

# SMOKE

## Ivan Turgenev

**Overview** Ivan Turgenev (1818-1883) was born in Moscow, son of a reasonably prosperous landowner, who was at the same time a serious philanderer, and of a mother who, left alone without spousal support, became increasingly abusive. It is no surprise that Ivan was especially drawn to living and studying in Western Europe, which was the source of fashionable ideas in Russia, and where his intellectual heroes, like Flaubert and Hegel, came from. Turgenev excelled in the novel, short story, and in drama; *Fathers and Sons* (1862) is a rich expression of his fascination with new and progressive 'scientific' attitudes.

**Story** The novel opens in the German spa town of Baden, a favorite resort at the time (summer of 1882, in this case) of the Russian upper classes on vacation. We are seeing through the eyes of Gyorgy Litvinov, who is on his way back to Russia, to meet his fiancée, Tatiana Shestov. The early narration involves Litvinov's personal encounters in Baden, with expatriate Russians who are much involved with rethinking the moral and social developments of a new Russia—rather like the thinking that Arkady and Bazarov bring back to the Russian countryside from their studies in St. Petersburg, in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*. Later one evening, shortly before he is to return to Russia, Litvinov enters his hotel room to find a beautiful bunch of heliotrope flowers, which had been left there by (he is told) an equally beautiful woman.

Searching his mind for an explanation of the flowers, Litvinov retreats to mental scenery from ten years earlier. The love affair between the humbly born Litvinov and the nobly born Irina Osinin flourishes until Irina makes a smashing appearance at court, and is accordingly adopted by her wealthy uncle, a move which separates her from Litvinov.

We return to Baden. Litvinov goes on a hike into the woods above Baden, where he meets a troupe of high aristocracy Russians, holidaying in the mountains. To his amazement he hears a female voice calling him; it is Irina. It is his old love. He is introduced to her jovial husband, who is engaged, with his fellow aristocrats, in highly conservative talk, expressing the desire to return to the Old Russia. Litvinov, a son of humble birth, is disgusted by this conversation. Irina invites him to visit them before he leaves Baden.

For several days, Litvinov refrains from reaching out to Irina, but then, upon receiving a letter from his fiancée, announcing a delay in her arrival in Baden, he gets in touch with Irina, and, while her husband is away on business, Litvinov and Irina engage in numerous long and nostalgic conversations. She urges him to accept her, once again, as at least a very special friend, but he hems and haws, feeling the dangers of the conversation, and well aware of the pain she caused him when she left him the first time.

After further talks, with disaffected and expatriate Russians, Litvinov comes to the sudden realization that in fact he is in love with Irina. Aware that he is about to destroy his upcoming marriage, he makes one last visit to Irina, to tell her that he loves her, but that he is leaving her. She throws him a curve ball, by telling him she loves him and that her destiny is in his hands.

Litvinov's fiancée arrives in Baden, but Litvinov treats her coldly, which makes her deeply suspicious. Shortly after, Litvinov meets Potugin, one of his expatriate acquaintances; Potugin, citing his own previous romantic failure with Irina, urges Litvinov to stick with Tatiana. From this point on Litvinov's world goes up in smoke. Tatiana, jealous of Irina, leaves Litvinov, while Irina, whom Litvinov urges to elope with him, ultimately chickens out, and cannot leave her husband or lifestyle.

A dejected Litvinov makes his way home to Russia. He begins to recoup his comfort zone, when he hears that Tatiana lives on a nearby estate. He gets in touch with her, she wants to see him, and the rest is history.

## Themes

**Change.** An atmosphere of cultural change surrounds the swirling discussions, in this novel which concerns the future of the motherland. Baden has become a seed bed for conflicting values among the Russian intelligentsia, and even the romantic issues that dominate the narrative, are played out in relation to their political-social background.

**Fidelity.** Litvinov follows his heart, but finds himself torn between a fiancée who doubts him, and an old lover who falls for him again, almost betrays her husband, then, at the last, decides not to risk all for this new-old love.

## Characters

**Litvinov** When first we meet Grigory Litvinov, he is on his way home to Russia from Europe, to meet his fiancée Tatiana, who will soon be arriving from Dresden. Litvinov is at this moment arriving at the watering spa of Baden Baden, where many Russians, especially of the aristocracy, gather to enjoy themselves and gossip. Litvinov soon falls into conversation with Russians of many viewpoints—Slavophiles, nihilists, Europeanists. Interchanges with these figures absorb much of the novel, as does Litvinov's romantic life—he is engaged, and he will meet an important old love. The novel comes together around honest social critique and satire, and about Litvinov's endless search for the right woman.

**Irina** Litvinov's early love, leaves him when her wealthy, court-surrounded uncle adopts her, and she is drawn into a high aristocratic milieu. She has never forgotten him, though, and when they meet again in Baden she eventually declares her lasting love for Litvinov. In the end she decides she has too much to lose, and parts from him.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

**LITVINOV** (Agreeable)

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**Parallels** Critique of one's own culture is the intersection point, for Turgenev's Litvinov, with any number of post-Renaissance texts, that delve into the mysteries of the new national cultures. One thinks of *Swift's Gulliver's Travels* (1726), with its raw satire of 18th century British culture; of Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies* (1930), with its caricatures of the golden and privileged Uxbridge young, or, for that matter, of the later (1975) British self-excoriation in Martin Amis' *Dead Babies*, which has added drugs, crime and nihilist to the scenarios Waugh described; or of Henry Miller's *Air-Conditioned Nightmare*, with its ruthless just post-WW2 scouring of an America which Miller had been lucky enough to be absent from for the previous ten years.

## Illustrative moments

**Observant** We first meet Grigory Litvinov 'bending forward and leaning on his cane with both hands' at a table near one of the watering spot restaurants frequented by Russian visitors to the fashionable spa

of Baden Baden. Thirty years old, 'his large expressive eyes, brown with a tawny tinge, gazed slowly about him, now blinking a little with the sunlight, again suddenly following some eccentric figure that passed by...' The last detail counts, for it marks Litvinov not only as a people-watcher, but as a culture-watcher, for ultimately that is his inclination, to probe cultures and to review his own Russian inheritance.

**Critical** The Litvinov we meet is self-satisfied, having a stable engagement ahead of him, a good university education behind him, and a reasonably comfortable income. Yet the question remains why he finds himself in Baden? It seems the perfect place to meet his fiancée and her mother, the latter of whom, a sworn democrat and foe of aristocracies and watering spots, shares Litvinov's interest in people-watching, and wishes to indulge it in this self-exposing spot. No place could better have opened Litvinoff to the variety of Russian cultural types he loved to satirize.

**Romantic** In a series of conversations, which unfold around him that evening in Baden, Litvinov hones his sense of positions he despises: that of Russian aristocrats whose sense of their own national value is completely myopic, that of blind worshippers of what they take to be contemporary modern 'Western culture'; and that of romantic Slavophiles, who dream of the great days of Tsarist power and magnificence. Of even more importance to Litvinov, than the voluble representatives of these view-points, whom he meets in Baden, is the bouquet of heliotrope which he finds awaiting him in his hotel room, on return from an evening of conversation.

**Disgusted** The sweet smelling heliotrope pervades Litvinov's hotel suite, and keeps him awake most of the night, trying to guess who left this previous gift. Having asked the bell boy who had left such beauty, all the lad can offer is something like 'a stately Russian countess,' an account which almost, but not fully, seems a possible fit to the lovely Irina who had been Litvinov's first love, ten years earlier. Litvinov is haunted by the guessing game, for in fact his truest frontier of susceptibility is romance. He determines to leave Baden, the next day; the self-centered comfort of the idle Russian community there finally disgusts him.

### **Discussion questions**

Is *Smoke* a study of the anatomy of romance, or a cultural criticism of the New Russia which was forming? Or is the book both of those things?

Is Litvinov himself one of the idle ex pats who gather in Baden Baden? That is, for all Litvinov's scorn of this group, does he belong to them himself?

What is the author's own view of Litvinov? Does the author agree with Litvinov that smoke is the ultimate condition of the new emerging Russia?

### **Reading**

<http://www.mirror-service.org/sites/ftp.ibiblio.org/pub/docs/books/gutenberg/4/0/8/1/40813/40813-h/40813-h.html>