About the Author:
Maxim Gorky (1868-1936)

The cultural and political activities of the Russian author Maxim Gorky (1868-1936) made him known in the Soviet Union as the greatest Russian literary figure of the 20th century.

Maxim Gorky, whose real name was Aleksei Maximovich Peshkov, was born on March 16, 1868, in the Volga River city of Nizhny Novgorod, which in 1932 was renamed Gorky in his honor. His father, a cabinetmaker, died when Gorky was 4 years old, and the boy was raised in harsh circumstances by his maternal grandparents, the proprietors of a dye works. From the age of 10 Gorky was virtually on his own, and he worked at a great variety of occupations, among them shopkeeper's errand boy, dishwasher on a Volga steamer, and apprentice to an icon maker. At a very tender age he saw a great deal of the brutal, seamy side of life and stored up impressions and details for the earthy and starkly realistic stories, novels, plays, and memoirs which he later wrote.

Almost completely self-educated, at the age of 16 Gorky tried without success to enter the University of Kazan. For the next 6 years he wandered widely about Russia, the Ukraine, and the Caucasus. In 1888 he worked in fisheries on the Caspian Sea. Gradually he developed revolutionary sympathies; he was arrested for antigovernment activities for the first time in 1889 and from then on was closely watched by the police. In 1891-1892 he spent a year in Tiflis, where he worked in railroad workshops, and where his first published short story, Makar Chudra, appeared in a newspaper in 1892.

From then on Gorky devoted himself mainly to literature, and in the next 5 years his stories appeared chiefly in newspapers along the Volga. His first collection of stories, published in 1898, made him famous throughout Russia, and his fame spread rapidly to the outside world. These early stories featured tramps, vagabonds, derelicts, and social outcasts. Gorky portrayed the bitterness of the oppressed and exploited people of Russia and demonstrated a proud defiance against organized, respectable society. He often found strong elements of humanity and individual dignity in even the most brutalized and demoralized of these "down-and-outers." His sympathy for the underdog made him known as a powerful spokesman for the illiterate masses—their sufferings and their dreams of a better life.

Foma Gordeyev (1899) established Gorky as a major novelist. It is the story of a well-intentioned but weak man who feels disgust, boredom, and guilt as the inheritor of a profitable family business. He rebels against his family and his class, but he is lacking in moral fiber, and in the end the forces of tradition defeat and destroy him. In this novel and all his later works, Gorky identified himself as being a bitter enemy of capitalism and depicted the society of prerevolutionary Russia as drab and dreary.

During this same period Gorky began writing plays and formed close connections with the Moscow Art Theater, which in 1902 produced his most famous play, The Lower Depths. It shows the misery and utter hopelessness of the lives of people at the bottom of Russian society and at the same time examines the illusions by means of which many of the unfortunate people of this earth sustain themselves.
Tall and rawboned, Gorky affected coarse dress and often crude manners at this stage of his life, but his personality was colorful and attractive. Even as a young man, he made many influential friends, including the two most famous writers of the day, Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov. His memoirs of these two men, written many years later, are among his finest works.

Gorky became increasingly active in the revolutionary movement. He was arrested briefly in 1898, and in 1901 he was exiled to the provinces for having helped organize an underground press. When he was elected to the Russian Academy of Sciences in 1902, the Czar vetoed the appointment because of the author's subversive activities. During the 1905 Revolution, Gorky was again imprisoned for writing proclamations calling for the overthrow of the Czar's government.

In 1906 Gorky left Russia illegally and went to America to raise funds for his fellow revolutionists and spent most of the year there, where he wrote the novel *Mother*. This is a propaganda novel which tells of how a simple working-class woman, inspired by the example of her son, who is a militant revolutionary, becomes an activist in the class struggle. *Mother* was regarded in the Soviet Union as a classic of "socialist realism."

From 1906 to 1913 Gorky lived in Italy on the island of Capri, where his home became a center of literary and political activity among Russians abroad. In 1913 he received an amnesty from the Czar's government and returned to Russia. In the next 3 years he completed the first two volumes of his autobiography, *Childhood* (1913) and *My Apprenticeship* (1915). The third volume, *My Universities*, was published in 1922. Gorky's autobiography is his finest work, describing dramatically and colorfully the people he knew and the adventures he had from boyhood to young manhood. It paints a fascinating picture of the Russia of his times. In many respects Gorky's nonfictional works are superior to his fiction.

In the years immediately following the October Revolution of 1917, Gorky worked tirelessly to help preserve the Russian cultural heritage. He organized homes for writers and artists, founded publishing houses and theaters, and used his influence with the new Soviet regime to encourage the development of the arts. He spent most of the period from 1921 to 1933, however, in Germany and Italy, partly for treatment of a lung ailment and partly because of disagreement with policies of the Soviet government. During this period he wrote the large novels *The Artamonov Business* (1925) and *The Life of Klim Samgin* (an epic novel translated into English as four separate novels—*The Bystander*, *The Magnet*, *Other Fires*, and *The Specter*), all of them severely critical of life in prerevolutionary Russia. These novels are long and slow-moving, and many readers find them dull and ponderous.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s Gorky made several trips to the Soviet Union, and he returned to stay in 1933. Once again he was very active on the cultural scene, chiefly in book and magazine publishing and literary criticism.

Gorky died near Moscow in 1936. Even in his lifetime he had been enormously celebrated in his native land. Since his death he has been officially hallowed as the greatest Russian writer of the 20th century, and numerous theaters, museums, streets, universities, and even factories and collective farms were named after