



**MONUMENTAL
PROPAGANDA
VLADIMIR VOINOVICH**

A KNOFF  BOOK

MONUMENTAL PROPAGANDA

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In loving memory of my wife, Irina

PROLOGUE

When I opened the envelope, out fell a newspaper clipping about the size of a matchbox. On it, in a black border of mourning, a group of comrades from the city of Dolgov informed the reader with profound regret of the tragic death of the pensioner Aglaya Stepanovna Revkina, member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union since 1933, veteran of the Great Patriotic War and outstanding social activist.

I was surprised, thinking that someone must have sent me a text from days long gone. But when I turned over the piece of paper and read “New in the Internet,” “Paging Services” and “Tax Inspection” (the end of the word was cut off), I was even more surprised. Who on earth would want to mention membership in the CPSU nowadays?

The anonymous individual who forwarded the notice had evidently expected it would strike a chord with me, and he was right. It was a long time since I had been in Dolgov; I was not aware that Aglaya had attained such an advanced age and found it hard even to imagine her alive in these times. I set off for Dolgov immediately and took up residence in the former Collective Farmers’ House, now the Hotel Continental, where I stayed for about two weeks, interviewing various people who knew anything at all about the final years of Aglaya, or Oglashennaya (“the woman possessed”) or Ogloednaya (“the bone gnawer”)—people used to modify her name in various ways, adapting it to suit her character. Her previous biography was well known to me. I had recounted part of it in my past novels *Chonkin* and *The Scheme*. Allow me, without repeating myself unduly, to remind you briefly: When she was a Komsomol member, youthful and ardent, she altered her documents to add five years or more to her age and plunged headlong into the class war. In her leather jacket and with her revolver on her side, she galloped around the local district on her horse, dekulakizing the rich and herding the poor into collective farms. After that she became the manager of the orphanage and married the district Party secretary, Andrei Revkin, whom she was later forced to sacrifice for the sublime cause. When German forces entered Dolgov in the fall of ’41, Aglaya blew up the local power station while her husband, who had laid the charges, was still inside. “The motherland will not forget you!” she shouted to him down the phone as she touched the ends of the wires together.

During the war Aglaya Stepanovna commanded a partisan unit, which was awarded two decorations for distinguished service in action. After the war she herself was the district Party secretary until she was “gobbled up” by more predatory comrades. She returned to her prewar place of employment and worked once again as director of the Felix Dzerzhinsky Children’s Home, where in February 1956 she was taken unawares by the historical event which provides the starting point of our narrative.

PART ONE

CONSOLIDATION

In February 1956, on the day the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU ended, in the Dolgov District House of the Railroad Worker, Khrushchev's secret speech about Stalin's personality cult was read to the local Party core of activists. The reader was the second secretary of the district Party committee, Pyotr Klimovich Porosyaninov, a plump, well-nourished, red-cheeked, bald man with thick, moist ears covered in whitish bristles—his surname, with its obvious resemblance to the Russian word for “piglet,” suited him very well. In fact, in Dolgov there were many people with names that had multiple meanings. There was even a period when the town possessed simultaneously a head of police called Tiuryagin (an obvious hint at the word “tiuryaga,” or jail), a public prosecutor called Strogii (meaning “strict”) with a deputy who rejoiced in the name of Vorovaty (“light-fingered”!), a judge called Shemyakin (reminiscent of the seventeenth-century hanging judge Shemyaka) and a head of the department of public education called Bogdan Filippovich Nechitailo (a surname which could be interpreted to mean “illiterate”).

Porosyaninov read slowly, smacking his lips together loudly as though he were eating cherries and spitting out the pits. At the same time, he lisped and stammered over every word, especially if it was a foreign one.

As Porosyaninov read, the core of Party activists listened in silence, their faces tense, their throats and necks and the backs of their skulls shorn in semi-crew cuts.

Then they asked the speaker questions: Would there be a purge of the Party? And what should they do with the portraits of Stalin, take them off the walls and rip them out of the books as they had done so many times before with former leaders of the Revolution and heroes of the Civil War? Porosyaninov involuntarily turned his head and squinted sidelong at the portrait of Lenin, then shivered and said that no purge was expected and there was no need to go overboard with the portraits. Although a certain number of individual actions taken by Stalin had been incorrect, he was and remained a distinguished member (that was the phrase the speaker used) of our Party and the world communist movement, and no one intended to deny him due recognition for his services.

Aglaya Revkina, who had been through so much in her life, proved to be unprepared for a blow like this. As they were leaving the club, several people heard her declare loudly, without addressing anyone in particular: “Such filth! Such terrible filth!”

Since on that particular evening the street was not covered in filth—in fact, it was cold and there was a blizzard swirling the snow about, so that everything could more accurately have been described as pure white—no one took Aglaya's words literally.

“Yes, yes,” said Valentina Semenovna Bochkareva, the planner from the Collective Farm Technical Unit, backing her up. “What people we put our faith in!”

Elena Muravyova (secret-agent alias “Mura”) reported this fleeting dialogue to the local department of the Ministry of State Security, and her report was confirmed by Bochkareva herself during an interview of a prophylactic nature that was conducted with her.

But Bochkareva had misunderstood Aglaya. Her words about filth had indeed been intended in a figurative sense, and not the one in which Bochkareva had taken them.

When she got home, Aglaya was absolutely beside herself. No, it was not Stalin’s crimes but the criticism of him that was what had astounded her most of all. How dare they? How dare they? She walked around all three rooms of her flat, beating her tough little fists against her tough little hips and repeating aloud the same words, addressed to her invisible opponents, over and over again: “How dare you dare? Who do you think you are? Who are you to raise your hand against him?”

“And you, disdainful descendants . . .”—Lermontov’s line, which she thought she had forgotten long ago, came drifting out from some dark corner of her memory . . .

She had never believed in God, but she would not have been surprised in the least if Porosyaninov’s tongue had withered or his nose had fallen off or he had been paralyzed by a stroke in the middle of giving his speech. The words he had uttered in the House of the Railroad Worker had been to her absolutely blasphemous.

She had never believed in a God in heaven, but her earthly god was Stalin. His portrait, the famous one with him lighting up his pipe, holding a lighted match close to the slightly singed mustache, had hung over her writing desk since the times before the war, and during the war it had traveled through the partisan forest trails with her and then returned to its place. A modest portrait in a simple limewood frame. In moments of doubt over her most startlingly dramatic actions, Aglaya would raise her eyes to the portrait, and Comrade Stalin seemed to screw up his own eyes slightly and urge her on with his kind and wise smile: Yes, Aglaya, you can do that, you must do it, and I believe that you will do it. Yes, she had been forced to make some difficult decisions in her life—harsh, even cruel, decisions concerning various people—but she had done it for the sake of the Party, the country, the people and the future generations. Stalin had taught her that for the sake of the sublime idea it was worth sacrificing everything, and no one could be pitied.

Of course, she respected the other leaders as well, the members of the Politburo and the secretaries of the Central Committee, but nonetheless she thought of them as just people. Very clever and boldly utterly devoted to our ideals, but people. They could make mistakes in their thoughts, words and actions, but only he was ineffably great and infallible, and his every word and every action expressed such transcendent genius that his contemporaries and the generations to come should accept them as unconditionally correct and absolutely binding.

A large statue of Stalin stood in the center of Dolgov on Stalin Square, formerly Cathedral Square, formerly the Square of the Fallen. It had been erected in 1949 in honor of Stalin's seventieth birthday on her—that is, Aglaya's—initiative. At that time Aglaya was the first secretary of the district Party committee, but even she had been forced to overcome opposition. Everyone understood what great educational importance the monument could have, and no one dared oppose it directly, but secret enemies of the people and demagogues had raised their heads to object, citing the present state of postwar devastation. They incessantly reminded everyone that the district suffered delays and irregularities in deliveries of foodstuffs, that the people were destitute and swollen-bellied from hunger and the time was not yet right for grandiose projects that were too great a burden on the local budget.

One of the monument's main opponents had been Wilhelm Leopoldovich Livshits, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Bolshevik Tempos*. He wrote an article called "Bronze Before Bread" and published it in his newspaper. In it he stated that monumental propaganda was, of course, a matter of great importance—Lenin himself had emphasized that it was a matter of great importance—but did we have the moral right today to spend so much money on a monument when our people were suffering? "Just whose 'ours' and 'yours' are these?" Aglaya inquired in a letter to the editor, in which she also explained that our Russian people are long-suffering, they would tighten their belts still further, they would suffer in the short term, but the monument erected by them would endure forever. In his reply Livshits informed her that all of us have only one people, the Soviet people, and that the monument was indeed essential, but it could be erected later, when the economic situation in the district and the country as a whole improved. He even had the effrontery to enlist Stalin himself as one of his allies. According to Livshits, Stalin, being wise and modest, would not have approved such prodigious expenditure at an hour of such great difficulty for the Motherland.

Of course, that was demagoguery. Livshits undoubtedly knew, as everyone knew—only one did not say it out loud—that the economic situation would only be easy under communism. Well then, we were supposed to just sit back and not build anything, neither saw nor sew nor plane nor forge nor sculpture until the advent of communism? Perhaps that was what the rootless and tribeless cosmopolitan Livshits was counting on? But he had miscalculated. Soon thereafter he had been exposed as involved with the international organization of Zionists and spies known as Joint and suffered the well-deserved penalty. In the quiet hour before dawn one of the automobiles popularly known as a "black raven" or "black Marusya" had pulled up at the Livshits' house and removed the self-appointed representative of the people to a place far distant from the city of Dolgov.

Livshits was not alone. Others may have expressed their opinions less openly, but they had also dropped hints.

Having overcome the resistance, Aglaya had her way and erected the monument—although

wasn't actually bronze, as had been anticipated at the beginning, but cast iron. Because the railway wagon with the bronze, having left the city of Yuzhnouralsk one fine day, never arrived at the city of Dolgov. (Where it did arrive remains a mystery even now.) This delighted certain spiteful faultfinders. Perhaps it also delighted Wilhelm Leopoldovich Livshits as he squatted on his prison toilet, but his delight was premature. Aglaya's enemies knew her well, but not well enough. They had underestimated her will to victory and failed to appreciate that she never retreated from her chosen goal. She went to Moscow, consulted the sculptor Max Ogorodov and commissioned him to forge the statue out of cast iron.

Stalin was seventy years old on Wednesday, December 21, 1949.

Aglaya remembered for the rest of her life that dark, frosty, misty morning, the granite pedestal and the figure swathed in white canvas wrapped around with string.

A gusty wind flapped the edges of the canvas in the air and swirled the dry gray snow across the square in a low, thin, shifting layer. Although it was a workday, the entire district leadership had turned up—men in identical dark coats and deerskin caps—and Aglaya had covered her own head with a light Orenburg shawl. And in addition, the regional Party secretary, Gennadii Kuzhelnikov, had arrived, wearing a woolen cloth coat with a padded lining and an astrakhan collar, and boots with galoshes from the Red Triangle factory. The head of the district Ministry of State Security office, Iva Kuzmich Dyrokhvost, stood out in his fur-lined leather coat and peaked leather cap. The chairmen of the collective farms were all to a man rosy-cheeked and red-nosed, wearing sheepskin coats, sheepskin caps and felt boots. Also present, naturally, was the monument's creator, the sculptor Ogorodov, who had delivered himself from Moscow to the venue for the occasion in a thin autumn coat and a red scarf, with a dark blue velvet beret set on his head at a jaunty angle and patent-leather shoes entirely unsuited to the prevailing weather conditions. Ogorodov had also brought his wife Zinaida with him.

Zinaida is unlikely to play too important a part in our narrative, but since she has found her way into these pages, let us note that she was a plump, domineering woman four years older than Ogorodov, that she possessed a voice rendered hoarse by smoking and was foul-mouthed to a degree encountered less frequently in those chaste times than nowadays.

She had found Ogorodov on a garbage heap before the war. That was what she said herself. In actual fact, it was not a garbage heap, but a hall of residence in Malakhovka, where he was living in absolute obscurity as a student, having arrived in Moscow from Kostroma or Kaluga. The appearance he presented was downtrodden, to say the least. He was barely surviving on bread and water from one student grant payment to the next, his only property being what he stood up in, what was in his suitcase, and the suitcase itself, made of plywood covered with glossy green paint, something like an ammunition box with a handle made of bent wire five millimeters thick.

Zinaida had taken the future sculptor home to the communal flat where she lived with her ancient and querulous mother, washed him off, cleaned him up and begun to live with him. They had survived the poverty of his student years together. At that time Ogorodov used to fashion clay whistles in the shape of cocks, wolves, bears and hares and bake them in the oven, and she used to sell them at the Tishinsky market. There was no question of any other kind of sculpture—what would he have made? Where, from what and for whom? But then when he came back from the war with four medals, with a red stripe on his sleeve for having been slightly wounded and a “Guards” badge, Zinaida began promoting him everywhere as a combat veteran, a hero and a genius. By dexterously exploiting his

services to the country, she opened doors and made essential contacts but never overstepped the mark (or if she did, it was only in exceptional circumstances, for the good of the cause). She managed to get Ogorodov membership in the Union of Artists, with a separate studio and an apartment in a wooden house. Heated by a wood-stove, but with no one else sharing it. She did everything for him, and he himself would confess, especially when he was a bit under the influence: "Zinka, my precious, I never have made it without you."

Zinaida made sure that her husband was always neatly dressed, but with that certain license appropriate for an artist. She herself sewed him the wide flannelette shirts and trousers and the velvet berets in which, as she thought, he resembled Rembrandt. She cooked fish dishes, believing fish contained a lot of phosphorus, which helped to enhance the intellect, talent and male potency. Eventually, Max acquired more or less tolerable working conditions, and in these conditions he was intending to fashion cocks and bears on an even grander scale, but that was when Zinaida had directed his efforts toward new goals and told him that now he must fashion leaders.

Naturally enough, of all the leaders, Max chose Stalin, and soon he became very successful manufacturing statues of the great man.

The group of people who were gathered, stamping their feet, below the pedestal were at one and the same time participants in the ceremony and its audience. Because of the inclement weather there were no other onlookers, and those who had turned out looked as though they were waiting impatiently to rush through the burial of a poor relative rather than engaging in a solemn political ceremony of state importance.

The monument was unveiled by Aglaya Stepanovna in person. The small number of witnesses later recalled her speech as being precise and firm, without the slightest sign of nervousness, although, of course, she was nervous.

“Comrades,” she began in a voice made hoarse by a cold and the effects of smoking, and rubbed her frozen nose, “today the entire Soviet people and the whole of progressive mankind is celebrating the glorious jubilee of our very greatest contemporary, the wise leader, the teacher of the peoples, the luminary of all the sciences, the outstanding military leader, our own dearest beloved Comrade Stalin.”

As she spoke, the gathered public applauded in a habitual manner, reacting to the key words. She briefly explained to her listeners what they already knew, having learned it in their weekly political study sessions. She retold the life of the great leader, recalling the facts of his difficult childhood, his early participation in the revolutionary movement, his role in the Civil War, collectivization, industrialization, the liquidation of the kulaks, the crushing of the opposition and, finally, the historic victory over German fascism.

She managed to convey in a few words the idea of the exceptional usefulness and necessity, especially in our days, of all forms of propaganda, and in particular of large-scale, monumental visual propaganda designed to endure through the ages. This monument, she said, which had been erected despite the opposition of our enemies, would stand here for thousands of years, inspiring future builders of communism to new feats of heroism.

Gennadii Kuzhelnikov took note of this phrase. What does she mean by that? he thought. That the Soviet people will be building communism for another thousand years? A stupid slip of the tongue or an act of sabotage? He had not even finished thinking his thought when Aglaya declared the monument open and handed him a large pair of shears like the ones used for clipping sheep. Kuzhelnikov took the shears without removing his gloves, brought the blades together and the ends of the string flew apart, fluttering in the wind. The cover was pulled off with great difficulty, because it had inflated like a parachute and kept tearing itself out of their hands. But when they did finally manage to subdue it, the participants in the event took a few short steps backward, looked up at the monument, gasped in a single breath and froze on the spot.

None of these people, except for Ogorodov and Zinaida, had the slightest idea about any kind of art, especially about sculpture, but even they could see that they had before them not simply a statue but something quite extraordinary. Stalin was sculpted in full dress uniform with the shoulder straps of a generalissimo, his uniform coat parted slightly to reveal his military jacket and decorations, with his right hand quite obviously raised in greeting to the masses of the people as they passed by, and his left hand lowered, clutching his gloves.

Stalin looked at the people gathered there as though he were alive. He gazed down on them grinning mysteriously into his mustache, and everyone thought they saw him actually wave his right hand and move his left, smacking the gloves against his knee.

At first Max Ogorodov couldn't believe his own eyes, and when he did, he opened his mouth wide and froze with an expression on his face that can only be called idiotic, as if he himself had been instantly transformed into cast iron.

In recent years he had sculpted Stalin, only Stalin and nobody but Stalin, but he had sculpted every possible aspect of him: Stalin's head, Stalin's bust, Stalin full length, Stalin standing and sitting (lying was the only position he hadn't sculpted), in a field jacket, in a high-collared tunic, in a long-skirted cavalry greatcoat and in the uniform of a generalissimo. He had eventually grown so skillful at his work that he could fashion Iosif Vissarionovich with his own eyes closed.

The authorities had given him their seal of approval as a truly fine artist who had completely mastered the method of socialist realism. They valued him and held him up as an example to others, encouraging and supporting him by moral, material and combined means, rewarding him with positions, decorations, bonuses, adulatory articles in the newspapers, the inclusion of his name in the encyclopedia, in the lists of the great modern masters and the lists of recipients of various food products that were in short supply. But his colleagues regarded him as a confirmed second-rater, a cold mechanical artisan, even a hack, and in general whenever his name came up, they said, "Oh him!" And they would gesture dismissively, never suspecting that he had any divine spark in him and thinking that he knew his own worth well enough, and was only concerned to tend his own pet affairs without hankering after an exalted position in art. And that was their big mistake. In actual fact, while well aware that he produced rubbish, the sculptor Ogorodov did hanker after an exalted position, perhaps even one on Mount Olympus itself, and every time he fashioned yet another Stalin he didn't just churn it out, he strove to create, weaving spells and performing entire religious rites. Each time, he made slight changes to the bearing, the inclination of the head, the narrowing of the eyes and the pressure of the closed lips. As he added the final touches, he would run a long way back, then run up close, sometimes shutting his eyes and making a dent somewhere on a sudden intuition, squeezing up, drawing in and retouching with his fingernail in the insane hope that a miracle would occur through some chance accident. Then he would run away and back again and breathe on his creation through his hands folded into a tube—perhaps it might have seemed funny to an outsider, but he was trying to breathe a soul into his creation! But yet again the creation would turn out lifeless—had no mystery, no wonder. Ogorodov suffered, sometimes he even wept, tugging at his sparse hair, hammering his fists against his head and calling himself a talentless hack, but he was wrong: a talentless hack is a man who is unaware of his own lack of talent.

While this sculpture was in the studio, Ogorodov had thought that it too was ordinary, but now

elevated on its pedestal (so that was what had been lacking!), it had come to life and gazed down in mocking triumph on all of them and its own creator with an expression that seemed somehow insolent, even suggesting that it had created itself.

“My God! My God!” muttered the astounded creator, his eyes fixed on the statue. But it’s alive, really alive, isn’t it? he asked himself, amazed that he hadn’t noticed it before.

“Calm down!” Zinaida told her husband quietly but firmly, sticking a coarse cigarette with an icicle dangling from its frozen cardboard tube into her mouth.

“No,” said Ogorodov, without making it clear what he was rejecting, then he reached out his arms toward his creation and shouted: “Hey!” And then again: “Hey! Hey!”

“Who are you yelling at?” Kuzhelnikov asked in arrogant amazement.

“Not you,” said Ogorodov, dismissing the other’s elevated rank out of hand. And he called out again: “Hey! Hey! Hey!”

Astounded, the people standing beside Ogorodov drew away from him just in case he might be crazy, and he stepped toward the monument with his arms raised aloft in passion and shouted to himself: “Hey, say something!”

Of course, he was not the first sculptor to address such a request to his own work. Long before his time the great Michelangelo had asked the same thing of the Moses he had created. But the people gathered in the square, unsuspecting of any plagiarism, exchanged glances, some of them in fact suspecting—respectfully, of course—that perhaps the sculptor was not quite all there: after all, he was an artist. However, the poet Serafim Butylko approached his brother in art, clapped him on the shoulder and, breathing out fumes of stale alcohol, garlic and rotten teeth, said in a respectful tone: “That’s right, he is almost alive.”

“Nonsense!” the sculptor protested in a whisper. “What do you mean, ‘almost’? He isn’t almost alive—he is alive. Just look, he’s watching, he’s breathing and there’s steam coming out of his mouth!”

This was a quite absurd assertion. The iron lips of the sculpture were clamped firmly shut; there was no steam emerging from between them. And there could not be. Perhaps there might just have been a chance eddy of snow in some surface irregularities. But be that as it may, not only the sculptor but everyone else thought they really did see something swirling in the air beneath the iron mustache.

While Ogorodov shouted incoherently, his wife Zinaida was once again chewing on her extinguished cigarette as she contemplated her immediate future. She had doggedly promoted Ogorodov’s career, fore-seeing even as she did so that if he should really become famous and fashionable, he would be swamped by predatory young female admirers and in the subsequent haste to find the position of the faded wife would immediately become untenable. But Ogorodov failed to notice his wife’s emotional turmoil: he tugged off his beret, threw it under his feet and with a cry of “I have vindicated my life!” began trampling the poor rag as furiously as if it were to blame for his not having vindicated his life sooner. “Vindicated, vindicated, vindicated my life!” he carried on bellowing, no

understanding that life is given to us just as it is, without any obligations attached, and there is no necessity to vindicate it in any particularly cumbersome fashion.

He carried on trampling his beret until the wind, taking pity on the miserable rag, snatched it away from Ogorodov and bore it off into the frosty gloom, and Ogorodov, his balding head exposed to the elements, once again raised his hands toward the monument and implored it: "Tell me you're alive! Prove it, move, give me a sign. Can you hear me or can't you?"

And then something happened that is very rare during the winter season: somewhere in the distance there was a low rumble of thunder, as though a cart had rolled along a cobbled street.

The comrades standing behind Ogorodov were all without exception dyed-in-the-wool materialists and none of them officially believed in either the Supreme Providence or the powers of darkness, but the stronger their official nonbelief, the more they suspected that both of the aforementioned did exist. And so they all flinched instinctively at the sound of thunder, and those at the front stepped back, treading on those behind them, and the lightning that then flashed across the winter sky without a sound of thunder at all left the gathered company absolutely dumbstruck. When the lightning flashed, the eyes of the cast-iron generalissimo lit up with a greedy orange flame that lingered in his eyeballs and faded slowly, as though it were being drawn inward. At this point several participants in the ceremony were overcome by an inexplicable fear, and they involuntarily recalled their transgressions against their wives, their motherland, their Party and Comrade Stalin in person. Remembering the embezzlements, the bribes and the unpaid Party membership dues, they found themselves frozen in the spot, mesmerized by the thought of possible retribution. When this stupefaction began to release its grip, Serafim Butylko spoke up again. In an attempt to raise his own spirits and everyone else's, he remarked that things still occasionally happened in nature that science was unable to explain.

"Yes," regional Party committee secretary Kuzhelnikov replied significantly, "certain inexplicable things do happen in certain districts." And he shuffled off in his galoshes in the direction of his waiting Pobeda automobile, leaving the participants in the event to ponder what his remark might have meant and what he had been hinting at. That the district was not among the most exemplary? But what had natural phenomena to do with that? A natural phenomenon decides for itself where to manifest itself, without applying to the district Party organs to stamp its papers. Nonetheless, their top Party boss had expressed dissatisfaction, and his subordinates realized there would be personnel changes in prospect, a thought that troubled some of those gathered there and inspired hope in others. And a struggle began, as they used to say in those days, between the good and the better, as a result of which Aglaya was replaced in her responsible post by a certain Vasilii Sidorovich Nechaev, who had previously worked as the Party organizer at the creamery. And Aglaya was transferred, as we have already mentioned, to the children's home, to nurture the coming generation.

An abundance of poets is a sign of a people's savagery.

At least that was the opinion of my oldest friend, Alexei Mikhailovich Makarov, nicknamed the Admiral, concerning whom we shall speak later. When he said it the first time, his assertion seemed ridiculous to me, but then he listed the countries and the regions of the world where people were wallowing in poverty and ignorance, some not even knowing what electricity or toilet paper were, and yet they had among them an immense number of bards, minstrels and other varieties of folk or court poets. The authorities there regard the state of the poetic word with anxious concern and good poets (who write good words about the authorities) are generously rewarded with all sorts of good things whereas bad poets (who write bad words about the authorities) have their heads cut off. The risk of being left without a head can act as such a powerful stimulus to the mind that on occasion bad poets write much better poetry than good poets and people copy the poems of bad poets into notebooks and learn them by heart and transmit them from one generation to the next.

Although in Dolgov the education of poets was conducted in accordance with a less extreme system (their heads were not cut off, but their lives were made a misery), the number of versifiers per head of the local population was clearly in excess of essential requirements. In the late forties the most famous and prominent among them was, of course, our past master and local sage Serafim Butylkin, but he was already growing old and antiquated in every sense. He had lost his six upper front teeth and turned gray, he dragged his feet and stooped, his control of metaphor was weak, he was unable to sustain a regular meter and he used weary, banal rhymes: "love—dove," "folk—awoke," "desire—perspire," "hurry—flurry." And this at a time when the young generation was boldly mastering word root rhymes—assonant, dissonant, complex and God knows what other kinds of rhymes—such as "empower—yell louder," "birch-tree—lurching free," "attributes—hard rebukes," "forest thickets—foreign critics," as well as quite mind-boggling images and metaphors. Our most sophisticated and versatile writer was Vlad Raspadov—poet, art historian, essayist, journalist and general multitalented artist of the word. In 1949, when he was still an eighth-grade schoolboy, he wrote a composition dedicated to the monument. The piece was written as a school essay, but it was so interesting that it was published in the *Dolgov Pravda*. This essay was called . . . Actually, I can't quite recall just at the moment . . . Either "A Melody Frozen in Metal," or "Music Congealed in Cast Iron." Something of that sort. It was a very vivid and graphic article, with a profound subtext. In speaking of the sculptor Ogorodov's creation, it said that it could not have been what it was were it not for the miraculous combination of the artist's talent and his genuine love for the prototype, which had fused into a single unity. "Gazing upon this marvel," Raspadov wrote, "it is hard to imagine that it was molded or carved or manufactured in any physical fashion at all. No, this is simply a song that has been broken free, that has been breathed out from the sculptor's soul and frozen in human form to our wonder and amazement."

Raspadov's article, although it was not entirely correct from the viewpoint of socialist realism

impressed the readers and pleased the ideological authorities, and after reading it Pyotr Klimovitch Porosyaninov said of Raspadov: “Yes, he’s one of us!” Then he thought for a moment and repeated in a whisper: “One of us!”

As for Max Ogorodov, having created such an absolute masterpiece, he became extremely famous. He won many state commissions and a Stalin Prize, Third Class, then Second Class, and then First Class, and soon changed his wife Zinaida, just as she had feared, for a new wife, First Class, who was eighteen years younger. And of course, he became very conceited. In his newfound conceit he claimed that he had surpassed all of his contemporaries in sculpture, even Tomsy and Konyonkov. And the only sculptors of the past he acknowledged as his equals were Myron, Praxiteles, Michelangelo and to some extent Rodin.

We will not attempt to deny that the miracle created by Ogorodov was a genuine miracle. It inspired awe and amazement in even the most worldly, distrustful and jealous connoisseurs of art. Scholars of art history made the journey to Dolgov especially, not only in eager anticipation of the twenty-some rubles a day travel allowance, but out of a genuine desire to be convinced by seeing it with their own eyes. One of them, having been convinced, took a handkerchief out of his pocket, dabbed his eyes with it and said: “That’s it! Now I can die.” And no one felt this response was oversentimental. Everyone could see that the monument really did radiate a mysterious power that distinguished it from other similar works. It stood in the middle of the square, on which streets large and small converged from every side. But previously they had simply met here as the accidental consequence of centuries of chaotic town planning. Whereas now every individual could sense physically that these streets and side streets were drawn here by the exceptionally powerful magnetism emanating from the monument, which was itself the natural focus of the town and, more than that, the center without which the town could not function, like a wheel without an axle. It was impossible for anyone who visited Dolgov on those days to imagine how the town could possibly have existed for all those hundreds of years without this statue.

Crowds of people, both locals and people passing through, came to look at the statue and noted the fact that, whichever side of the statue a person stood on—right or left—the cast-iron chief was looking at him, and even a person approaching the statue from behind had the feeling that it could actually see him with its back. Moreover, the iron man’s direct gaze instilled in all comers an incomprehensible fear that expanded into icy terror. And this applied not only to humans but also to animals of a lower order. Even the pigeons did not sit on the iron peaked cap, although its upper surface was round and flat, most convenient for taking off, landing and performing other functions natural to birds. And in addition (though this is a mere detail) the statue was never attacked by rust.

The fame of the sculptor Ogorodov’s exceptional creation spread far and wide, and one day an influential member of the Politburo came to Dolgov specially to see whether it would be worth transferring the monumental masterpiece to Moscow. Upon arriving in the square accompanied by Kuzhelnikov and looking at the statue, he also experienced quite evident agitation, and when he recovered, he said: “We don’t want any of that!” And once again the matter went no further than a review of personnel: Kuzhelnikov was removed from his position and sent off as an ambassador somewhere in Africa. But a short while later this Politburo member himself disappeared mysteriously and precisely because of that phrase “We don’t want any of that!” The phrase was reported to Stalin and Stalin took the words “We don’t want any of that!” as a reference to himself, not the sculptor.

following which the Politburo member vanished and his name was dropped from various lists, textbooks, reference works and encyclopedias, so that now not even the historians are able to say for certain whether he ever really existed or not.

When the monument was erected, there were few people who had regarded as too bold Aglaya's assertion that it would stand for thousands of years. And it would have been quite impossible then to imagine that children born in that year would not even have entered first grade at school before the very ground would be shaken beneath the monument, and also beneath the great leader's entire cause.

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