was initially commissioned to write, was fated never to be written.30

The Modern Slaughterhouse and the Ethics/Politics of Diet

Returning to the title of this article, we can see clearly how the “ethics” of diet relates to Tolstoy, the putative father of the Russian vegetarian movement, who was deeply influenced by Howard Williams’s book (itself titled The Ethics of Diet) who and who was lionized by “ethical” vegetarians championing nonviolence as a core principle and who advocated for the “ethical” treatment of animals. But the “politics” of diet also manifests itself in the rancorous doctrinal disputes and organizational infighting that took place within the Russian vegetarian movement, which became split between the two feuding camps of “moralistic” and “hygienic” vegetarians. The “politics” of diet also emerges at the governmental level, especially after the October Revolution, when Russian vegetarians came into conflict with the Bolshevik regime. In Tolstoy’s case, the “politics” of diet even extends into family politics, for internal disputes plagued the Tolstoy clan following the patriarch’s spiritual crisis in the late 1870s and early 1880s. Members of the Tolstoy family became sharply divided over Lev Nikolaevich’s radical new views on a whole host of issues, including the putative benefit of a meatless, bezuboinyi [nonviolent] diet.

When we turn our attention to Pilnyak, we see that the “politics” of diet is obviously central to his attempt to write a slaughterhouse novel in response to Commissar Mikoyan’s “social mandate” to glorify the Stalinist industrialization drive of the mid-1930s, an initiative that sought to increase meat production and meat consumption dramatically in order for the building of socialism to proceed apace. Literary politics and Party politics, meanwhile, permeate not only Mikoyan’s mandate that Pilnyak
write a Socialist Realist novel about modern Soviet slaughterhouses. They also play a vital part in the subsequent campaign of vilification waged against this unorthodox writer, culminating in his arrest, conviction, and execution, when that novel did not meet the expectations of the authorities in the Party or the approval of his colleagues in the Writers Union. The “ethics” of diet appears in Pilnyak’s case as well, however, for we find in Miaso a Sovietized version of Upton Sinclair’s The Jungle that praises—rather than condemns—modern slaughterhouses, and that encourages—rather than discourages—the industrialized slaughter of animals as a way to increase the production and subsequent consumption of meat, which was considered an essential food item in the country’s diet. Finally, “ethics” comes into play in Pilnyak’s decision to cooperate with the Soviet authorities in the first place and thus to compose the Socialist Realist slaughterhouse novel they had requested. By agreeing to collaborate, Pilnyak opened himself up to the charge, leveled against him by Max Eastman in his essay “The Humiliation of Boris Pilnyak” (1936), and by other critics subsequently, that he was yet another “artist in uniform” in the Soviet Union who had agreed to sell his pen—if not his soul as well—to the Stalinist bureaucracy and proceeded obediently to produce a propagandistic novel at the Party’s bidding.

It is the modern slaughterhouse, of course, that stands at the very center of the ethics and the politics of diet in both of these cases. The “slaughtering machine,” which Sinclair had censured so strongly and so memorably in The Jungle, is what drew Tolstoy to visit the modern abattoir in Tula in the first place and subsequently to write “Pervaia stupen.” If institutionalized animal slaughter is, as Sinclair put it, “like some horrible crime committed in a dungeon, all unseen and unheeded, buried out of sight and of memory” (42), then Tolstoy’s essay compels readers to see and heed the heinous operations of that modern slaughtering machine in the clear light of day. It brings the unethical treatment of animals explicitly into the reader’s sight, consciousness, and memory. Even if it is the case that abstinence, rather than vegetarianism, served as the main motivation behind Tolstoy’s decision to write his essay, the modern slaughterhouse is nonetheless responsible for the broad expansion of flesh-eating, making meat available in much larger quantities and with much wider distribution among the populace than ever before.

Fasting—or what Tolstoy called “self-control in food”—becomes even more difficult, especially in the case of abstaining from the use of animal food in one’s diet, when meat is so readily available. Taking the necessary “first step” toward a morally good life (“right living”) thus becomes appreciably harder in modern life due in large part to the existence of industrialized slaughterhouses.

Pilnyak, as we have seen, adopts a diametrically opposed position vis-à-vis the modern slaughterhouse. Commissioned to write a Socialist Realist novel about the recent achievements of the Soviet meat industry, Pilnyak could ill afford to draw the reader’s attention to the cruel suffering that animals experience as they are transformed, in the words of Paula Young Lee (2008: 8), “from cow to commodity.” As Lee points out in her introduction to Meat, Modernity, and the Rise of the Slaughterhouse (7), public discourse on the issue of animal slaughter is dominated by two rhetorical extremes: the “detachment of the statistician” and the “outrage of the activist.” If Tolstoy’s essay voices the outrage of the animal rights activist, then Pilnyak’s novel chronicles passionately the technological advancements that were being made in modern slaughterhouse operations (especially refrigeration) and the statistically higher outputs that were being achieved in Soviet meat production during the 1930s. Both of these Russian authors wrote about the modern slaughterhouse as a social institution, but their respective treatments of the ethical and political issues that arise out of this centralized site, where animals are killed for food, illustrate graphically the two rhetorical extremes that have dominated discourse on the issue of mechanized animal slaughter in modern times.

The broader implications of the sharply contrasting contributions that Tolstoy and Pilnyak each made to the discourse on animal slaughter in Russia, however, extend well beyond the ethics and politics of diet. The mockery of Tolstoy’s vegetarian beliefs by the Bolsheviks and the persecution of Pilnyak that followed in the wake of what some readers might have seen as a half-hearted (and largely ironic) response on his part to Mikoyan’s “social mandate” to write a Socialist Realist novel that glorifies Soviet meat production during the 1930s should remind us that the dictatorial regimes of Lenin and Stalin would not tolerate for long the overall ethics and politics, broadly considered, of either of these two heretical Russian writers and thinkers.

Tolstoy, whose dissident writings and progressive social activism led to his excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1901, advanced a Christian anarchism that was a painful thorn in the side of both the church and the state. Indeed, as some scholars have documented (Edgerton 1993; Roginsky 1989), many of Tolstoy’s fervent followers—who subscribed not only to their leader’s vegetarian beliefs, but also to his advocacy of pacifism, temperance, avoidance of tobacco, chastity, anti-militarism, and nonviolent resistance to evil—were actively persecuted by the new Soviet government during the 1920s and 1930s. Where Tolstoy and the Tolstoyans were radical Christian believers who wished to build the Kingdom of
God on earth, the Soviet authorities were atheistic Marxists who wished to modernize and industrialize the country’s economy so as to improve the material conditions of life. They were intent upon constructing socialism in Russia, not the Kingdom of God.

Pilnyak’s heretical challenge to the Soviet regime, on the other hand, was artistic and cultural rather than spiritual and religious. This unorthodox “fellow traveler,” “Scythian,” and literary “zoologist,” who provoked the ire of servile, doctrinaire proletarian writers in the Soviet Union through his disdain for their zealous attempts to follow obediently the guidelines of Socialist Realism, was an incorrigible modernist who could not control his natural impulse to mock and violate the canons of neorealism that were being established for literary artists in his homeland. If Pilnyak appeared to be, as Max Eastman once charged, an “artist in uniform,” then it must be added that he was the type of artist who intentionally sought to disgrace that uniform whenever possible by fulfilling his soldierly duty as a Soviet writer with tongue-in-cheek irony and hidden sarcasm. He was, as Stalin had long suspected, cleverly “misleading” and “deceiving” the Soviet authorities (Samov 2009: 44). And his heresy needed to be silenced, as it ultimately was in 1937–38, when he disappeared into what some commentators, ironically enough, have called the Stalinist miasorubka [meat grinder].

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NOTES

1. Mieka Erley (2010: 274) argues that Mayakovsky’s 1926 essay may be considered a “Soviet answer to Korolenko’s tsarist-era ‘Factory of Death.’”

2. Alexander Zholkovsky (1995) unearthed the “slaughterhouse” topos embedded in several works of prose fiction by other Russian writers during the 1920s, including Osip Mandelstam’s The Egyptian Stamp (1928), Yury Olesha’s Entry (1927), Boris Pilnyak’s “Mother Earth” (1924–25), and Mikhail Bulgakov’s The Heart of a Dog (1925).

3. Miaso was co-written with Sergey M. Belyaev, a zoologist and writer of science fiction who seems to have served as a silent partner for Pilnyak in the project. Belyaev did not suffer any of the vilification that befell Pilnyak in 1936 following the novel’s serial publication in Novyi mir.

4. As the protagonist Pozdnyshev laments in Tolstoy’s The Kreutzer Sonata (1886), the gentry’s “stimulating superfluity of food, together with complete physical idleness, is nothing but the systematic excitation of sexual lust.” Addressing the members of the privileged classes in Russian society, those “who consume two pounds of meat every day, and game, and fish, and all sorts of warming foods and strong drinks,” Pozdnyshev asks: “Where does all that go? Into excesses of sensuality” (23–24).

5. For a more detailed examination of Tolstoy’s philosophical connection with nineteenth-century diet reformers in the United States, see LeBlanc (1997).

6. Vladimir Pervodominsky (1992: 136), meanwhile, notes that Tolstoy was pleasantly surprised to meet in William’s book such a large number of worthy adherents of vegetarianism. The Ethics of Diet thus appears to have validated and legitimized vegetarian beliefs for Tolstoy.

7. “A tender, refined lady,” Tolstoy writes sarcastically in his essay, “will devour the carcasses of these animals with full assurance that what she is doing is right. Her doctor assures her that she is so delicate that she cannot be sustained by vegetable food alone. For her feeble organism, fleshly food is indispensable. Her doctor assures her that she is so sensitive that she is unable herself to inflict suffering on animals or even to bear the sight of suffering” (“Pervaia stupeni,” 83).

8. For critical studies that examine Tolstoy’s refusal to eat meat as a result of his advocacy of the ethical treatment of animals (rather than for any religious or ascetic reasons), see McDowell (2007) and Brang (2006).

9. For an example of the bowdlerized pamphlet version of “Pervaia stupeni,” which consisted exclusively of the slaughterhouse scene (and eliminated entirely the moral tract on abstinence), see Tolstoy, Na boine [At the abattoir].

10. See his diary entries for June 25, July 13, and August 27, 1891 in Tolstoy, Pohnoe sobranie sochinenii v 50 tomakh [Complete collected works in ninety volumes], vol. 52, pp. 43, 44, 50.

11. Pervodominsky (1992: 116), for instance, writes that in his homeland “the name ‘Lev Tolstoy’ and the concept of ‘vegetarianism’ have long been conflated and inextricably linked together. Every mention of vegetarianism almost inevitably draws forth, by way of example, a reference to Lev Tolstoy. Vegetarianism invariably appears in the series of associations that follows the mention of Lev Tolstoy’s name, together with War and Peace and Anna Karenina, Yasnaya Polyana, peasants, plowing, a gray beard, and a gray peasant blouse.”

12. One of the more famous of these vegetarian colonies was Tolstoy Farm, a cooperative colony that was founded by Mahatma Gandhi near Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1910.

13. Although mythologized as a vegetarian pacifist, writes Darra Goldstein (1996: 203), “Tolstoy’s abstinance did not initially arise from ethical considerations. Tolstoy struggled against carnal and gustatory temptation alike; the renunciation of sex and meat were equally important for attaining moral purity.” “The First Step,” she adds, “shows far greater concern with the rigors of asceticism than with compassion for animals.”

14. For a more detailed discussion of the rift that developed within the ranks of the Russian vegetarian movement following Tolstoy’s death, see LeBlanc (2001).

15. Robert and Galina Rothstein (1997) discuss the Soviet attempt to develop a large-scale system of public food service during the 1920s, when nutritional research institutes were established and a vast educational campaign was undertaken in an effort to change the eating habits of the Soviet population.

16. As Mikhail Gurvich, a noted Soviet nutritionist, has observed, “They taught us in school and at the institute that vegetarianism was not medicine; it was seen as foolish. Vegetarianism was considered a bourgeois theory of nutrition” (Tretyakova 1993: 439).
According to Pilnyak’s third wife, her husband did not want to undertake this project, but Mikoyan strongly insisted and he finally capitulated (Pilnyak 2002: 578). In a discussion about “social mandates” in 1929, Pilnyak had written: “I believe that a zakaz [mandate] in literature, when this mandate involves an idea, is not only unnecessary, harmful, and useless, but also impossible” (“Spor o sotsial’nom zakaze” [The debate about social mandate], 70).

The same charge could be made about Pilnyak’s O’kei: Amerikanskii roman [Okay: An American novel] (1933), which is not a novel at all, but instead a travelogue that records the author’s various observations during his five-month visit to the United States in 1931. In a letter he wrote to Mikoyan on May 25, 1936, Pilnyak protested that Erlikh was slandering not just Pilnyak himself, as the author of Miaso, but also Mikoyan, as the People’s Comissar for the food industry, when the critic characterized the slaughterhouse novel as being a work of “contractual literature.” In this way, Pilnyak objected, Erlikh was devaluing the important work being undertaken by this high-ranking government official and Party leader (Pilnyak 2002: vol. 2, 600–601).

The discussion that took place in the director’s office at the Mikoyan meat processing plant was published, in abridged form, in the June 3, 1936 issue of the plant’s journal, Za miasnuiu industriiu [For the meat industry] (Anonymous 1936b). I am relying here on the detailed account of that meeting provided in Glushchenko (2011).

According to Glushchenko’s account, the officials at the Mikoyan meat-packing plant complained that the novel, among other things, lacks a clear opening or dénouement, portrays characters characteristically, does not portray recognizable character types, does not feature a main hero, describes old pre-revolutionary slaughterhouses and their personnel more extensively than it does the new modern meat-packing plants now being constructed in the Soviet Union (as well as the Stakhanovite laborers who work at them), and, finally, is dreadfully boring to read.

See Pilnyak (2010: vol. 2, 622). A stenographic account of this Writers Union discussion is archived at the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (Rossiskii Gosudarstvennyi arkhiiv literatury i iskusstva), RGALI (f. 931, op. 2, ed. khr. 160, l. 35).

For a transcript of the report on his creative activity that Pilnyak delivered at this meeting, see Pilnyak (1997).

“The novel Miaso,” reads the report of the meeting later sent to Stalin, “speaks to the fact that Pilnyak has not paid attention to the demands placed upon a Soviet writer.” See Pilnyak (1994: 144).

Some of the “friendly advice” that Pilnyak had been offered (but that he had falsely refused to heed) appears to have come from Commissar Mikoyan himself. Years after the writer’s death, Pilnyak’s widow would claim that it was Mikoyan who insisted that certain scenes in the manuscript version of Miaso that had appeared in Noryi mir needed to be substantially amended before the slaughterhouse novel would be allowed to be published in book form (these scenes, which were not identified, purportedly “compromised” Soviet reality). But Pilnyak refused to make those changes, and the novel was never published as a separate edition. See Pilnyak (2002: 578).

“All of Pilnyak’s mistakes and woes, just like those of several other writers, were pointed out to them very clearly,” the anonymous author of the report notes. “Friendly and comradely creative assistance was given to these writers to help them examine their artistic positions from a political perspective, find their theme, and start to work not ‘seasonally,’ not running on empty, but in profound and organic accord with their artistic interests and aspirations” (Anonymous 1936a: 1).

REFERENCES


———. 1936b. “Roman Belyaeva i Pilnyaka Miaso na obsuzhdenii nashikh chitatelei” [The novel Miaso by Belyaev and Pilnyak under discussion by our readers]. Za miasnuiu industriiu [For the meat industry], June 2.


