SUMMARY

Settlement with totalitarianism? Russian literary criticism in the period of perestroika (selected disputes)

The object of research in this dissertation includes selected disputes in circles of literary critics in the period of perestroika. The main research problem is an attempt to answer the question about the degree and specificity of re-evaluation of specified aspect of the totalitarian past in critical literary discussions as well as the place and significance of the polemics and the entire literary criticism in the process of transformations of the period of perestroika. The main objective of this dissertation is to analyse the process of re-evaluation of the attitude to the Soviet totalitarianism in selected critical literary discussions between circles of “democrats” and “patriots” and to show the meaning of the phenomenon of a “civil war” in literature (based on presented polemics) in the process of transformation of the period of perestroika.

The analysis of problems in the dissertations makes the author advance a thesis, which also constitutes its fundamental research assumption: literary criticism in the period of perestroika fulfilled a significant function in the process of forming of a public debate and, at the same time, has a significant influence upon development of new ideas and interpretation of Stalinism, although re-evaluation of the totalitarian past during the debates did not become a permanent part of the collective memory of the Soviet/Russian society.

In this dissertation I discuss debates, which started in various stages of perestroika. This makes it possible to capture the development of a critical literary discourse and present it as a process, in which subsequent elements of the past are analysed and its participants gradually free themselves from restrictions imposed by weakening censorship. Another factor determining selection of disputes is connected with problems presented in this dissertation. Each of discussions selected relates to a different manifestation of the Soviet totalitarianism. These include:

- an individual’s struggle with Stalinism;
- deconstruction of the myth of Stalin and Stalinism;
- similarity of the two totalitarian systems – Nazism and Stalinism;
- searching for roots of the Soviet totalitarianism.

The dissertation includes five chapters. First of them includes a brief description of the fate of literary criticism in the post-Stalinist period (1956-1991). I have described...
development of circles of world views and their dependency on power. I have paid particular attention to the cultural context of the times, in which Gorbachev implemented his reforms – the phenomenon of "publication boom" and "recovered" literature. I have also presented a brief review of most important themes of polemics undertaken during the "civil war" in the literature and indicate characteristics of literary criticism of the period of perestroika.

The central part of this work includes the chapter two, three, four and five, in which I analyse critical literary debates relating to works published during perestroika. The objective of the chapter two entitled Towards human values is an attempt to describe a conflict between opposing world view circles in the initial period of the "civil war" in literature. Participants of the discussion about Daniil Granin’s Bison consider the attitude of the prominent Soviet scientist to idealogization of science and totalitarianism. They also develop a social image of the scientist, reinterpret of defend the memory of the past restored by the work of literature. In these opinions they also express their attitudes towards changes initiated during Gorbachev’s rule.

The chapter three describes deliberations of critics relating to the role of Stalin and Stalinism in the history of the USSR. The polemics were inspired by a literary image of the dictator as presented in Children of the Arbat, a novel by Anatolij Rybakov. Apart from an attempt to reformulate the myth about an autocrat, "democrats" and "patriots" also undertook the problem of totalitarianism as experience of generations. Their assessment of behaviours and choices made by "children of the Arbat", being the first generation raised in the communist state, often expressed world views of the polemists.

The aim of the chapter four is to analyse a debate concerning Wasilij Grossman’s Life and Fate. Theses found in the work led critics to consider similarities between Stalinism and Hitlerism. Participants of the dispute also discussed the issue of a conflict inside the USSR – a relation between the totalitarian state and "Soviet" nation. An important role in the discussion was taken by the issue of ethnic origin in the Stalinist state. The interest in the problem of nationality in polemics of "democrats" and "patriots" was strictly connected with growing significance of the problem in the social and political life.

The last chapter describes discussion in Grossman’s novel entitled Forever Flowing. The thought of influence of Russian mentality and Leninism upon Stalinism as included in the work became a reason for deliberations on sources of totalitarianism. Observing changes in the Soviet state, participants of the dispute designed possible variants of development of the USSR. The aim of this part of the dissertation is to present ideological opinions of both critical literary circles in the final stage of perestroika.