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Biographical Sketch

Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin was born on November 16, 1895, in Orel (south of Moscow), the second of five children in a cultured family of liberal views. His father worked as manager of a bank. Bakhtin grew up in two cosmopolitan border towns of the Russian Empire, Vilnius and later Odessa, and then earned a degree in classics and philology at the University of Petrograd (1913-18). His education in the classics is evident in his choice of topics and examples in his work.

After graduation, to avoid the terrible privations in the capital during the Civil War, Bakhtin moved to the small town of Nevel in western Russia. There he worked as a schoolteacher and participated in lecture series and study circles devoted to the relationship between philosophy, religion, and politics. In 1920, Bakhtin resettled in Vitebsk (the hometown of Marc Chagall and a center for the artistic avant-garde), where his study circle, including among others Valentin Voloshinov and Pavel Medvedev, continued to meet. During the early 1920's, Bakhtin defined himself against the neo-Kantianism of his own mentors and worked on a massive treatise concerning the nature of moral responsibility and aesthetics. In 1924, with the country more stabilized economically and politically, Bakhtin and his wife—who quickly became indispensable to her impractical, often ailing, and yet remarkably productive husband—moved back to Leningrad.

Most of Bakhtin's associates in his circle were able to find official and stable employment during the 1920's, because of either their Marxism or their versatility; Bakhtin was not. This was due in part to his illness, a bone disease that left him frequently bedridden and resulted in the amputation of his right leg in 1938. In part it was due to Bakhtin's lack of political credentials under the new regime.

In 1929, Bakhtin was arrested. In the mass raids on intellectuals in the early Stalinist years, almost any political eccentricity could serve as pretext; the particular charge against Bakhtin concerned his alleged activity in the underground Russian Orthodox Church. It is not clear to what extent the young Bakhtin actually involved

himself in the various above- and underground Christian study groups during this time. He was sentenced to ten years on the Solovetsky Islands, a death camp in the Soviet Far North. Thanks to the intervention of influential friends and to his own precarious health, Bakhtin's sentence was commuted to six years internal exile in Kazakhstan. During the 1930's, while working as a bookkeeper on a collective farm and at other odd jobs in exile, Bakhtin wrote his most famous essays on the theory of the novel.

He also researched a major work on Rabelais, which he was to submit as his doctoral dissertation in 1941 to the Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow. The Rabelais project—with its irreverence, celebration of carnival and sexuality, and utopian, philosophical anarchism—became something of a scandal. A degree (although not the *doktorat*) was eventually granted to Bakhtin, but the book was not published until 1965.

In 1936, Bakhtin took up a professorship at the fledgling and remote Mordovia State Teachers College in the town of Saransk, east of Moscow. There he taught courses in Russian and world literature until the rumors (and soon the reality) of new political purges—always a danger to former exiles—prompted him to resign and retire to a still less visible town. At the end of the Second World War, he returned to work at the Teachers College. His relative obscurity and low profile in print during this time of mass repression most likely saved his life.

Bakhtin's final years are the story of rediscovery and rising fame. In the 1950's, on the other side of the Stalinist night, a group of Moscow graduate students who had read Bakhtin's 1929 Dostoevsky book learned, to their astonishment, that its author was still alive, teaching at what had by then been upgraded to the University of Saransk. "Pilgrimages" to Saransk, to a survivor from a past believed lost, took on the character of a temporal crossing. Bakhtin was persuaded to rework the Dostoevsky book for a second edition. Once this book was reapproved for print (1963), other long-delayed Bakhtin manuscripts were published. Bakhtin became a bellwether for a post-Stalinist rethinking of literary studies, his advice sought by both the structuralist semioticians of the Tartu School and the more conservative Marxist-Leninist humanists of the Soviet establishment.

By the time of his death on March 7, 1975, Bakhtin was already the object of a cult in the Soviet Union. The cult spread through Paris to the United States in the 1980's. This phase has somewhat receded in Russia and in the West, but to date Western scholars of

Bakhtin's thought have been more active than their Soviet counterparts in the difficult task of assessing the legacy. If hopes are realized, this situation will change, as it becomes more possible in the Soviet Union to analyze the writings of Bakhtin and his associates dispassionately. A Soviet Academy Edition of the works of the Bakhtin circle now is projected for the mid-1990's.