

NIKOLAI NEKRASOV

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Nekrasov, Nikolai Alekseevich (1821-1878) is one of Russia's most famous poets, though less known abroad. Painfully aware of the injustice of serfdom, Nekrasov (the "master poet of the peasant masses") was the first poet to make the "People" the focal point of his poetry—especially the downtrodden who became the symbol of national suffering and exploitation. In one of his masterpieces, the satiric folk epic, *Who Can Be Happy and Free in Russia?* (written between 1873 and 1877) seven peasants try endlessly to guess the answer. Nekrasov also served for thirty years as editor of *Sovremnik* (The Contemporary), a journal he bought in 1847. Turgenev, Herzen, Byelinsky, and Dostoevsky gladly sent their writings to him, and soon Nekrasov became a leading intellectual of his time. Censorship was at its height at the beginning of his career, intensified by the French Revolution of 1848 and later Crimean War (1854-6). Only after the death of Nicholas I, the accession of the liberal Alexander II, could Nekrasov write more freely. The decade from 1855 to 1865 was one of the bright periods in Russian literature. Serfdom was abolished (1861), the *Sovremnik's* readership was constantly increasing, and Nekrasov published some of his finest poems, including "The Peasant Children," "Orina, the Mother of a Soldier," "The Gossips," "The Peddlers," "The Railway," and many others. Some contemporaries criticized Nekrasov for his didacticism and

“prosiness.” The enthusiastic response of radical revolutionaries to his poems served to confirm their suspicion that he was primarily a propagandist. But Nekrasov – as he wrote to Tolstoy - believed the role of a writer was to be a “teacher “and a “representative for the humble and voiceless.”

Nekrasov’s empathy for the poor and oppressed also stemmed from his life experiences. Although the son of a noble family, it had lost its wealth and land. His father, an officer in the army, eloped with the daughter of a Polish aristocrat, inducing her to give up her wealth. The couple soon moved to Yaroslav Province on the Volga River, where the young Nekrasov would hear and see the convicts pass on their way to Siberia. Now a police chief, his father took Nekrasov with him on his duties, during which the boy heard his condescending speeches and witnessed the cruel, corporal punishments his father inflicted on the poor peasants. When Nekrasov was seventeen, his father sent him to St. Petersburg to join the military. When Nekrasov disobeyed him and try to enter the university instead, his father cut off all funding. It took the poet three years of near-starvation before he could make enough money from his writing to survive.

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