

**THE CONFESSION:
A NOVEL**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649554386

The Confession: A Novel by Maksim Gorky & Rose Strunsky

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
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MAKSIM GORKY & ROSE STRUNSKY

**THE CONFESSION:
A NOVEL**

THE CONFESSION

A NOVEL

BY

MAXIM GORKY

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN BY

ROSE STRUNSKY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY THE TRANSLATOR



NEW YORK
FREDERICK A. STOKES COMPANY
PUBLISHERS

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ROSE STRUNSKY

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INTRODUCTION

To me Gorky has never suffered from that change it has become so fashionable for young Russia to mourn. "Since he has begun to give us doctrines, he has lost all his art," they say and shake their heads. "We can get all the doctrines we want from the platform of the Social Democratic party or from the theorists of the Social Revolutionaries — why go to Gorky? Or if it is a philosophy of life that we seek, have we not always Tolstoi, who is greater, truer and has more consummate art? Why does he not write again a *Foma Gordyeeff*, or an *Orloff and His Wife*, or a *Konovaloff*!"

I re-read *Foma Gordyeeff*, *Orloff and His Wife*, *Konovaloff* and so on, and read also *Mother*, *The Spy*, *In Prison*, and the little fables with a purpose so sadly decried, and I see nothing there but the old Gorky writing as usual from the by-ways of life as he passes along on the road. The road has lengthened and widened in the twenty-five years of his wandering, that is all. Russia has changed and grown and passed through deep-stirring experiences from the year 1890, when Gorky first published his immortal story of *Makar Chudra*, to her present moment of titanic struggle in the World War — the beginning of the year 1916.

Russia's changes were Gorky's changes. He first flung his type of hero, the people from the lowest of

the low — water-rats, tramps, petty thieves — into a discouraged, disappointed and hopeless Russia. It was a Russia that had almost decided that there were no more people, that they were without courage, that the misery and degradation in which they lived was there because of their own inefficiency, their lack of idealism, their incapacity to grasp an idea and to strike and fight for it.

The Russia that thought this and the Russia that Gorky awakened from its torpor by introducing to it again the people it had almost learned to scorn, showing them with a capacity of understanding ideas, with deep emotions and great courage, was the Russia that had settled back in bitter disappointment after the sad failure of the Revolutionary movement of the eighties.

Like an eddying pool, the generations in Russia have risen to the surface, made their protest against the anachronism of autocracy and despotism, and then subsided back again into the still and inert waters of the nation. But each rising generation has made a wider and wider eddy, coming ever from a greater depth. Thus in 1825 it was merely a small group of military officers, who having learned from the Napoleonic campaigns that there were such things as constitutional law and order, that liberty and freedom were truths to fight for, broke out in revolt in Petrograd in December of that year only to be immediately crushed. Five of the leaders were hanged, and the rest, intellectuals and writers among them, were sent to Siberia.

The loss of the élite of Russia, despite the names of

Pushkin and Lermontoff which graced that period, made great inroads in the intellectual life of the country. But in the fifties and sixties the seeming quiet was broken into by a new restlessness. This time the student youth, the young sons and daughters of the landlords and the nobles, became inspired by a passion for learning, for new conceptions of education, for new liberties of the people, for the abolition of serfdom and for a Pan-Slavism that would be democratic. It was then that the women left their homes to seek higher education and to enter new fields of work. They had to break with family tyranny which was fostered by tradition and the State, their men comrades standing valiantly by, helping them to make escapes, going through the forms of mock marriage, and conducting them safely to that Mecca of learning for the Russian youth — the medical school of Geneva. It was in this way that Sonya Kovalevsky, who later became the famous mathematician in the University of Stockholm, made her escape into the world, and the untold other heroines of Russia who were soon to return educated, free, and fired with a zeal to spread their new-found freedom to the people.

The abolition of serfdom in '61 brought with it great discontent, for the peasants had been led to believe that they would be liberated together with the land, since Russian serfdom, unlike the Western, was based on the theory that the peasant was attached to the land and that the landlord's hold on it came through his ownership of the serf. Consequently it was argued, when the Russian serf was liberated and the ancient communal

village form maintained, that all the land the serfs had owned would go to them. Of course, that was very far from what really happened. It is true that the serfs were liberated and the ancient communal form kept, but the land allotted to the village was poor and meager, the plots were scattered, and the tax on them for repayment to the landlords was so great that it took over fifty years to pay.

The peasants foresaw exactly the future that awaited them; the dearth in land, none too much to begin with, and the consequential lessening at each redistribution as the village increased in "souls," the needed "renting" from the landlord at exorbitant rates, the inability to pay and the resultant "paying in his own labor," and the eventual reestablishment of a virtual serfdom. Insurrections took place all over the country, the peasants believing firmly that the Government had treated them more kindly but that the landlords were deceiving them. However, the Government came only too gladly to the aid of the landlords, having got used to blood-baths in its drastic quenching of the Polish insurrection of '63.

The general disappointment among the youth in the Government's attitude towards both Polish liberty and peasant rights led to a stronger and more revolutionary stand on their part. Unlike the reaction that set in during the long and tyrannical reign of Nicholas I, after the outburst of the Decembrists, or the reaction that was to follow those thirty years of effort when the notes of Gorky were to sound like a clarion call to a renewed faith, the decade of the seventies rose to one of extreme

and intense idealism. The generation which had gone out of Russia to gain for itself new liberties had now returned and was spread throughout the length and breadth of the vast land, making converts by the thousands where formerly there were but few. The "fathers" and "sons," though not understanding each other very fully, were nevertheless following a pretty equal tendency. Where the former had sought for new general liberties in politics and social life through education, the latter, feeling that a great deal had already been won, had decided upon propaganda of action. The movement changed from a freeing of one's self to a freeing of the people. "To the people" became the watchword of the hour. The youth of the better classes went to live among the peasants, taught them, organized them into secret revolutionary groups for "land and liberty," made several abortive attempts at peasant revolution, and finally, the Government growing more and more reactionary, ended in the wielding of a personal "terror" against the Government representatives, which culminated in the assassination of the Czar, Alexander II, in 1882.

The reprisals that set in, the wholesale exiling of the youth to Siberia, the internment for life in the fortresses of Peter and Paul and in Schlüsselberg for participation in the Party of the Will of the People, and the general opinion that however reactionary Alexander II was he was still much more ready for reforms than his successor Alexander III, gave rise to a fundamental disillusionment. The sacrifices of the youth had been too much. They had led themselves to be hanged and