



Cement

Fedor Vasil'evich Gladkov , A.S. Arthur (Translator) , C. Ashleigh (Translator)

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A classic of socialist realism. *Cement* was the first novel to delineate the life of the people in relation to the economic policies of the Soviet state. Gleb, a heroic soldier, comes home from the revolution's wars to a world in transition as demonstrated by the reorganization of the local cement factory for the massive national effort. His wife, Dasha, is now a leader of the Women's Section of the Communist Party, an activist in a society where women are suddenly men's equals. Gleb finds that he cannot easily pick up the threads of their old relationship or adjust to this new social order.

Cement is the vivid story of life in the early 1920s in the infant Soviet Union. As such, it became the model for Soviet fiction in the coming decades.

Cement Details

Date : Published November 23rd 1994 by Northwestern University Press (first published 1925)

ISBN : 9780810111608

Author : Fedor Vasil'evich Gladkov , A.S. Arthur (Translator) , C. Ashleigh (Translator)

Format : Paperback 311 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, Russia, Literature, Russian Literature, Novels, 20th Century, Classics, Academic, Read For School

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From Reader Review Cement for online ebook

Tommy says

In general I am a huge fan of Russian Literature but this book just really didn't do it for me. I can't say if it was the translation (it's the only one that I could find) or just the writing but I had a very hard time getting into this book.

I felt that many of the characters weren't developed or motivated that well. There were a lot of good concepts and ideas and I think it was an interesting picture of Soviet Realism but there is still a minimum bar of writing that this book just didn't meet for me.

I was very disappointed and underwhelmed with this book.

Beverly Congdon says

Much quicker read than I had expected.

So far I have found this book to be really interesting, but probably only because how utterly Marxist it is. A Red Soldier returns home from the war victorious, eager to return to his wife, 'comrades,' and factory, only to find out that the Revolution is in shambles, and that the country is in famine despite food rations. When he left three years earlier, Revolution was in the air. Now his wife's heart has hardened, his "comrades" no longer recognize him, and the factory is deserted, stripped bare by the starving citizens. Nearly everyone has abandoned the Revolution, and icons of the revolution collect dust, neglected. Only a few have remained loyal to the Revolutionary ideals. These few serve as examples of the ideal socialist citizen, but there are too few of them and a socialist state requires the masses to operate the machine of the socialist cause. They are perhaps the only citizens who haven't gone mad from starvation. But as they desperately try to fuel their beloved socialist state, society plunges further into chaos, corruption and despair.

I would say it is a typical pro-Revolutionary Novel, and reminded me somewhat of *The Gods Will Have Blood* (novel on the French Revolution). Everyone believes in the Revolution in word but not in deed so it seems, and the few in power fall short of or outright oppose the revolutionary ideals. It's one of those time period piece novels you're assigned to read in a History of Soviet Russia course (the reason why I am reading it).

Alina Stefanescu says

Reviewed here.

Joel says

Did you know that the communists invented an entirely new genre for literature? When people talk about

‘Socialist Realism’ they most often think of the paintings of Diego Rivera like “Man at the Crossroads”, the heroic laborer seizing fearlessly the levers of industrial machines – the noble farmer toiling the fields. Tractors of the world unite!!! Scenes of Stalin receiving flowers from a group of ruddy little children from the Ural mountains. Pristine soviet villages sharing milk and honey.

But the soviets also used the written word – socialist realism in novels. Adopted officially in 1934 by the party and ratified by Stalin, this new genre “...demanded that all art must depict some aspect of man’s struggle toward socialist progress for a better life. It stressed the need for the creative artist to serve the proletariat by being realistic, optimistic and heroic.”

“Cement” by Fyodor Vasilievich Gladkov was one of the first and perhaps the blueprint for the genre. The story depicts the struggle of a village post-revolution to restart the cement factory in their midst, which has gone silent after the original managers were killed. In true socialist realism style, it ends on a high note; with a hero and a victory. But nevertheless I was surprised by the story, because it was not a story of nobility and loss and dignity against the odds. It was instead a tale of intrigue, petty infighting of the new communist overlords, exclusion, suffering and sadness. This book was tremendously sad. I suppose the point was to instill the need for sacrifice, to remind people that it would not be easy. To find that delicate balance between an ideology which can never be made to function as a model of government and the hopes that with only a little more work something will go right – though it never does.

One thing did surprise me, “Cement” was extremely well written. I who have read much Russian prose (as I’m sure you have) have accepted the fact that reading Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Solzhenitsyn, Chernyshevsky is a slog. A dreadful march through pages and pages of dialogue that seem to go nowhere, long-winded descriptions of incidents and places that are tangential to the stories. But not Cement, which was in fact a relatively easy read and in some places exhibited real rhetorical flourish.

“Without understanding why, Gleb felt wings unfolding in his soul. All this, the mountains, the sea, the factory, the town and the boundless distances beyond the horizon – the whole of Russia, we ourselves. All this immensity – the mountains, the factory, the distances – all were singing in their depths the song of our mighty labour. Do not our hands tremble at the thought of our back-breaking task, a task for giants? Will not our hearts burst with the tide of our blood? This is Workers’ Russia; this is us; the new world of which mankind has dreamed throughout the centuries. This is the beginning: the first indrawn breath before the first blow. It is. It will be. The thunder roars.”

It is so sad to see such talent put to the service of such a tremendous evil as was communism. I wonder what an amazing world Gladkov could have helped build, if he’d only been free.

Eren Bu?lal?lar says

Güzel bir sosyalist gerçekçi roman. Sovyet Devrimi'nin ilk y?llar?nda, bir kasabadaki çimento fabrikas?n? yeniden çal??r hale getirmek için verilen mücadeleleri anlat?yor. Hem kasabadaki parti organ? içinde, hem de halkla ya?anan çeli?kileri Dasha ve Gleb isimli iki karakter arac?l???yla gösteriyor.

Kad?n-erkek ili?kileri, yeni bir kad?n?n yarat?lmas? için verilen mücadele ve bunun olumlu olumsuz sonuçlar? Sovyet romanlar?nda al??k olmad???m?z kadar aç?k bir ?ekilde anlat?lm??. Ayd?n psikolojisinin devrimci mücadeleyle dü?tü?ü anla?mazl???n, ayd?n?n kendini a?ma çabas?n?n ele al?n?? biçimini ilginçti. Kitab?n üçte ikililik bölümünden sonra kurgu biraz tavş?yor, çeli?kiler karma??k bir hal ald?kça onlar? ana

çeli?kiye ba?layan kollar gev?iyor. Bu nedenle ba?lardaki heyecan ve zindelik sonlara do?ru azal?yor.

Harvey Smith says

One of the best books in Proletariat literature.

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Jack Allen says

Struggled to get going at the start, but later on became much more interesting!

Read for SLA221.

Greta says

I was supposed to have read this 30 years ago for a history class at university but never did. The little bit that I managed to get through I thought was *yawn* boring.

This time around, however, I found it rather interesting. If you read it not as a work of historical fiction, but as a work of fiction written in the past about mostly current events, it takes on a different character. That we get to read it in English also gives it a different character, I'm sure, than one would find in its original language.

At the end of this story, all I can say is that you can't really judge a book by its cover, or the translation, or necessarily from where you stand on the planet in your own headspace and time. This book and the story it tells takes you somewhere else entirely.

Theodora says

At least there's a bit of sex.

Andrew Galbraith says

I may have contributed to the collapse of my book club by suggesting "Cement."

I became aware of the novel in university thanks to a professor of Russian history who proclaimed it "the only readable work of socialist realist fiction" (I didn't read it until years later). To the extent that it's an *interesting* book from a historical and political perspective, that may be true. But I wouldn't call it a *good* book.

It's possible that the prose in the original Russian is less turgid, as I've heard that the only available English translation is poor. But it reads much as you'd expect a socialist realist work about the reopening of a cement factory to read.

As a student of Russian history, I'm glad I finally read it, and I would be interested in reading the book again if a new translation were ever offered. It's also worth noting that one member of my book club loved it and was inspired to seek out similar works (the rest sentenced me to a self-criticism session). But unless you have a specific interest in Soviet history and art, I find it very hard to recommend.

Polomoche says

Most Westerners familiar with Russian Lit immediately cast this book into the 'not worthy of real literature/soviet propaganda' dustbin (I suspect because their prof told them to and, I would imagine, without even reading it). In comments below, for instance: "This book is only of academic interest... written as

stalinist agitprop... bereft of any characteristics that would qualify the tome as literature."

A shame, because 'Cement' is a fascinating insight into the (granted, naive) spirit of post-revolutionary Soviet Russia. Historically it is a little like John Reed's 'Ten Days...': it captures very vividly a moment in time that is vital to understand if one wishes any insight on modern Russian History.

In terms of literature, while not on par with Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Turgenev, what writer is??? If we were to use the 'great Russian writer or bust' criteria for evaluation we'd eliminate the vast majority of novels ever penned. Gorky isn't there either (though better than Gladkov), but he's very good. Gladkov has his moments. His style is sparse, pithy, certainly prescient in terms of what was to come. Aesthetically something is afoot, mirroring the revolutionary changes taking place in the arts during this period - graphic art, Shostokovich, etc...

In short, a must read for anyone interested in the spectrum of Russian Lit. Give it a chance before you chalk it up to Soviet propaganda.

UPDATE: Having just read Lermontov's 'A Hero of Our Time' (highly recommend), I must say there is a terrible double standard in Russian literature. We forgive Lermontov's shaky prose just as we forgive Gogol for burning a good portion of 'Dead Souls' in his fireplace - all because of the moral, social, and historical merit that make both novels extraordinary.

'Cement' is just as extraordinary in this sense, yet for whatever reason is not forgiven for fairly mild literary shortcomings.

And yet we do know the reason. Criticism of 'Cement's' mild literary shortcomings is merely a ruse for a general attack on the Soviet propaganda machine. And for good reason: we justifiably abhor the extent to which the Soviets oppressed people generally and the arts specifically.

But to make "Cement" a scapegoat for Soviet censorship, oppression, etc., is a serious mistake. This is a novel that captures very beautifully not only an important moment in history but also the nascent emergence of many modern issues and practices transcending early Soviet life. The emergence of day care, for instance. Or the rights of women. The novel in fact is centered very much on the difficult adjustment Gleb and Dasha must make in reuniting; their newly-defined relationship certainly resonates with contemporary issues. Franz Boas would have a field day.

It is time to dissociate the crude connection between Gladkov and what is now a very impotent/obsolete political discourse, and rediscover the worthy place 'Cement' occupies in Russian literature.

Ned Hanlon says

Cement is a very beautifully written book. It is also deeply, massively, disconcerting. I have recently learned the term "gas lighting"; it seems to show up mostly on the internet and describes a method of making a person distrust their own reality by offering and insisting upon a new one. Cement provides a terrifying example. The world you know is not the world of the characters in the book. But that's not by some conscious choice on their part; the rules of the world just work differently.

When a war hero arrives home we have certain expectations. He is from the country and so he revels in the

pastoral bliss of his homeland: the trees, the rolling hills, the flowering dales. Gleb, the hero of Cement (or is he?), has no interest in these things; it is the factory, the turbines and the diesel engines that bring tears of joy to his eyes. And it's just wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong! It's a new reality that, as reader, I am forced to accept for the sake of the narrative. But if I accept it for the reading, it becomes harder to reject it in life.

Nearing the end of the novel I had a problem. I had no idea if the book was going to have a happy ending or a sad ending. Of course that did not matter as I would have no idea what a "happy" or "sad" ending would have entailed. (No-spoiler alert: I have literally no idea if that ending was "happy" or "sad") So in some respects the book failed to fully incorporate me into the reality.

The end result is deeply troubling and, more than anything I have ever read or watched, has taught me about the terror of the Cold War. More than the grueling personal narratives of the gulag, the dark comedy of movies, the ominous warnings of dystopian fiction or even the stories of my parents hiding under their school desks during air raid drills. Those deal with a war of people, but Cement? Cement launches a war of realities. And that is truly scary.

Dan says

even though it takes place in Russia during the revolution, it thoroughly depressed me that the situations described are still strangely familiar to Hungary 100 years later...

The Narrator says

reading this now; so far so good
