

# bedtime

In the latest instalment of **David Grove's** exploration of novels with a political message he looks at early 20th century Russian novel *Mother* by the revolutionary author Maxim Gorky.

People will be different in a socialist society. But must people change before we can win socialism, or must we have socialism before people will change? Many *Challenge* readers have probably discussed this question. The dialectical Marxist answer is that by committing themselves to the struggle for a better future, people begin to change themselves – and the world. No writer has conveyed this truth more eloquently than the Russian revolutionary Maxim Gorky (1868–1936) in his great novel *Mother*.

Gorky described people and society as they are, but at the same time discovered within them the essence of new men and women and the seeds of a different social order. This, I take it, is what is meant by socialist realism.

The book was published in 1907 and set in a period when the Bolshevik party was illegal and forced to operate underground. The novel's originality and strength are that the developing class struggle is seen entirely through the consciousness of the mother, as she morphs from an illiterate battered wife into an active communist.

Pelagea Nilovna is a widow living close to the factory where her only son Pavel works. She is puzzled when he takes to reading serious books that he hides carefully away. One evening several young men and women come covertly to the house for an animated discussion. The mother is

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shocked when Pavel tells her "We're socialists."

Slowly and painfully her fear for his future is overcome by admiration and respect for the dedication of Pavel and his comrades to a cause she still doesn't fully understand.

Pavel takes leaflets into the factory. He's arrested. The comrades realise that if the leaflets stop coming it will be clear that Pavel was responsible. So his mother volunteers to sell food at the factory gate, and finds a way of passing the leaflets to a trusted worker.

She struggles to teach herself to read. As her understanding grows, she is drawn into more activity: taking leaflets to the peasants; helping one of the comrades to hide after he's escaped from prison; smuggling copy to a sympathetic printer.

Pavel's great speech in court, condemning capitalism, is printed as a leaflet. The mother takes a load to the railway station, where she is accosted by a spy. The bag flies open; she hands out the leaflets and for

the first time in her life makes a public speech, before she is brutally arrested. Her transformation is complete.

The novel is driven by Gorky's anger and compassion. For instance, on domestic violence: *he used to beat me as if he was beating everybody he had a grudge against. On the future: We're forced to hate people so that the time will come when we can love them all...when each will be like a star to all the others. On the capitalist state: The director winks, the policeman nods...One of them holds the people by the horns while the other milks them dry.*

Some critics have said that Gorky's communists are too good to be true. I think he set out to show how communists should be – and can be. If there had not been many comrades like those in *Mother*, the Bolsheviks would never have led a successful revolution nor built so much of socialism in a backward land. The novel is still an inspiring read for any would-be revolutionary.

