

## Reading History From Literature: July 1941

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The science of history studies past events based on certain documents. A significant part of these documents consists of literary works which reveal a documentary nature by reflecting the period when they were written. Then it is safe to say that literary works play an effective role in terms of history teaching by carrying the features of a certain period in a nation's history with the realities depicted in them. On the contrary, depicting problems in literary works in terms of their socio-cultural and psychological effects on people and societies may produce a more effective history teaching than considering these problems in history books only in terms of their causes and effects. Especially the literary works centered on historical events generally serve as an integral part of history teaching. The best examples are the historical novels which are themed and plotted on a war-centered history. This paper undertakes to study the role of literature in communicating historical events and providing history teaching by considering one of the historical novels, namely "July 1941" by Grigory Baklanov.

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There exists a relation of interaction between literature and history at the point of reflecting reality. History reports the reality based on certain documents while literature communicates the reality by means of fiction. Literary works—especially historical novels—are some of the documents referred to in conveying historical reality. By means of literary works the problems considered in history books only in terms of their causes and effects are depicted in terms of their socio-cultural and psychological effects on people and societies. Especially the works centered on historical events bring the past to the readers and generally serve as an integral part of history teaching. Thus, history becomes a mirror turned to the future rather than just some knowledge about the past. As Russian writer Yuri Bondarev said, young generation has no future without their fathers' experience of the past.<sup>1</sup> Literary works are greatly significant in terms of bringing the past to the readers, and the works that are faithful to the past provide an opportunity for readers to evaluate the past and to live today accordingly. It is not without a reason that Karl Marx recommended French history students to read French novels by Stendhal, Balzac and other novelists rather than works of French historians.<sup>2</sup> The role of literary work in teaching history is a part of the progress of civilizations. Writer and poet Yahya Kemal expressed it with the following statement: "Lack of pictures and lack of prose... If not for these two tragic

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<sup>1</sup> Afanas'yev N., *Velikaya Otechestvennaya vojna v sud'be literaturi i kul'turi*, Bely Veter, Mozir' 2011, p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> Salim Durukoğlu, "Edebiyatla Tarihin Mutlu İzdivacı: Tarihi Roman Türü ve Osmancıktan Osman Gazi Han'a Bir Olgunlaşma Kurgusu", *Turkish Studies*, Volume 8/7, Summer 2015. Ankara/Turkey, p. 139.

defects our nation would have been a hundred times stronger than it is.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, one cannot deny the thought that a literary work with the reality carried in its structure is the means of facing the past and learning the history.

The greatest role in terms of history teaching belongs to the genre of novel. Ultimately, there exists a close relation between novel and history. The following statement made by Academic Kemal Erol about the closeness between history and the art of novel is noteworthy in this regard:

An individual can only reach a wholeness by making a connection between themselves and their nation with the sense of history. And this is the source of closeness between history and the art of novel. These two concepts are also closely connected at the point of considering a person’s journey in the world related to their past and their adventure related to the situations and events they experience. Because in the art of novel, persons and places are enclosed in time and a part of this concept of past time is covered by history. The art of novel obtains a philosophical or cultural value by considering or interpreting a historical event or situation.<sup>4</sup>

When realistic novel reached its highest point with the realism trend in 19th century and it reached wider audience as the most powerful literary genre, it gained a more valuable place in terms of history teaching. Thus, the genre of novel beginning from *Don Quixote* by Cervantes developed further in 19th century as history. Even the method of natural description of reality in novel was taken from history providing clear and easy conveyance of realities via arts, and novel gained an educative quality.<sup>5</sup> One of the representatives of literary realism Henry James connected the importance of novel to the way it reflects life as history. In his essay titled *The Art of Fiction* Henry James said: “But history also is allowed to compete with life... The subject matter of fiction is stored up likewise in documents and records, and... it must speak with assurance, with the tone of the historian.”<sup>6</sup> However, unlike history, novel’s description of life should not lack artistic characteristics. E. M. Forster in his book *The Aspects of the Novel* made the following observation about this necessity while describing the connection between novel and history:

Writers should view novel as means of teaching a moral lesson or entertaining readers. The true purpose of novel is to show life. From this point of view, novel is history, and writers try to describe human life just as historians do. However, since novel is also a work of art it must unite its characters, events, places, and conversations into one whole thing.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, it is highly important that an author’s literary work should correctly reflect historical information in the light of the author’s researches and at the same time not lose its artistic value. Every literary work is written at a certain time and the author is to reflect all the characteristics of that time in his/her work as they are in reality. An author’s failure to reflect the historical era correctly in his work will lead to the disappearance of the era. A writer Mehmet Kaplan in his work titled *Culture and Language* (Kültür ve Dil) explains it in the following way: “...when it has no trace of the real history it is as if it does not exist for us. No doubt, every experienced event will more or less affect the whole nation or a part of it.”<sup>8</sup> Yes, writers should describe their societies as correctly as possible in their works, because as intellectuals, they have this duty

<sup>3</sup> Yahya Kemal Beyatlı, *Edebiyata Dair: Yahya Kemal Külliyyatı*, İstanbul 2014, p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> Kemal Erol, “Tarih - Edebiyat İlişkisi ve Tarihi Romanların Tarih Öğretimine Katkısı”. *Dil ve Edebiyat Eğitimi Dergisi*, 1(2), 2012, p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> See Serpil Oppermann, *Postmodern Tarih Kuramı: Tarih Yazımı, Yeni Tarihçilik ve Roman*, Phoenix Yayınevi, Ankara 2006, p. 55.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54., see also E. M. Foster, *Roman Sanatı* (çev. Ünal Aytür), Adam Yayınları, İstanbul 1982, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> Mehmet Kaplan, *Kültür ve Dil*, Dergâh Yayınları, İstanbul 2006, pp. 52-53.

before the society. The duty of literary critics and intellectuals is in a sense educating, teaching and informing people.

Most of the modern writers who belong to the realism movement fulfil this duty of educating, teaching and informing people particularly by means of historical novels. One of these writers is a well-known Russian war-period prose writer Grigory Baklanov (1923-2009)<sup>9</sup>. The writer's range of themes consists of the events of World War II. The writer personally admits that the years of war remain in his memory as heavy and horrible times.<sup>10</sup> His former impressions of the war from the time when he was in charge of a battery in the Southwest front formed the basis for the works he wrote after the war. The writer's main works are historical novels *South of the Main Offensive* (Южнее главного удара, 1957), *The Foothold* (Пядь земли, 1959), *July 1941* (Июль 41 года, 1964), *Friends* (Друзья, 1975), and *Forever Nineteen* (Навеки девятнадцатилетние, 1979). The readers of the abovementioned works get a chance to see World War II as it was, to feel it and to think about it. *The Foothold* was the novel that made Grigory Baklanov famous as a writer.<sup>11</sup> His *July 1941* which we will consider in this paper was the author's first novel. The novel titled *July 1941* depicts Hitler's preparations in 1941 to attack his ideological enemy Russia with whom he had made a non-aggression pact beginning with Ukraine's fertile lands which Hitler considered a future part of Germany. Besides that, the author depicts the military and administrative devastation of the Russian Army which was caught unawares by the Germans because it was not prepared for the attack relying on the non-aggression pact<sup>12</sup> with Germany. As a result Baklanov puts in his novel the time and events of World War II and he explains the events which developed in the beginning of the war and the causes of Soviet Union's early defeats. The whole novel reflects Russian-German war in its political and moral dimensions.

*July 1941* is a novel that takes the readers back to history and makes them question the past and at the same time gives them the pleasure of novel reading. The writer raises historical awareness by showing the causes of the defeat in the war. *July 1941* expresses both Baklanov's understanding of art and his political criticism and questioning, because Grigory Baklanov comes from the same generation with the characters who fight in this novel and has the same experiences with them. The writer's opinion of war is well expressed in the following words by narrator describing the thoughts of the hero of the novel Shcherbatov:

All over the country spies are caught, newspapers write about vigilance and the German pilots who reconnoiter a military airdrome are released with honor. Is the fear to provoke Germans so great? In 20th century wars do not begin because of detaining a plane which violated a border. And when they want to start a war finding a pretext is not an issue.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Grigory Yakovlevich Baklanov was born on September 11, 1923 in Voronezh city. He lost his parents in an early age and lived with his uncle. The years of his childhood and adolescence passed in Voronezh. During World War II, he was in charge of a battery on the Southwest front until the end of the war. After the victory, in 1946-1951, he studied in the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute. His first stories *South of the Main Offensive* (Южнее главного удара, 1957) and *The Foothold* (Пядь земли, 1959) were highly appreciated by readers and critics. His other noteworthy works are his first novel *July 1941* (Июль 41 года) and his novel *Friends* (Друзья). In his works, the writer described the real life, the events which he had personally experienced at war. Baklanov died in Moscow on December 23, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> See Yelena Joli, "Grigoriy Baklanov", Pobeda Lyuboy Tsenoy, Web. Google books, 22.03.2016.

<sup>11</sup> I. V. Arhipova (Red.), "Grigori Baklanov", Eho voyni i pamyat' serdtsa: leytenantskaya proza pisateley frontovogo pokoleniya, Tsikl literaturnih besed, Chelyabinsk, 2005, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> For German-Russian Non-aggression Pact, Stalin and Hitler's intentions in making the pact, and the events that developed afterwards see: Badegül Can, *Savaş Nesri Yazarlarından Yuri Bondarev'in Eserlerine Sosyo-Psikolojik Bir Yaklaşım*, Erciyes Üniversitesi, Doktora Tezi, Kayseri 2014, pp. 6-20.

<sup>13</sup> Grigory Baklanov, *İyul' 41 goda, Naveki-devyatnadsatiletniye*, Hudojestvennaya literatura, Moskva 1988, p. 79.

The author is preoccupied with Shcherbatov's feelings as Shcherbatov anticipates the war on the border, but he cannot talk about it because of the leaders' reaction, so he has to wait in distress. Baklanov emphasizes the inevitable result of being unprepared to war, by using his main hero to show the readers that war is at hand, but nothing can be done about it:

Something strange was going on. Only one-third part of the tanks in the neighboring tank division could be battle-worthy. The rest of the tanks needed repair, but there were no spare parts, and even the requests for them were not fully accepted. Everyone was waiting for "T-34" and "KB" tanks. They were coming one by one, for they were just beginning to be used. Additional soldiers were enrolled to tank crews from infantry and cavalry. However, training them would take time. And would they have the time? How much time was left for them? Could the war be already standing at their borders?<sup>14</sup>

The author explicitly tells the readers that the leadership was not expecting war to start because of the Soviet-German Non-aggression Pact.

Shcherbatov could hardly wait to get the newspapers. But even before they arrived he had heard the news from TASS on the radio. And then he read it with his own eyes. Eight days before the war began he had read the following: "...According to the report of the USSR, Germany has been observing the terms of Soviet-German non-aggression pact as well as the USSR, and therefore, according to the Soviet circles, the rumors of Germany's intention to violate the pact and attack the USSR are groundless, and the recent movement of the German troops which completed the operation on the Balkans to the Eastern and Northeastern regions of Germany is thought to be connected to other motives which have nothing to do with Soviet-German relations".<sup>15</sup>

When the war is at the door, people sense that it's going to begin, unlike politicians:

And the thing that was still unclear to the people who make politics and are accustomed to determine the fate of thousands and millions was well understood by the simple people each of whom seemed insignificant and indiscernible in the whole mass of people, each of these ordinary people raising children in fear here, near the border. They were doing whatever people always do while expecting foreign invasion: stocking up salt, matches, and bread. Those who were planning to wait here until the invasion was over would bury their most precious possessions at night trying to be unnoticed by the neighbors, while others would prepare to move to another place. The people were hiding their things under the ground, withdrawing into themselves, for talking aloud about the evident thing was too inconvenient and unsafe.<sup>16</sup>

While people were getting ready for war, the army was not expecting it and continued its usual life:

Only the army kept living as if there was peace and nothing had changed. The artillery was training on military testing grounds, the tanks—most of them disassembled—were standing in repair, and all the divisions were preparing for amateur art activities. Shcherbatov later remembered it with horror. But it was the reality. There were sport games and competitions planned for Sunday, June 22, and those competitions were given great importance, and the preparations were in full swing.<sup>17</sup>

Thus, *July 1941* was the time full of disappointment and anxiety for Russian people. War came suddenly and Soviet people and soldiers faced it unexpectedly.

In his novel *July 1941*, Grigory Baklanov artistically describes the beginning of the unexpected war in the following way:

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 83-84.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 87.

All the phones in the headquarters were silent, the communication lines were all calmly waiting. All the commanders had gathered. The reconnaissance officer standing in the corner with his face toward the map said... (...) Then he approached the switch and for some reason everyone looked at him. The following events happened all at the same time and therefore they were perceived as one single action. Brovalsky raised his hand and touched the switch, and a flame of fire broke from the wall of the brick garage in the yard, as if the switch had turned on the explosion. (...) Explosions were already heard in the city, there was whizzing and wailing low over the houses, and planes were coming from the border with a heavy rumbling.<sup>18</sup>

The author describes the beginning of the war in the way it is known from the history books and he uses the main character Shcherbatov to portray the people's helplessness, lack of communication and total inability in face of the sudden war:

They were bombed to death on their airdromes before they could fly or before the command was signed for them. Shcherbatov read this instruction several days later because when it was given on June 22 at 7 o'clock in the morning, there were no means of communication to transmit it to the troops. It was found by chance among the papers of the headquarters which were destroyed by bombing, in a green box which was covered by the dead body of an officer who looked as if he were protecting the box with his body.<sup>19</sup>

While reading the novel, the readers see the Russian army caught unprepared to war and the people desperately looking for solutions. The author demonstrates it to the reader in Shcherbatov's example:

The second characteristic of the plan was Shcherbatov's decision to start the attack unexpectedly and unpreparedly. The corps could not expect the ammunition to be brought to them, so they had to count on themselves and to spare their ammunition, so they could have something to meet the counter attacking German tanks with.<sup>20</sup>

In the novel *July 1941*, the author also explains the readers why the war progressed in Germans' favor in the year 1941. The following conversation between Shcherbatov and the division commander is noteworthy in this regard:

Bring to me the division commander! The major appeared before him. Shcherbatov looked at him in surprise. -You... are you alive? And you aren't shooting? The major was standing straight in front of him. In the meantime, German planes were flying over them in the smoke, chasing the people who were pouring out of the carriages in the field. - Comrade General, I was given the order... I was given the order not to shoot! Not to answer to the provocation!<sup>21</sup>

As the novel explains, Germans felt confident because they knew that the Russians were not prepared to the war due to the pact and they had not been given any orders. The author describes it to the readers in the following way:

When the first plane was shot and the pilots who jumped out of it with parachutes were brought to Shcherbatov he interrogated them right there, on the battery. When the senior pilot—who had burned hair and whose uniform burned through all the way to his body—was asked why they weren't bombing the anti-aircraft gunnery, he said with the scornful smile: - Because we knew they were given the order not to shoot.<sup>22</sup>

However, as the author showed to the readers in the novel, Russians did not do anything because they did not want to provoke Germans and they thought Germans would not wage war in two fronts and would comply with the pact. Due to this non-action in 1941, Germans had the advantage in everything and Russian army was in a difficult situation.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., pp. 106-107.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

By his command to attack the Army Commander placed another division under Shcherbatov's order—that was Infantry Division 98 which was in the command of General Goloshchokov. The division had to be detrained somewhere in the 70 km radius or be on the march, and the command was given to find it. But Shcherbatov knew what the Army Commander probably didn't know yet, that the division didn't exist anymore. It had not reached the front. It was destroyed on the way when the troop trains were bombed. The only regiment which had managed to detrain was moving on vehicles in the daytime as a march column and it was noticed by the German planes, then their planes came from everywhere and did not let them out alive.<sup>23</sup>

By reading the novel, the readers refresh their knowledge of how Hitler broke the non-aggression pact and started the war against Russia in 1941. The readers once again understand that Russian leadership did not expect any war and did not do any preparation for it replying on the non-aggression pact. Thus, the readers start questioning why Germany which was the winner in the beginning of World War II became the loser in the end of the war. These indicators in the novel not only confirm the readers' historical knowledge, but also make them learn important lessons from the experience of the past. The educational and questioning quality of the novel reveals its documentary nature. Consequently, we may say that the literary works covering historical themes are of the documentary nature. The literary works of the documentary nature which still have relevance in our days and will continue to be relevant in future play very important role by presenting historical events to the readers from a different viewpoint and encouraging national unification and social transformation. In the light of the historical information presented in the novel the readers will evaluate the past period and make a connection between the past and the present. At this point, the novel will not only play an effective role in terms of history teaching, but will also extend the horizons for the formation of a better future.

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<sup>23</sup> İbid., p. 18.