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# *A intelligentsia na Guerra Civil: V tupike, de Vikentii Veresáiev*

Autor: David Mandel
Université du Québec à Montréal, Montreal, Québec, Canada
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# The Intelligentsia in the Civil War: Vikentii Veresaev's *V tupike*

David Mandel*

**Abstract:** Vikentiy Veresaev's novel *V tupike* (In a Dead-End) was the first major Soviet literary work set in the civil war of 1918-21. It continued Veresaev's already established literary focus on the evolution of the political and spiritual outlooks among Russia's socialist intelligentsia, those educated members of society whose life was guided by a commitment to improving the life of the toiling classes. This article focuses on the novel's depiction of attitudes among the intelligentsia to a central question of the novel: the contradiction between the revolutionary regime's professed humanistic, socialist goals and the often violent and arbitrary means which it adopted. The article ends with a brief discussion of the novel's reception, before its ultimate banning in the early 1930s.

**Resumo:** O romance *V tupike* (Num beco sem saída), de Vikentiy Veresaev, foi a primeira grande obra literária soviética ambientada na guerra civil de 1918-21. Ele dá continuidade ao foco literário já estabelecido por Veresáiev sobre a evolução das perspectivas políticas e espirituais no meio da intelligentsia socialista da Rússia, aqueles membros educados da sociedade cuja vida era guiada por um compromisso de melhorar a vida das classes trabalhadoras. Este artigo se concentra na descrição, no romance, das atitudes entre a intelligentsia em relação a uma questão central do romance: a contradição entre os objetivos humanísticos e socialistas professados pelo regime revolucionário e os meios frequentemente violentos e arbitrários que ele adotou. O artigo termina com uma breve discussão sobre a recepção do romance, antes de sua proibição final no início da década de 1930.

**Keywords:** Vikentii Veresaev; *V tupike;* Intelligentsia; Civil war
**Palavras-chave:** Vikentii Veresáiev; V tupike; Intelligentsia; Guerra civil

# Introduction

* Professor in the Department of Political Science, - Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada,. mandel.mark-david@uqam.ca

One of the first major literary works set in the Russian civil war of 1918-21, Vikentii Veresaev's novel *V tupike* (In a Dead-end) appeared even before K. Fedin's *Razgrom* and A. Serafimovich's *Zheleznyi potok*, both considered classics of the civil-war period. The novel went through seven printings in its first decade, but the last edition in 1931 was already severely censored, and the novel was removed soon after from libraries and bookstores to be republished only in 1990. It was thus largely unknown to several generations of Soviet readers.

The evolving world views, the social and political attitudes of the socialist intelligentsia – educated members of society who found meaning for their lives in service to the popular classes - were the central theme of the literary work of Veresaev, who, like the author Anton Chekhov, seven years his elder, was a doctor by training.

That is also a central theme of *V tupike*. This article presents the political attitudes of the intelligentsia in the civil war, as depicted in the novel, with a particular focus on the conflict between the revolution's declared humanistic goals and the red regime's use of violent, often arbitrary means.

The setting is the small *dacha*[1] community of Armatluk on Crimea's southern coast and the nearby town of Feodosiya. Crimea changed hands several times during the civil war that

1 Summer cottage.

pitted the Whites, supported by the propertied classes and the major capitalist states, against the Reds, who drew their main support from workers and, to a less constant and active extent, from the peasantry, the vast majority of Russia's population. The intelligentsia, from whom most of the novel's central characters are drawn, was mostly hostile to the October Revolution and the Bolshevik regime.[2]

The novel opens with Crimea under the Whites' rule. But the Reds soon return, this for a second time, in April 1919, only to be expelled as the novel closes in June of that same year. The central character is Katya, an *intelligentka*[3] in her twenties. She had been active in the revolutionary movement before 1917 and is opposed the Whites. But she is also repulsed by the cruelty and abuses that accompany the Reds' regime.

Hence the novel's epigram from Dante's *Divine Comedy* about the plight of the angels who remained neutral in the struggle between God and Satan and so were rejected by heaven, but not accepted by hell[4] - the fate of moderates in historic clashes of extremes.

As the novel opens, Katya is living with her elderly parents in a modest cottage by the sea. Her father, a zemstvo[5] doctor, who had boldly denounced the death penalty and the world war under the Tsar, is now equally opposed to the Whites and Reds. But Katya, who is young and open to life's new experiences, wavers. Unlike her father, she cannot stand aside and so works in the local soviet's education department under the

2 "Intelligentsia" here denotes people holding positions normally requiring higher, or at least secondary, education. On the intelligentsia's hostility to the October Revolution, see MANDEL, D. "A intelligentsia e a Revolução de Outubro". *RUS*, São Paulo, v. 8, n. 9, p. 1-32, jun. 17. See also BLOK, A. "Intelligentsia i revolyutsiya", *Znamya truda*, jan. 19, 1918. The poetess Zinaida Gippius observed that the intelligentsia was "solidly anti-Bolshevik at the time" (of the October Revolution). GIPPIUS, Z. *Zhivye litsa*. Leningrad: Iskusstvo, 1922, p. 38.

3 Female *intelligent*.

4«Commingled are they with that worthless choir of Angels who did not rebel, nor yet were true to God, but sided with themselves. The heavens, in order not to be less fair, expelled them; nor doth nether Hell receive them, because the bad would get some glory thence.» LANGDON, C. (trans.). *Dante's Divine Comedy: Inferno*, 1918, p. 5.

5 Local rural self-government

leadership of a Moscow academic, who like herself, follows his commitment to the popular classes.

It is largely through Katya's eyes, her adventures and misadventures, and especially her dialogues, that the novel invites - indeed forces - the reader to take a position in the political and moral complexity of the civil war.

This brief article could not possibly do justice to the richness of the novel as a portrait of Russian society in the civil war. Its goal is modest: a brief presentation of the political attitudes of some of the novel's main *intelligent* personages, with a particular focus on the conflict between the October Revolution's proclaimed humanistic goals and the regime's severe, often arbitrarily applied, methods. That, in fact, is a main underlying theme of the novel. The article concludes with a brief discussion of the novel's reception and of Veresaev's own position as regards the above conflict.

## Intelligentsia Attitudes

Ivan Ilych, Katya's father, is a zemstvo doctor who had been sentenced to Siberian exile under the autocracy for his outspoken opposition to the death penalty. He was arrested again by the Reds for similar declarations, but managed to escape while en route to sentencing and arrived at his modest cottage on the Crimean coast, where he selflessly treated the local peasants. The latter, for their part, did not hesitate to reduce what they paid for his services as soon as the Reds reconquered area, even as they raised price they charged him for their own produce.

In an exchange with his uncle, the doctor's nephew, Leonid, a Red-Army officer, observes that the leaders of the French revolution, so admired by the uncle, were not "baking almond cookies" – they too engaged in terror. If Ivan Ilych alone remained faithful to the revolution, why was he isolated, as the popular masses were with the Reds? The uncle's only response was that the Bolsheviks had spoiled the people and

that there were many ignorant boors in Russia. To this Mitya retorts: "So you sit arms folded and sigh over a ruined revolution. The 'boors' make revolutions. They shed the blood of others, but even more their own. And the noble *intelligenty*, the 'true' revolutionaries, only look on, indignant... Those who can't find what to do in such times are thrown onto the trash heap of history."[6]

Ivan Ilych's attitude is echoed in a letter of Menshevik leader F. Dan from 1923 in which he explained his party's refusal to support the soviet seizure of power, despite its popular support: had the party done so, it would have been forced to support the repressive measures adopted by the Bolsheviks in the civil war.[7] Lacking significant popular support, the Mensheviks largely sat out the conflict, depriving the regime of scarce left-leaning intelligentsia cadres whose education and skills might have made a difference. In the novel, Korsakov, chairman of the Feodosiya revolutionary committee, observes that committed (*ideinye*) *intelligenty* are "somehow more stable; their heads don't turn so easily... The average type in the masses, it seems to me, is less stable and more readily abuses power." But his wife, a doctor, disagrees, pointing to his complaints, in a time of hunger, about the food she puts on the table. Katya and Korsakov together recall the idealism of the revolutionaries who were exiled to Siberia under the Tsar. To this the doctor retorts: "So God willing, Kolchak [the white admiral] will win and send us back!"[8]

Academician Dmitrovskii is an example of a non-Bolshevik intellectual who remained loyal to his commitment to the popular classes. He organized the Feodosiya soviet's education department (as did Veresaev in real life), and under his direction Katya also took up work. Dmitrovskii's lectures on physics were very popular among the workers. When Ivan Ilych asked him why he was serving the Bolsheviks, the scientist

6 VERESAEV, V. *V tupike*. Sestry: romany, Moscow: Veche, 2016, p. 421.

7 DAN, F. K istorii poslednykh dnei Vremennogo pravitel'stva. *Letopis' Russkoi revolyutsii*. Berlin, v. 1, 1923. Disponível em: https://www.litres.ru/static/trials/00/17/59/00175948.a4.pdf.

8VERESAEV, 2016, p. 155-56.

answered that the masses were with them, while the Whites' banner was covered with filth and offered the people nothing: "There are only two forces, and honest people have to look the truth in the face, as hard as it is."[9] At the novel's end, when the Whites return, Dmitrovskii is denounced by a well-to-do cottager and arrested for a revolutionary declaration made at a Mayday celebration that the editor of the local Bolshevik paper had falsely attributed to him.

Early in the novel, just before the Reds' return to Crimea, Katya's beau, Mitya, a White officer and scholar of ancient Greek literature, makes an appearance. He says that the lower-rank officers talk of the constituent assembly, but the higher-ups dream only of the autocracy's restoration. He complains bitterly about the masses' bolshevism, their boorishness and the desecration of art that they cannot appreciate. Mitya does not really know what he is fighting for, except to be able to return to his beloved Greek classics. Katya accompanies him to deliver the effects of a fallen comrade to his parents, son of wealthy businessman. There they find a gathering, replete with frivolous music and rare delicacies, in which war-weary Mitya willingly participates. But Katya is repulsed at such luxury and frivolity in the midst of war and soon leaves. As Mitya departs to rejoin his regiment, Katya wonders how she could ever have loved him...

Vera, Katya's sister, a staunch Bolshevik, is Mitya's antithesis. She arrives in threadbare clothes from Petersburg, where she had been organizing women's committees. She is received very coldly by her father, who reminds her how under the Tsar she had publicly refused to shake the hand of a doctor who had presided over an execution. Katya tells Vera about her encounter with the corrupt head of the housing authority who had her thrown into jail under appalling conditions, after she, outraged at his arbitrary decision, had exclaimed: "When will this kingdom of boors (*khamskoe tsarstvo*) ever come to an end?!" She is disappointed that Vera defends the regime by citing the difficult conditions.

9 Ibidem, p. 32.

When the Whites retake Crimea, Vera herself is arrested and spends her last night before the firing squad consoling her fellow condemned, among whom is Khanov, an earlier chairman of the revolutionary committee. She surprises him when she says that she knows the source of his deep sadness: not the death that he is facing, "but the blood and the dirt in which you bathed... That is the horror, that there is no other way... But one has to remember in the name of what one is going. And you do remember - otherwise it would not torture you so."[10]

As the condemned gather round, Vera tells them that they are about to die for a good cause that will continue after their death. A sailor asks her if socialism will arrive soon, and she tells of the revolutions in Germany and Hungary. But Kapralov, a carpenter, retorts that nothing will come of it – the people don't like to work, except for themselves; and so, the bourgeoisie will crush them. When Vera asks for what act Kapralov was condemned, they tell her that he was denounced for confiscating books from well-to-do cottagers to stock a new public library. They talked together well into the night and then slept soundly. The next day, as they calmly faced the firing squad, the white officer was struck by Vera's radiant face. Khanov died singing the International.

Earlier in the novel, Katya is on the road with Leonid and a Jewish Bolshevik in a horse-drawn cart, when they are stopped by an armed mounted follower of anarchist leader Nestor Makhno. His movement, essentially peasants who had taken up arms and were for a certain time allied with the Reds, had recently appeared in the area and was busy plundering and generally terrorizing the local peasantry. Leonid tells Katya that, four or five years ago, these were docile peasants plodding behind their ploughs. Were it not for the Bolsheviks, all of Russia would be awash with such gangs, as in Russia's medieval "time of troubles". Pointing his revolver at them, the makhnovite demanded to see Leonid's papers. But he refuses to recognize them and asks Leonid who they are, meaning their nationality, wanting to know if they were Jews. Katya

10 Ibidem, p. 200.

whispered to Leonid: "Don't you have a gun?" But he had forgotten it. In the ensuing scuffle, during which the Jew was killed, Katya seizes the mahnovite's revolver and passes it to Leonid, telling him to shoot, since she does not know how.

The two then escape into the nearby hills, where Katya again raises the issue of arbitrary power and violence. Even under the autocracy, she says, there was not such cynical desecration of life. "You have arranged things so that only boors and careerists can come to you, people for whom power is wine." Leonid responds: "As you see it, life before was correct, clean and bright, and only the bastards prevented it from developing. My dear, it was an explosion of vast underground forces that threw up all the accumulated dirt and stench - but it is also a purifying fire. Could any human forces have held it back?"

"But you encouraged it!" she retorts. Leonid agrees: "Of course. We need it to overturn the old world." He tells her that she speaks like an institute girl in white gloves who wants a revolution made by selfless, disciplined worker battalions, burning with love for a future world and bearing a detailed plan for its organization. But there is a difference between the preparatory stage of revolution, with its self-sacrifice, high ideals and pure, young passion. "We were hundreds of thousands then; now they are millions, wild, uncultured, angry, marching not for humanity, but for themselves. The old psychology of the revolutionary *intelligent* is not only not needed, it is harmful." In those times, he continued, she had worked for the revolution because the workers were suffering. Now the bourgeoisie and the intelligentsia are suffering, and she is indignant: they are not to blame for having been born into their class. "We fight together with the workers not because they are some sort of better people, but because their class egoism moves them to destroy all classes and to make a better world. Do you remember the October [1917] days in Moscow, when we soft-hearted intellectuals were embarrassed at every additional shell fired, lest one damage the church of Basil the Blessed? The soldiers couldn't understand us – and they we right. We had to re-educate ourselves."

"All over Europe and Asia," he continued, the people are awakening, "the earth is trembling, the rot is being destroyed", and his tragedy is not having enough steel within him. There are times when he feels that he lacks the strength to continue. "Excesses – yes, we would love to root them out. It's clear that the heads of chekists [political police], in their terrible work, can easily be turned from power and blood. Many take morphine and end up themselves before the executioner. But to walk with eyes closed amidst the conspiracies and the assaults on the revolutionary authorities... Well, we are not such fools."

Katya thanks him for speaking for once from the heart and not as a Bolshevik official. But she remains unconvinced and recalls the words of a French officer who presided over the execution of the Parisian communards: "One has to have strong political convictions to endure in our souls what we are doing."[11]

Later, at a small gathering on Korsakov's birthday, Katya finds herself seated beside an unfamiliar grey-haired man in gold-rimmed glasses, a certain Korobko, in whom Veresaev clearly portrays Felix Dzerzhinskii, head of the Cheka, the Soviet political police. He laughs with the others at Korsakov's anti-Soviet anecdote about a Russian, driven half-mad by the myriad bureaucratic authorizations required for his trip to Berlin, where, arriving late at night, he tries to bribe a hotel doorman to let him sleep under the stairwell, since, as he explains, the housing authority would surely be closed at so late an hour.

Katya grants that one might understand, if not accept, such insanity, but not that innocent people are arrested and destroyed on the sole basis of a suspicion, sometimes not even that. Korobko admits that that happens. But he argues that it is sometimes better to destroy ten innocent people than to let one guilty person escape. "The main thing is the atmosphere of horror, the threat of being held responsible for any distant link. That is terror.... Only people with deep ideological convictions cannot fear that, and there are few such people among our enemies, who are powerless without masses. And in such conditions, the petty-bourgeois masses won't even dare to

11 Ibidem, p. 129-34.

budge, fearing to attract unfounded suspicion... That's the only way in conditions in which the revolution fights for its existence. It requires a special character not to get drunk on the blood, the power, the lack of oversight. Unfortunately, the majority usually end up that way: they either go mad or are sooner or later shot."[12] Korobko later orders the arrest and execution of the corrupt leading personnel of the housing commission.

As the novel closes and the Whites are returning to Crimea, the well-to-do cottagers emerge in their finery and much of the wealth that they had managed to hide from the Reds. Belozerov, a Moscow opera soloist who had always dressed modestly under the Reds when he performed for workers and peasants, reappears in a tuxedo for a gala performance in honour of the White Army. When the members of his opera troop react in shock, saying: "We are not Bolsheviks, but how can you?!" Belozerov threatens to denounce them to the White command. As the Red Army retreats, a white officer embedded undercover in the Red Army circulates a forged order to the retreating troops that leads them into a wholesale slaughter.[13]

But before leaving, Leonid had managed to save his uncle from execution with the other prisoners that the Reds had been holding. And as the novel closes, Katya is sitting on her cottage porch beside her father, who is sick with curvy and dying. He tells her that the revolution has turned to dirt and that, whoever wins, the reaction will be worse than last time (after the 1905 revolution). When Katya says how tired she is, Ivan Ilych proposes that they kill themselves. But Katya is appalled: "Yes, I want to die, but in battle! Let them saw me in half, rip off my skin, only let there be no flight!"

Ivan Ilych dies soon after. Katya sells the cottage's furniture and the few other remaining effects and, one morning, without saying goodbye to anyone, "she left the settlement to unknown destination (*neizvestno kuda*)."[14]

12 Ibidem, p. 168-172

13 Ibidem, p. 187-90

14 Ibidem, p. 204.

## The Novel's Reception

As the civil war ended in 1921, Veresaev returned to Moscow, where he finished his novel, after spending almost three years in Crimea. The novel began to appear in 1922 in partial form in literary reviews - no one wanted to publish it as a complete volume, in view of its complex and controversial character. Publisher N.S. Angarskii suggested to Veresaev that he read the text to the political leadership. And when Veresaev mentioned this to politburo member Lev Kamenev, the latter invited him to a New Year's dinner at his Kremlin apartment that was attended by most of the Soviet leadership, except for Lenin, Trotsky and Lunacharskii, and also by various *intelligenty*. In a memoir from 1938 that remained unpublished until 1990, Veresaev described what took place.

Since the novel is composed of more-or-less discrete scenes, somewhat in a style of "black and white" (a Communist activist told Veresaev that he should be locked in a cellar for some of the scenes and invited to join the party for others), he decided to begin reading with more "negative" scenes and then move on to "positive" ones, as sort of compensation.

But after an hour - much less than Veresaev had counted upon - Kamenev asked him to stop, since the invited artists had yet to perform. Although Veresaev still managed to read a few "bright scenes", the "dark" predominated. Kamenev and the *intelligenty* were critical, saying that he had failed to understand the revolution. Stalin, on the other hand, was quite positive, although he did observe that "It would be inconvenient, of course, for a state publishing house to print it; but it should be published."

Dzerzhinskii, on his part, warmly defended the novel warmly as a truthful and precise portrait of those *intelligenty* who joined the Communists and also those who opposed them. As for any accusation of slander against the Cheka, "between us, we know of other things that happened..." [15]

15 This excerpt from the memoir is from V. Nol'de et E. Zaïonchkovskii in their postface to VERESAEV, V. *V tupike*. Sestry. Moscow: Knzihnaya, 1990, pp. 377-380.

The dinner played a decisive role in the novel's publication, since Glavlit, the state censor, considered the novel counter-revolutionary and repeatedly held it up while awaiting authorization from on high. It was first published in book form in 1923 and reprinted eight more times, though the last edition of 1931 edition was quite severely cut. After that, the novel was removed from libraries and bookstores.

The novel was variously received, and sometimes with high praise. But even most of the more negative critics did not feel that Veresaev bore the regime ill-will. Somewhat typical of the latter was the critic V.P. Polonskii, who concluded in a 1924 article that the novel was a "negative, incomplete, and therefore inaccurate depiction of the revolution... The novel is not only dedicated to the intelligentsia, it is also written by an *intelligent*." Veresaev, he wrote, was one of Dante's angels who could not decide and who wavers between accepting the revolution and condemning it, "and so he could not accept the main things that it brought and in the name of which blood was shed. This 'in the name of' was hidden from his attention."[16]

## Conclusion: Revolutionary Optimism

Polonskii's criticism is mistaken. Veresaev was deeply committed to socialism, which he viewed as a society where people would be as brothers and sisters to each other. But equally strong was his other commitment - to truth, which he considered inseparable from the socialist goal. That was why Veresaev stopped writing fiction at the end of the 1920s, when the bureaucratic dictatorship conclusively established itself under Stalin's leadership.

An important dimension of Veresaev's commitment to truth was his concern for "totality", the truth being in the whole. In the novel he tries, successfully in our view, to present the social and political circumstances surrounding its main events and characters, as these are crucial to a valid appreciation.

16 "Intelligentsia i revolyutsiya v romane V. V. Veresaev" reprinted in POLONSKII, V. O sovremennoi literature, M.-L., *Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo*, 1928, p. 103.

The novel offers a vivid portrayal of the Reds' desperate efforts to govern in conditions of civil war, a disintegrating economy and decomposing social fabric, composed largely of an individualistic peasantry, and a hostile bourgeoisie and intelligentsia - all this on the background of a long and destructive world war, followed by foreign intervention on the part of the main capitalist states.

Veresaev's commitment to truth was intimately related to his world view, which can best be termed "revolutionary optimism". In that view, partial, tactical decisions must always be adopted and assessed in light of the ultimate, strategic goal - socialism. That goal must never be lost from view, even when circumstances compel deviation from it. Such a strategic outlook implies a constant concern with building and rebuilding a correlation of forces that favors the ultimate, socialist goal.

Veresaev believed that the mission of literature is to develop such a fundamentally optimistic outlook among the youth - a love for the beautiful but also the courage to overcome adversity. Hence Katya's almost violent reaction to her father's suggestion as the novel closes that they kill themselves: "The thought occurred to me. No, not for anything! To give up, to run away! To crouch down into some corner and to die there, like a poisoned rat!... Not for anything!... No! I want to die, but in struggle! Let them saw me in half, let them rip off my skin, only let there be no running away!"[17]

The novel ends with the following words: "Katya buried her father, sold the furniture and the extra things, and one morning, without saying goodbye to anyone, she left the settlement for a destination unknown."

The message is clear: the future is ours to make and our end goal must permanently inform our current action, even when harsh reality forces us to deviate from it.

17 VERESAEV, 2016, p. 204.

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