Ivan Olbracht

About Anna, the Red Proletarian

O Anně, rusé prolétařce

Presented by: Ivana Perica

Set against the backdrop of post-First World War Czechoslovakia, Ivan Olbracht's novel chronicles the political awakening of Anna, a young rural woman who moves from the small town of Pelhřimov to Prague. This can be read as leaning against a classical Marxist framework, according to which the subject of revolution is the urban proletariat; however, a deeper probing of the novel's semiosis shows that here even the backward countryside, including women, can emerge – under appropriate political leadership – as revolutionary subjects. It should therefore be read as endorsing the international communist argument of the 1920s, which advocated a broader revolutionary platform, recognising the revolutionary force of both women and peasants alongside urban male workers.

Capturing the complexities of Czechoslovakia's 'unfinished revolution' – in which the transition from Habsburg rule to a bourgeois republic left core economic and social inequalities intact – the novel offers vital insight into local left-wing dynamics during the new state's formative years, which resulted in the split of Czechoslovak Social Democracy (1920) and the founding of the Comintern section (1921). Although it has for decades been read as a socialist construction and agitation novel, contemporary readers may be chiefly interested in its documentary historical value, as well as in the gender constellations it depicts. From a gender perspective, and from the vantage point of the 21st century, it may even appear illustrative of the hierarchical gender constellations inherent in interwar class struggle, showing that proletarian emancipation was neither unconditional nor free of gender inequality. In this regard, the novel's gender regime possesses a historical depth that needs to be explicated for contemporary readers. Although it is sometimes claimed that it was not until late-1920s Stalinism – introduced into still young Czechoslovakia through the power structures of the Comintern – that heteronormative conservative ethos was reinforced (see Rühle-Gerstel 2007), this novel demonstrates that gender hierarchy was in fact constitutive of the broader interwar proletarian strata throughout the 1920s. Yet alongside this interesting documentary value, the novel advances a literary politics aligned with organised political struggle, one that defines freedom not as an individual escape from politics but as a collective demand for the emancipation of all – and this is perhaps its most compelling dimension, a distinctive marker of the political novel of that time.

The linear narrative follows Anna from Pelhřimov to Prague, where she works as a maid for the bourgeois architect and entrepreneur Rubeš, whom her friend and comrade Máňa calls "the greatest thief in all of Prague" (17). Exploitation is embodied by both Rubešand his wife, who frets over the decadent lifestyle of her dissolute children, including Miss Dadla. Warning Anna of urban dangers, Mrs Rubeš states: "Anna, you're an inexperienced country girl and you don't know what Prague is. On principle, I do not employ the Prague maids because they are all spoiled. There are great dangers waiting for you, of which I want to warn you on behalf of your mother." (1) Unaware of what being "spoiled" entails, Anna is initially drawn into Dadla's amorous adventures and pulp literature, failing to see how these fantasies clash with her own class interests.

Anna only begins to distance herself from Dadla and the Rubeš family after Máňa introduces her to the proletarian collective. When she becomes pregnant by Toník, a factory worker at Kolbenová Továrna (later ČKD), Anna rejects Máňa's advice to have an abortion, leaves her job and moves with Toník into a squat on Jeseniová Street in the working-class district of Žižkov, provided to them through the revolutionary housing organisation Černá ruka (Black Hand). In Žižkov, the traditional division between public and private spheres persists: while Toník attends party meetings, street protests and clandestine meetings with political refugees, Anna remains confined to housework and child-rearing, unable to understand his political work. Only at the novel's climax does she make a revolutionary leap, leaving her child unsupervised at home to join a workers' protest against the ČSDSD leadership, which had betrayed the class struggle in 1919 through its 'ministerialism' (abandoning the socialist-revolutionary cause and entering the governments of reactionary and fascist regimes). By jettisoning her provincial attachments, maternal instincts and counter-revolutionary attitudes, Anna finally resolves her inner conflict in favour of revolution.

Often compared to Fedor Gladkov's *Cement* (1925) – a foundational text of Soviet socialist realism – Anna resists simple ideological categorisation. At first glance, itsubordinates the women's question to a male-dominated class struggle, treating women not as an autonomous gender but as the "other half of the proletariat" (Studer 8). Yet a closer reading reveals nuanced emancipatory dynamics: it critiques bourgeois gender roles, exposes the debilitating, depoliticising nature of domestic labour and maps a potent spatial trajectory. The provinces (a peasant girl) are emancipated under the leadership of the urban periphery (the male proletariat). Anna's transformation from peasant maid to proletarian housewife and finally to street fighter mirrors her physical movement from rural Pelhřimov to bourgeois Wenceslas Square, and finally to revolutionary Žižkov – the second spatial shift that enables her politicisation.

When reading Anna and similar examples of interwar proletarian literature, one should refrain from emphasising features such as positive heroes and political instruction and instead read these novels in terms of the longue durée of socialist world views that permeated internationalist literary writing in the 1920s, of which Cement and Anna are telling examples. Both novels, each in its own way, attest to a revolutionary ethos wholly incompatible with the ethical turn of Stalin's Cultural Revolution, which is why they were subsequently revised, with their seemingly promiscuous sexual dimension in particular toned down to serve more conservative social purposes. At the same time, Anna's original ethos was characteristic of a way of life that is in many respects incompatible with the liberated lifestyle that emerged in some revolutionary circles after October 1917 (here, I primarily mean the ideal of the New Woman and of 'red love', most famously advocated by Alexandra Kollontai, which appealed to the middle and upper classes). Rather than classifying Olbracht's novel under the label of conservatism, this narrative actually voices the perhaps disheartening yet realist experience from below that was, on the one hand, too conventional for the idealised image of 'red love' and, on the other hand, still too controversial for the ethical regime imposed by the Comintern at the turn of the decade.

The questions that the novel raises:

How inclusive must a revolution be, and how can we relate to historical episodes of class struggle and revolution that appear incompatible with 21st-century intersectional expectations, which require progressive gender politics as a prerequisite for any just social progress? Is 'revolution' obliged to include those social strata that are less progressive than the seemingly enlightened revolutionary leadership; that is, how should revolution relate to these strata in order to include them, broaden its base, and thus strengthen its grassroots power? The interwar question of gender can today be

connected to grassroots work with conservative and even right-wing voters who might potentially be won over to support socially progressive political goals. What is the role of literary writing in agitational grassroots mobilisation?

Edition used:

Olbracht, Ivan (1925–1926 [1928]), *O Anně, rusé prolétařce*. In: Reflektor. Copy provided by the Scientific Information Centre of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Charles University. Available at Zenodo: rb.gy/s6xf21.

First published in the Journal Reflektor, Prague 1925–1926 The novel was revised and republished in book form as Anna proletářka (Anna, the Proletarian) in 1928, marking the republic's tenth anniversary. Ivan Olbracht: *Anna proletářka*. Prague: Fr. Borový, 1928.

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