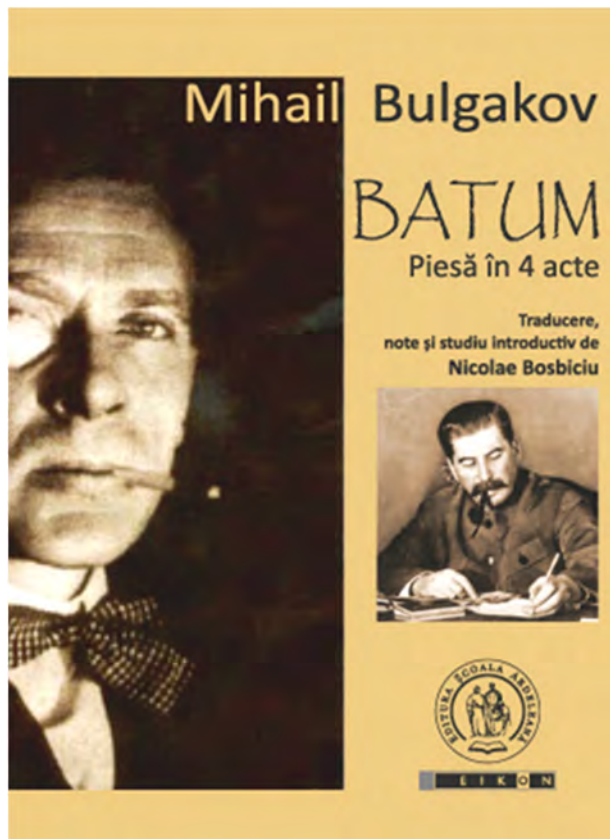


Mikhail Bulgakov's Stalin

Book review: Mihail Bulgakov, *Batum*, A play in 4 acts, Translation, notes and introductory study by Nicolae Bosbiciu, Cluj-Napoca, Eikon Publishing House, 2015



For all the readers fascinated by Mikhail Bulgakov's novels, most notably his masterpiece *The Master and Margarita*, as well as for all those interested in Bulgakov's theatre, the recent Romanian translation of *Batum*, published in 2015 by the Eikon Publishing House, will definitely represent a pleasant

surprise. A long overdue project, the play was written in 1939 (commissioned by the Moscow Art Theatre to celebrate Stalin's 60th anniversary, yet later banned and never staged), the publishing in Romanian translation of Bulgakov's last play, an elaborate project undertaken by the professor and researcher Nicolae Bosbiciu, represents an important piece in the puzzle that was the Russian author's complicated relationship with the dictator Joseph Stalin. The author's "obsession" was ignited by Stalin's phone call on April 18th, 1930 and his promise of a future meeting between the two, an event that, as the translator states in his extensive introductory study, determined the Russian author to become "haunted by horrific neurasthenia and by his fixation on the promised meeting between him and Stalin" (p. 113).

Indeed, *Batum* is nothing more, nothing less than Bulgakov's "play about Stalin", his last dramaturgical work, a last-ditch effort to get the Soviet leader's attention and, as the playwright secretly hoped, to benefit from his protection, in a climate of harsher and harsher repressive measures against "undesirable" writers. Bulgakov began working on the play on January 16th 1939, by consulting several sources, both official, like the anthology *The 1902 Batum Demonstration*, and unofficial, religious sources like *The Papers of the Georgia Diocese (1894-1897)* and the article *Memories of a Russian Theology Professor at the Georgian Orthodox Seminar in Tiflis* (1907). After several attempts (ten working titles), suggesting "the difficulty of the playwright's task" (p. 127), Bulgakov finally settles on the title *Batum*, as the action of the play – with the exception of the prologue, set in 1898, when a young, wise for his age and defiant Soso (one of Stalin's many aliases) is expelled from the orthodox theological seminar in Tiflis -, covers the years 1901-1904, circumscribing the events that lead to the Batum workers' strike, of which Stalin is portrayed as one of the main orchestrators, a "Messiah"-like, wise and carrying figure, as well as the immediate aftermath of these actions, Stalin's imprisonment and exile to Siberia and his symbolic return, as the savior of the Russian people.

Combining real historical events with prophetic, premonitory dialogues, like the gipsy's oracular predictions in the prologue (which, the editor informs us, "might have been disliked by Stalin and, together with other scenes, might have led to banning the play", footnote 2, p. 220), or the dialogue in Act III, between the future dictator and an old man, Redjeb, who travelled to Batum to tell young Stalin that he had dreamt that "there will no longer be a tsar and you will free the entire Abkhazia" (p. 282), Bulgakov creates a quasi-hyperbolic portrait of the dictator. In *Batum*, Stalin is depicted as both deeply human (certain physical descriptions that the playwright takes liberties with, like a birth mark, may

have been other reasons for the play's interdiction, see footnote 27, p. 253), and, at the same time, other-worldly and enlightened, capable of miraculous healings and able to survive the horrific conditions from Siberia.

The play, as professor Ion Vartic points out on the book's fourth cover, is "highly controversial to this day" and the mere translation of the text into Romanian, however salutary, would certainly not have been sufficient. In this respect, Nicolae Bosbiciu's editorial work proves to be outstanding. Accompanying the text of the play by an extensive (209 pages), well-designed and more than necessary introductory study, a "must-read" analytical inquiry into the inner workings of this complex dramatic text, its author's personal struggles with "not accepting any compromises" when writing it (p. 56) and the play's genesis and most poignant symbols, the editor's excellent observations are unquestionably a valuable tool for the readers. At the same time, Bosbiciu's rigorous scientific work is not only reflected in his introductory study, but also in the play's 56 explanatory footnotes, meant to guide the reader, to help him distinguish the "real" identities of the characters that populate the play, decipher the meaning of various fragments and quotations, or understand the aesthetic liberties the playwright had taken with regard to certain historical events.

The Romanian edition of Bulgakov's *Batum*, with the translator's extended introduction, is an event that deserves to be celebrated: it is a beautiful and rigorously crafted "homage" to the Russian author and, at the same time, an indispensable component in understanding the fascinating writer that was Mikhail Bulgakov.

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