

[](images/stories/mozhaev/Boris_Mozhaev_med.jpg) Boris Andreevich Mozhaev (1923-1996) was born in the village of Pitelino in the Riazan region (oblast), 196 kilometres south east of Moscow. ♦ He attended a local village school and, having completed his secondary education, he worked in a rural school for six months. ♦ He applied to enrol in a Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) military engineering and technical college, but he was refused a place on account of his father being officially dubbed an ♦ enemy of the people ♦. ♦ Mozhaev ♦'s father had refused to join the collective farm system in the early 1930s when independent peasant farmers were forced, under Stalin, to work for the state as near serfs on the newly formed collective farms: those who refused to join were often violently coerced and many abandoned farming to work as labourers or other types of manual workers in factories in the towns and cities. ♦ Such a refusal to join the collective farm often resulted in the peasant being exiled to spend time in one of the many, hugely expanded prison camps, developed under Stalin to accommodate his victims from collectivization and the purges of the late 1930s. ♦

Mozhaev carried out his military service in the Soviet Far East, near China, after which he managed to gain entry to an engineering college and, at the same time ♦ 1943-48, he studied in the philological faculty of Leningrad University, following courses on literature and folklore. ♦ He also attended meetings and workshops at the Leningrad House of Writers and, subsequently, courses in scriptwriting in Moscow. ♦ He returned to the Soviet Far East as a naval engineer, living and serving in China in 1949-51. ♦

Even while he was still in the navy, Mozhaev wrote poetry and stories, and he achieved some literary success in that some of his poems were made into popular songs in 1952. ♦ However, Mozhaev never had taken his poetry serious and he is principally a writer of prose, essays and plays. ♦ Several of his prose works have been adapted for the theatre and for films, while he has also written works specifically for the stage. ♦

Some of Mozhaev ♦'s earliest publications were folktales which he had collected for the first time himself. ♦ They were tales of a small group of people of Chinese and Mongolian origin, who speak a dialect which has been broadly classified as one of the Manchu-Tungu languages. ♦ These people are called the Udegei and they live in small villages scattered far and wide in the mountains of the Sikhote Alin of Russia ♦'s Maritime Province. ♦ The Udegei people live by fishing and hunting, as Mozhaev ♦'s stories describe, but they also trade in ginseng root, furs, and other natural products for traditional Chinese medicine. ♦ They have a rich folkloric tradition and a belief in shamanism and other natural spirits, whose presence they believe resides in the natural, unspoilt features of the taiga. ♦ Mozhaev introduces a strong ecological theme into his later stories, which also feature some Udegei characters as guides and scouts in the taiga, whose respect for the natural beauty and resources of the area contrast markedly with the spoiling and pillaging of the official Soviet policy of exploiting these natural resources at any cost to workers and the environment. ♦

Mozhaev left the navy in 1954 to develop a career in journalism and as a writer of prose fiction, pursuing his principal interest in rural life and agriculture. ♦ However, right from the onset of his career, he refused to produce the up-beat copy officially required of him as a journalist: the Soviet media demanded success stories from journalists who visited villages and collective farms, and many journalists and writers obliged by furnishing periodicals

with tales of bumper harvests and peasants enjoying a life of abundance on the farm. ♦ This glossy image of rural life was far from the truth and Mozhaev refused to churn out such lies: he courageously produced articles and works of fiction ♦ short stories and novellas ♦ which portrayed communities living in squalid conditions, slavishly adhering to an unrealistic plan handed down from on high by Moscow planners and bureaucrats, who knew and cared little about local conditions and the workers. ♦ Characters in his works who show initiative and take a personal interest of those in their charge have to battle constantly with officials of a mechanistic, Stalinist mentality. ♦ Mozhaev's stories often end on an ambiguous note, with the ♦hero♦ or ♦heroine♦ having to pay a heavy price, both physically and emotionally, for the stand they take. ♦ His works show a strong concern for ecological issues. ♦ Such stark, unvarnished truth about rural life increasingly earned Mozhaev a reputation as a dissident and politicians and literary critics alike accused him of ♦blackening life in the Russian countryside♦ and ♦concentrating too much on the negative aspect of our rural life♦. ♦ This led to Mozhaev being excluded from the Writers ♦ Union in 1959, which, in effect, meant that he could not longer publish his prose officially. ♦ His membership to the Writers ♦ Union was reinstated through the efforts of leading writers, whom it pained to see such a courageous and brilliant new talent curtailed. ♦ Although Mozhaev carried on writing, he was by now a marked man as far as the authorities were concerned and many editors would not risk publishing his works for anything up to twenty-two years after they had been completed.

One editor, noted for his courage and tenacity at getting controversial works published in a major literary journal, was Alexander Tvardovskii (1910-71), who frequently had to go right to the top of the Soviet power structure to get permission to print works which he knew would cause a sensation when they appeared. ♦ One such work was Solzhenitsyn's One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, which Tvardovskii managed to get permission to publish during a widow of brief liberalization in 1962. ♦ The story caused an international sensation. ♦ No less was the sensation caused by Mozhaev's story Zhivoi (Lively), published in the same journal under Tvardovskii's auspices, though it was considerably edited and many of the more controversial passages were either toned down or removed altogether. ♦ For both these writers, Solzhenitsyn and Mozhaev, these stories launched their careers as writers who would not avoid difficult and contentious issues, but it also meant that they were more than ever under the watchful eye of Soviet censorship. ♦ On a happier note, it was Solzhenitsyn's story which brought him and Mozhaev together, when they formed a close friendship which was to last for the rest of Mozhaev's life. ♦ This friendship is recounted in most touching terms in a memoir Solzhenitsyn wrote on the first anniversary of Mozhaev's death.

Although the picture Mozhaev paints of rural life is generally bleak, he did write about it in a comic vein and he can be seen at his most humorous in his story A History of the Village of Br?khovo, Written by P?tr Afanasievich Bulkin. ♦ The very title is reminiscent of Gogol's Mirgorod story of the two Ivans, and of Saltykov-Shchedrin's The History of a Town, and the humour reflects both writers: Saltykov's satire on history and the Russian monarchy is paralleled in Mozhaev's ridiculing of official Soviet historiography, politics, and associated Soviet rhetoric, and the story includes scenes of near slapstick comedy reminiscent of Gogol, but set in the context of major events in Soviet history, such as collectivization and dekulakization.

Mozhaev differs markedly from other writers who were his contemporaries and who also wrote on rural themes ♦ the so-called ♦village prose writers♦ of the late 1950s to the late 1970s. ♦ His work has a strong publicistic quality, he uses a variety of genres, and he often addresses issues of agricultural practice and organization current at the time of writing. ♦ He had a keen concern for ecological issues and law-breaking,

which was officially ignored. However, his rural characters are not supine, aged, and seem like an anachronism from a by-gone age, part of a lament for a way of life which is doomed to die out and in its last gasps of life, as in the prose of Valentin Rasputin. Nor is the village a museum which is in an equally depressing state of decrepitude, as in the writing of Soloukhin. Mozhaev's characters are alive or lively – they are witty, industrious, cunning, and, above all, indomitable. Their struggle against officials and bureaucracy is heroic, though true to life – it is not always successful.

One of Mozhaev's works that does not have a rural setting is his *One-and-a-Half Square Metres*, set in a small provincial town. Mozhaev brings to bear his keen sense of humour to a ludicrous situation, but he makes a serious point. It is the epic story of an inhabitant of a communal block of flats, Poluboiarinov, who tries to solve the problem of a neighbour, who habitually lies in a drunken stupor outside his door that opens out into the corridor: thus the man stops the door opening and prevents the tenant and his wife from using the communal bathroom. The solution requires taking one-and-a-half square metres of communal corridor to move the door and allow it to open into the flat. It is a story of bureaucracy and petty-mindedness gone mad, as officials in the town victimize Poluboiarinov for what they interpret as pre-revolutionary acquisitiveness, the chief accusation levelled at so-called kulak families in the early 1930s. As with so many of Mozhaev's other works, the story ends on a depressing note: Poluboiarinov becomes a broken man after years of desperately seeking justice and a rational outcome to his problems through official, legal channels.

Some of Mozhaev's works – particularly his later works – have a profound, philosophical aspect to them, when he questions the tenets of Marxist-Leninist thinking at the very foundation of the Soviet regime. In his screenplay *A Day Without End*, Mozhaev questions the scientific-materialistic basis of Marxism-Leninism. The controversy over Lysenko's ideas is re-enacted in this work between the biologist Mariia Tverdokhlebova and a senior researcher Liasota (clearly a parody of Lysenko himself). However, the work goes much deeper than this: the Marxist insistence on the influence of the social environment on the character of man is challenged. Liasota's attempt to adapt a strain of wheat to the inimical northern climate is juxtaposed with discussions about the attempt to change man, to create a new Soviet man by manipulating the social environment. There is also a scene in which a productive peasant is dispossessed on the thin pretext that he is a kulak, a theme developed subsequently in Mozhaev's novel *Peasant Folk* (*Muzhiki i baby*).

Mozhaev's novel *Peasant Folk* (1976-87), about the campaign for the full collectivization of agriculture, is written on a Dostoevskian scale. It features a rural community which has enjoyed a fair degree of prosperity under the NEP (New Economic Policy) period in Russian history in the 1920s, when the tight reins of economic and political control were slackened and rural farmers were allowed a certain independence to work as they judged best within communes and cooperatives. As with his character Kuzkin, Mozhaev portrays a lively, mixed community, from the highly motivated and industrious peasant to the layabout and drunk. Their turns of speech and phrase are enchanting and amusing, as is their folklore, and their view of life is fascinating. Disaster strikes all their lives as Stalin and other politicians of the day move to impose the collective farm system upon the community and when certain individuals resist, they are made to submit to the policy, often through violent means. The whole campaign turns into an orgy of violence. There are many moving passages as the novel progresses through a series of tableaux, powerfully narrated. However, there are also many interesting passages of detailed political and philosophical discussion, which try to get to the very heart of the thinking and motivation behind a policy which history has proved to be

catastrophic for Russian agriculture. ♦ The novel was received to great public and critical acclaim, but the second part, Book II, had to wait for the liberal era of glasnost and perestroika before its publication could even be contemplated. ♦ Mozhaev received the USSR State Prize for Literature for Book II of the novel in 1989.

Mozhaev's works regularly appear in reprinted collections and volumes in Russia and readers find his works just as fresh and relevant today, as when they were originally written.