

Satire, Svejk, and Hasek



The Red Commissar
by Jaroslav Hasek
translated by Cecil Parrott, 1981
Lester and Orpen Denys, 281
pages
\$13.95

Review by Geoff Martin

Jaroslav Hasek is a cult figure and literary legend among twentieth century European writers. Like Franz Kafka, he was born in the ancient city of Prague in 1883, but there the similarity ends. Hasek was a Czech "man-in-the-street"; an anarchist, satirist and frequenter of the city's many public houses.

Hasek is best known internationally for his brilliant anti-war book *The Good Soldier Svejk* (pronounced *Shvake*), which he was in the process of writing before his untimely death in 1923. *Svejk* is certainly great by any standards, due to Hasek's masterful satire and parody, but the collected stories in *The Red Commissar* show us a more versatile writer.

The book opens with "The Bugulma Stories" which present a previously unknown Hasek to the reader. In 1918, Hasek (who was fluent in Russian) was sent by the Soviet government to the town of Bugulma in Siberia to act as Commandant in the area. "The Bugulma Stories" consist of Hasek's usually fond recollections of this time.

His sharp satire was reserved for Comrade Yerokhimov and the Soviet Army Tribunal, but even here it is muted. One critic says this was normal for Hasek; his satire allegedly got worse the longer he had to work under any authority.

A collection of "Other stories" occupies another section and it contains some very good ones, featuring Hasek's absolutely devastating wit. In "The Criminals' Strike," the criminals of Prague call a general strike among themselves to protest the lack of equality before the law, causing problems for the judiciary, lawyers and police, who can no longer justify their existence.

All possible attempts are made to encourage crime, including subsidies and rewards for criminals, and police harassment. Within this context Hasek is able to make his satire work; with the judiciary, police, clerics and high society as the targets.

"Finally, a certain Deputy Public Prosecutor hit on an idea which in his view was bound to help in this exigency. He asked

the Archbishop's Office for a list of all monseigneurs and began to institute strict searches of all their houses...He then sat back and waited for the result. It was quite staggering: even the monseigneurs had given up stealing!"

Later, he writes: "And the police headquarters of the city of which we are writing here know from experience that it was a dead certainty that even at only slightly disturbed times there would have been at least a hundred such cases. But all expectations were disappointed and the [Chief of Police] began to have an unpleasant suspicion that his own staff belonged to the criminals' organization."

The strike is finally broken when a riot is started by the barristers and judges, sending a lot of people to the jails. It is a classical Hasek ending, and a little reminiscent of Guy du Maupassant.

Besides five previously untranslated *Good Soldier Svejk* stories, probably the best portion of the book deals with Hasek's joke-political party, "The Party of Moderate Progress Within the Bounds of the Law."

The party was headquartered at the dining room of Zverina's Restaurant, where by all reports there was more drinking and gambling than legitimate political discussion.

Frantisek Langer, one of Hasek's friends, writes that "Hasek's electoral speeches were the most voluminous and most humorous works of his that I had known before the publication of *Svejk*... He caricatured the hackneyed style...[of the political

profession of party canvassers, speakers, journalists and self-styled representatives...He had at his fingertips the complete jargon and slang of posters, the banalities of leaflets and leading articles...In addition he thought up false quotations and sayings, which he attributed to various authorities."

Several of Hasek's satirical speeches during the 1911 elections are presented: "No sooner had I been accorded the honour of adoption as candidate for the Party...than I became at once victim of a slander campaign...for the opposing side has said of me that I have already been gaoled [jailed] twice. My honourable constituents, I declare before you that this is a vile invention and a dirty lie. It is quite untrue that I have been gaoled twice. I have been gaoled three times! And only as a result of prosecution by the police and each time, of course when I was totally innocent, like last year for instance, during the autumn demonstrations, when..."

The Red Commissar is a funny book and one which must be read to understand this master of Eastern European fiction and satire.



Hopping Penguins

by Giles Osborne

Another chapter in the history of Halifax's underground was written last Thursday night as The Hopping Penguins took to the stage at The Garden for what was rumoured to be their last performance. The Penguins are what could be coined a "regressive" pop band—they have regressed from playing bright, fresh ska tunes to rhythm and blues epics laden with long solos, personnel introductions and other distractions in the entertainment process.

The entire first set was a series of missed breaks, missed verses

and overrun endings. Long interruptions between songs predominated, and it wasn't until the second set that the Penguins seemed to realize that they were engaged not in a basement jam, but in a public performance. Toward the end of the gig, chaos returned with the introduction of guest drummer John Alphonse, whose knowledge of the material seemed limited.

However, despite the noticeable lack of professionalism, a good time seemed to be had by all. The crowd was, predictably, 75% non-university, and highly active for its size.

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