

The Creation of a 'People's Hero': Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev
and the Fate of Soviet Popular History

By

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Abstract

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This dissertation is an analysis of the relationship between grand narratives and individual identity in the Soviet context analyzed through the popular mythology of Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev. It uses the concept of heroism effectively to bridge the divide between the collective and the discrete historical actor. The category of the hero, long central to historical narratives, has garnered scant attention in recent years. Contemporary history, which tends to emphasize the ‘bottom-up,’ has rightly pushed back against the representation of history as the province of powerful individuals. Yet heroism, too, can be explored from a bottom-up perspective by analyzing individual and popular engagement with, and influence on, heroic ideals.

The popular mythology of Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev is without an equivalent in Soviet History and offers critical insight into the dialectics of popular legitimacy in the world’s first socialist state. In Russia today, the widespread proliferation of images and stories about the peasant partisan leader, who went on to command a Bolshevik division during the Russian Civil War before dying in battle in 1919, is known as the “Chapaev Phenomenon.” Chapaev’s status in Russian memory is second only to that of Lenin, both in prevalence and longevity. Unlike Lenin, however, Chapaev was neither a founder of the state nor even a representative of its political class. On the contrary, his social origins in the peasantry made him politically suspect during his lifetime. And yet Chapaev’s popular appeal not only supported every political regime since the 1920s, it has endured well beyond the collapse of the Soviet state. In five chapters, my dissertation explains why. Centering on the concept of myth, it focuses on representations of Chapaev as a ‘people’s hero’ to explain how an individual became a cultural icon central to the self-representation of the Soviet state, and why a multitude of individuals appropriated this myth, building it into their own lives. Historically significant not only for its longevity, but for the cultural importance of the works it has spawned, Chapaev’s lives and afterlives inspired some of the most influential artistic and literary documents of the Soviet era, in some cases with heavy funding by the state. Nevertheless, beginning in the 1960s, he became a central figure in the irreverent jokes about the regime prominent in late Soviet culture. Paradoxically, these jokes underscored the willingness of Soviet citizens to make an ideological hero their own. Chapaev’s popularity ultimately transcended the collapse of the state that spawned it, enduring to become a condensed metaphor for Soviet History itself.

To Helen, Nora, and Ava: past, present, and future

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Archive Abbreviations

Russian State Military Archive, *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv* (RGVA)

Russian State Archive of Social-Political History, *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii* (RGASPI)

Russian State Archive of Literature and Art, *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva* (RGALI)

Russian State Library Manuscript Research Division, *Nauchno-issledovatel'skii otdel rukopisei* (NIOR)

Central Military Museum of the Russian Federation Document Division, *Dokumental'nyi otdel tsentral'nogo muzeia vooruzhennykh sil Rossiiskoi federatsii* (DOTsMVS RF)

Institute of Russian History, *Institut rossiiskoi istorii nauchno-issledovatel'skii institut Rossiiskoi akademii nauk* (NA IRI-RAN)

State Archive of the Chuvash Republic, *Gosudarnyi arkhiv Chuvashskoi Respubliki* (GACHR).

Chuvash Regional Museum of Local History, *Chuvashskii kraevedcheskii muzei* (ChKM)

Saratov Regional Museum of Local History, *Saratovskii oblastnoi muzei kraevedeniia* (SOMK)

Introduction

The phenomenon of popular heroism strikes at the heart of the modern era. During the twentieth century, the increasing emphasis placed on ‘the people’ as key to the legitimacy—real or symbolic—of political systems, and on ‘popular tastes’ as key to mass media productions, meant that individuals who figuratively embodied this powerful and anonymous collective were accorded ever greater significance. Popular heroes claimed to speak for the silent majority, but what gave their voices authenticity? While the modern era has seen many variants of popular heroism, the term ‘people’s hero’ was most often met in authoritarian, usually Communist, societies. Were these figures merely proxies for the top-down transmission of official values? Where do the expressions of the enthusiasm for them, manifested in folklore, fiction, and film, fall on the spectrum between genuine and feigned? All popular heroes depend on writers, actors, filmmakers, and tellers of tales and jokes to perpetuate their stories, yet each story morphs with each retelling. In the context of a strictly regulated society, the Soviet Union, where the nature of popular sovereignty was fiercely contested, these dynamics were particularly poignant. The developing story of Vasiliï Ivanovich Chapaev, a ‘people’s hero’ of unprecedented success, is therefore a matter of great historical significance.

Vasiliï Ivanovich Chapaev is without an equivalent in Soviet history. In Russia today, the immense cultural production surrounding the peasant partisan leader, who died fighting for the Bolsheviks in 1919, is known as the ‘Chapaev Phenomenon.’ Chapaev’s mythology was critical to the development of Soviet culture from its earliest moments, yet he was far from an obvious Soviet hero. The Soviet Union was founded on the principles of Marxism, a socio-economic theory which privileged the urban industrial proletariat and envisioned cities and factories as the landscapes of the future. Soviet heroes, especially in the initial stages of the culture, tended to be literate, politically conscious, industrial workers. Chapaev, by contrast, was an emphatic representative of the rural periphery: in many ways the antithesis of the Soviet ideal. And yet, in terms of longevity and flexibility, his popular appeal surpassed that of any other Soviet hero: enduring well beyond the collapse of the Soviet state. His legacy testifies to the power of popular taste and cultural continuity in a context where ideology has too often predetermined historical narratives.¹

Chapaev was born in 1887 to a poor peasant family in a rich agricultural region of the Volga River. Although he spent much of his early life in a burgeoning river port, and worked as an itinerant carpenter rather than a farmer, he was very much a product of the local culture. He attained a degree of literacy, but did not (and probably could not have) read Marx, Engels, and Lenin, or understand the finer points of the Bolshevik platform. His affinity for the party derived primarily from his experiences as a soldier during World War I: like so many others, he was attracted by Lenin’s unwavering commitment to ending the conflict. Chapaev rose to fame during the Russian Civil War as a skilled commander and charismatic leader able to influence popular sentiments. Fighting primarily in the region where he was raised, he embodied the local heroic ideal of the *narodnyi geroi* or ‘people’s hero’: a folk image based upon a centuries-old tradition of popular rural revolt against the imperial centers. This dynamic made him both useful and potentially dangerous to the Bolsheviks, who desperately needed the support of the periphery as they consolidated their control over the former Russian Empire.

¹ This applies to both Soviet and American historians, both of whom are guilty of reducing Soviet history to an inevitable byproduct of Marxism-Leninism.

It was the potential threat Chapaev posed to the Soviet center that helped to secure his lasting fame within it. His exploits were first popularized by the Bolshevik representative, Dmitrii Furmanov, who was sent to monitor him in 1919. In 1923, Furmanov published the novel, *Chapaev*, which became a foundational text in the official Soviet genre of Socialist Realism. Furmanov had served as Chapaev's political commissar during the final months of his life, and wrote the novel more in an effort to appropriate, rather than perpetuate, the commander's heroic legacy. In the immediate aftermath of Stalin's Collectivization campaign, which permanently subordinated the rural periphery to the urban center at the cost of millions of lives, Chapaev's story was adapted to film. The Vasiliev Brothers' 1934 cinematic adaptation, arguably the first truly Stalinist film, rehabilitated the 'people's hero' Furmanov had tried to replace. Chapaev took the lead on the Soviet screen while the political commissar faded into the background. This elevation represented the symbolic triumph of a periphery that had practically been defanged, and the irony did not go unnoticed. After the death of Stalin, Chapaev became the most recognizable figure in the irreverent jokes about the regime that characterized late Soviet popular culture. His popularity ultimately transcended the collapse of the state which had generated it, and his image has subsequently become the most salient symbol of Soviet History itself: perhaps the only example of a widely embraced Soviet legacy besides the Great Patriotic War.

Although the veneration of heroes and the proliferation of iconic images were common features of Soviet culture, Chapaev stood out for a variety of reasons. No other figure attained his popular appeal or longevity. Lenin is an approximate counterpart, but his status as the founder and official embodiment of the state places him in a separate category. Chapaev was neither a founder of the state nor even a representative of the political class. His social origins in the peasantry made him politically suspect during his lifetime. Yet although Chapaev has been an extremely flexible symbol, he is not a 'floating signifier.' His image has constantly evolved to incorporate changes in politics, society, culture, and the technology through which his story has been transmitted, but Chapaev is always accepted as an authentic representative of the people (*narod*). The status of the Soviet people changed dramatically over the course of Soviet history, as the overwhelmingly rural agricultural population became urban and industrial, as yesterday's heroes became today's villains, as Stalinism became post-Stalinism, and as Socialism went from being imminent to being left behind. Over all this time, Chapaev managed to remain one of them: not a 'floating signifier,' but a signifier of 'Us.'

History and Self-Fashioning

This dissertation is an analysis of the relationship between grand narratives and individual identity in the Soviet context. The concept of heroism effectively bridges the divide between the collective and the discrete historical actor, though the category of the hero, long central to historical narratives, has garnered scant attention in recent years.² It is a particularly

² A hero-driven, 'great men' approach to history became particularly marked in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, and was typified by Thomas Carlyle's *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*. Contemporary history, which tends to emphasize the 'bottom-up,' has rightly pushed back against the representation of history as the province of powerful individuals. Yet heroism, too, can be explored from for a bottom-up perspective by analyzing individual and popular engagement with, and influence on, heroic ideals. With the exception of a few recent works, like M. Gregory Kendrick, *The Heroic Ideal: Western Archetypes from the Greeks to the Present* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Printers, 2010), there has been little serious historical discussion of heroism in contemporary scholarship. The contemporary study of heroism has largely been restricted to literary

apt category of investigation in the Soviet context, where “the word ‘hero’ was ubiquitous” by at least as early as the 1930s.³ Heroes and their heroic deeds manifest the ideals of their particular society, but the question of ‘what makes a hero’ is not always straightforward—especially in an environment of dramatically shifting values. The rapid industrialization of the Soviet Union involved the relocation of millions from the village to the city. What was the fate of their rural culture in a society determined to overcome its agricultural legacy? Chapaev’s heroism was not the result of strict adherence to official ideology, and he was never simply a vehicle for the top-down transmission of official values. His heroism in many ways preceded attempts by the Soviet state to harness and shape it, a process which often involved the adaptation of official ideology to popular tastes. What can the seemingly unlikely triumph of the peasant ‘people’s hero,’ even in the eminently urban and supposedly monolithic context of Stalinism, tell us about the agency of popular sentiments in the construction of modern cultural norms?

By analyzing Soviet heroism, I necessarily engage with the history of Soviet self-fashioning: a topic of particular interest in the recent historiography. While the concept overlaps with issues of gender, class, ethnicity, and public persona, in recent years the question of Soviet identity formation has most often centered on the issue of Soviet subjectivity, of how individuals crafted their sense of self and their position within Soviet society, in dialogue with official ideology and cultural norms.⁴ Diaries have been a particularly important source to these analyses, including those of Dmitrii Furmanov, the political commissar whose novel about

studies, which, although useful, rarely go beyond the world of the text. Important examples which have informed the present work include especially Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr., *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000) and Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *The Cossack Hero in Russian literature: A Study in Cultural Mythology* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

² Shelia Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times—Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 71. Even today, visitors to Moscow are greeted with signs informing them that they are entering ‘the city of heroes.’

³ Shelia Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times—Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), 71. Even today, visitors to Moscow are greeted with signs informing them that they are entering ‘the city of heroes.’

⁴The concept of self-fashioning was first laid out in Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Drawing on the ideas of Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Clifford Geertz and others, Greenblatt argues that the modern era has been typified by an increased inwardness and tendency on the part of the individual to craft their own identity. See also Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2001); Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973). Scholars have subsequently pushed back against the exclusively modern valence of self-fashioning, arguing for its existence even in the ancient world.

Debates about Soviet subjectivity—how it is or is not similar to Western subjectivities, whether it is fundamentally constructed in resistance to, or in cooperation with, official ideology—have been central to Soviet historiography over the last several decades. See Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995); Veronique Garros, Natalia Korenevskaya, and Thomas Lahusen, eds., *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1995); Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck, “Rethinking the Stalinist Subject: Stephen Kotkin’s ‘Magnetic Mountain’ and the State of Soviet Historical Studies,” *Jahrbucher fur Geschichte Osteuropas*, Neue Folge, Bd.44, H.3 (1996), pp.456-463; Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006). Recent work on Soviet subjectivity explores intersections with the experience of trauma. See Alexis Peri, *The War Within: Diaries from the Siege of Leningrad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

Chapaev launched the official mythology. My work is the first to investigate the unpublished (i.e. unofficial) versions in detail, and it thus intervenes in the debate about Soviet subjectivity.

Self-fashioning and identity will be investigated in this dissertation from multiple other angles as well. What can we know about Chapaev's own self-fashioning? Since he was only semi-literate, and left no written record of his inner process, we have only the record of his actions, largely chronicled by other people. Many used Chapaev's heroism as a vehicle with which to position themselves within the Soviet context. Some, like Furmanov, left detailed and introspective records, while others wrote songs and folklore, or built museums to him in their home towns. Can a collective, such as a town engage in self-fashioning? In each of these instances, the individuals or collectives seeking to harness Chapaev's popular appeal have had to engage with key questions about Soviet identity.

As an expression of collective values, heroism necessarily engages with essential categories like gender, class, or ethnicity, and Chapaev's mythology is no exception. The 1934 film featured one of the first positive representations of a female combatant in cinematic history. The character of Anka the Machine-Gunner became a model for generations of Soviet women, and her image remained a touchstone for representations of gender over the entire course of Soviet history. Likewise, Chapaev's peasant background and nominal Russian ethnicity have been central to the discussion of his image and its changing representation over time.

Mythology, history, and History

This is in many ways the history of a mythology, or the history of a History, and this requires some explanation. An analysis of the dynamic development of Chapaev's status as a popular hero requires a distinction between History and history. One is a fixed sacral narrative of the past or, as in Hegel and Marx, an almost godlike impersonal force operating in/on human society. The other is the tentative, systematic reconstruction of the past through the collection of evidence. Histories with a capital H rely extensively on myths and heroes. Myths, Histories, and heroes are the embodiment of unquestioned socio-cultural values, akin to Pierre Bourdieu's doxa or Viktor Shklovsky's proverbial chair that people look at without ever really seeing.⁵ The object (or in this case, the representation) is registered and categorized, without ever being engaged on its own terms. A hero is a hero because they act heroically.⁶ The meaning seems given, and few casual observers will stop to parse the details.

Myth can refer to a sacred origin story, which conveys the deepest truths of a culture, and it can also connote intrinsic falsehood, as in the common phrase, 'it's a myth' (meaning 'it's not

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

Viktor Shklovsky was an important theorist of Russian Formalism in the early decades of the 20th century. He believed that the mind tends to categorize the world, becoming mechanical in its interpretation of everyday objects (i.e. the chair) and ideas. Shklovsky argued that the goal of art and criticism (and I would also add, of history) is to 'de-familiarize' the everyday and thereby facilitate sincere engagement with it. See Viktor Shklovsky, "Literature Beyond Plot," *Viktor Shklovsky: A Reader*, Alexandra Berlina, trans., ed. (New York, NY: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

⁶ This usually involves some kind of individual subordination to collective interests or values, in a manner consistent with accepted conventions of model behavior.

true').⁷ Myth is unreliable. Roland Barthes draws on this point, combining it with a Nietzschean conception of myth as “an intensely concentrated image of the world.” Barthes thereby produces a paradigm of mythology as an inherently slippery and highly condensed symbolic language most fully realized in the image-based culture of modern capitalism.⁸ This dissertation draws on Barthes’ idea of myth as a kind of condensed, often slippery language (in the sense of containing hidden assumptions, double-meanings, etc.). But it also draws on Bruce Lincoln’s *Theorizing Myth*, which surveys the changing connotations of *mythos* in ancient usage before arriving at a definition of myth as “*ideology in narrative form*.”⁹ Ideology here signifies the ideas and values which emanate from, and maintain, the dominant social structure. The idea of myth as condensed language is helpful, but I do not intend to engage with semiotic theory or an overtly Marxist analysis. Lincoln’s ideas are the most applicable, especially his conception of the “relation between social order and the stories told about it” as “dynamic” and open to the influence of rival narrators from below, or the “selective hearing and reinterpretation” of audiences over time.¹⁰ Mythology, like ideology, only functions when, and because, individual subjects respond to it.

Both History and Mythology imply origin stories, grand narratives of collective development, and dense layers of cumulative meaning. Yet there is a subtle difference that will become especially important towards the end of this dissertation as Chapaev’s popularity transcends the Soviet Union itself. The study of History was accorded supreme significance in the Soviet Union. History was understood not just as a sequence of events in ‘the story of us,’ but as the philosophical center of the Marxist system. Encapsulated in the dialectic of class struggle leading inevitably from Feudalism to Capitalism to Communism, History was a knowable impersonal force reminiscent of god. The work of historians involved not just the collection and parsing of facts, but, more importantly, it sought to discern the operation of History beneath them. The collapse of the Soviet Union involved the end of an entire way of perceiving the relationship between time, events, and human agency. The Soviet story now had an end, making Soviet History conceivable as a self-contained unit. What was its place in the narratives which succeeded it?

⁷ This sense influences Bourdieu’s definition, which distinguishes myth from doxa by giving it an intermediate status between unquestioned truth and recognized fiction. Here myths are important truths that are nevertheless not given, and still open to interrogation.

⁸ Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 62. Barthes uses two examples, one verbal (an example from a language textbook) and the other visual (a picture in a magazine of a colonial African soldier saluting the French flag) to illustrate the deceptive semantic function of mythology: 116—“The signifier can be looked at, in myth, from two points of view: as the final term of the linguistic system, or as the first term of the mythical system. We therefore need two names. On the plane of language, that is, as the final term of the first system, I shall call the signifier *meaning* ... on the plane of myth, I shall call it form.” “In a simple system like language, the signified cannot distort anything at all because the signifier, being empty, arbitrary [i.e. like Saussure’s signs], offers no resistance to it. But here... the signifier has, so to speak, two aspects: one full, which is the meaning (the history of the lion a, of the Negro soldier), one empty, which is the form... What the concept distorts is of course what is full, the meaning: the lion and the Negro are deprived of their history, changed into gestures.” Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 116, 22. He argues that “myth is a type of speech defined by its intention (*I am a grammatical example*) more than by its literal sense (*my name is lion*); and that in spite of this, its intention is somehow frozen, purified, eternalized, *made absent* by this literal sense. Ibid, 125

⁹ Bruce Lincoln, *Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology, and Scholarship* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), xii.

¹⁰ Ibid, 150.

For the successor states, new grand narratives ‘about us’ usually involved some variation on the theme of victimization. For many of the non-Russian states, the Soviet era could be easily conceived as a period of oppression by the Russians, which ‘we’ endured in order to achieve the national independence enjoy today. For the Russian Federation, this was somewhat more complicated. Rhetoric about the Soviet suppression of Russian nationalism had helped Boris Yeltsin to dismantle the Soviet state. Rumors about the Soviet state being a Jewish plot to oppress Russia had circulated amongst émigrés since the time of the Revolution, and didn’t take long to catch on in certain circles. And yet the Soviet Union had been Russian in a way it could never be Ukrainian, Georgian, or Uzbek. Although it was far from an equivalent, the Soviet Empire had in many ways perpetuated the institutional, social, and cultural legacies of the Russian Empire it replaced. Russian History had become a surrogate Soviet History since Stalin rehabilitated it in the mid-1930s. What was to be the place of this legacy in post-Soviet Russia?

Soviet writers, filmmakers, and museum workers, worked alongside historians, to produce Soviet History. Much Soviet historical research consisted of collecting and documenting evidence from the past, and it would have met modern academic standards. Yet, the underlying organization was almost always mythological. The fact that it was perceived as history, rather than myth, is significant and should be noted. Soviet History took on new contours as a self-contained unit of historical time when the Soviet Union collapsed, and this perception of a separate Soviet epoch was integrated into the post-Soviet Russian experience. In this dissertation, History also needs to be distinguished from Memory, the contemporary *experience* of the past. Whereas Memory tends to be the province of discreet moments and events, which appear and disappear from the collective perception of the past, I refer to Soviet History as the entire lifespan of a discrete civilization. In the post-Soviet period, Chapaev came to represent the Soviet experience in its totality: became, perhaps, the most salient symbol of Soviet History.

Chapaev and the ‘Chapaev Phenomenon’

While Chapaev’s popularity has been noted in Western scholarship, it is rarely (if ever) interrogated on its own terms. The historian Richard Stites explains the “immense popularity” of *Chapaev* by the fact that Chapaev and his men “are *like cowboys*...tough, dirty, rude, even menacing, but also humorous, brave, loyal, and egalitarian.”¹¹ The literary and film scholar Evgeny Dobrenko, whose analyses of Stalinist culture tend towards the actively difficult, nevertheless claims that what “made *Chapaev* popular” was “the tireless interest of the audience in detective stories.”¹² Their statements raise questions: why have cowboys and detectives historically been popular, and what do we mean by popularity? Effectively, such figures represent the most salient features of the eras in which they emerged, and their popularity must be historicized to be understood.

The detective story, for instance, emerged from the modern city, whose rapid growth in the 19th century presented new and mysterious landscapes that required deciphering. In the unprecedented matrix of public and private, “private space was mysterious space, the site of

¹¹ Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 45. Italics mine.

¹² Evgeny Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History*, 227.

secret evils demanding to be penetrated, investigated, exposed, and mapped out by the reader.”¹³ The detective came to signify mastery of the modern urban environment. The popular image of the cowboy developed alongside American populist politics and its ideology of westward expansion. Here again, the popularity of the image is not just given, it results from the condensed historical meaning contained within it.¹⁴

The Chapaev phenomenon has not gone unnoticed by western scholars, but none have adequately historicized it or explained it on its own terms. Julian Graffy’s 2010 I.B. Tauris film companion to the Vasiliev Brothers 1934 film comes closest, contextualizing it by providing a brief, but informative, general survey of the mythology. The most intriguing section sketches the reception and “extraordinary afterlife” of the film, clearly demonstrating its unprecedented popularity and longevity. Yet Graffy’s work is not intended to be an academic history. Effectively describing the Chapaev phenomenon, it makes no effort to analyze or explain it historically.¹⁵ In *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History*, the film scholar Evgeny

¹³ Karen Haltunnen, *Murder Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 123. In Gothic mystery stories (predecessors to the detective genre), such as Eugene Sue’s *Les Mysteres de Paris*, or Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Man of the Crowd*, the city was a dark labyrinth that blended public and private into new and uncertain forms. Ibid, 124. The crowd that inhabited its streets was a strange new organism, at once both menacing and hypnotizing. In Poe’s story, the narrator sits by the window in a London coffee shop and becomes mesmerized by the “tides of population...rushing past the door” and this “tumultuous sea of human heads” fills him “with a delicious novelty of emotion.” Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man of the Crowd” *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: The Modern Library, 1938), 475. He is eventually swept into the street and spends all night obsessively tailing a strange and criminal character, whose mysteries the narrator is compelled to uncover. In 1841, one year after writing *The Man of the Crowd*, Poe allowed his hero Dupin to satisfy this urge to know and thereby created the world’s first detective story *The Murders of the Rue Morgue*. The city could now be read and deciphered by the discerning and scientific mind of the individual detective, who alone was equipped to bring order to the seeming chaos of modern city life. This pattern certainly played out in the Russian context, where the detective craze clearly coincided with the rapid growth of industrial society and the city. For more on the crowd in Poe (as well as in Baudelaire, and E.T.A Hoffman) see Walter Benjamin, “On some motifs in Baudelaire” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflection* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), especially pgs. 166-176. For more on the origins and development of the detective genre see A.E. Murch, *The Development of the Detective Novel* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1958).

¹⁴ In *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic*, the historian Alexander Saxton describes the long evolution of the cowboy image and its relationship to American ideological formation. Beginning in the era of Andrew Jackson (America’s first populist president) “regional and vernacular heroes like David Crockett” were promoted by a burgeoning mass politics to represent the particular concerns of those Americans who occupied the periphery or frontier. Alexander Saxton, *The Rise and Fall of the White Republic: Class Politics and Mass Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Verso, 1990), 84. After the American Civil War, the hegemonic political and cultural power exercised by the Republican Party was mirrored in the “the triumph of the western hero” who had “evolved from regional to western to national” in a process which was “not so much a final de-regionalizing of the hero as the westernizing of national identity.” Ibid, 337. All of this went hand in hand with the extermination of the Native Americans, which the cowboy mythology legitimized. In *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922*, Dutch historians Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes extend Saxton’s analysis to Europe, where Buffalo Bill’s travelling extravaganza, the Wild West Show, effectively transmitted American mass culture by making “the story of the American West merge with the story of European expansion at a time when European colonization reached the far frontiers of its own empires.” Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 111. So the cowboy went from regional western hero to Western hero in the broadest sense.

¹⁵ Graffy’s short film companion admittedly set the stakes for my own research, which was enriched by the imperative to elaborate the upon Graffy’s sketch. For example, in outlining the historical background of the novel and the film, Graffy draws upon several entries from Dmitrii Furmanov’s diary as “presented in the 1960 *Collected Works*.” In my archival work, I found the unpublished versions of these diaries to be an extremely rich source base.

Dobrenko ascribes to the Vasiliev Brothers' 1934 film benchmark status in the development of Stalinist cinema, claiming that "film criticism of the Stalin era fully recognized the birth of a new cinematic style and a new generic canon when it asserted that the line which included *Battleship Potemkin* and *The End of St. Petersburg*, at the center of which lay 'collective mass psychology, which is developed against the backdrop of historic events', ended with Efim Dzigal's film, *We are from Kronstadt* (1936)" and that "the new line began with *Chapaev*."¹⁶ Dobrenko refers to this unique status numerous times, arguing that "Chapaev...laid the foundations of the tradition of the mythologisation of historical biography...at the basis of which was the individual distinctiveness of the person, his or her 'national character'."¹⁷

The archives complicate this narrative. In crafting Chapaev's cinematic image, the Vasilievs struggled to create a type which was both distinct and universal. If anything, they sought to fashion an image of the unrealized ideal of Soviet nationality as an all-inclusive identity --broad as the steppe, as the Soviet land). Historical heroes have a ready-made popular valence by virtue of being part of the collective. The later turn to historical heroes like Alexander Nevsky in the late 1930s was part of the same impulse as Chapaev, but Chapaev was the rare Soviet-era historical hero who worked because he was somehow historically authentic, ambiguous, and dead. He could therefore be transgressive in the popular way without posing a threat to the regime. The undeniable distinctiveness of Chapaev's on-screen persona ultimately owed just as much the Vasilievs' casting of the eminently talented Boris Babochkin in the role than it did to any overarching theoretical agenda. Stalin would later try to establish *Chapaev* as a model for future Soviet films, but the ultimate failure to replicate its success only highlights the fact that the Vasiliev Brothers' achievement owed at least as much to contingency as it did to formula. The true appreciation of Chapaev's significance requires a detailed history of the production process.

Two other works of scholarship have used the image of Chapaev as an organizing metaphor. Angela Brintlinger's *Chapaev and His Comrades: War and the Russian Literary Hero across the Twentieth Century*, is a work of literary scholarship that uses Chapaev as a representative of the popular Soviet war hero, but is emphatically not "a complete history of the Chapaev story."¹⁸ His popularity is described, but not analyzed in depth before proceeding to the survey of Soviet war heroes and their representation over time at the center of the analysis. He is treated as a type of the Socialist Realist hero, with the emphasis on his ideological education and his path from ignorance to consciousness. The lasting image is of a relatively standard war hero: successful and loyal, dashing and brave, the embodiment of official Soviet virtue. While correct, Brintlinger offers only one aspect of his image. The narrative arc of Socialist Realism allowed for the existence of an undisciplined, rebellious, crude, and independent figure, with the understanding that he would be reformed in the end. Yet it was arguably the unredeemed Chapaev who became so beloved and lived the longest.

My comparison of these unedited documents with the more sanitized published versions was extremely productive, becoming the basis of my second chapter as well as important sections throughout the dissertation. Julian Graffy, *Chapaev: KinoFiles Film Companion* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 7.

¹⁶ Evgeny Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History*, 194.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 67.

¹⁸ Angela Brintlinger, *Chapaev and his Comrades: War and the Russian Literary Hero Across the Twentieth Century* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2012), 11.

Justus Grant Hartzok's University of Iowa doctoral dissertation, *Children of Chapaev: the Russian Civil War Cult and the Creation of Soviet Identity, 1918-1941* is a more historical treatment. Yet here again, Hartzok's work is much more about the 'children' and the 'Russian Civil War Cult' than it is about the specific history of Chapaev and his mythology. Only one chapter is devoted to Chapaev, an analysis of the 1934 film with an emphasis on its reception as "a critical mode of contact between the state and everyday citizens, in which people acted not only as spectators, but as active participants."¹⁹ The discussion is insightful, and has informed my own research, yet here too Chapaev and his mythology are ultimately treated tangentially.

These and other works of secondary literature have enriched my analysis. Yet both the film, *Chapaev*, and the popularity of the man himself need to be understood in a broader context, beginning with Chapaev's biography, and continuing through the multiple ways in which his image developed from the 1910s to the present day. I argue that the construction of Chapaev's myth was intimately tied to the identity construction of those individuals, both men and women, with the power to influence the myth. In this sense, my work goes further than previous scholarship in tying personal narratives into the national, civic, and historical narratives that characterized Soviet culture at various points in time.

The inherent diversity of Chapaev's mythology has required an equally diverse source base. This can roughly be divided into three categories, listed in order of importance: archival research—including letters, diaries, military orders, interviews, and formal debates; published works—novels, children's books, folklore collections, memoirs, newspapers, histories; and internet research—online newspapers, discussion boards, fan websites, etc. During my research, I cast a very wide net—scouring the archives of Moscow and several provincial cities, sifting through countless references in Soviet era books, or on the Russian internet, for any mention of Chapaev. A unifying concern has been with defining the status of his heroism and determining if and how it has changed from genre to genre and over time. What, for instance, is the continuity between a Stalinist era 'folk tale' about Chapaev and a Brezhnev-era joke, or a Yeltsin-era video game? I argue that there is in fact continuity. Chapaev is not 'a floating signifier,' for there has always been a unified meaning to his image despite the many and vast transformations.

A study of the 'people's hero,' and of Soviet identity construction, I offer an analysis of the Chapaev phenomenon in 5 chapters. Chapter 1 reconstructs what can be known about Chapaev's life, using contemporary records and memoirs from the Russian State War Archive (RGVA) and the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI). A veteran of the Imperial Army and Civil War hero, Chapaev himself played an active role in managing his own life story, drawing on local legends to bolster his position as a Red Army Commander. The myth rapidly deepened and spread. Dmitry Furmanov's 1923 novel, *Chapaev*, is widely considered to be a foundational text in the establishment of Socialist Realism, and Chapter 2 analyzes Furmanov's extensive unpublished diaries, held in the Manuscript Division of the Russian State Library (NIOR), to explore how he used his experiences serving with Chapaev to create a new Bolshevik hero modeled on himself. The Vasiliev Brothers' 1934 film adaptation, also titled *Chapaev*, is the subject of Chapter 3, which is based upon the personal archives of actors and directors held at the Russian State Archive of Art and Literature (RGALI). *Chapaev*

¹⁹ Justus Grant Hartzok, "Children of Chapaev: the Russian Civil War Cult and the Creation of Soviet Identity, 1918-1941" (A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in History in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa, July 2009), vii.

was a didactic film with genuine mass appeal which is still considered a benchmark classic in Russia today. Both chapters argue that Chapaev mattered at a time when Soviet ideologists sought to legitimate the violence of Civil War (and by extension, collectivization) in popular memory. These chapters also argue for the central importance of new technologies in shaping ideological and artistic expression. In the 1930s, Chapaev was both the product of the development of celluloid and an emblem that made it popular. Chapaev's captivating cinematic image effectively reinvigorated the image of the popular peasant hero that Furmanov's novel had undermined.

Chapaev's persona held genuine mass appeal, which the state tried, with varying degrees of success, to harness and manage. Chapter 4 uses newspaper articles and documents from the archives of provincial Chapaev museums to describe how local governments in the regions where Chapaev had lived and fought used his image to connect their identities to the Soviet center. Chapaev museums became significant sites of Soviet pilgrimage and tourism, and they continue to attract large numbers of visitors every year. But Chapaev's mythology also has an unofficial trajectory, which is the subject of chapter 5. Beginning in the 1960s, he became a central figure in the irreverent jokes about the regime prominent in late Soviet culture. Paradoxically, these jokes underscored the willingness of Soviet citizens to make an ideological hero their own. Even after the fall of the Soviet Union, Chapaev remains an important cultural icon: with a cult novel, a popular computer game, and most recently, a popular miniseries on state television all perpetuating his cultural legacy. The most eclectic in terms of sources, this chapter uses Stalin-era folklore collections and children's books, newspaper articles, joke collections, internet sources and a postmodern novel to explore the fate of the Chapaev's popular trajectory. The myth, I argue, has always concerned the relationship between the present moment and an ambivalent or rejected past, enduring to become the most salient symbol of Soviet History itself.

Chapaev's longevity would be historically significant and worthy of study regardless of the specific context, but is particularly notable in a region that has, perhaps more than any other in modern times, undergone numerous and profound transformations in self-conception. Over the 20th century, Chapaev's homeland has changed from Russian Empire to Soviet Union to Russian Federation. The state's grand legitimating narratives have been 'rewritten' multiple times: from the divine sanction of Orthodox Autocracy, to the will of History as Progress realized through the dictatorship of the Communist Party, to the present incarnation, in which the state primarily justifies itself as a bulwark of order against chaos and secondarily through a resurgent, historically victimized, Russian nationalism (highly problematic in a multinational federation). In Russian and Soviet culture, the most durable popular figures have tended to be ambivalent and somehow transgressive. Russian culture arguably never managed to formulate a stable identity that effectively reconciled the Russian nation with the Russian empire, or to definitively locate that identity within Europe or Asia. The most common self-descriptions have tended to be intrinsically ambiguous: the 'Russian soul' is, for instance, said to be as broad as the Russian land.²⁰

²⁰ The word for ethnic Russians, *russkie*, is not the same as the word for citizens of Russia, *rossiiskie*, who can be of many different ethnicities.

Chapter 1--An Unlikely Hero?: The Ambivalent Origins of a Soviet Icon

In May of 1934, members of the Society (*zemliachestvo*) of Former Chapaevtsy ---a veterans group founded in 1928 to promote the history of the 25th Chapaev Division-- met several times to discuss the history of their unit and its famous commander. The Society had already participated extensively in the production of a film about Chapaev soon to be released by the Vasiliev Brothers. Yet the film, and Dmitrii Furmanov's 1923 novel upon which it was based, did not satisfy the veterans, who still viewed the production of "a plausible historical biography about Chapaev" as a matter of "the utmost necessity."²¹

The search for an authentic personal history of Chapaev is a core feature of his mythology. In spite of the wealth of material devoted to his life, each new work confirms a sense that something essential is missing. Most introductions note that although Chapaev's image is well known from books and film, "the Soviet people still want to know more about the life of this outstanding commander" and promise that "every page" of the current work would "help to more fully present the captivating image of the hero."²² Ironically, most of these attempts to explain this 'exceptional' individual make him typical of broader phenomena. One early volume of reminiscences, published in 1930, refers to him as "a Son of the Revolution" and claims that "He was born in October 1917." While his "official birth date" was obviously much earlier, "Our Chapaev, the one we know and about whom we read, was born precisely in October of 1917 and not in any other year."²³ Here, the hero's connection to the events of the Revolution is so strong that his pre-Revolutionary biography becomes irrelevant.

Prominent representations of Chapaev, such as Furmanov's novel and the Vasilievs' film adaptation of it, focused on the final months of his life as a commander in the Civil War (i.e. the Spring and Summer of 1919, when Furmanov served as his commissar) and this had an obvious impact on the popular desire to learn more about him. Those who had served under him were eager to add their experiences to the ever expanding saga of the commander who, in the aftermath of the 1934 film, had become the most prominent symbol of the Civil War. While few if any Soviet accounts completely severed Chapaev's ties with Revolution, the desire to uncover his background increasingly ascribed heroic agency to his surroundings (both geographic and human).

According to Arsenii Mikhailov, the leader of the Chapaev Society (or *zemliachestvo*), Chapaev's life could only be explained by reference to the region of the lower Volga where he lived and fought. Not only was this region a prominent focal point of pre-revolutionary class tensions, it was a locale with a "great tradition" of revolt, a base of support for such "notorious insurgents" as the peasant rebels of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Stenka Razin and Emilian Pugachev."²⁴ Here Chapaev's heroism is a product of both regional culture and socio-economic conditions. Mikhailov claimed that Chapaev's fame owed much to the people he fought alongside; it was "not a matter of specific individuals, but of the poor peasants and farmhands" who battled for control of the rich agricultural land by the Volga during the Civil

²¹ RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.783, l.2

²² V. Kozlov, *Nash Chapai: Vospominaniia lichnego shofera* (Cheliabinskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1961), 5.

²³ *Chapaev i Chapaevtsy---Sbornik vospominanii k desiatiletiiu gibeli V.I.Chapaeva, 1919—5 Sentabriia—1929* (Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo sredne-volzhskoe oblastnoe otdelenie: Samara, 1930), 5.

²⁴ RGVA—f.28361, op.3, d.788, l.1-2.

War. Without these larger groups, he claimed, “the name of Chapaev would be no more significant than that of Ivanov.”²⁵

Mikhailov’s claim may have resonated with the emphasis on class struggle in Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, yet it fit a broader pattern of myth-making in the Soviet Union. It ascribes Chapaev’s individual greatness to his typicality (exceptional only in his heightened ability to represent those around him). The heroism of Chapaev is variously explained by his participation in the Revolution, his ostensible heritage on the Volga, his alleged birth among the poor peasantry, his profession as a carpenter (which made him vaguely proletarian), and increasingly, his Russian ethnicity.²⁶ In many cases, these representations were the product of jealousy. Many who told the story of Chapaev, including his second in command Ivan Kutiakov, the leader of the regional Soviet, Arsenii Mikhailov, and (especially) his political commissar, Dmitrii Furmanov, were motivated in no small part by a thinly disguised resentment of his fame: a fame to which they contributed, and in which they hoped to share.

Many of the facts of Chapaev’s life are difficult to verify because he left little written record of his own. He was not a completely illiterate man: there are numerous letters, telegraphs, and military orders bearing his name—some of which were indisputably written by him.²⁷ There are also strong indications that he liked to read about famous military commanders, and was well acquainted with the tropes and symbolism of popular heroic tales, which he played on to enhance his fame. Ultimately, however, he was not capable of writing his own saga, and this fact is central to the shape it would take: his actions are always presented and interpreted through the eyes (and for the purposes) of others.

And yet, Chapaev was keenly aware of his public persona: there are moments when his voice breaks through, even though his story is being told by someone else. In the obituary that Furmanov wrote for Chapaev shortly after his death, he recounts a colorful version of the commander’s life which he claims to have learned through conversations with him. In this version of his life, Chapaev was the love child of a gypsy artist and the daughter of the governor of Kazan. The gypsy abandoned the poor girl, whose father was apparently dead, and left her to raise Chapaev alone on the streets.²⁸ This story also appears in the version of Chapaev’s biography contained in Furmanov’s novel (also allegedly based on the commander’s own words) alongside tales of an exploitative apprenticeship to a merchant and a brief career travelling up and down the Volga with his girlfriend singing and playing music while she danced. The obituary, unlike the novel, contains no authorial asides questioning the veracity of these tales.²⁹ While it is certainly possible that Furmanov fabricated these details, when considered alongside other known facts about Chapaev’s life and personality, it seems far more likely that he was the source.

²⁵ Ibid, 3.

²⁶ According to Matiushin, another member of the Chapaev *zemliachestvo*, “if we consider the names of the most famous commanders” in the region, “Toporov—a carpenter, Mikhailov—a carpenter, Chapaev—a carpenter, Demitnik—a cooper... These are proletarians, genuine Bolsheviks, workers.” Ibid, 41.

²⁷ I refer here to letters between Chapaev, Furmanov, and Furmanov’s wife, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

²⁸ TsMVS, Lichnoe delo Chapaeva--4/16.206=2.

²⁹ Dmitrii Furmanov, *Chapaev* (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo «Khudozhestvennaia Literatura», 1967), 110-11.

This uncertainty is itself significant, for the Chapaev legend has managed to remain highly flexible, enduring precisely because of its inherent ambivalence: a legacy of both the Civil War and the person of Chapaev. Indeed, his myth was at its most ambivalent at the very moments in time when its circulation peaked. In 1935, when his symbolic association with the Soviet state was at its zenith due to the Vasiliev Brothers' film, rumors circulated about the fact that "if Chapaev had lived, he might have caused a lot of trouble" or "would have sided with the opposition."³⁰

The core of this dissertation will be dedicated to second-hand representations and perspectives of others, yet this first chapter will consider the known facts about Chapaev's early life and career in an effort to understand the relationship between his general historical context and subsequent fame. This will ultimately demonstrate that Mikhailov (the leader of the Chapaev Society) was, to some extent, correct about the importance of the 'great revolutionary tradition' of the Volga region. The imagery and symbolism of this tradition were central to Chapaev's legend, but only because he deliberately made them so. Chapaev was no 'Ivanov' because his fame was in no small part a product of his own intentions.³¹ Despite the significant handicap of his limited literacy, he succeeded in crafting an enduring popular image of himself.

A Typical Background

Chapaev was born in the year 1887, into an ethnically Russian family in the village of Budaika by the banks of the Volga River: a bustling commercial artery which would wield a strong influence over the course of Chapaev's life and career. The village of Budaika was built on the site of an ancient Chuvash settlement just outside of the city of Cheboksary.³² The establishment of the village had been decreed by Ivan IV (the 'Terrible') in 1555, in conjunction with his conquest of the khanate of Kazan in 1552. The region was dominated by the Turkic speaking Chuvash people and, after subduing the region, the tsar had ordered the establishment of numerous such villages: ethnically Russian colonies intended to help incorporate the newly conquered, ethnically diverse regions into the emerging Russian empire. By the late 19th century, the village shared the region's general stigma of rural backwardness.³³ The family of Ivan Stepanovich Chapaev was allegedly among the most impoverished in the town.

According to Vasilii Ivanovich's cousin, N.G. Nikiforova, the family was very poor, living "in a small, practically empty one-room hut without even an entry hall or a functional roof."³⁴ Such descriptions of Chapaev's youth helped to locate it firmly within the Russian literary genre of the "Anti-Childhood," inaugurated in 1913 by the writer Maxim Gorky and his semi-fictionalized autobiographical account, *Childhood (Detstvo)*. This work, a clear polemic with the tradition of the 'happy gentry childhood' spawned by Lev Tolstoy's 1852 work of the same name, proposed the "unhappy childhood [as] the 'proper' kind, because adversity early in

³⁰ TsMVS--4/16.203=1, 16.

³¹ This refers to Mihailov claim, cited above, that without his comrades Chapaev's name would have been no more recognizable than 'Ivanov'-- the Russian equivalent of 'John Doe' or 'Average Joe.'

³² As Cheboksary expanded in the 20th century, it eventually incorporated Budaika. At the present, the former site of the village is located roughly in the center of the city.

³³ The Chuvash ethnographer, G.I. Komissarov, noted at the turn of the century that it was not uncommon for Russians to mock the Chuvash as "Vasilii Ivanoviches" or "Chuvash hicks" (*Chuvashskie lapotniki*). G.I. Komissarov, *O Chuvashakh: issledovaniia, vospominaniia, dnevniki, pis'ma* (Cheboksary, 2003), 207.

³⁴ CHKM 11097/44, papka No. 49, f. 448, V.A. Nesterov, "K voprosu o dome Chapaevykh."

life was thought to lead to a desire to change the world for the better.”³⁵ The introduction to the children’s book, *Chapai’s Childhood (Detstvo Chapaia)* promises its young readers that since “few of you know how he spent his impoverished childhood,” it would recount “how Vasia Chapaev began to understand that the rich ---merchants and landlords—are the enemies of the working people.” In this story, the residents of Budaika preferred to call their town *Griazevka* (from the root *griaz*, or ‘dirty’). Chapaev was described as having had first experience of command while leading an attack against a local kulak child who lorded his wealth over everyone.³⁶

All embellishments aside, Chapaev no doubt shared in the significant hardships faced by many inhabitants of the Volga region during the late 19th century. Like many former serfs and peasants, the Chapaev family made a long and difficult transition away from agriculture. His grandfather had begun to supplement the family income by working the docks of Cheboksary. According to Vasilii’s older brother, the name ‘Chapaev’ was derived from the nickname given to Stepan Gavrilovich by his fellow workers for his frequent habit of yelling ‘*chep*’, *chep*’, *chepai*’ (from *tsepliai* or ‘hold on’).³⁷ When Vasilii was born, his father earned a living travelling long distances up and down the Volga looking for carpentry work, as there was no way for him to support a family of nine on the roughly five acres of loamy soil he had inherited.³⁸ By the time Vasilii had reached the age of eight, almost half of the farms in his village were receiving at least part of their income from sources other than agriculture.³⁹ According to those who knew him, Chapaev claimed to have spent a period working on steamships and barges as they sailed back and forth from Nizhny Novgorod to Astrakhan (a distance of nearly 1,000 miles).⁴⁰ While this may be fabrication, there is little doubt that he labored alongside his father as an itinerant carpenter, following the construction boom accompanying Russia’s turn-of-the century economic expansion.

These were lean and difficult years for the family. In 1891, four years after Vasilii’s birth, the Chapaevs lost the family patriarch, Stepan Gavrilovich, who allegedly drowned in the Volga while trying to save a co-worker.⁴¹ This was likely a significant economic, as well as personal, loss. While it is unknown for certain how much the grandfather contributed to the family income, it was not uncommon for peasant families (both before and after the emancipation) to pool their resources in order to survive.⁴² Stepan Gavrilovich’s death occurred in the very same year that the region was ravaged by the worst famine in generations, and it is very possible that this was the actual cause of his demise.⁴³ The number of deaths produced by

³⁵ Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *The Battle For Childhood: Creation of a Russian Myth* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 131.

³⁶ Z. Likhacheva, E. Matveeva, *Detstvo Chapaia—povest* (Volgograd: Volgogradskoe Knizhnoe Izdatel’stvo, 1962), 4-7. The introductory quote has no page number, but is located at the very beginning of the text.

³⁷ A.V. Chapaev, K.V. Chapaeva, Ia. A. Volodikhin, *Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev: Ocherk zhizni, revoliutsionnoi i boevoi deiatel’nosti* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1987), 17.

³⁸ Kutiakov, *Boevoi put’ Chapaeva* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe Voennoe Izdatel’stvo, 1936), 4.

³⁹ *Ibid*, 19.

⁴⁰ RGVA- f.28361, op.1, d. 783

⁴¹ Chapaev, Chapaeva, Volodikhin, *Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev*, 20.

⁴² For further on the structure of the peasant family economy, see Stephen L. Hock, *Serfdom and Social Control in Russia: Petrovskoe, a Village in Tambov* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁴³ A dry hot summer and cold dry winter had led to the smallest crop in over a decade. The rye crop, a staple of the peasant diet, was 30% below the average. In Kazan province, where the Chapaevs lived, it was even worse: about 67% below the average. Such a small harvest did not bode well for the peasantry, but did not, in and of itself, mean

the famine is unclear. Death estimates for the peak of the famine in 1892 range between 375,000 and 650,000, many of which were caused by disease as displaced peasants wandering from village to village, brought with them typhus and cholera.⁴⁴ This was only the first of several devastating famines to ravage the Volga region during the 1890s. The decade coincided with the vast expansion of industrialization in Russia, financed primarily through agricultural exports. Combined with a post-Emancipation population boom that, by 1900, had helped to reduce “the average peasant’s allotment...by over a third,” Russia’s industrial expansion only augmented the structural problems of the countryside by offering further incentives for peasants to risk hunger in the hopes of windfall profits that might solve their mounting economic woes.⁴⁵

Yet for those willing and able to leave the land, the industrial boom of the 1890s extended the promise of survival. In 1897, famine again struck the region of the upper Volga where the Chapaevs lived. Throughout the region, “people quit the land, boarded up their cottages, and wandered in great crowds towards the cities.”⁴⁶ For Vasili Chapaev’s father, Ivan Stepanovich, who knew the region better than most of his neighbors, the time had come to move to greener pastures. Rather than boarding up the small family hut, he sold it, and moved his family to the booming commercial center of Balakovo far to the south along the Volga --a significant change from the small rural village of Budaika. At the turn of the century, Balakovo was the second most prosperous grain and bread market on the Volga, after Samara to the north. Here grain from the surrounding steppe was collected and shipped up and down the Volga, or along other tributaries east all the way to the Ural mountains. This rapidly expanding commercial hub, which had been barely more than a village at the time of the Emancipation in 1861, had cobblestone streets and numerous stone houses, as well as taverns, restaurants, hotels, banks, schools, a telegraph office and even a cinema.⁴⁷ Here, Ivan Stepanovich and his sons built their new home: a small, one room hut with three windows and a carpentry workshop in place of a yard.

Further details are difficult to verify. It seems certain that the children spent a period of time in school, though there are contradictory reports about the length and nature of this education. Still, later correspondence by Chapaev is evidence of some literacy. According to several accounts, he was apprenticed to a local merchant named Beloglazov, who promised to

that famine was unavoidable. The situation was compounded by emerging structural problems in the Russian countryside. Indeed, many signs associated with famine, such as using substitutes for grain in bread (so-called *famine bread*), were noticed by observers even before the disastrous harvest. Peasants who tried to support themselves and their families from the land were often only able to do so through methods that were risky and, in the long term, unsustainable. They reduced the size of their herds and converted pastures to fields. They failed to let fields lie fallow, choosing instead to burn them over and replant: hoping that a bumper harvest would enable them to finally get ahead. For many, the ability “to meet their obligations had reached its limits and arrears on taxes and redemption payments grew steadily.” In the years leading up to the famine, officials noted that many peasants were selling off needed livestock just to feed their families. When the harvest failed, many of them had nothing left to fall back on. Richard G. Robbins Jr., *Famine in Russia, 1891-1892* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1975), 2-10.

⁴⁴ Richard G. Robbins Jr., *Famine in Russia, 1891-1892* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1975), 170-171.

⁴⁵ Barbara Alpern Engel, *Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861-1914* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2.

⁴⁶ Kutiakov, *Boevoi put’ Chapaeva*, 4.

⁴⁷ E.N. Artemov, *V.I. Chapaev na zemle Saratovskoi* (Saratov: Privolzhskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1974), 7.

turn the boy into a “market man” (*torgovlyi chelovek*).⁴⁸ Vasilii was allegedly forced to work without pay, “for a piece of bread,” and was “encouraged” by Beloglazov to work harder through frequent beatings. After leaving Beloglazov, the young Chapaev allegedly spent time working in a teahouse, where he slaved away from early in the morning until late at night for three rubles a month.⁴⁹ These accounts clearly draw on tropes of the ‘Anti-Childhood’ and are probably apocryphal, though they may have been first told by Chapaev himself.⁵⁰ Once again, it seems relatively certain that he began at some point to work as a carpenter with his father spending the warmer months travelling around the county (uezd) of Nikolaevsk and working with his collective (*artel*).⁵¹

A clearly turning point came when his older brother, Andrei, was arrested while serving in the army and, shortly thereafter, executed. According to one account, Andrei had been accused of engaging in anti-government propaganda during the Revolution of 1905 and was shot while trying to escape imprisonment in Siberia.⁵² Not long after this, in 1908, Vasilii Ivanovich was himself called up for military service. The knowledge that his brother had been executed by the state while serving as a soldier can only have made the process more difficult for him. Vasilii somehow managed to dramatically reduce the length of his service. Called up in November of 1908, he was demobilized in the spring of 1909, “allegedly for sickness.”⁵³ Whatever his supposed ailment, it was not serious enough to prevent him from continuing his carpentry work, nor did it keep him from getting married that July to Pelageia Nikanorovna Metlina, a worker at a local Balakovo candy factory.

It was to be an unhappy, though not altogether unproductive, marriage. The couple had three children between 1910 and 1914: two sons and a daughter. The youngest, Arkadii, was born during the summer of 1914. Whatever the nature of Vasilii Ivanovich’s previous ailment, it was not enough to exempt him from service in the war with Germany and Austria-Hungary. The separation necessitated by war put a strain upon a marriage that already seems to have been suffering. Most accounts agree that Pelageia decided to abandon her children when Chapaev left for the front because she had “fell in love with another man,” but her confinement in the family’s small one room house, with three small children and her husband’s parents, was probably also a factor.⁵⁴

The effect this abandonment had on Chapaev can only be guessed at. What is certain about his subsequent service in the war is that he exhibited enough heroism to be awarded the distinguished St. George’s Cross (the most prestigious award in the Imperial Russian Army) four

⁴⁸ Artemov, *V.I. Chapaev na zemle Saratovskoi*, 9; Kutiakov, *Boevoi put’ Chapaeva*, 5.

⁴⁹ Kutiakov, *Boevoi put’ Chapaeva*, 6-7.

⁵⁰ In his obituary, Furmanov includes similar accounts, reportedly told to him by Chapaev, of being apprenticed and exploited as a child. TsMVS--4/16.206=2.

⁵¹ Artemov, *V.I. Chapaev na zemle Saratovskoi*, 9. One of Chapaev’s junior officers, I.T. Strel’tsov, remembers that he first met the commander while the latter was building a church with the *artel* in the village of Klintsovka prior to the war—see RGVA-f.28361, op.1, d.783, 4.

⁵² RGVA-f.28361, op.1, d.783, 10. Mutinies within the military were a prominent feature of this period. Between May and July of 1906 alone, there were 149 mutinies---many of which included political demands, such as “higher pay and better food, better clothing and medical treatment...free transportation while on leave..an end to the use of troops in police actions (and) the granting of freedom of assembly to civilians and soldiers.” Abraham Ascher, *The Revolution of 1905: A Short History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 152.

⁵³ Chapaev, Chapaeva, Volodikhin, *Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev*, 29.

⁵⁴ RGASPI-f.71, op.34, d.1026 “Boevyi put’ 25-go Strelkovoi Chapaevskoi divizii,” 9.

times.⁵⁵ Stefan Fedorovich Danil'chenko, who would serve as an officer under Chapaev during the Civil War, remembered having heard stories and rumors about Chapaev's various exploits while fighting in a neighboring unit in the Carpathian Mountains (in present-day Romania). Chapaev was apparently known throughout the ranks as an "experienced scout, who was often entrusted with difficult assignments."⁵⁶

Many of these First World War stories were almost certainly fabricated, such as one in which Chapaev pretended to be decapitated by buying his head in the parapet of a trench as he lay wounded among a group of his fellow soldiers cut down by an unexpected Austrian assault. Before moving on, the Austrians stationed three observers not far from where Chapaev lay. After waiting for the perfect moment, "Chapaev 'rose from the dead,'" crept up to the sleeping Austrians, and took them prisoner: forcing two of them to help transport a gravely wounded comrade back to the Russian camp.⁵⁷ Other stories emphasize Chapaev's lack of regard for authority, outdone only by his indifference to his own safety in battle, do fit with the known facts about his later career. Even before receiving his awards, Vasilii Ivanovich had allegedly been "unable to tolerate unfair orders and conditions," and "after receiving four medals this intolerance only increased." On one occasion, he "rudely interrupted a superior officer," who was also a member of the nobility (*dvorianin*), and would have been subject to capital punishment had he not been "saved by his Crosses."⁵⁸

It is also certain that, just as in the Civil War, Chapaev was repeatedly wounded in battle over the course of his service in the First World War. On September 27, 1915 he was wounded during a series of battles fought in the forests between the villages of Tsuman and Kaprilovka.⁵⁹ On December 1 of the same year, he was again hospitalized for wounds sustained in battle.⁶⁰ Several months later, a superior officer, Count Barantsov, recommended Chapaev for a St. George's Cross for his actions during combat on June 15, 1916 near the city of Kutuy, where he claims that Chapaev provided a "powerful example of bravery and courage to his subordinates." After "being dangerously wounded" he "bandaged his own wounds before returning to his unit and continuing to engage in combat."⁶¹ Towards the end of 1916, Chapaev was again hospitalized due to "the reopening of an old wound."⁶² At this point, his superiors judged him no longer fit for service, or perhaps they decided to be merciful to a soldier who had so clearly done

⁵⁵ RGVA-f.28361, d.783 "Stenogrammy obshchego sobraniia Chapaevskogo zemliachestva. 15 maia 1934," 5. The unprecedented casualty rates and brutal conditions of the First World War certainly made upward mobility in the army easier, and the practice of bestowing medals in order to keep up flagging moral was notorious. Even so, the St. George's Cross remained a highly prestigious award, and to receive four such crosses was a rare honor. During the final days of the Provisional Government, Konstantin Ivanovich Ryabtsev, commander of the Moscow Military District, advised militias organizing in resistance to the Bolshevik uprising in Moscow to set aside the most important posts for *Georgievskie Kavelery* (recipients of the St. George's Cross). The fate of the country, he claimed, lay in the "hands of these proven defenders of the Motherland." RGASPI—f.71, op.33, d.29, l. 111.

⁵⁶ S.F. Danil'chenko, *Chapaev i Chapaevtsy* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1973), 7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 9.

⁵⁸ RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.783, l.5-6.

⁵⁹ *Legendarnyj Nachdiv: Sbornik dokumentov*, "Iz prikaza po 326 polku ob iskluchenii V.I. Chapaeva s dovol'stviia posle ranenii, 30 sentiabria 1915 g.," (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1986), 11.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, "Iz prikaza po 326 polku o zachislenii na dovol'stvie vylechivshikhsia ot ran, 1 dekabria 1915," 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, "Iz prikaza po 11 armeiskomu korpusu o nagrazhdenii V.I. Chapaeva Georgievskim Krestom 2 Stepeni, 23 oktiabria 1916," 15.

⁶² "Doklad Strel'tsova" iz RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.783, *Stenogrammy obshchego sobraniia Chapaevskogo zemliachestva. 15 maia 1934 g.*, 6.

his duty, yet this was to be the end of his service in World War One. Chapaev was evacuated to a hospital in the city of Saratov, located on the Volga about 110 miles south of Balakovo.⁶³

Saratov had long had a reputation as one of the most radical cities on the Volga. Its location far from the seat of imperial power helped contribute to an “unusual mixture of independent-minded people” and “encouraged a local spirit of defiance.”⁶⁴ The centrality of the grain market, and close proximity to one of the most fertile agricultural regions in Russia, gave the city a distinctly peasant character. The ‘Peasant Problem’ --how to penetrate the notoriously insular peasant universe and introduce reforms that would alleviate the grinding, systemic poverty that plagued the rural inhabitants who comprised roughly 80% of the Russian population—stood at the center of local political and intellectual debates.⁶⁵ By the time war broke out in Europe, Saratov had become one of the centers of the Socialist Revolutionaries, a peasant-oriented party that was easily the most popular in Russia, and which would present the Bolsheviks with one of their most formidable opponents as the Revolution and the Civil War unfolded.⁶⁶

The already tense situation in Saratov had been compounded, as elsewhere, by the First World War. According to the 1897 census, more than three-quarters of the province’s residents were defined as ethnically Russian. The war “altered Saratov’s social makeup” as large numbers of ethnic Russians were conscripted and their jobs were taken over by Poles, Latvians, Ukrainians, and other nationalities fleeing the fighting. Perhaps the most potentially disruptive demographic transformation, however, was that introduced by the Saratov garrison, where Chapaev now found himself. The garrison was the second largest in the Kazan Military District (surpassed only by Kazan itself) and the population of soldiers flowing to and from the front varied from 30,000 to 70,000 (this in a city whose population in 1913 was estimated at 242,425).⁶⁷

After the February Revolution, Saratov and the surrounding region Lower Volga region experienced upheavals that were often just as serious as those faced in the urban centers of Petrograd and Moscow. Village assemblies traditionally charged with the oversight of local problems, such as the redistribution of communal land and the payment of collective taxes, had experienced a dramatic increase in the scope of their responsibilities during the course of the war as the center increasingly relied on local leaders to coordinate the “compulsory collection of foodstuffs” and the “billeting of refugees and prisoners of war.”⁶⁸ As the central government collapsed, many of these assemblies “began to turn themselves into autonomous ‘governments’, authorizing the peasant seizure of private property in the rural localities.”⁶⁹ In a provincial capital with a large garrison, such as Saratov, the situation was compounded by the presence of tens of thousands of war-weary peasant soldiers. Many of them were eager to return home to

⁶³ Kutiakov, *Boevoi put' Chapaeva*, 11.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 23.

⁶⁵ Nikolai Chernyshevsky, easily the most influential Russian revolutionary of the 19th century, had spent his formative years here.

⁶⁶ Donald J. Raleigh, *Experiencing Russia's Civil War: Politics, Society, and Revolutionary Culture in Saratov, 1917-1922* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 4.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 16-19.

⁶⁸ Orlando Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution 1917-1921* (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), 32.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 40.

their villages to claim their share of the land, or to protect their families from the increasingly violent outbreaks of ‘agrarian revolution’. In a diary entry dated March 29, 1917, Saratov resident Alexander Babine noted that “stragglers, worn out, shabbily clad soldiers” were “beginning to line the road, trudging wearily along, with half empty knapsacks on their backs, homeward bound.”⁷⁰

This turbulent atmosphere clearly had an impact upon Chapaev. Virtually nothing is known about his political views before his time in Saratov. His war record reveals only a highly-decorated, trusted soldier of the Imperial Army. It was allegedly during his time in the Saratov garrison that Chapaev began to develop radical political views as he “fell under the influence of several of his comrades” who convinced him to join a group of local “anarcho-communists.”⁷¹ And yet the extent to which he was engaged or even interested in the theoretical side of revolutionary politics remains unclear. Arsenii Mikhailov later argued that, as someone “personally very well-acquainted with Chapaev” he “strongly doubted” the extent to which Vasilii Ivanovich understood political matters. “In my opinion,” he claimed, “he simply could not comprehend that much.”⁷²

Accounts of his early involvement in revolutionary activity indicate that he, like many peasant soldiers from the Volga region, was primarily concerned with ending the war and returning home.⁷³ By November of 1917, public opinion amongst the soldiers had shifted decisively toward the Bolsheviks. Sometime near the end of September 1917, Chapaev arrived in the town of Nikolaevsk, the administrative center of Nikolaevsk *uezd*, located around 140 miles northeast of Saratov and only 50 miles from his family in Balakovo. Mikhailov remembers that Chapaev arrived at the headquarters of the local Bolsheviks dressed to impress: “the ends of his black mustache were curled into thin rings... and he wore a grey overcoat with epaulettes on the shoulders, with a saber and revolver hanging from the belt. His boots were polished to perfection.” He approached and asked, “May I sign up with the Bolsheviks here?” The bemused Mikhailov offered the dashing young officer a seat and questioned him about his social and political background. Chapaev’s answers, which apparently focused on his loyal military service and dislike of the Tsar, were apparently sufficient for Mikhailov. He gave the “unusual visitor” a copy of the party platform and instructed him to attend an upcoming meeting. “And so” he later explained, “Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev became a member of our glorious Bolshevik Communist Party.”⁷⁴

The process described is relatively consistent with the mass-party ethos of the Bolsheviks during the early days of the Revolution. Often desperate for support, many officials were quite willing to overlook deficiencies in political consciousness in individuals who could serve the practical needs of the moment. And more than anything else, the Party in the small town of

⁷⁰ Donald J. Raleigh, ed., *A Russian Civil War Diary: Alexis Babine in Saratov, 1917-1922* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988), 11.

⁷¹ Kutiakov, *Boevoi put' Chapaeva*, 12.

⁷² RGVA—f.28361, op.3, d.783, l.13.

⁷³ Danil'chenko, *Chapaev I Chapaevtsy*, 11-12.

⁷⁴ Arseny Mikhailov, *V.I. Chapaev v Pugachevske* (Biblioteka ‘Ogonek’ № 33 (983), Zhurnal'no-Gazetnoe Ob`edinenie Moskva, 1936), 5-7. Mikhailov remembers the incident taking place near the beginning of October, but, when registering at the Military Academy in Moscow, Chapaev claimed that he signed up with the Bolsheviks on September 28, 1917. (*Legendarnyi Nachdiv: Sbornik Dokumentov*, 274). The confusion may be related to the use of the Julian calendar in Russia prior to the Bolshevik Revolution.

Nikolaevsk needed well-trained fighters with an ability to connect with the soldiers and peasants. Nikolaevsk uezd was a large agricultural region containing roughly 750,000 inhabitants (most of them peasants). It was also the home of the 138 Infantry Reserve Regiment, whose garrison fluctuated between 12,000—17,000 soldiers (the upper limit being roughly equal to the entire population of the ‘city’).⁷⁵

During the February Revolution, the regiment had mutinied, arrested its officer corps, and subjected them to trial by military tribunal. Under the direction of activist soldiers like Veniamin Iosifovich Ermoshchenko, a member of the Bolshevik Party since 1909, the regiment took control of the town, establishing a soldiers’ soviet (council) chaired by Ermoshchenko himself.⁷⁶ The Soviet quickly found itself at odds with both the Provisional Government and the Socialist Revolutionaries, who dominated local revolutionary politics (outside of the garrison). Officials from the Kazan Military District sent an order to the Nikolaevsk garrison, nullifying its self-elected leadership and demanding that Ermoshchenko be delivered to the military tribunal in Kazan. The Nikolaevsk Soviet simply ignored these demands and continued to pursue its own local agenda.⁷⁷ There was little that the Provisional Government could do to stop it.

The region was the scene of a violent sectional conflict, in which the peasantry spontaneously confiscated the gentry land they had so long seen as their rightful property since the disappointing days of the Emancipation. They did so *en masse*, not along the largely imaginary ‘class’ lines the Bolsheviks would later delineate within the village.⁷⁸ Any political group aspiring to popular support in this context had to endorse the agrarian revolution. Since the redistribution of gentry land among the peasantry had been a traditional platform of the Socialist Revolutionaries (a popular anarcho-communist party which saw the Russian peasant village as model of the socialist future), they were particularly well-positioned to capitalize on it. And they didn’t hesitate to do so. At the end of May 1917, the Nikolaevsk Committee of

⁷⁵ RGVA- f.28361, op.1, d.777, l. 1.

⁷⁶ Chapaev, Chapaeva, Volodikhin, *Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev*, 49. The soviets that spontaneously organized throughout Russia during and after the February Revolution were relatively independent, democratic organizations comprised of workers and soldiers and representing their interests. Although they tended to be socialist, they were by no means dominated by the Bolsheviks. Indeed, many of the divisive issues, pitting the Bolsheviks against the Mensheviks or the Socialist Revolutionaries, which would eventually spill over into open conflict during the Civil War, were first debated within the soviets. The soviets made their first appearance on the political landscape of Russia during the turbulent days of the 1905 Revolution. Their initial purpose was to “provide unified leadership for workers and to serve as strike committees” but many eventually “evolved into organizations that fused the struggle for economic and political change.” Abraham Ascher, *The Revolution of 1905: A Short History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 45. Trotsky first rose to national prominence in Russian revolutionary politics as a leader of the St. Petersburg Soviet during 1905. The first volume of Isaac Deutscher’s biography of Trotsky, *The Prophet Armed* remains perhaps the most gripping (and informative) narrative about the place of the soviet in the politics of the Russian Revolutions.

⁷⁷ RGVA- f.28361, op.1, d.777, l.3.

⁷⁸ For discussions of the complicated nature of social categories in Russia, see Gregory L. Freeze, “The *Soslovie* (Estate) Paradigm in Russian Social History.” *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 11-36, and Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *Structures of Society: imperial Russia’s ‘People of Various Ranks’* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994). For Bolshevik attempts to overcome these realities, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Bolshevik Invention of Class” and “Class and *Soslovie*” in *Tear Off the Masks!: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 29-50 and 71-87.

People's Power (*Komitet Narodnoi voly* or KNV) became one of the first entities in Russia to be chastised by the Provisional Government for endorsing the peasant land grab.⁷⁹

Chapaev's reasons for choosing Nikolaevsk as his home base, and the Bolsheviks as his party, were probably both influenced by his family. The town was only about fifty miles from his family in Balakovo: the closest he had been to them since 1914. During the previous summer, he allegedly brought his seven year-old son Alexander to live with him in the Saratov barracks for a month, indicating that he desired to be nearer to his family.⁸⁰ The fact that his brother Grigory the Bolshevik War Commissar of Balakovo probably played a role in his decision to join the Bolsheviks, though he left no record of his political beliefs.⁸¹ But this decision was ultimately typical of broader political sentiments among common soldiers, which shifted decisively towards the Bolsheviks over the summer of 1917 as Lenin's firm commitment to immediate peace made him increasingly preferable to Alexander Kerensky (the SR leader of the Provisional Government), who seemed determined to continue the war at all costs.

One of Chapaev's strengths was his ability to connect with his fellow soldiers, and he quickly gained popularity in the Nikolaevsk garrison. While he was initially appointed as a sergeant-major (*fel'dfebel'*) in charge of the garrison's fourth company, on December 13, 1917, in a move characteristic of the democratic volunteerism dominating the ethos of the armed forces at the time, Chapaev was "unanimously elected" by the 138th Reserve Regiment to command the entire garrison.⁸² The introduction of elections coincided with dramatic changes in the structure of the Soviet military. The Bolsheviks had come to power on promises of land and peace---both of which hinged on the demobilization of the army so that peasant soldiers could return to their villages and participate in the redistribution of gentry land. And yet, the internal domestic conflict that was an immediate and conscious byproduct of the Bolshevik takeover meant that they still needed soldiers to fight for them. While many demobilized soldiers left the army, others, like Chapaev, stayed in order to protect the gains of the Revolution. There was a widespread anxiety (deliberately stoked by Bolshevik propaganda) that a counter-revolution would strip the peasants of the lands, rights, and peace they believed they had won. Across rich agricultural region of the Lower Volga, officers were voted out, new commanders were chosen, and detachments of revolutionary Red Guards came "spontaneously" into existence. According to Ermoshchenko, the first "test" faced by this new Red Guard detachment in Nikolaevsk was the "pacification" of an uprising in Balakovo, which broke out on February 9, 1918.⁸³

For Chapaev, the event could hardly have been more personal. Not only did his children and his parents live in Balakovo, but his brother Grigorii was the local Bolshevik Party's War Commissar. According to Valentin Sechko, who was the Commissar of Labor in Balakovo at the time, the Bolshevik presence there was quite tenuous. The town apparently contained "only about one hundred communists" and, unlike other important population centers in the region, such as Samara, Nikolaevsk, and Saratov, it had not even managed to organize a local soviet of

⁷⁹ Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War.*, 42.

⁸⁰ Chapaev, Chapaeva, Volodikhin, *Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev*, 48.

⁸¹ One account claims that Grigory was "if it is possible to use such an expression, a Bolshevik fanatic." RGASPI—f.71, d.34, d.1026, l. 9.

⁸² Kutiakov, *Boevoi Put' Chapaeva*, 14; "Protokol sobraniia garnizona g. Nikolaevska ob izbranii V.I. Chapaeva komandirov 138 pekhotnogo polka I vystuplenii polka na pomoshch' Tsaritsinu, 13 dekabriia 1917 g." in *Legendarnyj Nachdiv: Sbornik Dokumentov*, 23.

⁸³ RGVA-f.28361, op.1, d.777, l.5.

workers and peasants. The authorities in Balakovo had waited until December of 1917 (i.e. significantly later than its neighbors) to recognize the new Soviet government: a fact which testifies to the ambivalence of the population towards the new regime.

Grigorii Chapaev seems to have responded to the unrest almost immediately. He organized a small detachment of Red Guards and hastened to the square to confront the rioters. It is unclear whether he was fully aware of the scope of the unrest, or just believed that he could somehow diffuse the situation. Regardless, his small contingent was hopelessly outnumbered. The rioters quickly opened fire on the Red Guards, killing a number of them and scattering the rest. Grigorii Chapaev was gravely wounded. According to several accounts, he endured “brutal tortures” before finally being killed.⁸⁴ When news of the uprising in Balakovo reached Nikolaevsk, Ermoshchenko sent a contingent of Red Guards, under the command of Vasilii Ivanovich, to suppress it. Chapaev ordered the detachment to undertake forced nighttime marches “despite the frost and the difficulty of the road.” Yet they faced resistance in several villages along the way and were only able to reach Balakovo on the 13th of February. Chapaev divided his forces and attacked the city from the south and the east. This assault, combined with the ongoing resistance of local workers and Bolsheviks, quickly brought the city back under Soviet control.⁸⁵

It was too late to save his brother, but the rest of his family remained unharmed. The loss of another brother was surely a blow to Chapaev. His parents were devastated. His mother could not even bring herself to attend the funeral: a solemn civic event complete with red flags, wreaths, and banners with Bolshevik slogans. It drew great crowds, including Red Guards’ detachments from Samara and other surrounding cities.⁸⁶ Thus, at the beginning of 1918, Chapaev, already the commander of a detachment of Red Guards, became the brother of a local Bolshevik martyr.

Chapaev’s lesson

The year 1918 would see Chapaev become one of the most famous and talented commanders in the Bolshevik army. Although he began the year as the obscure leader of a small detachment of rural partisans, by November he had been sent to the newly opened Moscow Military Academy. This was both an affirmation of his perceived value to the Soviet state and a disciplinary measure intended to rein in the talented, but problematic commander. The story of his time in Moscow would be told and retold countless times, but was first recorded by Dmitry Furmanov in his novel—occurring after a scene in which the commander and his new commissar had been arguing over the Red Army’s need for trained generals to impart military knowledge. In response to Furmanov’s claim that the military needed trained officers, Chapaev claims, “I was with them at the academy. For two months I dangled my prick in cabbage soup before being spit out here again.”⁸⁷ There was nothing for our brothers to do there.” He then tells how, during

⁸⁴ Kutiakov, *Boevoi put’ Chapaeva*, 18.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 19.

⁸⁶ V.V. Biriulin, *Narodnyi polkovodets* (Saratov: Privolzhskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1986), 46; Chapaev, Chapaeva, Volodikhin, *Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev*, 71.

⁸⁷ Furmanov, *Chapaev*, 76. The literal expression here is “*kak khren vo shchakh*.” *Khren* (horseradish) is a euphemism for *khui* (the most obscene expression for the male organ). Furmanov is providing a somewhat sanitized version of a common expression “like a prick in cabbage soup” (meaning ‘useless’). Related sayings include ‘*Shchi khot’ khui poloshi*,’ referring to ‘*shchi* (cabbage soup) so bad it’s only good for washing your *khui*,’ and ‘*sidit doma*,

one exam, a professor asked him if he knew where the Rhine River was, and he responded “No, I don’t. But do you know where the Solyanka River is?” The professor, “gawked, not expecting this” and said “No, what of it?” to which Chapaev replied, “It means your questions are empty...I was wounded on the Solyanka and crossed it back and forth five times...What the devil does your Rhine River mean to me? But I do need to know every little hill along the Solyanka, because that’s where we fight the Cossacks!”⁸⁸

As time went by, this story was increasingly used to demonstrate Chapaev’s natural military talent and the ignorance of central authorities about the needs of the periphery. In Furmanov’s telling, by contrast, the story is meant to illustrate the childishness of the ‘People’s Hero’-- a heroic type he equated with Chapaev and was eager to deconstruct in his novel. Whether or not the account was true, it indicates an ambivalence at the heart of the Chapaev image which has been a crucial source of the flexibility and endurance of his myth. This ambivalence derives in no small part from the history of Chapaev’s military career over the course of 1918, which itself was a microcosm for broader developments taking place within the burgeoning Soviet Red Army.

During the early years of the Civil War, representatives of the Bolshevik center increasingly struggled to reconcile their very real need for such adept and charismatic leaders as Chapaev in the disintegrating state periphery with a deepening anxiety over the potential threat these leaders (or groups) posed as alternative sources of authority and identity. This was particularly true in the military. While the Bolsheviks had gained much of their popularity by refusing to compromise with the Provisional Government, they could not afford to let ideological scruples stand in the way of building an effective army. Lev Trotsky, charged with the creation of the Red Army, was often forced to rely on former Tsarist officers, many of whom came from the hated aristocracy. When possible, Bolsheviks preferred to recruit “former NCOs of the Tsarist army” like Chapaev.⁸⁹

The long-term plan was to train up a new corps of officers from the working class. But in the immediate context of the war, non-commissioned officers like Chapaev were the best the Red Army could hope for, because they claimed loyalty to the Bolshevik cause, even if they remained largely ignorant of ideological subtleties. The social background of an NCO, though often less than ideal, was less repugnant to Bolshevik ideology than that of the aristocratic officers who made up the bulk of the military specialists. And yet, ironically, the very gulf between the former elites and the bulk of the population which rendered them symbolically offensive as servants of the workers’ state, may actually have made them less threatening. Charismatic commoners like Chapaev (or Nestor Makhno, Aleksandr Antonov, etc.) were able to garner popular support, which multiplied the potential danger they posed. The history of Chapaev represents a broader pattern of relations between the embattled Soviet state and the provincial leaders it needed, but could not fully trust.

This dynamic in many ways mirrored the historical relationship between the Russian Empire and the Cossack hosts who guarded its frontier. Long before achieving their symbolic

khui v schakh poloshchet’ (sitting at home doing nothing, rinsing his *khui* in *shchi*). This nod to Chapaev’s vulgar folksiness gets somewhat lost in translation.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Leon Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, Vol 1: 1918 (London, UK: New Park Publications, Ltd., 1979), 12.

status as loyal guardians of the state, the Cossacks had effectively represented the limits of its influence in the periphery. It is therefore significant that as the fame of his partisans increased, Chapaev and his men increasingly appropriated the symbolic appeal of famous Cossack heroes: changing the name of their base of operations from Nikolaevsk to Pugachev and taking the names of Pugachev and Razin for two of their loosely organized ‘regiments’.⁹⁰ The fact that a prominent Bolshevik representative such as Leon Trotsky would characterize the dynamic between center and periphery in analogous terms --referring to partisan leaders like Chapaev as “*atamans*” (a term used for Cossack chieftans)-- suggests that for all of its radical newness, the Soviet Union was unavoidably shaped by its context.⁹¹ Chapaev was not the only pupil in the lesson described above: the historical background of this tale reveals the extent to which the

⁹⁰ RGASPI—f.71, op.33, d.380, l.1; Arsenii Mikhailov, *V.I. Chapaev v Pugachevske* (Biblioteka ‘Ogonek’ №33 (948), Zhural’no-Zhurnal’no-Gazetnoe Ob”edinenie Moskva—1936), 25. Emilian Pugachev and Stenka Razin were the leaders of substantial rural uprisings of Cossacks and peasants against the autocracy in the 17th and 18th centuries. The region of the Volga where Chapaev lived and fought was an important base of support for both. The historian Serhii Plokhy explains that the Cossacks were “a product of the Eurasian frontier, where steppe and settled area, farmers and nomads, Christianity and Islam came together during late medieval and early modern times to create a unique culture.” See Serhii Plokhy, *The Cossack Myth: History and Nationhood in the Age of Empires* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 31. The literary scholar, Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, argues in her study of Cossack mythology in Russian culture, that the Cossack has long occupied an ambivalent space in the popular imagination of the former Russian Empire. It is the Cossack’s very liminality that is central to their appeal and effectiveness as symbols for Russian culture. As both occupants and vanguards of an expanding frontier, they embody the vast physical geography of the Russian state in human form (becoming natural representatives of the typical ‘wide’ and wild ‘Russian soul’). The European ‘discovery of the nation’-- the craze for establishing deep cultural connections between ethno-linguistic populations (nations) and the territory they inhabited— beginning in the late eighteenth century, was particularly problematic for a contiguous land empire like Russia, which incorporated not just a huge physical space, but also an incredible diversity of peoples, within its borders. As a distinctly Russian national culture developed over the course of the nineteenth century, Cossacks increasingly came to represent the quintessential folk hero. The historic Cossack combination of Slavic and Turkic cultural elements symbolically “helped reconcile at least two major sets of related opposites that plagued [Russian] society: Asia and Europe, and repression and freedom.” Both authors and readers of such stories could “identify a part of himself and his culture that might not be apparent [and] assert that he and the aggressive Cossacks are one, that the Russians too are whole, united, integrated, and spontaneous.” For a culture that was increasingly characterized by ambivalence --East or West, empire or nation-state, Orthodox Christian or religiously pluralistic (the actual population was, and is, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, and Animist as well as Christian)—the image of the Cossack offered the illusion of coherence. It’s little wonder that Tolstoy once claimed that all Russians secretly desired to be Cossacks.⁹⁰ See Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *The Cossack Hero in Russian literature: A Study in Cultural Mythology* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 13-15. For similar reasons, the image of the Cossack have also been central to the development the history of Ukraine, much of which is geographically and culturally linked to the Eurasian steppe where many Cossacks lived. Ironically, it was a chronicle forged by Ukrainian Cossack noblemen in the 19th century which was primarily responsible for inaugurating the craze for Cossack culture in the Russian Empire. Called *The History of the Rus’*, the chronicle claims to prove that the Ukrainian Cossacks are the true historical descendents of the Rus’ (the allegedly Scandinavian tribe that gave Russia its name and provided its first royal dynasty) and is easily the most important document in the formation of modern Ukrainian nationalism. See Plokhy, *The Cossack Myth: History and Nationhood in the Age of Empires* and Serhii Plokhy, *Tsars and Cossacks: A Study in Iconography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁹¹ Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, Vol 1: 1918, 12.

Soviet state was still learning how to balance the center and the periphery in the vast region it had inherited.

The People's Hero

By the end of 1918, Chapaev's leadership ability had earned him widespread respect. A telegraphed exchange between a regional Bolshevik commander and his commissar from October 27, 1918—more than ten days after Chapaev and his men had been encircled by enemy forces during their second assault on Uralsk—reveals that Chapaev's popularity was far from restricted to peasant fighters within his own ranks. The chief concern in this conversation was to rescue Chapaev personally: "save the brave and trustworthy commander Chapaev," the speaker instructs, "he is more valuable than gold."⁹²

His value was more than just tactical. Chapaev was popular with the local peasantry, whose continued support was essential for the Red Army's ability to provision itself and maintain control over regions it had 'conquered', and this made him an extremely important asset. The cost of provisioning the military was often born by local inhabitants, who were expected to supply horses (as well as food, livestock, and anything else the army might need). Could peasants be convinced to "define themselves as members of the toiling peasantry in alliance with the working class" or would they consider themselves "residents of their province first and foremost, and thus suspicious of any city newcomer?" Such considerations were far from trivial, for "identity defined allegiance, and allegiance determined participation in the civil war."⁹³ A commander able to maintain good relations with the rural population truly was more valuable than gold. Far too often, the heavy-handedness with which both sides exploited the rural economy led directly to large peasant rebellions that dramatically complicated the conflict. A report to the party newspaper in the region of Balakovo and Nikolaevsk illustrates the potential of a mismanaged requisition policy to disrupt relations with the local population. This report is particularly interesting because it dates from the end of 1918: a period when the Bolsheviks were intensifying Red Army organization efforts, and also when Chapaev was at the height of his popularity as a local partisan leader.

The author, who identifies himself only as "a Communist from the village of Ural," describes the callous confiscation of horses and other provisions from local peasants, directed by a "commandant...some sort of loafer who arrived, selected goods for confiscation, got drunk, struck fear and horror into the local populace, and then took off. And all under the banner of Soviet power." He warns that the "fruit of this labor" would be neither long in coming, nor good for the Soviet war effort. The peasants were so "benighted" that they already tended to see anyone from the city as an enemy and expected nothing from the Soviets but "trickery." He also notes that undisciplined soldiers and commanders were the greatest threat to Soviet power in the countryside, claiming that it was not among kulaks that one encountered the most intense

⁹²RGVA—f.1299, op.2, d.8, l.3

⁹³ Vladimir N. Brovkin, *Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War: Political Parties and Social Movements in Russia, 1918-1922* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); Vladimir Buldakov claims that "socio-cultural dislocation" between city and the countryside in the Russian Empire at the beginning of the 20th century was the source of all its suffering. While this is a bit strong, his claim that rural-urban resentments were a significant source of violence during the Civil War is more convincing. V. Buldakov, *Krasnaia Smuta-Priroda i posledstviia revoliutsionnogo nasiliia* (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 1997), 18.

dissatisfaction, but among the “most ordinary peasants, who value nothing more highly than their own work.” The terror among these very peasants was apparently so widespread, that “any soldier with a rifle can get whatever he wants.”⁹⁴

Chapaev’s popularity in the local countryside stemmed not just from his charismatic evocation of past heroes, but from the priority he assigned to minimizing the negative impact of the military presence on the rural economy.⁹⁵ Contrary to Bolshevik characterizations of partisan bands as anarchic (and undoubtedly many of them were), Chapaev’s detachments are said to have been ruled by a strict, sometimes even brutal, discipline. In an effort to eradicate banditry from his ranks, Chapaev issued an order on September 27, 1918, sentencing all thieves to be shot. Stolen goods were to be collected and brought to a general meeting, where soldiers were encouraged to “rebuke one another.”⁹⁶ Although Bolsheviks at the time frequently associated *partizanstvo* (guerilla warfare) with lawlessness and disorganization, there are numerous references to Chapaev’s strict enforcement of discipline, and frequent use of extreme punishments for a variety of offenses. I.T. Strel’tsov recalls that Chapaev once instructed him to “shoot all cowards on the spot.”⁹⁷ Another report alleges that Chapaev personally shot twenty suspected SR agents from among his own troops for allegedly trying to sabotage morale.⁹⁸ Such brutal methods were undoubtedly applied to the enemy with even greater frequency, helping to project an image of the *Chapaevtsy* as a fearsome fighting force, which became an important element of their success. Widespread rumors that “Chapaev doesn’t take prisoners, but shoots everyone on the spot” surely had an effect on his opponents.⁹⁹

The Bolsheviks were hardly opposed to violent tactics. Forces on all sides resorted to horrific acts of violence, yet Chapaev’s violence flowed from the will of an individual whose loyalties to the working class and the Communist Party were unclear, and therefore suspect.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴RGASPI—f.71, op.34, d.2120, l. 11.

⁹⁵ There is evidence that Chapaev was personally responsible for naming one of his regiments, and the garrison town of Nikolaevsk, after Pugachev. A report issued after Chapaev’s units had successfully retaken Nikolaevsk from Czechoslovak forces in August of 1918, recommends to the Soviet of People’s Commissars that they “honor the desire of the Nikolaevsk regiments to change their name to the ‘PUGACHEVSK REGIMENTS’.” See RGASPI—f.71, op.33, d.380. While these requests were only granted after the successful repulsion of enemy forces from Nikolaevsk on August 21, the minutes of a meeting of district Soviets dated August 6 reveal that Chapaev had personally petitioned the center for a regimental name-change well before the battle. See RGASPI—f.71, op.33, d.14. Accounts linking Chapaev and his men to the renaming of Nikolaevsk shortly after it was retaken are second-hand, but it seems likely considering their decision to rename their regiment at roughly the same time.

⁹⁶RGVA—f.1299, op.2, d.6, l. 135.

⁹⁷ I.T. Strel’tsov, *Krasnyi put’ 22-i divizii: vospoinaniia Chapaevtsa* (sic) (Samara: izdatel’stvo Kraevogo Zamliachestva Chapaevtsev, 1930), 29.

⁹⁸SOMK-22605/6 “Pirushkin S.D.—Po mestam, gde shel V.I. Chapaev’ 28/10-57, 4-5.

⁹⁹ SOMK—22605/8 ‘Rasskaz—Vospominanie Esipova Petra Ivanovicha’, 16.

¹⁰⁰ In 1921, Mikhail Frunze, the commander of the 4th Army (in which Chapaev would serve after the reorganization of the Eastern Front during the winter of 1918-1919), and eventually Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces after the Civil War, described the ideal discipline that the Red Army should strive for as “based not on fear of punishment or naked coercion (*golom prinuzhdenii*), but on the conscious, voluntary performance of duties by all – and the prime example of such discipline should be the command staff.” From M.V. Frunze, *Izbrannye Proizvedeniia, Tom 2* (Moskva: Voennoe Izdatel’stvo Ministerstva Oborony Soiuzna SSR, 1957), 21. This should, of course, be read primarily as an ideal to be strived for, not a description of general practice during the Civil War. Nevertheless, as such, it contains several moments that arguably reflect the broader issues informing the formation of a professional Red Army. Perhaps most interesting is the emphasis on a common culture of self-discipline among the command staff, rather than the charismatic rule of talented individual commanders. As we shall see, Frunze was

In this respect, Chapaev was representative of a much broader phenomenon, which included such figures as Nestor Makhno and Alexander Antonov—former allies of the Red Army who became substantial threats when they turned against it.¹⁰¹ Anxieties about the potential threat posed by partisans were on the rise at the very moment when Chapaev was achieving widespread notoriety (for both his heroic exploits and his lack of reliability). A report by E.P. Gribanov, a political commissar operating in the region of Saratov, dated September 17, 1918 warned that “all partisan activity on the enemy front is to cease immediately” since these actions often smacked of “quixotism” (*donkikhotstvo*),” leading to “incalculable harm.”¹⁰² In a statement which reveals the perceived importance of the issue at the time, the February 23, 1919 edition of the Saratov Red Army newspaper, *Krasnoarmeets*, declared that “The development and strengthening of the gains of the Revolution demand the building of an army that can guarantee the Republic against the danger of little and great Napoleons.”¹⁰³ Although Chapaev would ultimately prove faithful until the end, his loyalty could not be taken for granted by observers at the time.

Center vs. Periphery

Chapaev’s earliest conflicts with authority were primarily military. Like many natural leaders, he seems to have resented following orders that he disagreed with. In several prominent cases, he simply refused to do so. During the assault on Pugachev (Nikolaevsk), he was ordered by the division commander, Sergei Zakharov, to remain with his unit in the village of Davydovka and prepare for a frontal assault on the Czechoslovaks guarding Pugachev. Fearful that this position exposed his unit to a potentially devastating preemptive strike by the enemy, Chapaev “instructed his men not to carry out the orders of Comrade Zakharov.” Instead, he ordered them to cross the Bolshoi Irgiz river that ran through Pugachev and attack the enemy from behind, using the village of Tavolozhka as a base of operations.¹⁰⁴ The maneuver proved to be a decisive factor in the liberation of the city and helped to establish Chapaev and his men as one of the most capable fighting forces in the region.

Yet Chapaev’s growing fame was not all positive. Nor was his refusal to follow direct orders during the assault on Pugachev the first instance of flagrant defiance of the military hierarchy. According to Arsenii Mikhailov, Chapaev had behaved similarly during the first assault on Uralsk, an important Cossack base far to the southeast of Pugachev. His detachment was ordered to remain in the village of Shipovo to guard the depot of supplies, ammunition, and equipment stored there. The order outraged Chapaev, who apparently went pale and began shouting: “I will not remain in the rear! This order is wrong!” Efforts to convince Vasiliï Ivanovich to follow orders only angered him further. He stubbornly insisted that the order was incorrect and that his detachment was going on the offensive until Mikhailov and several others

personally acquainted with Chapaev and certainly had individuals like him in mind when formulating his plans for the future of the Soviet military.

¹⁰¹ The literary critic Leopold Averbakh would later “characterize the *Chapaevshchina*” as being “no different than the *Makhnovshchina*” and claimed that “many *Chapaevtsy* would have been *Makhnovtsy* if they had been in Ukraine, just as *Makhnovtsy* would have been *Chapaevtsy* if they had been from the Ural Steppe.” RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.783, l.1.

¹⁰² RGASPI—f.71, op.33, d.278, l.9.

¹⁰³ *Krasnoarmeets*, Organ Saratovskogo Gubernskogo Voennogo Komissariata, 23 fevralia 1919, №5.

¹⁰⁴ RGASPI—f.71, op.34, d.1026, l.29-30.

convinced the military leadership to assign a unit from Tambov to guard duty and thereby free up the Chapaevtsy for battle.¹⁰⁵

Given Chapaev's tactical acumen and winning record, these offenses were perhaps forgivable. His interference in matters unrelated to military strategy, however, was far more damning. By the end of October 1918, Chapaev was the subject of a full-scale Cheka (secret police) investigation into alleged abuses of power. A report dated October 24 explains that the impetus for the investigation was Chapaev's unauthorized release of 18 prisoners, incarcerated for political and criminal offenses, from the Nikolaevsk House of Forced Labor during his liberation of the city on August 21. The language of this report, labeled "top secret," is somewhat ominous: after acknowledging that "information about Chapaev is contradictory," it advises that it is "necessary" for the Commission (i.e. the secret police) "to comprehensively shed light on his character" (*vsestoronne vyiasnit' ego figuru*).¹⁰⁶ His alleged decision to free the prisoners in Nikolaevsk earned him the ire of a certain Comrade Shumnyi, the "Commissar of Justice and Chairman of the Extraordinary Commission for the Battle against Counter-Revolution, Speculation, and Crime." In a letter to the regional leadership of Nikolaevsk/Pugachev (the *Nikolaevskii uezdnyi ispolnitel'nyi komitet*), dated October 8, Shumnyi expressed particular outrage at Chapaev's disregard for the separation of military and political authority. Despite having "absolutely no relationship to the office of justice" he freed a group of prisoners that included "subjects of ongoing investigations, and a number of serious criminals." Shumnyi, speaking "in [his] capacity as the Chairman of the Extraordinary Commission" considered "such unlawful behavior" to be "pure anarchy."¹⁰⁷

The fact that Chapaev was never charged or punished for this alleged crime is surprising. It is quite possible that his skills as a commander shielded him from prosecution. Yet there was perhaps more to this conflict between Chapaev and the regional hierarchy than Shumnyi let on. The timing of both the complaints and the investigation curiously coincide with a sustained effort by Chapaev to expose the repeated failure of the center to provide adequate provision and support for his men. Thus, while there is no evidence that the charges against him were trumped up, it is likely that the investigation was to some extent motivated by opposition to his increasingly vocal dissent.

As early as September 2, Chapaev had delivered a report to the Executive Committee of the Nikolaevsk District (*Nik-Ispolk*) lamenting the fact that his soldiers were forced to fight "barefoot and unclothed, without rifles, without all necessities." The fact that they still won battles, he claimed, was only due to their "revolutionary spirit."¹⁰⁸ This may not have been the first time Chapaev complained to the authorities about inadequate provisioning, and it was certainly not the last. During the fierce fighting of October 1918, the second half of which Chapaev and his men spent encircled by the enemy without supplies or support, the commander sent a steady stream of complaints to various representatives of the regional hierarchy. While many of his exchanges with his superiors express frustration, by the end of the month his tone had become noticeably hostile. In a radiogram to the staff headquarters of the Fourth Army from

¹⁰⁵ Mikhailov, *V.I. Chapaev v Pugachevske*, 22.

¹⁰⁶ RGVA—f.184, op.3, d.9, l.1-2.

¹⁰⁷ RGVA—f.184, op.3, d.9, l.24.

¹⁰⁸ "Protokol Ekstrennogo zasedaniia nikolaevskogo uezdnogo ispolnitel'nogo komiteta o snabzhenii armii i oborone goroda ot kontrevoliutsii, 2 sentiabriia 1918" in *Legendarnyi Nachdiv*, 54.

October 26, he closes his request for aid with the words “if the blood of your comrades is valuable to you, don’t spill it in vain.”¹⁰⁹ The implied criticism here is that the military leadership did not care for the lives of its soldiers, that it was demonstrating the same callous indifference to human life as the Tsarist leadership during World War One. Whether motivated by annoyance on Chapaev’s part, or whether intended to motivate the bureaucracy with the specter of unrest, such accusations from a popular partisan commander would undoubtedly have been unsettling to Bolshevik officials and military commanders.

By the time Chapaev sent this message, other members of the civilian and military hierarchy in the region had clearly lost patience. Three days earlier, on October 23, a meeting of the Revolutionary-Military Soviet of Nikolaevsk Province, which included representatives of the Fourth Army’s command staff and regional Bolshevik officials, declared Chapaev and several of his subordinates (including Kutiakov and Galaktionov) to be “enemies of the regional Executive Committee” (*Ispolkom*) who “threatened its very existence.” Moreover, the committee claimed that, while “in the past it was possible to have doubts...now it was absolutely clear” that the “harmful and destructive work” of Chapaev and his subordinates was “not simply a striving for hegemony, but something far worse.” They sought nothing less than to “destroy all of the fruitful work achieved by Soviet power.”¹¹⁰ As testament, the committee cited Chapaev’s release of the prisoners in Nikolaevsk, but also numerous other instances of unruly, and in some cases, criminal, behavior. Most of these had some connection to issues of provisioning. Chapaev frequently demanded supplies such as “fodder...oil and gas,” but was usually “reluctant to pay for them.” It was also well known that he had “arbitrarily shot Soviet employees, without any charge” and on several occasions had allegedly threatened, in front of numerous witnesses, to shoot members of the *Ispolkom* if they failed to give him what he wanted.¹¹¹

Such behavior was clearly a problem, yet the solution was far from simple. Most of Chapaev’s complaints were quite legitimate. The revolution had been precipitated by the breakdown of state infrastructure due to a long and costly war, and things had not improved since then. While the Bolsheviks had the military advantage of occupying the major industrial and railway centers of the former Russian Empire, they essentially presided over a failed state. Throughout the Civil War, adequate provisioning was rare. The state of Chapaev’s men—half-clothed, half-starved, often without sufficient weapons and ammunition—was more of a norm than an exception. The system was in complete disarray. As Trotsky explained to the Fifth Congress of Soviets on July 10, “Soviet centralism is, in general, still in a rudimentary state, but without it we shall achieve nothing, either in the sphere of food-supply or in any other sphere, and especially not in the military sphere.”¹¹² Indeed, officials at the highest levels of power were often “unable to determine” whether allocated provisions had failed to reach their destination due to “sabotage” or merely “red tape.”¹¹³ Under such conditions, a unit’s ability to survive and fight too often depended on its willingness to steal.

Chapaev seems to have preferred stealing from the center to robbing the peasants who supplied the bulk of his manpower. Yet even this was sometimes unavoidable. Petrov, an

¹⁰⁹ RGVA—f.184, op.3, d.9, l.9.

¹¹⁰ RGVA—f.184, op.3, d.9, l.14.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, 15.

¹¹² Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, 417.

¹¹³ RGVA—f.254, op.1, d.485, l.23.

official in charge of provisioning Chapaev's division¹¹⁴ during 1919 claims that Vasilii Ivanovich agonized over the fact that "we rob the countryside, not because we want to, but because we are desperate."¹¹⁵ While he eventually reconciled himself with the need to extort goods from the rural populace, his passionate efforts to acquire supplies through regular channels during the autumn of 1918 perhaps indicate his resistance to the practice. They also reveal Chapaev's naïve faith in the ability of the state to provide. Rather than structural deficiencies, he saw only a lack of will.

On October 11, Trotsky sent a message to the Saratov Military Soviet in which he describes a recent complaint he had received from Chapaev, who claimed to be unable to continue fighting because he was "deprived of the most essential means." Trotsky's message refers to an earlier correspondence between himself and Chapaev in which Trotsky promised to procure an automobile for the commander.¹¹⁶ While the specifics of this correspondence are unknown, its contents can be guessed at by a similar request to Tikhon Khvesin, the commander of the Fourth Army, on October 5. In this exchange, Chapaev threatens to complain about Khvesin to the *Ispolkom* for his failure to provide him with adequate transport. He continues: "You have given me an order and demanded that I fulfill it, but I cannot travel along the entire front on foot and I am unable to ride on horseback. As you well know, my hand is injured and I can't ride a horse. Regiments are located far from one another, and during battle it is absolutely necessary that I be with them all. Therefore, I ask you to send me, for the division and for the work of the revolution: one motorcycle with a sidecar, two light automobiles, and four trucks for carrying supplies."¹¹⁷

There is an undeniable air of dilettantism in this exchange, and it is hardly surprising that virtually all of the controversies between Chapaev and the hierarchy occurred in the period after his celebrated liberation of Nikolaevsk/Pugachev. This victory, which took place during a particularly trying period for Bolshevik forces, earned Chapaev and his men widespread gratitude and recognition. In early September, Khvesin petitioned the Revolutionary Military Soviet to award Chapaev's men with the Revolutionary Banner "for repeated heroic victories in connection with two months of fighting against Czechoslovak forces."¹¹⁸ This would be the first of many such decorations. Even more numerous were the outpourings of praise. On September 8, the Commander in Chief of the Eastern Front, Ioakim Vatsetis, issued a declaration to all of the forces of the Eastern front (the most significant region of conflict at the time) thanking Chapaev's men, and Chapaev personally, for their heroic victory in Nikolaevsk. Vatsetis claims that "this brilliant victory was due, not only to the dedication and courage of the men of the Nikolaevsk regiment, not only to their steadfast determination to achieve victory or death, not only to their passionate faith in the righteousness of their cause, but to the skillful leadership of their commander, Comrade Chapaev."¹¹⁹ The fact that this 'skillful leadership' had involved

¹¹⁴ The various names given to Chapaev's forces between 1918 and 1919 reflects their uncertain status somewhere between volunteer militias and regular forces. Between the summer of 1918 and the spring of 1919, the various forces under Chapaev's command were named the First and Second Nikolaevsk regiments, the Second Nikolaevsk division, and the Aleksandrovo—Gaikoi Group, among others, before finally becoming the 25th Division. After Chapaev's death in September 1919, it was again re-named the 25th Chapaev Division.

¹¹⁵ RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.779, l.6.

¹¹⁶ RGVA—f.184, op.3, d.9, l.4.

¹¹⁷ *Legendarnyi Nachdiv*, 82.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid*, 65.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid*, № 76, 61.

disobeying a direct order from his commanding officer would not have been lost on Chapaev—or his commander. In the aftermath of his victory in Nikoaevesk, a period in which he was “constantly on the offensive” and frequently encircled by the enemy, Chapaev seems to have harbored the conviction that his talent on the battlefield entitled him to a certain degree of accomodation from the center.¹²⁰

Chapaev’s own model of leadership often involved placing himself in close proximity to danger alongside his men, and he was well attuned to the propaganda value of his own injuries. He was repeatedly injured in battle during the First World War --a fact which added to his heroic mystique at the time—and he would likewise be wounded numerous times in the Civil War before ultimately dying in it. The same day that he attempted to use his wounded hand as a bargaining chip in his exchange with Khvesin, he closed a battle report to the Fourth Army headquarters by emphasizing his personal involvement despite being wounded: “All of the officers participated in the battle alongside the regular soldiers. The chief of staff was in the ranks, as well as the commander of the division, Chapaev, despite only having one hand.”¹²¹ His willingness to continue fighting despite grave injuries became a something of a trademark. Emphasizing his closeness to the rank and file implicitly juxtaposed him with the officials and officers, whose aloofness he so despised. This dynamic is perfectly captured in a famous picture taken after the liberation of Ufa in June 1919, during which Chapaev was struck in the head with shrapnel.

Trotsky was thus in a truly difficult position when it came to dealing with popular commanders like Chapaev. Treating the revered veteran in a heavy-handed manner could create a dangerous enemy out of what was otherwise a valuable, if troublesome, ally. The fact that Trotsky’s message to the Saratov Military Soviet only mentions one promised automobile indicates his general reliance on compromise: while he concedes the commander’s need for battlefield transport, he doesn’t seem to have recognized his need for an entire fleet of vehicles. Trotsky’s careful handling of the popular commander is even more evident in an exchange made a day after his investigation into the status of Chapaev’s automobile. In a telegram to the Military Soviet in Pokrovsk, Trotsky inquires into allegations they had made about Chapaev commandeering supplies intended for a division from Samara. The tone of the message is surprisingly ambivalent, especially considering the nature of the accusation. Trotsky claims that such an event would “not be entirely regrettable,” but recognizes the need to investigate further and to take some action if Chapaev had indeed acted “unlawfully.”¹²²

Overall, these exchanges reveal a surprising degree of leniency on Trotsky’s part that is starkly at odds with prevailing depictions of his relationship with Chapaev in popular Russian (Soviet, but also post-Soviet) historiography. The vast majority of these accounts depict Trotsky, in his familiar Stalinist role as arch-enemy of the Soviet Union, plotting to undermine the people’s commander in order to aid the enemy and destroy the Soviet state.¹²³ They also tend to

¹²⁰ RGVA—f.184, op.3, d.85, l.33.

¹²¹RGVA—f.1299, op.2, d.7, l.217.

¹²² RGVA—f.184, op.3, d.9, l.10.

¹²³ This depiction is common in Soviet-era histories of Chapaev. For more recent incarnations, see the account of Trotsky’s visit in Evgeniia Chapaeva, *Moi neizvestnyi Chapaev* (Korvet: 2005) and the 2012 television series on Russian state television, *Strasti po Chapaiu*.

center on Trotsky's personal inspection of Chapaev's unit in Pugachev on September 19-20, 1918, where Trotsky is depicted as haughty and derisive, taking every opportunity to berate and humiliate the commander in front of his men. While the encounter was undoubtedly strained, especially given Chapaev's demonstrated resentment for the chain of command, there is ample reason to question the alleged hostility on Trotsky's part.

An anonymous account of the encounter, written no later than 1922 (i.e. before Trotsky himself came to be seen as an enemy of the state) does indicate a degree of tension, as well as some resentment (perhaps oversensitivity) on the part of Chapaev and his men. Trotsky is described as visiting, "not to greet the soldiers" but "to provide guidance, or as he loved to say 'order'." High on his list was the issue of 'guerilla-ism' (*partizanstvo*), which, although it would increasingly acquire a pejorative connotation, at the time referred primarily to the loose organizational structure and lack of subordination to the military hierarchy demonstrated by many volunteer rural units at that stage of the conflict. While streamlining and centralizing the military apparatus was certainly at the top of Trotsky's list, there are few indications that he harbored any specific disdain for Chapaev or his men. Yet the Chapaevtsy could not help feeling that the label of 'partisan' diminished them and their numerous sacrifices. They "could not understand exactly what it was that made them 'partisans'...was it the fact that they did not spare their own blood, nor their very lives, but sincerely, with unlimited devotion, defended Soviet power?"¹²⁴

This account essentially describes a familiar dynamic of condescension and wounded pride between center and periphery, not a campaign of humiliation and sabotage by a notorious arch-villain. Despite his obvious sympathy for the *Chapaevtsy*, the author includes several details that confirm the essentially diplomatic nature of the visit. While Trotsky undoubtedly struck a superior air with Chapaev, he also "praised him for his heroism and talent...presented him with a gold watch" as a gesture of gratitude and respect, and promoted him to commander of the Second Nikolaevsk Division.¹²⁵

Taken as a whole, and especially in light of the offenses Chapaev stood accused of, Trotsky's treatment of the commander was surprisingly gracious. Chapaev's official status during the 1930s as the face of the Civil War was only made possible by his death in 1919, as well as Trotsky's subsequent demonization. In life, he had represented the same threat to centralized Soviet power that Stalin would imagine, fabricate, and destroy even as Chapaev's cinematic double thrilled Soviet audiences. Such are the ironies and ambiguities of myth-making.

Vasilii Ivanovich Goes to Moscow

In the end, the conflicts between Chapaev and the central authorities were emblematic of the larger disorganization within the nascent Soviet state and its military. Trotsky frequently characterized the year 1918, both at the time and subsequently, as a transitional period: a time when 'volunteerism' and 'guerilla-ism' were necessary, albeit imperfect, features of military policy. By early November, the military situation had stabilized enough to allow for the reorganization of the front. Partisan bands were re-organized into a proper military hierarchy

¹²⁴ RGASPI—f.71, op.34, d.1026, l.40.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 41.

and many commanders, including Chapaev, were removed from command posts and sent to the newly opened military academy in Moscow.

Lenin had issued an order calling for the immediate establishment of the General Staff Academy of the Workers' and Peasants' Red Army on October 8th as a necessary step in the professionalization of the Soviet military.¹²⁶ The academy was to provide, “not only an exhaustive and expert military education” but “as much as possible, a broad general education by qualified individuals able to address all questions of political, social, and international life.”¹²⁷ In other words, it was to be just as much a school of Bolshevik ideology as of military tactics. Yet, the military component was far from an afterthought: courses included “strategy, military philosophy, general and specialized tactics, military psychology, a history of the military arts, a history of the World War, service in the General Staff, military geography, military administration, naval tactics, military topography, military engineering” among others.¹²⁸

The foundation of the academy was central to the structural reorganization of the Red Army. A key imperative of the institution was to train up a new officer corps from among the workers and peasants that the new state claimed to represent, and thereby to decrease the Red Army's dependence on the expertise of former Tsarist officers. The fact that Chapaev was chosen to be a part of this new officer corps actually signaled recognition of his demonstrated talent. Less able commanders were simply subordinated or removed from power altogether. Chapaev was one of only twelve from the ranks of the Fourth Army assigned to Moscow in an order dated November 5.¹²⁹ Among them was Khvesin, the former commander of the Fourth Army Chapaev had butted heads with in October.¹³⁰

Chapaev was hardly being singled out for punishment, but the work of the Academy was absolutely disciplinary and intended to instill respect for the military hierarchy and deference to authority. Despite being compelled to go, he was required to request permission to attend from several different entities and individuals (including Trotsky).¹³¹ Once at the academy, he was subjected to an extremely regulated environment. Daily attendance at lectures and “practical lessons” was mandatory and monitored.¹³² Students were required to carry identifying documents at all times, and “to promptly notify the institution of any changes of address...vacations, sicknesses, or plans to leave.”¹³³ For someone as averse to authority and micromanagement as Chapaev, this was far from an ideal environment.

Considering his frequent conflicts with his superiors, it is understandable that Chapaev (and many of his men) were alarmed and dismayed by the news of his imminent departure. According to one of his subordinates, Vasilii Ivanovich was “seriously troubled” by the belief that he was being permanently deprived of command. He worried about “those times when he

¹²⁶ RGVA--Predislovie k listovoi opisi Fonda № 24696—Krasnoznamennaia ordena Lenina Voennaia akademiia RKKK/Krasnoi armii/im. M.V. Frunze.

¹²⁷ RGVA—f.24696, op.1, d.148, l.1.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ RGVA—f.184, op.1, d.22, l.26.

¹³⁰ RGASPI—f.71, op.34, d.339, l.106. A short time earlier, Khvesin had “earnestly request[ed]” to be reassigned—*Ibid*, 96.

¹³¹ RGVA—f.1299, op.2, d.7, l.490.

¹³² RGVA—f.24696, op.1, d.149, l.18.

¹³³ *Ibid*, l.40.

had failed to carry out a direct order, refused to speak with army headquarters by telephone or telegraph, or even worse, had scolded his superiors. And there were many such incidents with Chapaev.”¹³⁴ Despite the best attempts of several close companions to console him, he continued to worry. At one point he apparently contemplated refusing the order and immediately beginning the third assault on Uralsk he had so eagerly been awaiting. In the end, a group of Chapaev’s soldiers drafted resolution praising Chapaev’s value to the revolution and imploring the authorities to return him to command once he had completed his education. The document was “very valuable” to Chapaev, and alone succeeded in “scattering his fears” and convincing him to leave.¹³⁵

The letter is a curious and revealing attempt by the rural periphery to negotiate with the center of Soviet power. It demonstrates a strong belief in the protective power of documents and collective resolutions. The “representatives...of the 2nd ‘Garibaldi’ Cavalry Regiment” affirm that they are “RESOLVED: to greet [Chapaev] as one of the leading fighters of the Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army” and the “successful organizer of the village poor.” They laud him for “successfully creat[ing] combat-ready regiments able to hold off the onslaught of the Czechoslovaks from one direction and the Cossack White-Guardists from the other,” despite the fact that, “a half-savage darkness reigned in our forgotten corner of the steppe.”¹³⁶ The depiction of Chapaev as an organizer and a bringer of light, demonstrates a basic familiarity with Bolshevik tropes. But the letter’s naïve belief in the power of a collective and democratically expressed will was the product of a revolutionary stage that the center was now determined to move beyond. The period of radical democracy, when soldiers elected their commanders, when the army was organized on the basis of ‘volunteerism’, was over. The letter’s conclusion, “Long live our commanders Lenin, Trotsky, and Chapaev,” which implies a degree of parity between the rural partisan commander and the chief representatives of the Communist Party, was decidedly out of place.¹³⁷ This was a lesson Chapaev would learn all too well in 1919: after returning from the academy in February, he soon found himself locked in an intensely personal power struggle with his newly appointed political commissar, Dmitrii Furmanov. The next chapter of his life, even more than the first, is a testament to the fact that the Bolsheviks still had a lot to learn about negotiating their periphery: as the Civil War continued, so too did the scale and severity of rural unrest.

¹³⁴ Strel’tsov, *Krasnyi put’ 22-I divizii: vospoinaniia Chepaevtsa*, 40.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹³⁶ RGVA—f.184, op.3, d.85, l.83.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

Chapter 2-The Absence of Anna: ‘Real life’, Art, and the Creation of a Socialist Realist Prototype

On September 24, 1923, Dmitry Furmanov mused about his newfound status as the author of the novel *Chapaev*, written about his experiences as Vasili Ivanovich Chapaev’s political commissar during the spring and summer of 1919. His diary entry for the day conveys his surprise at suddenly being recognized in public: “Ruzer and Volkov and Nasimovich all know about *Chapaev*. In short, practically everyone I meet asks me, ‘Ahh...so you are the one who wrote *Chapaev*?’
--‘Yes, that’s me...’
--‘It’s very well written’.”

He makes little effort to conceal his enthusiasm about having finally attained his goal of becoming a respected literary figure. Long before he dreamed of revolution, before his booming voice explained the will of the new government to crowds of workers, peasants, and soldiers, Dmitry Furmanov had wanted to be a writer. Now, his dream attained, he wondered at the course of events that had brought him here. “It’s clear”, he wrote, “that Chapaev established my name. And I have established his.”¹³⁸

Although he wrote many short stories, and another full-length novel (also based upon his personal experiences in the Civil War), it was his novel about Chapaev that fixed the name of Furmanov in the annals of Soviet literature. The focus of the novel is the relationship between the two men, commissar and commander: a personification of the tutelary relationship between the Communist Party and the talented, but politically ignorant masses of the former Russian Empire. According to the literary scholar Katerina Clark, it is this early example of the so-called ‘spontaneity-consciousness dialectic’, which she calls the ‘master plot’ of Socialist Realism, that established Furmanov’s work a prototype of early Soviet culture.¹³⁹ While agreeing with Clark’s assessment of the work’s seminal status, this chapter will argue that it is the novel’s tenuous balance between life and art, history and fiction, which truly makes *Chapaev* a prototype of Socialist Realism. And this is as much a matter of what is absent from the work as of what it contains.¹⁴⁰

The novel is ostensibly the story of the successful functioning of Trotsky’s dual power model for the Red Army: with a commander in charge of the military realm and a commissar overseeing the ideological. The successful division of the command structure was predicated on the integrity of the individual commissar: a belief that the proper psychology, origins, and revolutionary credentials would enable the commissar to avoid the pitfalls inherent in the

¹³⁸ NIOR-f.320, k.7, d.6, l.46.

¹³⁹ Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2000), 84-9.

¹⁴⁰ My understanding of Socialist Realism here draws on Evgeny Dobrenko’s formulation of it as “an institution for the production of socialism.” Dobrenko claims that its “basic function was not propaganda...but rather to *produce reality by aestheticizing it*...to produce socialism’s symbolic values by de-realizing everydayness.” As the dominant culture of Stalinism, Socialist Realism sought to transform reality by transforming the representation of it: the actual present of everyday life was represented as the past, while the ‘real’ present was represented as the future paradise of socialism. It is Furmanov’s blurring of the lines between the real and the ideal, his aesthetic representation of his experience, not as it was, but as it should have been, that truly makes him (and his novel) a forerunner Socialist Realism. See Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), xii, 4-5, 201-202.

bifurcation of leadership. Arguing for the creation of the institution before the All-Russian central Executive Committee on April 22, 1918, Trotsky explained that “the structure of the commanding apparatus cannot at present be based upon the principle of ‘one-man management’; ...we are compelled to bisect the authority of the military leader---assigning the purely military, operational, fighting function to someone who has studied it...while, on the other hand, assigning the work of ideological and political formation to someone who, by virtue of his psychology, his consciousness and his origin, is linked with the new class which has come to power”.¹⁴¹ Earlier in the month he described the commissars as derived “from the ranks of irreproachable revolutionaries.” Their person was considered “inviolable”. They were the personification of Soviet power in the army and any “insult of a commissar” was a “serious offense against the Soviet state” itself.¹⁴² They were to keep a close watch on all aspects of unit life to ensure that “all members of the Red Army, from the top to the bottom, completed their work conscientiously and energetically.”¹⁴³ They were to devote “special attention” to the command staff in order to “find out the true nature of their political beliefs.”¹⁴⁴ No orders were considered valid without the counter-signature of a commissar.

The story of Furmanov and Chapaev is historically significant on several levels. At the very least, it humanizes the Soviet Union’s division of power between specialists and ideologues during the Civil War, allowing insight into the ways this dynamic played out in the realm of human relationships and psychology. Since the Bolsheviks aspired to create a system predicated on the possibility of human transcendence, on the ability of those with the correct consciousness to shape society in such a way as to eradicate (or significantly reduce) human vice and frailty, it is important to recognize that, at the very outset, this project faced huge obstacles at the level of everyday life. Furmanov’s artistic rendering of his relationship with Chapaev removed these uncomfortable details in order to align the narrative with ideology, a process which has considerable relevance for historical discussions about Soviet art, ideology, and subjectivity.

Furmanov’s *Chapaev* purported to be taken from ‘real life’: derived from his extensive diary entries during his time as commissar of the 25th ‘Chapaev’ Division. Like other early Soviet artists, most notably the documentary filmmaker Dziga Vertov, Furmanov attempted to illustrate the revolutionary development of the country through his ability to objectively arrange ‘facts’ recorded from daily life. While working on the manuscript, he wrote that he “did not pretend at artistic decoration”. On the contrary, he was merely writing a “simple, slightly processed (*slegka obrabotannyi*) historical account of what [he had] experienced”.¹⁴⁵ He claimed that his “method” was completely “new”. It was “completely unnecessary” for him to “polish (*vylyzyvat*) the narrative.” He would simply allow it to be “as fragmentary as life itself.” In describing “historical figures” like “Chapaev”, he did not need to reproduce their actual words and thoughts with painstaking accuracy. The most important thing was “basic loyalty to the characteristic personality and historical identity” and these things were not found in the minutiae, but in the description of a broader pattern.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Lev Trotsky, *How the Revolution Armed*, “Speech at the session of the All-Russia Central Executive Committee, April 22, 1918”, 129.

¹⁴² RGASPI--f.71, op.34, d.117, l.4.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 5.

¹⁴⁴ RGASPI--f.71, op.33, d.277, l.8.

¹⁴⁵ NIOR—f.320, k.12, d.2, l.4.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 3.

Just like Vertov, whose newsreels and films were highly edited and stylized even while claiming to be a presentation of ‘life as it is’, Furmanov’s perception of his own objectivity was linked to his sense of himself as a genius uniquely qualified to discern the spirit of the age in the material of daily life: a conceit that reveals a strong penchant for romanticism among the self-styled apostles of revolutionary consciousness.¹⁴⁷ And just like Vertov, Furmanov was accused, both at the time and subsequently, of a lack of formal consistency that blurred the lines of genre and confused the boundary between life and art. In a critical letter to Furmanov written in 1925, the writer Maxim Gorky (*the* towering literary figure of the era) wrote that “Chapaev is not a story, not a biography, not even a documentary...I think that it is unnecessary for me to explain to you the enormous importance, the decisive importance, of form in art.”¹⁴⁸ Yet it was in many ways this lack of a clear boundary between life and art, rather than its depiction the spontaneity-consciousness dialectic, that truly made *Chapaev* an archetype of Socialist Realism: a genre Gorky himself defined as the simultaneous depiction of life in both its present and ideal future states (‘realism’ and ‘socialism’).

Both the Bolsheviks and later historians of the Soviet Union have used Furmanov as a prime example of the development of revolutionary consciousness/Soviet subjectivity. Selections from his diaries during the period from March 1917 to November 1918 were compiled by his wife and published under the title, “The Path to Bolshevism” shortly after his death from meningitis in 1926 at the age of thirty five. The book was praised for the “sincerity and straightforwardness” with which Furmanov described the “political and psychological evolution culminating in his admission into the ranks of the Bolshevik Party.” While the “individual path of such a person as Dmitrii Furmanov” was considered worthy of attention in its own right, his path to Bolshevism was “not just his personal path, it was the journey of an entire generation, an entire social stratum.” Thus, Furmanov’s diary simultaneously gave insight into his own biography, even as it “revealed a page from the biography of his contemporaries.”¹⁴⁹ According to Leopold Averbakh, a central figure in the proletarian literature movements during the 1920s and a close personal associate of Furmanov, the diaristic account of how the author “rebuilt his personality” expressed “the main idea” of his life’s work: “we [the Bolsheviks] will build a new society, only to the extent that we are able to refashion ourselves into new people.”¹⁵⁰

Not surprisingly, Furmanov’s diaries have been used as a point of departure in recent discussions about the development of a uniquely Soviet subjectivity in which the individual’s private life, rather than being considered separate and sacrosanct, was consciously ‘worked on’ and subordinated to the collective.¹⁵¹ Yet Furmanov’s published diaries, particularly those

¹⁴⁷ Jochen Hellbeck claims that Furmanov “firmly adhered to the Enlightenment stage of the Communist project” and that his relationship to Chapaev, in both the novel and his diaries, is “told through the binary opposition of elementary spontaneity and revolutionary consciousness.” See Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 21.

¹⁴⁸ NIOR—f.320, k.15, d.1, l.1.

¹⁴⁹ Dmitrii Furmanov, *Put’ k Bol’shevizmu-Stranitsy dnevnika* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo, 1928), 9-10.

¹⁵⁰ NIOR—f.320, k.16, d.27, l.15.

¹⁵¹ See Hellbeck, *Revolution on my Mind*. Hellbeck uses Furmanov as a pre-cursor to diary writing and subjectivity under Stalinism, which he in many ways was. But it is an important to remember that he was in many ways different. His ‘laying bare of the soul’ through confession seems to have been rooted less in a desire to purge himself of bourgeois psychological residue, and more in a romantic interest in the contradictions of human consciousness: the “simultaneous blending of different levels” that Rousseau, through his own agonized self-

compiled as ‘The Path to Bolshevism’, are edited in such a way as to give a false sense of unity and teleology. The unprocessed versions are much more fragmentary, and reveal an often erratic personality that hardly fits the image of Bolshevik self-discipline. And these moments don’t always fit the paradigm of confession as exorcism, as a means of self-improvement, either. A closer examination of Furmanov’s diaries, focusing on (but not limited to) his time serving with Chapaev in the Civil War, will add a degree of nuance to our historical understanding of ideological and identity formation in the early years of the Soviet Union. While Furmanov became a useful type of revolutionary consciousness and Soviet subjectivity (due in no small part to his own efforts) he perceived himself, first and foremost, as a writer.¹⁵² Before he wrote his diaries in order to ‘gather material’ about the history of the revolution and the Soviet state, before he became a Bolshevik (or a Socialist Revolutionary, or a Maximalist, or an Anarchist) he was writing his diaries to ‘gather material’ for some as-yet-unknown literary endeavor. The story of Furmanov’s development is not about the creation of a generic Soviet subjectivity, but rather the specific subjectivity of a Soviet artist. Taken together, his diaries and his literary works are not just concerned with ‘writing Furmanov into history’ (to borrow Hellbeck’s formulation), but with *rewriting* history so that it aligned with the author’s personal and ideological imperatives.¹⁵³ In the end, it is Furmanov himself, as the representative of the Communist Party, who is the intended protagonist of *Chapaev*: and this had as much to do with the author’s desire to re-write and ‘beautify’ a difficult, even humiliating, personal experience (and to thereby realize his long-desired dream of becoming a successful writer) as it did with ideology.¹⁵⁴ As truly important as recent advances in our historical understanding of Soviet subjectivity are, it is perhaps useful to remind ourselves of the common biological basis for

analysis, discovered to be the foundation of his own personality. See Lydia Ginzburg, *On Psychological Prose* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 153-194.

¹⁵² According to Irina Paperno, “The relationship between the creative personality and culture is dynamic...the individual absorbs cultural material that resonates with his psychic needs and inclinations. Having been selected by an individual, these elements interact and are juxtaposed in new and idiosyncratic ways: yielding new meaning...Viewed this way, the individual psychological process appears as an integral part of culture.” Irina Paperno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism* (Stanford University Press, 1988), 3.

¹⁵³ Changing the course of history through an act of revolutionary will seems a very Leninist act and there is an obvious parallel here with Boris Groys’ characterization of the Soviet avant-garde artist (and later Stalin himself) as demiurge: “Stalinist culture looks upon itself as post apocalyptic culture---the final verdict on all human culture has already been passed, and all that was once temporally distinct has become forever simultaneous”; “socialist realism, which regards historical time as ended and therefore occupies no particular place in it, looks upon history as the arena of struggle between active, demiurgic, creative progressive art aspiring to build a new world in the interests of the oppressed classes and passive, contemporary art that does not believe in or desire change but accepts things as they are or dreams of the past....According to Stalinist aesthetics, everything is new in the new posthistorical reality”, Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 48-9.

¹⁵⁴ Anne Nesbet, commenting on Mikhail Bakhtin’s observations about authors and the heroes they create says, “To be an ‘author’, an active participant in one’s own life and world, one must remain ‘unconsummated,’ open. However it is consummation that renders things aesthetic, and perhaps for this reason, every ‘author’ is drawn, despite himself, to the more aesthetic—that is, finalized---image of himself which the world sees.” See Anne Nesbet, *The Aesthetics of Violence in Russian and East German Literature* (Ph.D dissertation for the University of California, Berkeley), 195. This tendency towards consummation was especially strong in the case of Furmanov, who was not just an author, but an author who actively fictionalized his own life experiences; Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *The Cossack Hero in Russian literature: A Study in Cultural Mythology* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992): “The real hero of the novel is not Chapaev, but Fedor Klychkov, a thinly disguised depiction of Furmanov himself.”

human consciousness. And few things are more human than jealousy, ambition, and the creative impulse.

Chapaev: An Ambiguous Prototype of an Ambiguous Genre

Furmanov's novel would come to occupy a place of prominence in the genealogy of Socialist Realism: frequently included alongside works like Gorky's *Mother*, Fadeev's *The Rout*, and Gladkov's *Cement* in official lists of Socialist Realist 'classics'.¹⁵⁵ Although critics were divided about its artistic merit, the novel was a popular success. One of the earliest reviews of the novel, which appeared in *Na Postu*, the periodical of the Moscow Association of Proletarian Writers (MAPP), claimed that the novel "occupied a position somewhere between journalism and art" and argued that a truly artistic rendering of the epic struggle of Chapaev's Division was "a task worthy of only a truly great artist." Furmanov's work, while full of "exciting material", did not "deal with the problem like an artist". While not overwhelming in his praise, the reviewer concludes that the work "may provide more valuable material than poets or writers seeking to produce a revolutionary epic" and constitutes "the best book about the heroic struggle of the Red Army."¹⁵⁶ Little more than a year after its initial publication, a third edition was released, complete with a forward by the Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky, which praised the novel as "one of the most brilliant successes of our post-revolutionary *belle-lettres*": a didactic novel that was "highly readable" and "impossible to put down".¹⁵⁷

The novel's popularity, generic messiness (a mix of documentary and literature), and official acclaim, lend credibility to the claim that it was a prototype of Socialist Realism: an officially prescribed genre meant to be popular and didactic with a fluid relationship between life and art. Yet the issue of Socialist Realism's lineage was far from straightforward. The genre was formulated at the First Writers' Union Congress in 1934 and was emblematic of the centralization of Soviet culture during the First Five Year Plan and its attending Cultural Revolution. Already in 1928, the *agitprop* section of the Central Committee had convened a conference which laid out the new direction of the Soviet film industry as the production of films that would be accessible and appealing to the broadest swath of Soviet society: a move which dramatically limited the number of films produced even as it laid out more stringent guidelines for their content.¹⁵⁸ In 1932, this centralizing process reached the domain of literature with the closure of The Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), Proletkult, and other nominally independent literary associations. These were replaced by the Union of Soviet Writers, organized directly by the Central Committee of the Communist Party to more completely subordinate Soviet literature to the state.

The theory of Socialist Realism was secondary to its practical function of streamlining the production of culture and was "not formulated until after the term had been coined."¹⁵⁹ Once

¹⁵⁵ Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 27.

¹⁵⁶ "Na postu", №4, Noiabr', 1923, 194-6.

¹⁵⁷ "Oktiabr': literaturno-khudozhestvennyi i obshchestvenno-bytovoi zhurnal Vsesoiuznoi Assotsiatsii Proletarskikh Pisatelei", №.1 (5), Ianvar' 1925, 1.152.

¹⁵⁸ Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society: From the Revolution to the Death of Stalin* (London-New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 93-94. The tightened critical environment led to a drastic decrease in the number of films released: down from 148 films in 1928 to just 35 in 1933. Ibid, 108.

¹⁵⁹ Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 27.

the organizational task had been accomplished and given a theory to justify it, it was necessary to demonstrate that it had a prehistory: that it was the legitimate heir of the best revolutionary traditions in Russian, World, and, especially, Soviet literature. The best examples of Socialist Realism *avant la lettre* were claimed to be those Soviet works which best reflected Lenin and Gorky's ideas about a fully partisan, didactic literature with idealized communist heroes

Much of the new genre's theory was articulated in polemic with the philosophy of the now defunct RAPP: especially the latter's emphasis on describing the psychological complexity of its heroes, seen in slogans about 'the living man' and the need to 'tear off the masks'. The Soviet *Literary Encyclopedia* of 1935, in its entry on RAPP, claimed that "by concentrating writers' attention on the moods and feelings of the separate, isolated person, by demanding from writers the exposure of the conscious and unconscious movements of the soul, the RAPP theorists at the same time led the writers away from the paramount tasks of reflecting the objective processes of the socialist revolution." This demand for psychological realism, for "the discovery in the heroes of contradictions, of duality, and...of a lack of full-valuedness" was now declared to be "politically wrong."¹⁶⁰ Rather than complex and flawed characters, Socialist Realism was to create *heroes*: larger than life figures able "to match in significance the place" the Soviet state "believed Marxism-Leninism occupied in the evolution of human thought."¹⁶¹ Speaking at the 1934 Congress, Gorky claimed that "the deepest and brightest, the most artistically perfect types of heroes were created by folklore, the oral creation of the working mass."¹⁶² This was, in part, an echo of the earlier imperative given to the Soviet film industry, that it move away from formal experimentation towards more broadly accessible plots and characters: a nod to the "survival of the folk imagination among large sections of the reading public."¹⁶³

In some respects, Furmanov's novel fits easily into the family tree of Socialist Realism: the tutelary relationship between the commander, Chapaev, and the commissar, Klychkov, clearly resembles the "road to consciousness" plot established in Gorky's novel *Mother*. This 1906 work, allegedly written in consultation with Lenin, was later touted as *the* beginning of the Socialist Realist tradition.¹⁶⁴ Considering the immense popularity of the *Chapaev* film, released just months after the Writers' Union Congress, it was inevitable that the novel upon which it was based be included in the official Soviet canon. Yet *Chapaev* was in many ways an awkward literary ancestor. Unlike the film, where the 'road to consciousness' plot is straightforward and central, Furmanov's novel was much more concerned with deconstructing the kind of heroic folk image touted by Gorky as the model for Socialist Realist characters.

¹⁶⁰ "RAPP," *Literaturnaia entsiklopediia*, 9:524, quoted in Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr., *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 217.

¹⁶¹ Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 36.

¹⁶² *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd sovetskikh pisatelei, 1934; stenographicheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1934), 9. Quoted in Rufus W. Mathewson, Jr., *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 231.

¹⁶³ Mathewson, *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature*, 231.

¹⁶⁴ Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 65. The 'road to consciousness' plot, a variant of the *Bildungsroman* (or novel of education), involves the transformation of a naïve, politically innocent character into a conscious revolutionary worker. Because of Lenin's alleged influence on the writing of *Mother*, linking Socialist Realism to the novel conveniently enabled the Soviet literary establishment to connect their new genre to the father of the state.

The basic structure of *Chapaev* follows a simple quest/journey model: the plot follows the commissar Klychkov from the industrial heartland of Russia to the wild periphery of the steppe, where he meets and fights alongside Chapaev and his men in a series of increasingly significant battles until the commander tragically dies while escaping across a river. At the level of character development, it is a thoroughly RAPP novel: Furmanov was an important leader of the association when he wrote it and he clearly designed it to exemplify the movement's emphasis on human complexity. In the film, which is much more firmly within the Socialist Realist 'tradition', the commissar character is fully formed (i.e. flat, without internal conflict or need of development), and the flawed (politically innocent) character of Chapaev must be trained up to his level. In the novel, both characters are flawed and the narrative is more concerned with the development of the commissar himself than with the theme of Chapaev's education (although this is still important).

The novel opens on a crowd at a train station. Through snippets of conversations, full of colloquial language meant to illustrate the unpretentious, natural ease of working class relations, we learn that they are textile workers who have heeded Lenin's call to join the fight against Kolchak and are waiting for the train which will take them to the front. This is the novel's fully-formed (i.e. already complete, without internal conflict) collective 'hero': the working masses voluntarily joining the Red Army. Klychkov is only introduced later, once the heroic worker image has been established.¹⁶⁵ The first descriptions of him are negative, "this was not a weaver, not really even a worker", and clearly indicate his incompleteness as a character. We are told that he had only recently arrived from Moscow, where he had lived "like a bird", studying and giving lessons.¹⁶⁶ During the Revolution, he had "discovered" (*nashchupal*—literally 'to fumble', 'feel for', 'find by groping') that he was a good organizer. At meetings, "his speeches were ecstatic, riveting, passionate, though not always practical." The most redeeming quality attributed to him in this introductory description is the fact that the "workers knew him intimately, loved him, and considered him one of their own."¹⁶⁷

A key device in the novel is the juxtaposition of complete and incomplete characters, with Klychkov occupying a position somewhere in the middle. He serves as the model for Chapaev, but is himself juxtaposed with the more complete hero image of Mikhail Frunze: a longtime Bolshevik revolutionary of working-class origins who commanded the Fourth Army, of which Chapaev's Division was a part, and who (in both fact and fiction) assigned Klychkov/Furmanov to serve as Chapaev's commissar. Frunze represents the synthesis of commander and commissar. Looking at him, Klychkov wonders "how did he acquire such a clear understanding of military affairs? How does he manage to grasp everything so fully, to field all questions without being stumped? He understands everything, easily works out every puzzle and anticipates every problem. What the hell! (*chto za chert*)."¹⁶⁸ The frustration here clearly indicates Klychkov's internal conflict and heroic trajectory: he must achieve the same, seemingly effortless command of himself and the present moment.

¹⁶⁵ Dmitrii Furmanov, *Chapaev* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo "Khudozhestvennaia Literatura", 1967).

¹⁶⁶ Furmanov uses this bird metaphor frequently in both his diaries and the novel. It usually refers to a lack of rootedness/direction and is therefore nominally negative—yet, there are moments, especially in the diaries, where he seems much more attracted to the 'bird's life', depicting it as a condition of freedom and adventure.

¹⁶⁷ Furmanov, *Chapaev*, 27.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid*, 51.

On the most obvious level this involves a literal trial by fire. Furmanov's self-deprecating description of his first combat experience is an important moment in the narrative. The commissar is quickly overtaken by the rapidity and confusion of events. He suddenly realizes that the front line has moved forward without him and is "shamed by the realization that he did not keep his head in battle, that he had run away like a frightened cat and failed to realize his own hopes and expectations for himself."¹⁶⁹ This frank, humanizing portrayal of Klychkov's personal failings is a far cry from the later film adaptation in which the commissar is a spotless model of Bolshevik perfection (and a thoroughly forgettable character).

This is not an isolated moment. The novel's primary theme is the overcoming of preoccupation with the individual personality. The element that distinguishes Frunze and the weavers as complete characters is their natural ease and lack of affect: their concern for the collective has eclipsed their preoccupation with the self. The weavers serve as a model for the novel's other collective character, the *Chapaevtsy*: a loosely organized, but highly effective mass of peasant soldiers who must learn to fight for the greater good, rather than martial glory or the approval of their charismatic commander. Chapaev represents the charismatic individual, the 'People's Hero' (*narodnyi geroi*), as a negative cultural phenomenon. The novel contains numerous discussions of the *narodnyi geroi*, noting that the "majority came from the peasantry" and represented "a completely different style" than the "coherent, broad, organized struggle of the weavers".¹⁷⁰

Furmanov repeatedly uses variants of the word *vostorg* (meaning 'ecstasy, rapture, delight') to describe the effects of Chapaev's leadership. When he speaks to his troops, or to peasants in the villages, "their eyes burn with ecstasy" and "shivers of ecstasy ripple through the crowd."¹⁷¹ He moves energetically about the stage, the picture of a charismatic demagogue cultivating the emotional impact upon his audience. The "success" of his public performances was "not in his speeches, but in the name of Chapaev. His name had a kind of magic power" while his speeches were "hollow and meaningless."¹⁷² Yet even Klychkov is not immune to the power of the *narodnyi geroi*. Although he prefers the collective heroism of the urban workers, he can't help being "enamored (*vostorgat'sia*) with the daring exploits" of individuals like Chapaev, despite "always-always having a sense of apprehension" about them.¹⁷³ In order to become a complete (conscious) character, Klychkov must reconcile this internal conflict and break the hold which the *narodnyi geroi* has over him (thereby choosing the good of the collective over the appeal of the individual).¹⁷⁴

The entire novel is saturated with this tension: celebrating the legendary image of Chapaev while simultaneously working to deconstruct it. The danger inherent in Chapaev's charismatic leadership is best represented by the character of Elan', who is modeled upon Ivan Kutiakov—an important subordinate of Chapaev who would replace him as commander after he died. Elan' is himself a brave and talented commander and cannot understand why he does not

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 92.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 70.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 98.

¹⁷² Ibid, 109.

¹⁷³ Ibid, 71.

¹⁷⁴ The fact that he displays a similar hero-worship of Frunze indicates a strong subjective component to the problem: this is in keeping with Furmanov's statements about the need to build new men before building a new country.

command the same level of respect and admiration as Chapaev.¹⁷⁵ His jealousy, portrayed as the inevitable product of an excessive emphasis on the individual hero, is a poison that threatens the cohesion of the *Chapaevtsy* and represents their inferiority vis-a-vis the working masses.

Chapaev and the *Chapaevtsy* embody Bolshevik ideas about the weakness of the peasant masses being rooted in their particularism. Chapaev is depicted as “lean, of medium height, seemingly without much strength, with thin, almost feminine hands, soft, dark brown hair, a short, nervous, thin nose, thin connected eyebrow, thin lips, clean sparkling teeth...luxuriant mustache” and a “fresh, clean face without pimples or wrinkles.”¹⁷⁶ This emphasis here upon his childlike, feminine appearance is matched by descriptions of his erratic temperament and naiveté, and clearly alludes to stereotypes of the peasantry. His ‘thin’ features, apparent lack of strength, and elaborate grooming signify the weak and illusory nature of his excessive individualism, even as his “quick, intelligent, unblinking” eyes indicate his inherent potential.

Conveniently, it is history which decides the hero’s fate. On September 5, 1919, Chapaev drowned in the Ural River while attempting to escape a Cossack ambush. The entire novel builds towards this moment, revealing why it was historically necessary for him to die. It is the only possible resolution of the disciplining/reformation theme: a charismatic personality like Chapaev could only be redeemed by disappearing altogether. The narrative closes at the river’s edge, as the *Chapaevtsy* pay homage to all those who sacrificed their lives there. Significantly, Chapaev is not specifically mentioned: the emphasis has clearly shifted to the collective.

The advent of Socialist Realism marked a shift in the opposite direction: away from the masses as hero so prevalent in the 1920s, towards the individual hero who embodied the unity of the masses in the unity of his character (i.e. without internal division or complex psychology). The relationship between Furmanov’s novel and the genre of Socialist Realism is clearly tenuous. Yet, insofar as Socialist Realism can be said to have precursors or prototypes, *Chapaev* is still arguably a prime candidate. From its inception, the genre’s aesthetic considerations were secondary. Socialist Realism’s primary function was to enact Stalin’s centralization of power in the realm of culture and its formal ambiguity was a product of this non-aesthetic emphasis.

Similarly, the structure and content of Dmitrii Furmanov’s novel were inseparable from his political ambitions at the time when he wrote it. Furmanov was more than just an aspiring writer. He was a prominent figure in the Proletarian literary movement, intimately acquainted with many of the founding members of RAPP, VAPP, and MAPP and actively involved in their efforts to shape the future course (and politics) of Soviet literature. *Chapaev* not only established Furmanov’s credentials as a serious writer, thereby lending credibility to his increasingly prominent role in literary politics: it also whitewashed his past. His actual relationship with Chapaev had ended in a public scandal which revealed the commissar to be far more attached to his individual ego than the novel suggested. And just as Socialist Realism’s theorists manipulated literary history to create an artistic genealogy to justify Stalin’s consolidation of culture, Furmanov’s novel rewrote his personal history to better reflect the important Bolshevik official he was becoming.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 133.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 64.

“The Path to Bolshevism”: Ambition and Ideology

Ambition was arguably Furmanov’s most consistent characteristic. The easy transition of his novelistic alter-ego, from individual to collective consciousness, was far from autobiographical. At the time of *Chapaev*’s publication, Furmanov imagined himself surrounded by resentful adversaries, “their greedy eyes full of jealousy, burning with one covetous thought: ‘Scoundrel!...Why you? Why not me? Why couldn’t I produce such an important, such a well received book?’”¹⁷⁷ This perspective hardly seems consistent with Furmanov’s popular image as a model Bolshevik: the selfless, humble defender of the common cause.

In later accounts of Furmanov’s life during the revolution, it became commonplace to refer to him as a man undergoing constant rapid change. According to his wife, Anna Nikitichna Furmanova, “he grew, not by the day, but by the hour.”¹⁷⁸ This sentiment is intended to reinforce the image of Furmanov evolving inevitably towards Bolshevism. Since his conversion came relatively late, many months after the Bolsheviks had taken over the government, the framing of his diary entries as the revelation of a subjective ‘path to Bolshevism’ was a convenient way to avoid questions about his political loyalty. A closer examination of Furmanov’s writings, from both prior to and during the process of his political conversion, reveals a much more stable, much less dynamic, personality. Most importantly, it reveals that long before his relationship with Chapaev, Furmanov struggled with the core psychological and philosophical issues which motivated both his conflict with the commander and his subsequent desire to aestheticize it.

In his diaries dating from at least 1915 on, Furmanov was always already an *intelligent*: a member of the class of educated enlighteners who saw it as their special mission to lift the Russian people out of poverty and, increasingly, to save them from the autocracy. Regardless of the various ideologies and programs he espoused over the course of the revolution, he almost always took a leadership and educational role. It was this identity, more so than any associated with the various political ideologies he espoused, that consistently dominated his sense of self.¹⁷⁹

Although originally derived from disaffected members of the educated aristocracy, the *intelligentsia* was more of a self-definition than a social class. As education became more widely available over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the social composition of the *intelligentsia* became increasingly diverse. Ironically, Furmanov’s early family history was strikingly similar to Chapaev’s. He was born into a peasant family in 1891, and spent the first six years of his life in the small village of Sereda outside the important industrial center of Ivanovo-Vosnesensk. In 1897, his father “quit the peasantry” and moved the family to the city of Ivanovo, where he opened a teahouse.¹⁸⁰ Yet unlike Chapaev’s father, who was never able to make enough money to enable his children to transition into the urban middle class, Furmanov’s father was determined that his son would be educated. Dmitrii received an extensive education,

¹⁷⁷ NIOR—f.320, k.7, d.6, l.16.

¹⁷⁸ NIOR—f.320, k.15, d.10, l.1.

¹⁷⁹ Furmanov’s acute attention to himself was part of “a much wider discourse in late imperial Russia in which we see heightened awareness of the personal self, obsessive introspection, and a growing sense of the moral and social implications of acknowledging the self.” The personality, or ‘*lichnost*’, “denoted not simply the individual or person but the person’s inward nature and personality, the self, which made individuals naturally deserving of respect and freedom.” Mark D. Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910-1925* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 65, 63. The second chapter of Steinberg’s book discusses the concept of *lichnost*’ in detail, especially its appropriation by aspiring proletarian ‘worker-writers’ in the early 20th century.

¹⁸⁰ NIOR—f.320, k.15, d.16, l.1; Aleksandr Isbakh, *Furmanov* (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo TsK VLKSM “Molodaia Gvardiia”, 1968), 7.

including both elementary and secondary training, a brief stint at a merchant school (*torgovaia shkola*), and university studies in Moscow, where he quit the law faculty in favor of literature and dreams of being a writer-reformer like Belinskii, Dobroluibov, Tolstoi, or Gorky.

There is a certain irony to the fact that Furmanov's self-identification with 'consciousness', as well as his depiction of Chapaev as the personification of untapped peasant potential (or 'spontaneity') was to some extent made possible by his father's success navigating the market. Although Averbakh, the director of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), would one day characterize him as an "authentic proletarian writer", Furmanov's extensive education and insulation from the daily hardships of working-class labor made him different from the 'worker-writers' cultivated by Gorky and others as the future of a new, proletarian literature.¹⁸¹ His struggle to shoulder the weight of a self-imposed destiny, and to align his inner life with this sense of great purpose, although typical of the cult of the writer in Russia both before and after the revolution, was far closer to the bourgeois individualism the proletarian literary movement sought to replace than to the collective ideal towards which it strove.¹⁸² If the story of Furmanov's ideological maturation is about the constant struggle between these two poles, his development as a Soviet artist involved a careful editing of the uncomfortable and messy details this process inevitably produced.

In February 1915, the twenty-four year-old Furmanov was recovering from a severe three-week bout with illness. Lying in his sickbed, he saw before him the promise of "sincere and truthful relationships with women" and the faces of "dear and pure people" with whom he was "eager to share [his] entire soul." To do this, he needed to "develop more than just restraint". He would need to "cast numerous relationships completely out [his] life". He would need to "tear many things up by the root" and plant new things in their place.¹⁸³ This clearly had something to do with women, but "to limit the question to relationships with women would be the same as trying to fix a ragged chord by changing just one note." What he needed was "radical change". But, knowing his own nature, he was skeptical about his ability to realize such a plan. "I can restrict myself to certain boundaries," he admitted, "but to go further would mean war with myself, with my spontaneous, sincere and natural wishes and feelings." He did not feel that he had the strength for such a fight, but "more importantly" he felt that such an act of self-violence would be somehow "criminal". In the end, he decided that he "did not need to tear up the roots", but rather "should take care of the development of the tree, to protect it and preserve its beauty."¹⁸⁴

One month later, as he again spent long night hours reflecting on his life, he "was reminded of Ivan Karamazov, who loved 'the sticky green leaves of spring'" and realized that he himself had a similarly intense and problematic love of life. This tree, a symbol "refracted from literature", functions here as a metaphor of Furmanov's ambivalent relationship to both his unmastered self and his wife, whom he perceived to be both an inextricable part of himself, and an impediment to his self-actualization.¹⁸⁵ Over the years, Furmanov would re-package this

¹⁸¹ NIOR—f.320, k.16, d.27, l.9.

¹⁸² His self-description fits perfectly with the standard image of the Russian writer as an "inspired, striving, and suffering" self, a "mixture...of memory and conscious mythmaking" including many "images refracted from literature". See Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*, 95.

¹⁸³ NIOR—f.320, k.4, d.2, l. 4.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 5.

¹⁸⁵ Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*, 95. The correlation between the tree and life, attributed above to Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, is also a prominent symbol in Tolstoi's *War and Peace* (i.e. Prince Bolkonsky, Natasha Rostova, and the old oak).

dynamic numerous times, but the underlying association between his wife and the ugly, imperfect details of his personal life would remain constant. For now, she was imagined as both his reason for living, and for his fear of dying. When visited by thoughts about death, an experience he had “repeatedly, and not without good reason”, he was not frightened by them. In these moments, he “only felt unbearably sad for Naia” (“Naia was the pet name he had invented for Anna”).¹⁸⁶ He “imagined her sorrow, astonishing in its depth” and it made him sad. This was followed by the troubling thought that he was a “mediocre personality” because “all prominent personalities definitively broke with their families, even Jesus (according to Renan)...But I cannot do this. Naia is too close, too dear to me.”¹⁸⁷

This was connected, in his mind, to a broader ambivalence about the merits of theory versus practice. In the novel *Chapaev*, Furmanov’s literary alter-ego, the character Fedor Klychkov, is the embodiment of the intellect. In actuality Furmanov was often much less certain about theoretical programs. In the same entry dated March 1915, in which he agonized over whether to pick up the cross of Renan’s Christ and cast off Naia, he concluded that he was obligated “to love and care for her” because “all morality aside, life itself indicates where and how to proceed.” This thought was immediately followed by the observation that the world needed a “living hope, not a philosophical system, not an abstract theory.” To solve the refugee crisis in Russia, he claimed, “we don’t need books about refugees, or a history of their suffering, but bread.”¹⁸⁸ Once again Furmanov’s emotional turmoil over his wife becomes a segue to broader anxieties about his personal mission and worldview. Choosing the woman is implicitly linked to rejecting theory and letting ‘life itself’ lead the way.¹⁸⁹

Over the years, Furmanov demonstrated a highly instrumental relationship to ideology: whenever theory pressed up against his personal life (more often than not associated with Naia) he would jealousy protect the latter. Regardless of the platform he currently embraced, he was always determined to take a leadership role. Just days after the February Revolution, Furmanov delivered a two-and-a-half hour long lecture to a crowd of some 230 onlookers. Although thrilled that he had “gathered sufficient material” to speak for such a long time, the experience

Furmanov and Anna Nikitichna had met as students in Moscow the previous year and were married shortly thereafter. When Furmanov became the commissar of the Chapaev’s 25th Division (formed in 1919 and commanded by Vasiliï Ivanovich after his departure from the Academy), Naia accompanied him as the division’s cultural administrator tasked with organizing theatrical performances and other events intended to boost morale and raise political consciousness. Isbakh, *Furmanov*, 45.

¹⁸⁶NIOR—f.320, k.4, d.2, l.15.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. Both Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov and Renan’s Jesus were internally divided characters who struggled to purge themselves of imperfection before they could achieve greatness in the service of mankind.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 16.

¹⁸⁹ The woman was an established representative of the necessities and inequities of everyday life in the Russian intelligentsia tradition, and Furmanov’s early writings about Naia were undoubtedly conditioned by this broader conversation. See Paperno, *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism*, 89-141 and Chapter 1 of Wendy Z. Goldman’s, *Women, the State & Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993). While it is a mistake to equate life as portrayed in a diary with the ‘real life’ of everyday experience, Furmanov’s frequent habit of associating his wife with the deepest parts of his own unreformed psyche seems to be more than just a diaristic convention. Despite significant changes in his worldview and frequent professions of internal revolution, he stubbornly shielded his ‘sincere and natural’ self, almost always associated with his wife, from intrusion even though this was contrary to everything he espoused and aspired to. When Furmanov became a Bolshevik, his inability to allow Naia the kind of freedom and equality his ideology demanded was conceptualized as an inescapable remnant of his bourgeois conditioning that he was either unable or unwilling to conquer. Although the labels changed frequently, there was a substantial consistency to this man whose popular image became synonymous with ruthless self-fashioning.

left him certain of just one thing: “we, the *intelligentsia*, are completely unprepared.” In order to hold their own in arguments with “knowledgeable people”, it was necessary to “analyze the entire alphabet of social questions.”¹⁹⁰ Before he himself had gathered enough information to consciously embrace a political platform, he was lecturing the masses about politics as a self-professed member of the *intelligentsia*.

Between 1917 and 1918, Furmanov had numerous political conversions: he was a Socialist Revolutionary, an Internationalist, a Maximalist, an Anarchist, and finally, a Bolshevik. And he almost always assumed a leadership position. In August of 1917, after spending the summer month educating peasants in the countryside as a member of the Socialist Revolutionaries, Furmanov admitted “I still don’t know who I am. Just an SR internationalist, or a Maximalist? And always I envy the governing body of the Bolsheviks.”¹⁹¹ Long before he became familiar with Marxist theory, almost a year before his conversion to Bolshevism, it was the strong leadership organization of the Bolsheviks, rather than their specific political program, which attracted Furmanov to the Party of Lenin. Just weeks later he would muse about the fact that he, who “became a socialist such a short time ago and has such little familiarity with the fundamentals of social theory, took upon [him]self the burden of leadership in the Maximalist group.” In his plans for the group, the establishment of “an iron internal discipline” took priority over working out the details of a political platform.¹⁹²

This pattern did not go unnoticed by Furmanov’s contemporaries. In November of 1917, an anonymous pamphlet entitled “A Hero of Our Time” criticized his opportunism, comparing him to the mythological Morpheus and accusing him of cynically serving both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat for his own ends.¹⁹³ He was compared to a soldier who, “sooner or later inevitably believes himself to be a general” and mocked for his “dreams of literary glory”.¹⁹⁴ Furmanov was convinced that the pamphlet could only have been penned by someone close to him, since it revealed things he had only told to two or three acquaintances. He countered with a personal attack: mocking the author’s literary references, correcting their spelling, and affirming the sincerity of his political conversion by claiming that the “rupture of his consciousness” was “from a psychological point of view, something almost unexplainable, catastrophic and elemental.”¹⁹⁵

By June of 1918, after some five weeks of soul searching, Furmanov had again endured this experience and was now forced to admit that he had “become, at heart, an anarchist”.¹⁹⁶

Once again, his embrace of this new position seems to have been more emotional than intellectual. He was convinced that it was futile to work within the confines of a state system and believed that the future of the revolution lay in the free association of individuals within a communal system. But his knowledge of anarchist theory was limited, and his political writings over the course of the next month were restricted to debating whether or not the anarchists should work together with the soviets. By the beginning of July, he again found himself envying the Bolsheviks: this time for “their fierceness and their decisiveness” which he admired and did not see as “contrary to the theory and practice of anarchism.” Although he never clearly

¹⁹⁰ NIOR—f.320, k.4, d.2, 1, 245-246.

¹⁹¹ Ibid, 303.

¹⁹² Ibid, 312.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 344-46.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 347-48.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 349.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 369.

articulated what he believed this theory to be, he was now convinced that it was necessary to fuse it with Bolshevik practice and “to create something new...a school of anarcho-realists.”¹⁹⁷

From here, it was an easy transition to a final and decisive conversion to Bolshevism. The very next day, on July 3, he wrote a long and passionate entry under the title “From Anarchism to Bolshevism”. He begins, in typical fashion, with an account of the inner turmoil created by this process: “Again and again these torments of uncertainty! Again the crossroads. Again the search. The familiar anxious condition.” But at this point the tenor of the piece becomes noticeably different. Rather than dwelling on the specifics of his most recent ‘break’, he points back to “the first time when I stood at the crossroads and didn’t know whom to give my revolutionary heart, whom to give my strength, with whom to go. Not understanding anything, not knowing theory and tactics, I was drawn to the SR’s without knowing exactly why--perhaps because an idyllic ‘village’ mood still predominated in me.”¹⁹⁸

There is an unusual ‘love story’ dynamic to this description. Furmanov goes on to describe how, at first, his idyllic nature was “frightened and repulsed” by the Bolshevik party and its emphasis on “science, numbers, and irrefutable facts” which he found “dry and boring”. He fled to the village, but was disillusioned when he realized that “they had no ideological superstructure or foundation—just a simple desire for land”.¹⁹⁹ He decided to quit the Right SRs (a more conservative wing of the party committed to village reform and to working within the Provisional Government), but didn’t know where to turn. From his new vantage point it was, of course, obvious that he “should have turned then, without wasting a second more, to the Bolsheviks” but he was “still too weak and lacking in spirit” to trade one ideology for another.²⁰⁰ He continues in this way for several pages, re-framing his political career and search for the truth (which had been ongoing just one day prior!) as a process in which he was gradually and inevitably wooed by the Bolshevik Party. Two days later, he confidently proclaimed that “only now does my conscious work begin...before this point, it was the product of my mood and temperament; from now on, it will be the product of a scientifically-grounded and bold theory.”²⁰¹

There is an element of finality here that is missing from Furmanov’s earlier accounts of conversion which, although passionate and convinced, are not conceptualized and contained within such a hermetic narrative form. Conspicuously absent from the story is the broader context of relations between the Socialist Revolutionaries and the Bolsheviks at precisely this moment. In March, the Left SRs had quit the Council of People’s Commissars in an act of protest against the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany. This effectively handed de-facto control of the government to the Bolsheviks, but the Left SRs still maintained a large presence within the Soviets. At the Fifth Congress of All-Russian Soviets on July 4 (i.e. just one day after Furmanov’s ‘conversion’), the Left SRs enacted a program of outright hostility to the Bolsheviks: the first stages of an uprising that would see the attempted takeover of Moscow and the assassination of the German ambassador to Russia on July 6. While he may not have had detailed knowledge of these plans, someone with a position of leadership within the party would certainly not have been unaware that a moment of decision was at hand. His embrace of the Bolshevik party was as much an issue of personal survival as of political conviction.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 375.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 375-6.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 376.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 377.

²⁰¹ Ibid, 383.

Just days after speculating about the need to form a new ‘anarcho-realist’ branch of the SR Party, Furmanov’s formal declaration that he had split with the Socialist Revolutionaries and joined the ranks of the Bolsheviks was published in *Rabochii Krai*, the local Bolshevik newspaper in his home town of Ivanovo-Voznesensk.²⁰² It didn’t take long for him to convince himself that he was more than just an average foot-soldier. While he had to endure frequent questions about his switch from one party to another, and couldn’t help but notice the “ironic smiles” that occasionally appeared on the faces of his fellow Bolsheviks when they saw him, he could comfort himself with the knowledge that he “didn’t jump into the Communist party during the honeymoon period (*medovyi mesiats*) of her October-November victory, when half of Russia went after the Bolsheviks.” He was better than that. He approached the party, “not like a triumphant victor, but like a saintly martyr.”²⁰³ This post-facto narrativization of his ‘path to Bolshevism’, foreshadows his later aesthetic move in the novel *Chapaev*: acting as a kind of wish-fulfillment in which uncomfortable personal and political details are omitted, allowing the conflicted man he was to become the uncomplicated Bolshevik hero he would be ever after.

Furmanov and Frunze: A Prototypical Partnership

Furmanov was assigned as the commissar of the 25th Rifle Division by Mikhail Vasileevich Frunze, a close personal acquaintance who had recently been given command of the newly organized 4th Army which operated in the region of Southern Russia between the Volga and Ural rivers. According to Anna Fumanova, Frunze had been instrumental in her husband’s conversion to Bolshevism. Despite his political wanderings, Furmanov had maintained a regular presence working in the soviet in his home town of Ivanovo-Voznesensk. This brought him into frequent contact with Frunze, an ‘Old Bolshevik’ and veteran of the revolutionary underground, who as the Chairman of the local cell of the Communist Party was also active in the soviet. Frunze, who was allegedly impressed by Furmanov’s public presence and skill as a public speaker, “took him by the hand and, gradually, over the course of long conversations, shattered the remains of his anarchist views.”²⁰⁴

While these conversations are absent from Furmanov’s account of his conversion (depicted as a *sui generis*), his numerous writings about Frunze clearly present him as a mentor and role model. His first impressions of the man, recorded in an entry from February 1918 (some five months before his conversion) describe him as “an astonishing person (*udivitel’nyi chelovek*)” with a penetratingly intelligent gaze and deep, profound thoughts that were nevertheless expressed “simply, concisely, and clearly.”²⁰⁵ Frunze was responsible, not just for bringing Furmanov into the Bolshevik camp, but also for directing his early career in the Party. It was Frunze who recommended Furmanov to the Communist Party and, two weeks later, helped to install him as a secretary in the regional party organization.²⁰⁶

As always, Furmanov was a quick study and a fervent supporter of his newfound ideology. Within months he would publish articles approving the use of terror against the

²⁰² Ibid, 384.

²⁰³ Ibid, 386.

²⁰⁴ NIOR—f.320, k.15, d.7, 1.

²⁰⁵ NIOR—f.320, k.4, d.2, l.361.

²⁰⁶ NIOR—f.320, k.15, d.7, l.1. This mentor relationship was a common convention in Bolshevik literature: a convert could not enter the fold without the guidance of an existing member. While it is unclear what the extent of Frunze’s influence on Furmanov’s conversion was, there is ample evidence that the two were friends and that something like a mentor relationship existed. Artistic conventions are not always independent of reality.

enemies of communism, proclaiming that “all other disciplines, both personal and social, should be subordinated to the discipline of the Party”, and demanding that “before the voice of the Party center, all other voices must die out”.²⁰⁷

This had much to do with Furmanov’s own personality, but the influence of Frunze certainly played a role. Furmanov would frequently depict Frunze as an undivided, almost perfected, personality: the synthesis towards which he himself aspired. Descriptions of him contain none of the inner turmoil and vacillation Furmanov used to describe himself, or the lack of discipline and glaring character flaws he attributed to Chapaev. Frunze is always profound, yet simple: with “the head of a sage and the heart of a child.”²⁰⁸ He is the perfect combination of commissar and commander: deeply versed in Marxist theory, yet a man of action unafraid of battle; both a firm leader and a sympathetic friend.

It was likely because of their close personal relationship that Frunze, who had recently been appointed the commander of the southern group of the Eastern Front, comprised of the 1st, 4th, 5th, and Turkestan Armies, entrusted Furmanov with the sensitive assignment as Chapaev’s commissar.²⁰⁹ The commander had a troubled history with the chain of command and recent events among several of his former units only complicated things further. On January 16, Comrade Lindov (who less than a month before had received and refused Chapaev’s personal request to leave the Military Academy in Moscow and return to the front) arrived at the Nikolaevsk Division hoping to diffuse tensions that had developed there.²¹⁰ Several regiments were anxious about a proposed reorganization of their units, and a group of mutineers, led by one Kurilov, had refused direct orders to transfer from the rear to the front. Other units subsequently refused to disarm the ‘Kurilovtsy’ and an uneasy standoff ensued. The commander of the Nikolaevsk Division, apparently instructed by Lindov, ordered that the mutineers be bombed from the air. On the morning of January 20, Lindov and three of his political commissars were attacked and killed by an armored train under the control of the mutineers.²¹¹

It was a personal tragedy for many in the staff of the Fourth Army, and a serious enough matter to warrant the personal attention of Lenin. Yet in the aftermath, emphasis was placed on quieting the unrest and restoring order, rather than assigning blame. The killings were concluded to be accidental: the result of momentary panic under tense circumstances.²¹² There was no mention of any connection between the events and Lindov’s recent refusal to permit Chapaev’s departure from the Academy, and it is highly unlikely that there was a direct correlation. Yet

²⁰⁷ NIOR—f.320, k.13, d.23, l.1; f.320, k.13, d.10, l.2.

²⁰⁸ NIOR—f.320, k.11, d.25, l.8.

²⁰⁹ V.V. Bobrova, V.I. Brovchenkova, N.I. Eliseeva, eds., *Legendarnyi Nachdiv: Sbornik dokumentov* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1986), 121.

²¹⁰ On December 24, 1918, Chapaev wrote to Comrade Lindov, a member of the 4th Army’s Military Soviet, with a request that he not be “starved in captivity” inside the “stone walls” of the Military Academy in Moscow, which seemed to him “like a prison”. He wanted “to work and not lie about”, to do something practical and useful, and claimed that he was willing to serve as either a commander or a commissar. The fact that he also threatened that, if his request was denied, he would go to a doctor who would “free” him and allow him to “lie about uselessly”, shows that he had not really internalized the discipline that the office of commissar was supposed to represent. Yet it is significant that he considered work as a commissar to be both ‘practical’ and ‘useful’. RGVA—f.254, op.1, d.485, l.386.

²¹¹ RGVA--f.254, op.1, d.484, l.78-80.

²¹² *Ibid*, 86.

such violent unrest among the *Chapaevtsy*, men who had been such an asset to the Soviet war effort while under Chapaev's command in 1918, almost certainly influenced the subsequent decision to return him to the front. Probably no one seemed as capable of directing *Chapaevtsy* violence towards the enemy (and away from Soviet officials and commissars) as their beloved former leader. Chapaev was released from the Military Academy on February 4, 1919 and was allowed to return to the district of Nikolaevsk to "organize [his] domestic affairs" with the understanding that he would soon return to military service.²¹³

If Chapaev was going to return to the front, the staff of the Fourth Army with whom he had so often clashed (and who had just lost several of its members at the hands of 'his' men) would have been reassured by Frunze's decision to appoint a close personal friend as his political commissar. The same February that Chapaev was released from the academy, Furmanov was ordered to report to the headquarters of the Fourth Army in the recently captured city of Uralsk.²¹⁴ On March 9, he and Chapaev began their working relationship as the commander and political commissar of the Aleksandrovo-Gaiskii group: a combination of Chapaev's former partisan units and other local forces organized into a more regularized military hierarchy.

The Spring and Summer of 1919 was the most precarious period the Soviet state faced during the entire Civil War. In November of 1918, a former Tsarist admiral, Aleksandr Kolchak, declared himself the leader of an independent Siberian republic. On March 4-6, Kolchak's forces launched an ambitious offensive against Soviet forces in the Volga region, capturing the strategic city of Ufa on the western slopes of the Ural mountains and using it as a base of operations from which they launched assaults towards Kazan and Samara. If Kolchak's troops managed to cross the Volga and link up with the White forces of General Denikin, who had been attacking Soviet positions further south on the Volga from their bases in the Southeastern Ukraine and the North Caucasus, there would be little to stop a direct assault on Moscow.²¹⁵

This was the context of Chapaev and Furmanov's working relationship. Their immediate military objective, as part of Frunze's South-Eastern forces, was to halt and roll back the Kolchak offensive. Shortly after the two assumed command, the Aleksandrovo-Gaiskii group was added to and reorganized into the 25th Rifle Division (later the 25th Chapaev Division): a large fighting force that was far removed from the volunteer regiments and partisan bands Chapaev had commanded previously. Both men had been entrusted with unprecedented responsibilities, and both recognized the importance of the moment for both the Soviet state and their personal fortunes. An effective partnership between commander and commissar would require respect for the objective division of power. No order would be valid without the signature of both. Chapaev's control of the military sphere was absolute, as was Furmanov's authority in all things related to matters of politics and ideology. But, as events would prove, the relationship between the two men was far more than a matter of jurisdiction and procedure.

²¹³ RGVA—f.184, op.1, d.31, l.56.

²¹⁴ Ibid, 84.

²¹⁵ Even without managing to link up with Kolchak, Denikin's forces pushed to within 225 miles of Moscow during the summer of 1919.

Mitya and Chapai²¹⁶—a Bolshevik Friendship

The success of the 25th Division in the fight against Kolchak was the high point of Chapaev's career, establishing his reputation as one of the most talented commanders in the entire Soviet army. Frunze's counterattack against Kolchak's southern flank began on the 28th of April and focused on liberating the important cities of Buguruslan, Belebei, and especially Ufa. The 25th Division would play a pivotal role in all of these conflicts, and Chapaev was personally credited with capturing Ufa on June 9: a moment which represented a decisive tipping point in the struggle against Kolchak in the East. Soviet histories and artistic representations of this moment focus on the military tactics and glorious exploits, depicting Comrades Chapaev and Furmanov as an indomitable team: a triumph of the dual-power structure in the Red Army and an affirmation of collective leadership. The reality was far different.

In the novel, when Furmanov's alter ego, Klychkov, receives the order from Frunze assigning him to serve with Chapaev, he is "struck" as though by strong alcohol: his "blood convulsed with tremors" and he is "unable to speak from excitement." The thought of serving "shoulder to shoulder" with "such a hero", a man he had "dreamed of as a legendary figure", of "maybe even becoming close friends" with him was overwhelming. From this moment on, Klychkov was "consumed by just one thought, one passionate desire---to see Chapaev."²¹⁷ On a narrative level, this early hero-worship represents the commissar's immaturity: he is too susceptible to the charismatic power of the popular leader. He loses control of his body, including his most valuable asset-- his power of speech. To truly stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with Chapaev (and, more importantly, to rule over him) Klychkov needs to master himself, to immunize himself against the irrational power the hero is able to exert over him, even from a distance.

The actual relationship does not, of course, fit into this narrative frame so easily. Furmanov's early fascination with Chapaev seems to have been very real. As a member of the *intelligentsia*, he was conditioned by a culture that placed enormous philosophical significance on friendship and it was clearly important to him that his relations with the commander be close: most likely modeled on the mentor dynamic he experienced with Frunze. Many of his diary entries about Chapaev depict him as a kind of project. He is the very embodiment of constant activity: possessing a "restless nature", he needed to be "constantly on the move" and would become nervous and agitated if required to stay in the same place for more than three or four days. He frequently went without sleep, devoting all of his time and energy to caring for and instructing his men, who "all, like little chicks, worked under the wing of Chapai."²¹⁸ The teacher, it seems, needed to be taught to harness his natural energy, to organize his time rationally in order to effectively care for his men.

Furmanov's descriptions of both Chapaev and the *Chapaevtsy* ultimately express a desire to belong: to fulfill his function in the group by asserting his tutelary role and gathering both Chapaev and his men under the wing of the Communist Party. Thus, although Chapaev and his men were "naïve, simple people" with "insufficient knowledge and skills", they were "redeemed" by their "energy and desire to work." Their natural, seemingly effortless

²¹⁶ 'Mitya' and 'Chapai' are the diminutive forms of Dmitrii and Chapaev: used to denote intimacy and affection.

²¹⁷ Furmanov, *Chapaev*, 54-55.

²¹⁸ NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1, l.11.

camaraderie was a model of sincere human relations. “The entire company of *Chapaevtsy* has the same feature”, he notes. “When two of them are together, they are always friends and always trust each other”. Yet, when they are apart, they begin “to suspect one another of all sorts of faults, even of dishonesty.” Their natural asset of sincerity is “too credulous”: again, a sin of ignorance that he alone seems qualified to correct.²¹⁹

Overall, Furmanov’s early entries from his time in the 25th Division are extremely positive. He seems to have transitioned quite easily into his role as commissar and rarely reports obstacles to the exercise of his duties. At the end of May, Furmanov writes that relations between himself and Chapaev are “extremely intimate”, claiming that they were kindred spirits and even “loved each other”.²²⁰ He notes with concern that his friend seems to have “become completely unglued (*sovsem raskleilsia*)” by his constant activity. He worries that “if he (Chapaev) leaves, it will be very hard for me” since they had “grown so intimate, so used to each other’s company” that they could not “spend even a day apart without grief.”²²¹ Even more importantly, he feels that he is easily able to exercise his duties as commissar. He feels that he has “perfected” his ability “to tame (*ukroshchat*)” Chapaev, and claims that “there has not been one instance when he refused to accept one of my suggestions.”²²² This affection extended to Chapaev’s “guys” (*rebiata*) as well. He felt himself a part of this community of “dashing, brave, honorable warriors.”²²³ Contrary to the many of his previous diary entries, in which he frequently agonized over his present state and wondered when his “real life” would begin,²²⁴ his writings from this period express a sincere satisfaction with the present moment. “Here”, he writes, “I am living a full life.”²²⁵

Mitya and Naia—A Civil War Romance

The source of the conflict between commander and commissar was something other than the chain of command or politics. It actually seems to have originated in a conflict between the commissar and his wife. Several years of marriage had done little to dampen his diaristic tendency to idealize her as the embodiment of his personal life. Writing on May 13, Furmanov demonstrates the passionate intensity typical of most diary entries he placed under the heading of ‘Naia’. “Such closeness, such happiness, how dear we are to each other”, he writes. “Sometimes it seems that neither you nor I exist. Instead, there is something one, something whole and unbroken, which has just one heart and one mind.”²²⁶ This is an unusual moment: there is a glaring disconnect between this idealized description and the rest of the entry, which documents an argument from the previous night:

“I sat hunched on the chair smoking a cigarette while she lay on the bed. In high spirits, happy and affectionate, I approached the bed and put out the light. Jokingly, I lay down with my back

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid, 15.

²²¹ Ibid, 13.

²²² Ibid, 15.

²²³ Ibid, 13.

²²⁴ NIOR—f.320, k.4, d.2, l.214.

²²⁵ NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1, l.13.

²²⁶ Ibid, 5.

to her, but then turned to face her. I was in terrible need of sleep and dozed off almost immediately. Suddenly I hear:

---Mitiai, you are completely without affection for me. What does that mean?

I remained silent, not speaking a word.

---Well, answer me.

---What is there to answer: it means that it's my nature. It means that I'm not very affectionate. Affection isn't something you do, it comes of itself. It is born, not created."²²⁷

His cool response didn't help. Before long, Naia was accusing him of having more affection for the dog than for her and threatening to send "this comedy" of a marriage "to the devil".

As the argument unfolds, it becomes clear that the root of Naia's anger (at least as presented/understood by Furmanov) was his refusal to allow her to take a course in operating a machine-gun, and more broadly, his refusal to allow her to accompany him to the front and serve in combat. Furmanov's language in this argument reveals that there was much more to the issue than Naia's safety. He claims that he doesn't want her being a "trashy machine-gunner (*driannoi pulemetchik*)" because it would require her spending too much time "in the ranks (*v tsepi*)", while he was forced to "wait and suffer".²²⁸ The sexual anxiety here is thinly disguised. While there was undoubtedly some concern that she could be killed or harmed in combat, Furmanov's emphasis is clearly on the unseemliness of her operating a machine-gun and living among a mass of men.²²⁹

Clearly all was not well with the young Bolshevik couple. The argument ends with Naia threatening to leave and Furmanov assuring her that he would be fine without her since he was "already accustomed to living alone."²³⁰ The entry ends with a monologue, addressed to Naia (although seemingly not a record of their actual conversation) that is the polar opposite of the sentiments expressed at the opening. Furmanov declares that he does not want "to merge and destroy [his] personality" with that of another: an act he equates with "suicide". While he might "agree (*soiitis*)" with her on certain things, there were "millions" of other issues which he

²²⁷ Ibid, 6.

²²⁸ Ibid, 7. In her work on the role of women in combat during World War Two, Anna Krylova claims that the "act of understanding the logic behind women's desire to fight was in itself a major cultural shift in general social imagining of modern war and the soldier." She argues that, ironically, it was the Stalinist culture of the 1930s which "enabled more varied popular ways of viewing and expressing gender" and thereby facilitated broader social acceptance of women at the front. It is therefore hardly surprising that Furmanov reacted the way that he did. Yet Krylova's question about the women of World Two ("What gender frameworks enabled them to merge the woman and the soldier into a noncontradictory social identity") seems doubly apt in the case of Anna Furmanova in 1919 (i.e. before the 1930s). Indeed, Krylova attributes significant agency to the fictionalized image of Furmanova, in the character of Anka the Machine-Gunner, in the creation of popular acceptance for the female soldier. See Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 28, 13 & 67.

²²⁹ See the first chapter of Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies: Volume 2, Male Bodies: Psychanalyzing the White Terror* for an apt description of the various associations possible between 'the masses' and sexual danger in the popular imagination. Although Theweleit's work focuses on the German Freikorps of the 1920s, the parallels with the contemporaneous culture of Soviet Russia can be seen through a comparison with Eric Naiman's *Sex in Public*, which describes many of the sexual anxieties inherent in the creation of a new, mass society.

²³⁰ Ibid, 8.

refused to compromise on because “these characteristics are mine, personally mine, Dmitry Furmanov’s” and “the way I live now, is the way I will live my entire life.”²³¹

The disparity between the opening and closing of the May 13th entry essentially repeats the dynamic of Furmanov’s March 1915 entry discussed above: highly idealized rhapsodizing about the couple’s mystical union is followed by Furmanov’s stubborn defense of his own individuality and refusal to cross certain internal boundaries related to his wife. It is highly unlikely that this was unconscious. Furmanov was committed to the diaristic project of unfolding his personality by documenting all of it, even the irrational. Yet it is significant that the dynamic described above changed so little between 1915 and 1919, especially considering the ideological sea-change that had supposedly occurred in the interim. Despite being a representative of the Soviet state, an entity that (especially in its early years) was committed to collectivism and the radical equality of men and women, Furmanov stubbornly guarded his personal life, of which he considered his wife to be a central part. He was emphatic that, if there was to be unity between them, it would be a product of her subordination to his imperatives rather than vice-versa. And his language indicates that this was often a matter of will rather than ability: in both instances, he repeatedly expresses the fact that there were core features of his personality that he simply did not *want* to change.

Anna Nikitichna, for her part, was clearly not content being a mere accessory to her husband. She had not received her revolutionary politics from him. In her autobiography, she explains that, unlike her husband, she came from a distinctly working-class background. Her grandfather had been a freight loader and her father, who worked at a tanning factory, had participated in the Revolution of 1905.²³² Anna studied at the gymnasium, completing the fifth class before being forced to quit due to a lack of funds. At the age of 15, she began working as a teacher in the villages: an experience she describes as “not teaching, but torture”. Despite a “year of agony” populated by “priests and village atamans”, she refused to return home and “live off of her father.” To improve her fortunes, she took typing lessons, and eventually began earning enough to send back half of her wages to her family.²³³ At the beginning of 1914, she travelled to Moscow where she enrolled in “higher education for women” and it was at a student party that she first met her future husband.²³⁴ The two soon married and, when the war broke out, travelled together to work in hospitals on the Turkish front in Georgia.

After June of 1915, the couple transferred together from the Turkish front to the Western front on the borders of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Furmanov was soon forced to leave after angrily striking the leader of his detachment for suggesting that a group of wounded Hungarians be shot, rather than attended to. Anna claims that she was forced to stay, and that after Furmanov left, the officer lavished his attention on her and frequently tried to discuss female “emancipation”.²³⁵ She apparently resisted his advances, and it is unclear to what extent

²³¹ Ibid. “The human being has always to learn from scratch from the Other what he has to do, as man or as woman...Sexuality is established in the field of the subject by a way that is that of lack...the living being, by being subject to sex, has fallen under the blow of individual death.” Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1998), 204-5.

²³² NIOR—f.320, k.17, d.2, l.37.

²³³ Ibid, 38.

²³⁴ Ibid, 39.

²³⁵ Ibid, 42-3.

Furmanov was aware of them. But his later anxieties about her interactions with men in positions of military or political authority, and about her being ‘in the ranks’, indicates that this period of separation put a strain on the marriage. Significantly, it was during this time that, under the tutelage of several male acquaintances in the military, Anna became a Bolshevik. Her autobiography makes it clear that this conversion had nothing to do with Furmanov, and in fact pre-dated his own. In a section of her autobiography that was later crossed out and not included in future drafts, Anna notes that at the moment when her own political position was taking shape, she received several letters from her husband which made it clear that he was still “unable to find the path” and expressed dismay over, and an inability to understand, her recent decision.²³⁶

There is good reason to suspect that her political conversion bothered Furmanov for more than just political reasons. There is reason to suspect that Anna harbored the free love/sexual independence sentiments common among revolutionaries during this period and that Furmanov was intensely troubled by the knowledge that he should, but could not, assent to such an arrangement. In an entry dated August 7, 1921, he makes his most detailed and emphatic statement concerning his insecurities about his wife, and the link between these insecurities and ideology. This passage was written years after the Chapaev interlude, and was directly influenced by it. Moreover, Furmanov’s willingness to admit the tenacious influence that his pre-revolutionary conditioning still had over him, even his very conceptualization of his jealousy *as* pre-revolutionary conditioning, was no doubt influenced by the context of NEP.²³⁷ Yet the passage clearly participates in many of the patterns noted in entries from 1915. Before discussing the interaction between Furmanov, Anna Nikitichna, and Chapaev during the summer of 1919, and the impact that it had upon the commissar’s subsequent literary representation of the commander, it will be useful to pause and consider the author’s thinking about the relationship between himself, his wife, and their ideology.

After receiving several letters from Naia (who was serving in Central Asia at the time) in which she describes a commissar who had been helpful in assisting her with her work in Tashkent and Samarkand, Furmanov wrote a diary response, which, as was typical, is addressed directly to Naia. The passage reveals a surprising degree of jealousy and suspicion: after quoting segments of her letter, he scolds:

“What did you think these words would bring me more of, happiness or grief?...Let him help—it’s good for us, and especially good for you: relax, recover, keep up your health. But I am still plagued by doubts: are you planning to leave me? Are you succumbing to another’s flattering words, the excitement of strange caresses? Are you giving yourself over to the power of a stranger’s body?”²³⁸

He then pleads with her not to give in and warns of the negative impact this would have on their relationship.

²³⁶ Ibid, 12.

²³⁷ For a detailed discussion on the effect of NEP on early Soviet discourse about the pre-revolutionary past, see Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public*, Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet ideology* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), especially Chapter 4--Behind the Red Door: An Introduction to NEP Gothic.

²³⁸ NIOR—f.320, k.7, d.4, l.33.

Several times the passage swings dramatically between agonized rambling and a nod to ideology in which he concedes that she has the right to do as she pleases: “Oh, of course, of course, we are free, we are not slaves to each other and you have the right to give your body to whomever you want.”²³⁹ The ‘Oh, of course’ (*O, konechno*) functions as a pre-emptive response to an expected argument of his imagined interlocutor (i.e. Naia) and indicates the existence of a conversation between the couple about the implications of ideology for their relationship. Once again, the writer whose *oeuvre* (of which the diaries were considered central) was supposed to express the core theme of Bolshevik self-fashioning, of the new society’s prerequisite need for new men, demonstrates a marked inability (or perhaps unwillingness) to violate his innermost self, embodied by his wife:

“There will come a day when all human relations will be tranquil...when they will be conducted, not just externally, but internally, without anger, worry, or cursing. This will be, but not for us. It will be only for our descendants, people of a different century, of other conditions, without our spiritual constitution (*dukhovnaia konstitutsiia*). And we, although we are Communists, people of the idea, people who live by our own great doctrine, we are at the same time the children of our own century, with all its conditions and influences. All of our sexual feelings and qualities are full of passion and jealousy---we are simply mortals and nothing more. We still cannot abandon the idea that the body of a woman belongs to us...When I think about your body, Naia, I consider it my own, existing for me alone, for my pleasure.”²⁴⁰

After admitting that his own sexuality is hopelessly marred and constrained by its pre-revolutionary conditioning, he proceeds to wallow in a kind of masochistic daydreaming in which he imagines in excruciating detail the secret rendezvous his wife might be having with this stranger in Tashkent. He describes the city as a sensual paradise, “especially at night!”: full of long winding alleys and secret corners which “entice you to pleasure.” Step by step he imagines their meeting, describing her nervousness, her gradual conquering of her shame, even the manner in which the stranger throws her onto the bed, before again begging her “Don’t do it Naia! Don’t do it my darling!”²⁴¹ The entire passage acts as a bulwark for Furmanov’s admittedly non-revolutionary passions: after noting the discord between his romantic/sexual feelings for his wife and his ideology, he then actively inflames those very feelings through an act of narration.

This passage from 1921, when considered alongside other passages about his wife from 1915 and 1919, establishes a clear pattern in Furmanov’s thinking about his wife: a pattern that is decidedly at odds with the revolutionary tenor of his work as a whole. This is not an anomaly: entries under the heading of ‘Naia’, many of which are addressed directly to her and/or express similar sentiments as the ones described above, are one of the most consistent features of his diaries. In considering the episode with Chapaev, it is important to bear in mind that Furmanov was a chronically jealous man. And in considering Furmanov’s subsequent novelization of his time with Chapaev (a story about the triumph of ideology over passion), it is highly significant that the author’s own struggles with passion were linked, in his mind, with a failure to align his inner life with ideology as well as to his time with Chapaev. In the midst of pleading with Naia not to ‘do it’ in his diary entry from 1921, Furmanov begs her to think back on their time “in

²³⁹ Ibid, 35.

²⁴⁰ Ibid, 34.

²⁴¹ Ibid, 36.

Ufa, two years ago, when we swore on our love for each other not to keep any secrets or hide any transgressions from each other.”²⁴²

Mitya, Naia, and Chapai—A Bolshevik Love Triangle

The liberation of Ufa on June 9, 1919 was the high-water mark of Chapaev’s career. The 25th Division played a decisive role and Chapaev’s quick thinking, tactical acumen, and close personal involvement in the battle (so close that he was seriously wounded in the head by shrapnel) made the victory possible. The significance of the victory for the Bolshevik cause was enormous: representing a major tipping point in the balance of power on the Eastern Front. Ironically, Furmanov’s diary from the time is almost entirely consumed by personal matters. For him, Ufa represented a tipping point of another sort: it was the place where his relationship with his wife was reaffirmed and his friendship with Chapaev was ended.

After their May 13th argument about Naia’s participation at the front, relations between the Furmanovs continued to grow strained. One week later, Furmanov noted with unease that his wife seemed to be keeping something from him. After he had confessed “all” the “sins and mistakes” of his former life to her, she seemed hesitant to do the same: leaving him with the impression that she harbored “dreadful secrets”.²⁴³ The very same day he noticed that Chapaev seemed to be suffering from some kind of secret dilemma, and claimed that it was hard for him to look at his friend. He wondered to himself whether or not his wife had something to do with it.²⁴⁴ Several days later, on June 2, Chapaev and Furmanov had a serious argument. Furmanov scolded Chapaev, calling him a ‘bandit’ for not allowing the horses to rest. Chapaev, apparently offended at the label, claimed that he should act like real bandit and shoot Furmanov before brandishing his revolver and riding off in anger.

On May 6, Furmanov spotted his wife walking hand and hand with another man.²⁴⁵ When she noticed him, she quickly dropped the hand and walked off. The ease with which she “deceived” him infuriated and shamed Furmanov. That evening, the two again argued heatedly until Naia stood up, went to the table and began to write two letters: one to the Political Department requesting permission to leave her duties in the rear, and the other to Chapaev, expressing her desire to be admitted to a front line regiment. Faced with this ultimatum, Furmanov recalled that, not long ago, Chapaev had claimed that he “would be proud to have such a brave wife” and would “rejoice to have her ride into battle” with him. This clearly pricked Furmanov’s conscience. He began to wonder, “After all, why don’t I just take her with me?” He decided that he was afraid for her safety, because she was so dear to him, and considered such concerns to be “egotistical” and “shameful”. He admitted that “if I am truly a communist, I should forget and cast off all personal feelings and bring her here, where generous and honorable people are especially needed.” After agreeing to concede to her wishes, Furmanov claimed that their happiness had been restored and that life was “easy, like never before”.²⁴⁶

²⁴² Ibid, 34.

²⁴³ NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1, l.14.

²⁴⁴ Ibid, 22.

²⁴⁵ Petr Isaev -- an orderly who is only mentioned briefly in the novel, but would become a major character (Pet’ka) in the film.

²⁴⁶ Ibid, 25-6.

This reconciliation did not last long. Furmanov wrote the next entry, a long and bitter diatribe under the heading ‘Jealousy’, on June 9th: the day that the 25th Division liberated Ufa. The entire passage was written on a table next to the sickbed, where Chapaev lay recovering from a serious head wound he had received earlier that day. There is a marked absence of attention to, or concern for, the commander’s condition. His wounds are an afterthought, and the events of the battle serve only as the background for the real, internal drama consuming the author. It seems that he had finally agreed to bring Naia with him to the front. That evening, Chapaev had ordered him to report to a bridge on the Belaia River, where a key phase of the offensive against the city was to take place. Furmanov believed that Chapaev secretly desired to be alone with Naia, and that this was the reason he ordered him to the bridge: perhaps thinking that Furmanov would not bring his wife along on such a dangerous assignment. Yet his “plans were thwarted” and Naia accompanied her husband while Chapaev “departed alone—heavy, sad, and frustrated in his expectations.”²⁴⁷

The Furmanovs spent the evening huddled together in silence at the bridge, under the almost constant bombardment of enemy artillery. In Furmanov’s mind, the experience “somehow renewed our tenderness for each other---seriously and deeply. The danger fused us together even closer.”²⁴⁸ All seemed to be going well until news came that Chapaev had been injured. “As always,” claims Furmanov, “I greeted the news with complete calm.” His wife, on the other hand, was visibly upset and her “lively concern for the fate of Chapaev was, to put it frankly, unpleasant and difficult.”²⁴⁹ This pattern played out for the rest of the evening: Furmanov demonstrated almost complete indifference about the well-being of a man he had characterized as an intimate friend and brother just weeks earlier. He forbade his wife from accompanying him to see Chapaev until after he had visited him alone: claiming that he needed to gather “impressions of his psychological condition”.²⁵⁰

This seems to have been merely an excuse for Furmanov to investigate the suspected relationship between his wife and the commander. He had planned to conduct a “special psychological experiment” by telling Chapaev that Naia had remained at the front and gauging his reaction. But when he arrived at the house where the commander lay recuperating, he was informed by the orderly that Chapaev had repeatedly requested Naia’s presence. This sent him rushing back to his wife, demanding an explanation. Naia apparently convinced him, for the time being, that it was only in her capacity as a nurse that Chapaev desired her. As he sat writing by Chapaev’s bedside, Furmanov seems to have concluded that his wife was not guilty of any crimes and that his friend could not be faulted for the fact that he had fallen in love with her. Nonetheless, he could not seem to shake a feeling of deep anxiety. He ends the passage with a tone of marked ambivalence: “There was no need to go to the bridge...”²⁵¹

Over the next several days, Furmanov became increasingly fixated on Chapaev’s motives for sending him to the bridge, and soon convinced himself that “he sent me to the hottest part of the battle because he wants, desperately desires, me to be killed so that Naia can be his.”²⁵² His evidence is largely derived from looking deeply into Chapaev and Naia’s eyes, in the manner of

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 27.

²⁴⁸ Ibid, 29.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, 31.

²⁵¹ Ibid, 33.

²⁵² Ibid, 35.

his intended ‘psychological experiment’. When confronting his wife with Chapaev’s request that she visit him, he had looked “intently” into her eyes to discern the effect on her.²⁵³ Likewise, he claimed that now the commander’s “eyes burned like evil flames” when speaking with him and believed that was proof of a desire to get rid of him. While he had previously convinced himself that the commander’s affection for his wife was innocent and harmless, he was now (based on no new evidence) certain that Chapaev wanted him dead: a conviction he would repeat obsessively over the subsequent days and weeks. He was convinced, not only that Chapaev was in love with his wife, but that he hated him “as one can only hate a person standing in the way of their most iridescent and pure pleasure.”²⁵⁴

Based upon Furmanov’s own observations, Chapaev seems to have made a genuine effort to smooth things over. On the 12th of June, he arrived at the Furmanov’s quarters hoping to discuss the recent unpleasantness between them. He was aware of Furmanov’s suspicions and wanted him to know that, even though he considered Anna Nikitichna a close friend, there was never any talk or thought of love between them. Furmanov, for his part, seemed more concerned with proving that he had not been deceived. “Let’s be honest Chapai”, he reportedly said. “As no fool, as a relatively keen person---I have understood everything, noticed everything, that was spoken in glances, gestures, body language, etc.”²⁵⁵ As a writer, Furmanov had strong pretensions about his ability to discern and analyze the inner workings of those around him (many of his literary works are populated by real people he actually knew). His novelistic alter-ego, Fedor Klychkov, in a passage strikingly similar to the recorded conversation above, “perceived and understood Chapaev’s every step—even his hidden motives (*skrytye pruzhinki*) and secret thoughts.”²⁵⁶ For Furmanov, the thought that he might have failed to notice a relationship between the two people closest to him would have been both a personal and a professional failure.

Chapaev, for his part, was so upset by the exchange that he began threatening to leave the division. The next day Anna reported to her husband that she had been at Chapaev’s headquarters and read a request he had written asking to be transferred. She begged him to reconcile with the commander, since both of them were needed by the revolution. The commissar responded by obsessing over why she had been with him in the first place and why she was so desperate to keep him around. At this point his personal life seems to have completely dominated his thinking: overshadowing any considerations about the collective.²⁵⁷ He was rarely able to endure such contradictions for long. Several days later, in an obvious attempt to reconcile the personal and the political, he began to entertain the idea that he himself might become commander. To his mind this had nothing to do with his jealousy of Chapaev, but was motivated by a sense that he was “risking too little” for the cause.²⁵⁸ When Naia anxiously (and somewhat coldly) rejected the idea, “What are you talking about? Come to your senses! What kind of commander would you be?...Why are you doing all of this Mitiai?”, Furmanov responded indignantly: “What do you mean why, Naia...this is the general line of our party: to

²⁵³ Ibid, 31.

²⁵⁴ Ibid, 36.

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 43.

²⁵⁶ Furmanov, *Chapaev*, 256.

²⁵⁷ NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1, l.44.

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 47.

remove unreliable elements of the command staff and replace them with our own, with communists.”²⁵⁹

His logic did little to convince her. “I know you”, she said, “and I see that you have a completely different mentality, a different structure of thought and belief, a different talent. You will never be a good commander---this is not your domain.”²⁶⁰ These comments no doubt stung. The next day, after growing agitated while waiting for her outside a store for “women’s accessories”, Furmanov claims that he could “barely restrain [him]self from abusive swearing” and two times let slip the ultimate insult of “fuck your mother (*mat tvoiu tak*)”.²⁶¹ Anna was so distraught that she seems to have had a nervous breakdown. She was bedridden for days and the doctor warned Furmanov that another such incident might lead to her “complete ruin”.²⁶² Surprisingly, Furmanov writes that the couple was soon reconciled: upon seeing him at her bedside, Anna was allegedly overcome with relief, having been convinced that he had abandoned her forever. For his part, Furmanov seems to have taken the doctor’s words seriously: from this point on he refrained from such violent outbursts and generally assumed her innocence: laying all blame at the commander’s feet.

The incident with Naia brought relations between the commissar and the commander to a new low. On June 23, the two argued for more than two hours, with an outraged Chapaev questioning how Furmanov could “drive such a person as Anna Nikitichna to an early grave“ and scolding him for failing to set a proper example before the troops. He threatened that, should another such incident occur, he would not hesitate to intervene: causing Furmanov to explode “Intervene how? Intervene in what? In my personal life?”. Chapaev’s response to this was surprising, not just for its content, but for the fact that Furmanov recorded it in his diary. “Yes I will intervene,” he said. “I have the right. You are a communist, and your wife is a communist. Your lives don’t just belong to yourselves, but to our common cause.” The scene is a complete reversal of the tutelary dynamic represented in the novel, and Furmanov was no doubt indignant that the peasant commander would presume to educate him about a communist’s proper relation to private life. Next to this statement, whether ironically or in earnest, Furmanov inserted the comment “a lofty and noble argument!”²⁶³

Even though Furmanov had suspected that the commander wanted to kill him and steal his wife weeks earlier, it was only at this point, June 24, that he wrote an entry under the title “A complete break with Chapaev”. The bulk of the passage has nothing to do with his personal life, but focuses on an incident involving 180 Hungarian soldiers who refused to participate in an offensive. Furmanov claims that Chapaev wanted to shoot them, and that this was the reason for a bitter argument between the two. That evening, a visibly troubled Anna Nikitichna approached her husband with a letter in her hand and said “I do not know what to do. How should I react to such baseness?” The letter was from Chapaev:

²⁵⁹ Ibid, 46. The comment hints that his intention was not just to be *a* commander, but to replace Chapaev as the commander of the 25th Division.

²⁶⁰ Ibid, 48.

²⁶¹ Ibid, 54.

²⁶² Ibid, 58.

²⁶³ 62.

“Anna Nikitishna. I wait for your final word. I can no longer work with such an idiot, he is not a commissar, but a slave-driver (*kucher*) and I have spoken and argued with him at length about you: if you like, I will share the details with you personally, just don’t take him as a guardian (*ne berite ego storozhem*). I cannot watch him trudge behind you. If you wish, for one last time, to tell me a few words, then give your answer, I feel that we will soon be separated forever. I’m waiting.

Love, Chapaev”²⁶⁴

The letter does seem to indicate an attempt to win Anna from her husband. The two seem to have been very close. In her own attempts (after the death of her husband) to write a biography of Chapaev, she frequently referred to him with genuine admiration. Significantly, she considered him (rather than her husband) to be her “greatest support” in her cultural work in the division: always respectful and eager to help.²⁶⁵

Yet, in seeking to win Anna away from her husband (if this was indeed his intention), Chapaev overplayed his hand. If she had in fact been wavering between commissar and commander, the letter prompted a moment of decision. She now emphatically sided with her husband, sending a response to Chapaev in which she expressed particular outrage about the insults leveled against her husband, which she equated with insults against herself.²⁶⁶ Not satisfied with this, Furmanov demanded that she explain why Chapaev would have had reason to hope that she would take his side. This apparently prompted the vows of renewed love and honesty he would refer to two years later when worrying about her possible romance with the commissar in Tashkent. Whatever passed between them that night, Furmanov’s confidence was quickly restored. Within a short time, his diary would once again be full of romantic rhapsodies about how “Naia loves Mitya and this love is hidden from no one” and philosophical insights about “the love of a Marxist” which “is always both highly theoretical and fundamentally practical.”²⁶⁷

Making the Personal Political

Once he was assured of his wife’s loyalties, Furmanov wasted no time launching an all out assault against Chapaev. On June 25, he sent a letter to Frunze clearly intended to remove Chapaev from command. He begins by claiming that any reports that Frunze may have received from Chapaev “about a ‘conflict’” between them should not be taken seriously. Without mentioning anything about Anna, he refers to an argument over a horse and an exchange of profanities, none of which constituted a “conflict, but were just trifles that were forgotten within minutes.” Chapaev, he claimed, was merely trying to preempt the real issue: the incident with the Hungarian soldiers, which was really symbolic of a much bigger problem. Furmanov claimed that he no longer trusted the commander. He had “been too good to him” and had “forgiven him too much”. He hadn’t said anything earlier because he didn’t want to trouble

²⁶⁴ Ibid, 67-68. This version, taken from Furmanov’s diary is identical to the original, located at NIOR—f.320, k.2,d.7, except for having corrected spellings and being slightly cleaned up (although not perfected) grammatically.

²⁶⁵ NIOR—f.320, k.15, d.7, l.9.

²⁶⁶ NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1,l.68

²⁶⁷ Ibid, 83 and 87.

Frunze with his doubts, and had hoped that by maintaining comradely relations with the commander, he could change him.

Furmanov now claimed to be convinced that Chapaev was merely “an opportunist and a careerist”, concerned with nothing other than his own fortunes. It had recently come to his attention that the commander had only been feigning friendship with him in an effort to ingratiate himself with Frunze and climb up the ranks.²⁶⁸ He now considered Chapaev to be a man “completely without guiding principles” who “hated commissars with all his soul” and constantly expressed his hatred for the Political Department publically. Furmanov announced that he was “no longer able to work together with him, for [he] had lost all respect for him”, did “not trust him”, and considered him a “wretched careerist”. He recommended that Chapaev be removed from command immediately, for “in such a position---he is dangerous.”²⁶⁹

In the following days, Furmanov repeatedly used his position as commissar to undermine Chapaev. On June 27, he refused to countersign Chapaev’s appointment of one Khrenov to the staff of the 74th brigade, claiming that the decision was “completely ridiculous” and taking the opportunity to remind the commander that “without my sanction you cannot give orders of any kind.”²⁷⁰ Several days later, he convened a secret meeting of eight political commissars from the division so that he could “inquire about their attitude towards Chapaev and their understanding of his character.” He proudly described the character of the meeting as “clandestine, almost conspiratorial” and seemed to relish in the fact that he was essentially attempting a *coup d’etat*.²⁷¹ During the course of the meeting, the participants “prepared the tomb of the entire Chapaevshchina”, considering it a “dangerous trend” that threatened to undermine the organization and activities of the Red Army. Several of the participants subsequently prepared reports about the danger Chapaev posed to the Soviet state. One, entitled “On Chapaev and the Chapaevshchina” compared Chapaev, and the phenomenon of his popularity among his men, to the popularity of Makhno and Grigor’ev in Ukraine: both of whom proved to be “a knife in the back of Soviet Russia”.²⁷² Another claimed that Chapaev was “a hooligan, not a commander”, who was guilty of “unrestrained drunkenness” and conducting “counter-revolutionary plots” which “threatened...the entire revolution”.²⁷³

Furmanov had clearly tapped into a well-spring of discontent among the division’s political workers, and the collective nature of these ‘conclusions’ (which were soon presented to the Revolutionary Military Council) ultimately enabled Furmanov to claim, and perhaps even believe, that his plot against the commander was not the product of his own “personal opinions”.²⁷⁴ Here as elsewhere, there seems to be a curious disconnect between Furmanov’s

²⁶⁸ NIOR--f.320, k.2, d.12, l.2

²⁶⁹ Ibid, 3.

²⁷⁰ NIOR--f.320, k.6, d.1, l.72.

²⁷¹ Once can’t help but wonder, given his recently expressed ambition for command, if he wondered whether or not he himself might replace Chapaev.

²⁷² NIOR—f.320, k.2, d.13., l.1-2. Nestor Makhno and Nikifor Grigoriev were extremely popular partisan leaders from the peasantry who had allied with the Bolsheviks, but later rebelled against them and became some of the most significant components of the ‘Greens’—peasant, often anarchist, groups who fought for independence from central government of any kind (White or Red).

²⁷³ NIOR--f.320, k.2, d.14, l.1-3.

²⁷⁴ NIOR--f.320, k.6, d.1, 75.

motives and his own understanding of them. It is certainly possible that he cynically used politics as a cover for the personal. But why would he consciously choose to detail this hypocrisy in his diary? It seems more likely (and is completely in line with his previously demonstrated patterns of thinking and behavior) that he was completely convinced about the sincerity of his current position. When Chapaev accused him of sabotaging his command out of jealousy towards him because of Anna Nikitichna, Furmanov scoffed at the idea that he would ever be jealous of the peasant commander. He merely smiled and said: “Towards you? No, forgive me, with all due respect! Such competition is completely harmless to me. Even the idea that you could pose any threat to me is laughable. You are far beneath her...She doesn’t need my help. She is capable of spitting in the face of such fine fellows on her own.”²⁷⁵ Did he really believe this? Had his recently renewed relations with his wife blinded him to what came before? A quick perusal of his own diary should have been sufficient to demonstrate that he had in fact been jealous (to an arguably pathological degree) and that the complete change in relations between himself and Chapaev was directly connected to suspicions about the commander and his wife.

On June 30, he wrote an entry under the heading “Is it Jealousy? (*Revnost’-li?*), which essentially functions as a refutation of his earlier June 9th entry, “Jealousy (*Revnost’*)”. He begins by admitting that he had asked himself several times, whether or not jealousy was the motive behind his recent actions. He then goes on to give a detailed argument (consisting of five numbered bullet points) that ‘proved’ his motives were completely divorced from any personal considerations. First, his intimate knowledge of his wife’s personality convinced him that the idea of her leaving him was “laughable and stupid”. Second, if she were going to cheat on him, it wouldn’t be with someone like Chapaev, in whom she was “completely uninterested as a personality and a man.” Third, he himself was not capable of “stooping so low as to mix the personal and the political in one heap”. Fourth, if jealousy was truly his motive, the break with Chapaev would have come two-and-a-half months earlier, when Anna had begun working in the division. The fact that the break with Chapaev came so recently was “a sufficiently strong argument” to prove that the change in relations had nothing to do with jealousy. Point five merely refers to points one through four as indisputable “facts” and expresses confidence that his exposition of them sufficiently proved his case.²⁷⁶

While it does effectively map Furmanov’s rationalization of his motives, this passage is hardly a testament to his aptitude for logic.²⁷⁷ This is all the more striking considering that the entire ‘argument’ was framed as a rebuttal of any claim Chapaev might make to the Revolutionary Military Council accusing Furmanov of attacking him for personal reasons. One can hardly imagine that his closing statement, “What more do you want? Abandon your assumptions for I give you facts”, would have swayed any truly objective audience, considering the highly subjective nature of these purported ‘facts’.²⁷⁸ In the end, Furmanov clearly overplayed his hand: his attempted coup was a failure. On the very same day that Furmanov sent his letter to Frunze attempting to unseat the commander, Frunze sent an order to Chapaev refusing his own request to be transferred from the division.²⁷⁹ In the end, both the commissar

²⁷⁵ Ibid, 73.

²⁷⁶ Ibid, 76-77.

²⁷⁷ A fact which effectively illustrates the fiction inherent in his literary self-representation as the embodiment of Bolshevik rationalism

²⁷⁸ Ibid, 77.

²⁷⁹ *Legendarnyi Nachdiv*, 184.

and the commander expressed an unwillingness to work with the other and it was the commissar who was transferred.

Making Life Art

In the novel, Klychkov's departure from the 25th Division is depicted as the triumphal exit of a hero who is "called away to other, greater responsibilities" after successfully completing his mission.²⁸⁰ The moment removes all doubt that it is the commissar who is the narrative's intended protagonist: "After looking back over the last six months, Klychkov hardly recognized himself—he had grown so much, his spirit had been so strengthened, he had been so tempered by the trials he had endured, that he could now easily confront and resolve a variety of issues which had previously seemed insurmountable."²⁸¹ His experience serving at the front has perfected his revolutionary development: adding practical experience fighting the class enemy to his mastery of theory to produce a fully formed Bolshevik hero able to carry the battle to higher spheres.

On the surface, this was true. Doubtless due in no small part to his friendship with Frunze, he was appointed Secretary of Political Affairs on the Turkestan Front and transferred to Central Asia at the beginning of August. Yet Furmanov clearly considered his dismissal to be a humiliation rather than an increase in his fortunes. As he prepared to leave, he reflected on his pride in the 25th Division, "the only one to receive the Order of the Red Banner in all of its regiments", claiming that it "the strongest division in the entire Soviet Republic". Being reassigned to a desk job during wartime was an embarrassment and he was concerned that many of his colleagues believed that he was being "reassigned as punishment". The uncomfortable details of his conflict with Chapaev were widely known, and he considered the entire affair to be a "catastrophic scandal".²⁸² He left the 25th Division in a "state of nervousness, bordering on hysteria."²⁸³

It is unclear what the state of the relationship between commissar and commander was at the moment when they parted ways. There is some indication they had managed to reconcile. In his entry for July 30, Furmanov reports that Chapaev was upset upon hearing the news of his reassignment and even sent a telegram to headquarters attempting to reverse the decision.²⁸⁴ At the end of August, Furmanov wrote an entry about Chapaev that still characterized him as a danger to the Soviet cause, but at least attempted to modify earlier statements about the threat he posed and his potential for betrayal. On September 3, he sent Chapaev a friendly letter from his new position in Turkestan. "You would not believe how much I miss the division", he wrote. "It is true, my work is extensive and honorable, involving the simultaneous coordination of three armies, but my heart isn't in it. It doesn't give me the same satisfaction. My soul is silent within me, not happy like when you and I flew together across the front like birds. My soul wants to be occupied, to live and think actively, to work desperately, to overflow, to overflow and not to fade. But now---everything has grown quiet."²⁸⁵

²⁸⁰ Furmanov, *Chapaev*, 255.

²⁸¹ *Ibid*, 257.

²⁸² NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.2, l. 14-16.

²⁸³ *Ibid*, 1.

²⁸⁴ NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1, l.96-7.

²⁸⁵ NIOR—f.320, k.2, d.9, l.1.

His new position of increased responsibility, involving crucial oversight over matters of ideology and political education, is depicted as a kind of death. He writes from a position of exile: forcibly cast out of the ‘real life’ he had finally found in the ranks of the 25th Division. During the heat of his conflict with Chapaev, Furmanov had written about the “People’s Hero” as a “terribly dangerous element”. These “immigrants from below (*vykhodtsy s nizu*) were not “connected with” or “controlled by any ideology” but ruled through their innate talent, boundless energy, and the force of their own “grandiose and unprincipled” personalities.²⁸⁶ Yet, in pining for a life of frenzied activity, flying like a bird across the front, Furmanov demonstrates his preference for a life that is strikingly similar to that of the People’s hero. His conflict with Chapaev had never been just a matter of ideology, or the subordination of the military to the rule of the Party: it had been a highly personal struggle between rivals for one woman and one command. In life, Furmanov had left the battle in disgrace: but death provided an opportunity to rewrite the tale.

On the evening of September 4th, Chapaev was stationed in the small town of Lbishchensk, located on the Ural River south of Ural’sk (in present day Kazakhstan). In recent weeks, the 25th Division had come dangerously close to exhaustion. Food and water were scarce, and many soldiers were growing sick from hunger and thirst. Chapaev sent the bulk of the division onward in search of supplies while he remained at the headquarters he had established in Lbishchensk with only his command staff and a small detachment as protection. Somehow learning that he was momentarily vulnerable, a large contingent of White Cossacks surrounded Lbishchensk late on the night of September 4, 1919.²⁸⁷ Attacked from three different directions, Chapaev and his small detachment attempted to escape by crossing the Ural River. By the time Chapaev tried to swim across during the early hours of September 5, he had already been seriously wounded in the hand and head. His body was never found.²⁸⁸

Furmanov first heard the rumors on September 9. In his diary entry from that day, Chapaev has already been aestheticized by death. The man he had only recently referred to as a dangerous and unprincipled careerist, was now “a genuine hero, a pure and noble individual.” The tragedy in Lbishchensk completely changed Furmanov’s outlook. Without his recent disgrace and exile, there was “no doubt” that he too “would have fallen into the clutches of the Cossacks.”²⁸⁹ Chapaev’s death also changed Furmanov’s perspective on the nature of their conflict. By September 21, his insistence that neither his own jealousy nor any improprieties on Naia’s part had played a role in the falling out were dropped. He now freely admitted that Naia was “the central figure” in the conflict and that his own “fierce jealousy” had been “the subjective cause” of what had transpired (although he continued to insist that there were other “objective causes”).²⁹⁰ With the threat of Chapaev removed, Furmanov’s jealousy no longer had

²⁸⁶ NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1, l.71.

²⁸⁷ There are many rumors and theories surrounding Chapaev’s death. The most persistent claims that he was betrayed by members of his aerial reconnaissance group, who failed to inform Chapaev’s headquarters that they had spotted a large group of Cossacks closing in on Lbishchensk in the days prior to the assault. RGASPI—f.71, op.34, d.1026, l.75.

²⁸⁸ A. Kononov, *Rasskaz’ e o Chapaevе* (Moskva & Leningrad: Detizdat TsKVLKSM, 1939), 47-53; A.V. Chapaev, K.V. Chapaeva, Ia. A. Volodikhin, *Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev: ocherki zhizni, revoliutsionnoi i boevoi deiatel’nosti* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1987), 328-333. *Legendarnyi Nachdiv*, 245-247.

²⁸⁹ NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.2, l.11.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 14.

an object. Even Naia's "immediate participation" in "the scandal" could now be framed as act of salvation: "It seems that my life was saved by my dear Naia, my benevolent genius, my radiant fairy."²⁹¹

Not only did Chapaev's death change the significance of recent events in Furmanov's own mind, it opened up the possibility for him to create an entirely new narrative about the relationship between himself and the legendary commander. The diaries, which had long served as a repository of material for some great future literary project, now constituted the most substantial collection of documentary 'evidence' about the life of the fallen hero. From his new position of responsibility for ideological and political affairs, in possession of an extensive archive about Chapaev's final months, the recently humiliated outcast was now perfectly positioned to curate the memory of the commander.

The very day he heard the news about Chapaev, he could scarcely contain his excitement about the possibility that he might soon be allowed form a new political staff and "return to my native division!"²⁹² Although this hope never materialized, in the following month, Furmanov actively took the lead raising money for the support of the commander's children, commissioning a commemorative bust, and organizing a "Chapaev Day" celebration where those who knew the "legendary commander" would "describe the full extent of his powerful spirit" to crowds of assembled mourners.²⁹³ When the political department of the Turkestan front, headed by Furmanov, released a publication commemorating Chapaev, three of the six articles were written by Furmanov and one was written by Anna. Furmanov's eulogies sketched Chapaev's biography from birth to death, heaped effusive praise upon him, and established the unity between himself, the *Chapaevtsy*, and Chapaev. Speaking on behalf of the 25th Division, he wrote:

"The entire division---one living body, imbued with a single desire, always ready for any test...was strengthened by the tremendous role played by the late Chapaev together with his commanders. Now the division has been orphaned. The glorious leader, the fierce commander, is no more. But all the same, the mighty body of the division, strong as steel, cannot be weakened even by the death of such a leader as Chapaev. Eternal memory to you, dear comrade. During your entire life of combat, you burned like a pyre, always searching, always striving, always eager to press forward. And you died an honorable death, befitting a revolutionary, weapon in hand, pierced by the bullets of the enemy."²⁹⁴

It seems that Furmanov was quick to recognize the opportunity for what it was. Having publically established his connection to the commander and his memory, he was soon poring over his diary hoping "to gather a wealth of material" for a future literary project. He was struck by the extent to which his diary was dominated by "notes from personal life" and how little it reflected the broader life of society.²⁹⁵ It reminded him of how, during the early days of the revolution, he had read entries from the diary of Nicholas II, which were full of personal details

²⁹¹ Ibid, 15-16.

²⁹² NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.2, l.11

²⁹³ Ibid, 21.

²⁹⁴ DOTsMVS RF--4/16.206=2.

²⁹⁵ NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.2, l.38.

and barely mentioned the broader events tearing the nation apart.²⁹⁶ True to form, he easily reconciled this uncomfortable fact by noting that the broader life of society could be gleaned from newspapers and magazines, while the history of a personal life could never be reproduced without reference to personal documents. By combining material from the press, his diaries, and his published articles, he could situate the personal within the social: marry the objective and the subjective histories of the revolution. He could, of course, never reproduce the subjective experience “in totality (*v polnost'iu*)”, but he “had no time or patience” for “totality (*polnost'*)” anyway.²⁹⁷

What he ended up producing was a story without his wife in it. Initially, he did write several drafts of a story about the love of a partisan commander for his commissar's wife. In one of the version's, called “Stepan's Love (Notes of a Commissar)”, the names of the character's have all been changed.²⁹⁸ In another, “Chapaev's Love (Notes of a Commissar), he chose to use the name of the commander, but decided against using the name of his wife: Naia is crossed out and replaced with Galia.²⁹⁹ Otherwise, the stories are almost identical and make it clear that one of his primary motivations for fictionalizing his relationship with Chapaev was to negate the humiliation he had experienced because of it. The stories include many key events from the scandal: including the scene at the bridge, the letter, and the commissar's conviction that the commander was trying to kill him in order to steal his wife. But there is absolutely no culpability on the part of the wife, and the commissar is a picture of calm composure throughout. The extent to which the stories function as a kind of wish-fulfillment (transposed onto the past, rather than the future) is evident in a scene where the commander, having been excused of all guilt by the benevolent commissar, pleads for forgiveness and exclaims “It's not true, I am guilty, seriously guilty.”³⁰⁰

As satisfying as such a scene must have been for him, by the time he wrote the novel in 1923/4, there were strong personal and ideological reasons for him to remove Naia from the story altogether. As Eric Naiman has argued, the culture of NEP had a strong misogynist bent. The Civil War period, coded as masculine and typified by the establishment of War Communism, was widely seen as a lost era of pure ideological struggle. The New Economic Policy's concessions to market forces gave rise to the representation of a revolutionary present haunted by its “undead past”, associated with the patterns of everyday life and the female (a dynamic Naiman refers to as ‘NEP Gothic’). Symbolically, women “served to remind Bolsheviks of the flaws in the Revolution's incarnation and the necessity of patiently preserving ideological virtue”.³⁰¹ In numerous artistic representations from the time, there was a sense that “the only good woman is a woman who is no longer here.”³⁰² This was doubly true for a story set in the heroic age of the Civil War.

²⁹⁶ Ibid, 45-6.

²⁹⁷ Ibid, 46.

²⁹⁸ NIOR--f.320, k.9, d.20, l.1.

²⁹⁹ NIOR--f.320, k.9, d.21, l.1.

³⁰⁰ NIOR--f.320, k.9, d.20, l.12.

³⁰¹ Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet ideology*, 187. Furmanov's characterization of his jealous feelings as an inevitable product of his pre-revolutionary conditioning, from the 1921 entry discussed above, fits perfectly into this dynamic. It is significant that he only articulates it this way after the advent of NEP.

³⁰² Ibid, 203.

The presence of Naia in a story about his adventures with Chapaev was personally inconvenient for Furmanov. By cutting her out, he was not only able to erase the scandal from history, he was able to re-characterize the nature of the conflict between himself and Chapaev and, ultimately, to transfer the commander's heroic status to himself. By making the conflict about ideology, the novel becomes a narrative about the construction of new kind of hero --the urban, proletarian, Bolshevik-- and the deconstruction of another —the rural, peasant, People's Hero (*narodnyi geroi*) of age-old Russian vintage. Even as it carefully plots Klychkov's heroic development through his various trials at the front, the novel continually asks the reader to question "Where is Chapaev's heroism? Where are his exploits? Do they exist at all?"³⁰³ The answer given is that Chapaev's heroism derives largely from the heroism of the men around him, who see themselves in an individual whose chief talent was his ability to typify the mass from which he emerged.³⁰⁴

Generically ambiguous on several levels, *Chapaev* is both a tragedy and a comedy. By drowning in the Ural River, the People's Hero is not incorporated into the new society. The Bolshevik hero however, moves on to greater exploits in the service of the Soviet state: and to Furmanov's mind, there was no higher calling than the life of a writer. His next novel, *Miatezh*, drops the convention of pseudonyms and openly positions himself, Dmitrii Furmanov, as the protagonist. At the time of his untimely death in 1926, he had begun work on a new novel, *Writers (Pisateli)*, in which he "wanted to present a synthetic artistic picture of the life of proletarian writers"³⁰⁵. These were the heroes of the new age: by holding up a mirror for the masses, the Soviet writer would teach them to see themselves more clearly, so that they could become 'new people' who no longer identified with false idols of the past, like Chapaev. And if the mirror sometimes showed things, not as they were, but as they should have been, this was the price (and perhaps the means) of creating the future that should be.³⁰⁶

³⁰³ Furmanov, *Chapaev*, 256.

³⁰⁴ Ibid, 174.

³⁰⁵ NIOR—f.320, k.16, d.18, l.13.

³⁰⁶ Katerina Clark refers to the "modal schizophrenia" of the Soviet novel as a "juxtaposition of 'what is' and 'what ought to be': a combination of Epic and Novel, mythic time and everyday time. See Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 38. In the case of Furmanov and *Chapaev*, it was more a matter of juxtaposing 'what was' with 'what should have been' for reasons that were arguably more personal than ideological.

Chapter 3--“A Film for the Entire Proletariat”: *Chapaev*, Cinema, and the Historical Aesthetics of Stalinism

Sergei and Grigorii Vasiliev, the directors of the 1934 film adaptation of *Chapaev*, would later tell a story about screening the film with Stalin. Prior to watching the film for the first time, Stalin was informed by one of his “comrades” that the directors were in Moscow and “dreamed of attending the screening” with him. The leader responded that “we don’t yet know whether we like the film or not. Maybe we will scold them (*mozhet byt’ my budem ikh rugat’*) and this is always bad for the artist.” He advised that it would be better to wait. Yet, after watching a portion of the film, Stalin allegedly “turned to that same comrade” and said “Now we can summon (*pozvat’*) the directors.”³⁰⁷

The directors describe “sitting in the darkened hall...quivering at every comment from our comrades watching the film:

When the picture ended, Comrade Stalin casually (*prosto*) approached us and exchanged introductions. He asked whether we were really brothers or not, and when we answered that ‘we are not actually brothers, Comrade Stalin, this is just our pseudonym’, he replied jokingly: ‘You have deceived the People (*narod obmanyvaete*)’. This phrase didn’t actually signify anything, yet it somehow laid us bare (*sovershenno zastavila nas raskryt’sia*) before the influence of that smile, that completely remarkable smile: it is rare when a person can smile with their entire being.”³⁰⁸

Stalin was clearly pleased and “described the essential significance of the picture in just a few words, which we did not grasp the full meaning of until much later.” Smiling his knowing smile, the leader proclaimed “It is a film for the entire proletariat” and then proceeded to make it so.³⁰⁹

Whether apocryphal or not, the Vasiliev Brother’s story about Stalin’s first viewing of their film underscores an important element of what it meant for a film to be ‘Stalinist.’ The scene ultimately questions the extent to which it was ‘their’ film at all. Stalin is represented as a critical component of the Soviet production process: not only approving the film, but declaring it to be the collective property of the people before and making sure that it was represented as such in the press. When Stalin said it was “a film for the entire proletariat,” he was making claims about the context of both Soviet film and the Soviet people, both of which had been recently consolidated behind his leadership like never before.

Chapaev was arguably the first truly Stalinist film. This is not just a matter of content, although the disciplinary relationship between Furmanov and Chapaev as a model for that between party and state, center and periphery, was very much in line with the ideological program outlined earlier in the year at the Writer’s Congress. What truly makes the film Stalinist is the choreographing of its reception in the Soviet press, much of which attributed to Stalin the role of *Chapaev*’s ultimate producer.³¹⁰ Scholars of Soviet film continue to debate if and when the medium became definitively ‘Stalinist,’ with a recent article claiming that “it is impossible to

³⁰⁷ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.434, l.17-18. The story is taken from a meeting between the directors and Soviet military commanders and veterans in 1936.

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 18-19.

³⁰⁹ Ibid, 20.

³¹⁰ At his ninth viewing of the film on November 15, he allegedly worried that too few regions of the Soviet Union would be able to view the film because they were not equipped with the appropriate screen or sound technology. On his eleventh viewing five days later, he demanded that *Pravda* run a leader with a summary of audience reactions to the film. Julian Graffy, *Chapaev—KINOfiles Film Companion 12* (I.B. Tauris: London-New York, 2010), 68.

identify a single milestone that suddenly turned Soviet cinema ‘Stalinist’ or socialist realist,” since “one can find a variety of approaches to filmic expression even in the late Stalin period.”³¹¹ Here Stalinism is equated with the monolithic: signifying a top-down culture paradigm in which ideological content trumps and ultimately homogenizes form. Yet, recent historical scholarship has argued that Stalinism, especially in its early stages, was in fact a dynamic process involving a constant negotiation between ‘top’ and ‘bottom’, center and periphery.³¹²

Insomuch as Chapaev has been analyzed by historians, it is the 1934 film and its reception, which has received the most attention. It was represented at the time, and for decades after, as a Historical event. When the film was released on November 5, 1934, columns of Soviet citizens marched down the streets with placards announcing their intention to see it.³¹³ People watched it repeatedly. Stalin himself saw it more than 27 times in the first year of its release.³¹⁴ On November 21, 1934, the first *Pravda* editorial devoted entirely to a film, declared that *Chapaev* would be screened “in all corners of our vast country—in towns, villages, collective farms, settlements, in barracks, in clubs and in squares.”³¹⁵

While this moment of popular enthusiasm was no doubt genuine and spontaneous, it was also anticipated. Appealing to a broad Soviet audience had long been an important goal of Soviet directors in the 1920s. Very early on, the most prominent Bolshevik leaders had lauded the cinema as “a first class and perhaps even an incomparable instrument for the dissemination of all sorts of ideas.”³¹⁶ This had been an objective of Soviet film since the Civil War, when agit-prop trains and steamships canvassed villages, cities, and military encampments with newsreels and short propaganda films in an effort to garner support for the new Soviet state. The unifying potential of film was a key motivation behind Soviet films, such as Dziga Vertov’s 1926 documentary travel film about the Soviet Union entitled *A Sixth Part of the World*, which he claimed had “strictly speaking, no ‘viewers’ within the borders of the USSR, since all the working people of the USSR (130-140 million of them) are not viewers but participants in the film”.³¹⁷ In other words, the film was to serve as a unifying mechanism for the vast and diverse Soviet people: by watching and being watched, they were to realize their identity with one another. In a statement that anticipated the *Pravda* editorial about *Chapaev* by almost a decade,

³¹¹ Maria Belodubrovskaya, “Abram Room, *A Strict Young Man*, and the 1936 Campaign against Formalism in Soviet Cinema”, *Slavic Review* (Summer 2015), 311. More than twenty years earlier, Vance Kepley, Jr. began his challenge to standard narratives about the development of Soviet montage in the 1920s with the statement “It is an invigorating paradox of film history that advances in research typically produce uncertainty rather than clarity, argument rather than consensus. As our received wisdoms fall prey to revisionist probings... we are reminded of the overdetermined historical causation.” Vance Kepley, Jr., “Kuleshov in the Land of the Modernists”, in Anna Lawton, ed., *The Red Screen: Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 132. How are film historians to treat the ‘overdetermined historical causations’ of Soviet film by the Soviet state?

³¹² See especially, Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995) and Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

³¹³ *Sovetskii ekran*, №10, mai 1964.

³¹⁴ Julian Graffy, *Chapaev—KINOfiles Film Companion 12* (I.B. Tauris: London-New York, 2010), 68. The image here is not of an obsessive fan, but of a director honing his faculties.

³¹⁵ “‘Chapaeva’ posmotrit vsia strana”, *Pravda in Chapaev—o filme* (Kinofotoizdat, 1936), 9.

³¹⁶ Anatoli Lunacharsky: “Revolutionary Ideology and Cinema” in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 109.

³¹⁷ “Shestaia chast mira (Beseda s Dzigoi Vertovym)”, *Kino*, 17 August 1926, pg.3 in Yuri Tsivian, ed., *Lines of Resistance: Dziga Vertov and the Twenties* (Le Giornate del Cinema Muto: 2004), 182.

Vertov expressed his desire that “all citizens of the Union of Soviet Socialist republics from 10 to 100 years old must see this work. By the tenth anniversary of October there must not be a single Tungus who has not seen *A Sixth Part of the World*.”³¹⁸

In 1928 (some six years prior to the centralization of Soviet literature), the *agitprop* section of the Central Committee convened a conference which laid out the new direction of the Soviet film industry as the production of films that would be accessible and appealing to the broadest swath of Soviet society.³¹⁹ The tightened critical environment led to a drastic decrease in the number of films released: down from 148 films in 1928 to just 35 in 1933.³²⁰ Yet as bleak as these numbers may seem, the same period witnessed a dramatic increase in the sizes of the domestic audiences for these films. Between 1928 and 1940, the number of tickets sold for an average film had tripled.³²¹

The purpose of Soviet film, especially by 1934, was not just to foster popular unity. It was to stitch gaps in Soviet History. In the *Pravda* article cited above, the author lamented that “our young people have an unsatisfactory knowledge of their country’s past, and this represents a significant gap (*probel*) in their class education.”³²² Almost miraculously, the cinematic apparatus, here the embodiment of Soviet technological achievement, appears to fill this deficit with the magic of film: “the lights go down in the theatre, the viewer hears the sound of the apparatus behind his back, a blue stream flows from the projectionist’s booth---and suddenly, from among the swarm of vague shadows, history is resurrected: the stern, proud history of our struggles and our victory.”³²³

The new History of Chapaev was ultimately intended to replace the troubled recent history between Soviet center and periphery. The triumphant moment of the screening, which Soviet newspapers praised as a moment of popular unity, transcended the division between town and countryside which had defined and survived the Civil War. During the collectivization drives of the late 1920s and early 1930s, Stalin effectively ended the ongoing conflict between town and countryside by decisively crushing the autonomy of the latter. Grain was seized, private property was confiscated and redistributed by the state, and ‘rich’ peasants (and/or those who resisted) were either killed immediately or sent to the gulag. The triumphant reception of the film was a manufactured Historical event about Soviet History, which elided the moment of the Civil War with the moment of Stalin’s triumph over the rural periphery and erased the

³¹⁸ Ibid, 184.

³¹⁹ Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society: From the Revolution to the Death of Stalin* (London-New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 93-94.

³²⁰ Ibid, 108.

³²¹ Ibid, 119.

³²² “Chapaeva’ posmotrit vsia strana”, *Pravda in Chapaev—o filme* (Kinofotoizdat, 1936), 5.

³²³ Ibid, 7. This quote is clearly reminiscent of Plato’s cave in *The Republic*, a moment which film scholars have frequently used to describe the psychological effect of film and the functioning of the film ‘apparatus’. See especially, Jean-Louis Baudry, “The Apparatus: Metaphysical Approaches to the Impression of Reality in the Cinema”, in Philip Rosen, ed., *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1986), 299-318. “Plato’s prisoner is the victim of an illusion of reality...he is the prey of an impression, of an impression of reality” which functions just like cinema—with light from behind the subject projecting images onto a screen in front of him. The desire for cinema, expressed by Plato two thousand years before its invention, derives from the dream. “Cinema, like dream” is the product of a desire to obtain “from reality a position, a condition in which what is perceived would no longer be distinguished from representations.” Ibid, 302 and 315.

memory of what came between. If, as some historians have noted, Stalin's industrial drive of the late 1920s and early 1930s effectively marked the end of the Revolution, the release of a film with a redeemed 'People's Hero' (*narodnyi geroi*) arguably connoted the symbolic end of the Civil War.³²⁴

The film adaptation forever associated Chapaev's image with the culture and history of Stalinism, a fact of great significance for its subsequent development. This chapter examines the film adaptation of *Chapaev*, considering the place of the film within the larger trajectory of Chapaev's mythology, the context of 1934, and contemporary Soviet ideas about the reproduction of the past. Each section will focus on an important moment from the film, with the goal of linking this content with the broader context. I will pay particular attention to contingencies or influences that were later omitted from the triumphal History of the film. Here the theme is picked up from the previous chapter: for if Furmanov's novel foreshadowed Stalinist culture, this was as much about the subordination of the past to the present as the spontaneity/consciousness dialectic.

There is an important concept in the study of cinema called 'suture,' which derives from critical and psychological theories about how "subjects emerge within discourse." Film only makes sense so long as the viewer spontaneously and unquestionably identifies with the perspective of the camera. The cinema "depends upon the subjects willingness to become absent to itself by permitting a fictional character to 'stand in' for it, or by allowing a particular point of view to define what it sees. The operation of suture is successful at the moment that the viewing subject says, 'Yes, that's me,' or 'That's what I see.'"³²⁵ A similar dynamic functioned at the heart of Stalinist culture, and *Chapaev* is a prime example of it. The film, and the fanfare surrounding it, performed a kind of 'Historical suture': stitching the gap between 1919 and 1934 for audiences who became "active participants in a communal experience that allowed them to play out or replay the Civil War in their own contemporary lives."³²⁶ This was predicated on the elision of the history in between.

The goal of this chapter is to fill in the gap. Key aspects of the film, which subsequently defined the evolution of the mythology, are only comprehensible through an analysis of the context in which they emerged. The creation of the Anka *pulemetchitsa* character, for instance, depended heavily upon Anna Furmonova's individual effort to include a female perspective in the film. Despite the Soviet Union's official commitment to female equality, Furmanova's effort faced significant socio-cultural resistance. The character of Anka *pulemetchitsa*, although unprecedented in its depiction of a female combatant, nevertheless filters this role through traditional categories of sex and domesticity. Likewise, the comic and overwhelmingly positive reinterpretation of Chapaev's character was rooted in the context of Collectivization and the need to heal the divide between town and country, center and periphery. Soviet audiences were conditioned by the same context from which the characters emerged: a context which was made absent in the process of watching the film, as 1919 and 1934 became one. In this chapter, the

³²⁴ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

³²⁵ Kaja Silverman, "Suture[Excerpts]" in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, Philip Rosen, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 219 and 222.

³²⁶ Justus Grant Hartzog, "Children of Chapaev: The Russian Civil War Cult and the creation of Soviet identity, 1918-1941," (PhD diss., University of Iowa, 2009), 105.

context will take center stage. The directors and the Producer will remain in the background, waiting to edit the messy details.

A Museum of the Civil War

Chapaev begins with the approaching jingle of bells: the sound can be heard just a fraction of a second before the camera opens on a wide shot of a horse-drawn carriage (or *tachanka*) riding towards the viewer from the top of the screen, while a disorganized mass of soldiers rushes towards it from the bottom of the screen. The opposing movement of the two forces seems determined to end in conflict. Only in the next shot, when the camera transitions to a medium shot of Chapaev, does it become clear that everybody is on the same side. The effect of this visual ruse is vaguely comical: a sense which is accentuated by the bumpkin mannerisms of the reporting soldier and the visual contrast of the horse-drawn *tachanka* mounted with a Maxim machine-gun.

If the opening shots establish Chapaev and the Chapaevtsy as a slightly disorganized, endearingly comical bunch, the following shots demonstrate their potency as a fighting force. The scene switches to a wide shot of Czech forces commanding a bridge. Again there is the sound of bells in the distance: gradually distinguishing itself from the sound of water flowing under the bridge. As the Czechs begin to notice the sound, they look to the trees in the distance. The camera hovers on the distant forest in a series of extended shots, with the sound of the bells growing increasingly louder: the juxtaposition of visual and aural elements again giving the distinct impression that the source of the sound is the natural landscape. When Chapaev and his men finally appear onscreen, it is in an extreme long shot: an impersonal, or transpersonal, 'crowd' perspective. The mass of Chapaevtsy burst from the trees and flow downhill like a force of nature, an unstoppable wave that the Czechs can do little but flee from.

The pace of the montage speeds up as the camera begins to intersperse medium close-up shots of Pet'ka manning the machine gun while Chapaev frantically points out targets for him.³²⁷ This image of Chapaev and Pet'ka on the *tachanka* would become the most iconic of the film. It is the perfect visual metaphor for the film's theme about the struggle to unite town and countryside. The mildly comic effect produced by this juxtaposition is employed throughout the film---comprising one of its most effective innovations. Indeed there is no historical evidence that Chapaev by *tachanka* (with or without machine-gun); he is only known to have travelled on horseback or in a chauffeured car. The mounting of machine guns on top of *tachanki* was an actual practice during the Civil War, but it was most widely associated with Nestor Makhno, the Ukrainian anarchist leader and frequent historical double of Chapaev.³²⁸

³²⁷ While the montage here is definitely distinguished from the pace of the shots which precede it, it is nowhere near that of the machine-gun scene in Eisenstein's *Oktiabr*. The more rapid pace increases the dramatic tension of the scene (the sense that you are experiencing the chaos of battle), but it is still restrained enough to mask the device.

³²⁸ The word *tachanka* is likely derived from the Tavria region of Crimea and Azov where Makhno was based, and he made extensive use of the wagons to transport his highly mobile 'Republic on Wheels'. One White officer claims that in one encounter with Makhno's forces, he faced 120 *tachanki* mounted with machine guns. See Michael Malet, *Nestor Makhno in the Russian Civil War* (London: The London School of Economics and Political Science, 1982), 85-6.

Both Makhno and Chapaev were charismatic Civil War leaders, extremely popular among the peasantry, whose loyalties were perceived to be suspect or unreliable.³²⁹ During the 1920s, Leopold Averbakh (the leader of the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, or RAPP) wrote an article in which the *Chapaevshchina* (the Chapaev ‘phenomenon’ or ‘movement’) was characterized as “of the same essence as the *Makhnovshchina*”.³³⁰ In both Furmanov’s diary and novel, Chapaev is portrayed as a potential Makhno and the author’s motivating impulse is to deconstruct this false heroic image. Yet this very image of Chapaev as a peasant hero – brimming with visual dynamism, boundless energy, and the kind of innate cleverness encapsulated in the *tachanka*—is central to the popular appeal of the film. In the film, Chapaev’s loyalty to the Bolshevik cause is never in question. When Chapaev and Pet’ka appeared onscreen in a *tachanka*, they appropriated its symbolic power (i.e. the ingenuity and fighting spirit of the countryside) while simultaneously eroding the memory of Makhno.³³¹



The author at the V.I. Chapaev Museum in Cheboksary, Russia

This museum logic, in which a contemporary exhibition of History displaces actual history, is everywhere in *Chapaev*, including its directors’ explanations about how the film came to be.³³² Although they were still relatively unknown at the time of its release in 1934, *Chapaev* was the fifth film of Georgii and Sergei Vasiliev: two biologically unrelated filmmakers with the same last name.³³³ As they were fond of reminding their audiences during discussions of their work, the two were not “accidental filmmakers”, but had honed their talents for years under the

³²⁹ Makhno and his forces originally fought with the Bolsheviks before turning against them and reversing most of their gains in Ukraine.

³³⁰ RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.783.

³³¹ Today, in the Russian Museum of Contemporary History (formerly the Museum of the Revolution) in Moscow, a statue of Chapaev is exhibited alongside a *tachanka*.

³³² The film scholar Evgeny Dobrenko argues that Stalinist culture was the culture of the museum, and that this was most evident in Stalinist film. Evgeny Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History: Museum of the Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

³³³ Two of these films, including the first one they made together in 1928, were short documentaries.

mentorship of Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein. It was in Eisenstein's studio, "or 'the Geezer's studio' as we called it" (referring to their nickname for the beloved director) that the two had first met.³³⁴ They would later claim that it was in their third film, *A Personal Matter* (*Lichnoe delo*), "about the theme of modern work", that they first set themselves "the task of creating realistic images of characters through the use of actors": a process they perceived to be central to the recent "turn" in Soviet art, which was now "dominated by the image of man" and, of course, "intimately connected to the development of the style and method of socialist realism."³³⁵

While this was certainly true for formal aesthetic reasons (the style), it was even more so for the way in which the film participated in an emergent, distinctly Stalinist, cultural mode which deliberately blurred the lines between art and life, past and present, history and politics (the method). Stalinist art was not so much a style as "a grandiose political-aesthetic project which completes the revolutionary project."³³⁶ While historical fiction often refers more to the present than to the past, this process of shifting the present into the past (and the future to the present) was central to 'completing' the Soviet revolutionary project, for only through the individual internalization of such a temporal shift could the Revolution's ideal be approximated in lived experience.³³⁷

Stalinist culture was the culture of the museum: destroying the past by exhibiting definitive versions of it. And no medium was as well suited to the task of exhibiting History as film.³³⁸ Anniversary films, sponsored by the state, often provided the impetus for ambitious attempts to bring History to life on the screen.³³⁹ In the process of making his anniversary film, *October*, Sergei Eisenstein broke more windows in the Winter Palace than had been broken during its actual 'storming'. His co-director, Grisha Alexandrov, was arrested on suspicion of counter-revolution while attempting to get a crowd shot of demonstrations during the February Revolution. He had passed out banners with bourgeois slogans to a crowd of May Day participants in Leningrad, confusing and alarming local authorities who believed they were witnessing a rebellion.³⁴⁰ All historicizing art tends towards the museum, and the Soviet Union was not unique in its efforts to fix the narrative of its past. Yet the Stalinist film's production of History was not restricted to the events portrayed on screen. With the advent of *Chapaev*, the film becomes an exhibited historical event in its own right: an amalgam of both the film itself and all of the state directed narratives about its production, reception, and harmony with the larger socialist project.

Official discussions of *Chapaev* were largely devoid of the kind of intense aesthetic debates typical of the 1920s. Issues of artistic method and theory were more described than disputed. Discussants were unanimous in their praise of the film. The Vasilievs, for their part, constantly emphasized the deterministic nature of their artistic choices. Just as they were not

³³⁴ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.428, l.2

³³⁵ Brat'ia Vasilevy, *Sobranie sochinenii: tom vtoroi*, 51.

³³⁶ Evgeny Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History: Museum of the Revolution*, 1.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

³³⁹ The year 1927, in particular, witnessed the production of numerous, artistically important, historical films to mark the tenth anniversary of the Revolution, including Vsevelod Pudovkin's, *The End of Saint Petersburg*, Esfir Shub's *Fall of the Romanov Dynasty*, and Sergei Eisenstein's *October*. Anne Nesbet claims that Eisenstein was particularly determined "to make history Historical", that is to transform "the undifferentiated time within which we spin vaguely toward our deaths...into the History that is a story of progress and becoming." Anne Nesbet, *Savage Junctures: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking* (London/New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003), 77.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

‘accidental filmmakers’, their choice to make a film about the Civil War, and specifically about Chapaev, was likewise “absolutely no accident” (*sovershenno ne sluchaino*).³⁴¹ Their motivation for making a Civil War film, they claimed, stemmed from their desire to understand “the general beginnings of Socialist Construction and the leadership role played by the Party in this process.” They looked everywhere for appropriate material -- “in museums, through conversations with huge numbers of people”. Eventually they discovered Furmanov’s diary, which “interested [them] as the description of the interaction between two individuals”, in which they perceived “material which would help [them] to open up [their] theme.”³⁴²

In spite of the promise the directors perceived in the topic, they claimed that the prospect of making “yet another film about the Civil War seemed like a terrible thing“ for “the viewer has no desire to see a Civil War picture.” The Civil War had long been a fertile topic of Soviet literature and film. Yet, whereas these productions had too often kept the conflict sealed off in the past, the directors wished to make it present. This characterization portrays *Chapaev* as a necessary next step for Soviet culture, one which only the directors perceived, placing the Vasilievs and their film in the ranks of the *avant garde*. “There is nothing harder than working with material which is already considered well known”, they claimed.³⁴³ The directors would need to “use a new language” and “uncover new perspectives” in order to make a Civil War film suitable for the present moment.³⁴⁴

According to their own narrative, the directors’ artistic maturation (linked through Eisenstein to the past accomplishments of Soviet film) was organically connected to the necessary development of Soviet society and culture (indeed, such efforts to harmonize the personal, the political, and the artistic are central to the Socialist Realist project/aesthetic). The will to exhibit is also to erase. By eliding the new beginning of Socialist Construction, (the buzz-phrase for the rapid industrialization of Stalin’s First Five-Year Plan) with the heroic beginnings of the Soviet state during the Civil War, the Vasilievs’ new film stitched the inconvenient gap of NEP. In the words of one respondent at an official discussion of the film, “material about the history of the Civil War presents a problem which is extremely acute in today’s environment: the problem of authentic culture, of the development and growth of a new culture, which is posed through the collision between Chapaev and Furmanov. This dynamic may be transferred to a number of images from our present life, to a variety of areas of Socialist Construction.”³⁴⁵ Here, the issues of ‘authentic’ and ‘new’ culture are transmitted directly from 1919 to 1934, with the years in between (and all of their controversies, false starts, and compromises) consigned to the dustbin.

³⁴¹ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.434, l.2

³⁴² Ibid. Considering the content of Furmanov’s actual diary (discussed in the previous chapter) this seems a highly ironic choice. The directors were emphatic about the fact that they did not see their film as an adaptation of Furmanov’s novel (which they claimed “could not be filmed”). In all likelihood, they are referring to the collection of diary entries edited by Furmanov’s wife Anna under the title “The Path to Bolshevism”, shortly after the author’s death in 1926.

³⁴³ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.428, l.11.

³⁴⁴ Ibid, 12.

³⁴⁵ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.426, l.4.

The Resurgence of the Civil War in Soviet Memory

The perceived need for a new Civil War film suggests that the memory of that conflict was still problematic. The gathering momentum of Stalin's 'Revolution from Above' during the late 1920s, lent the collective impulse to memorialize the Civil War special urgency. That impulse had been particularly strong since 1928, which marked the tenth anniversary of the outbreak of hostilities. Over the next several years, as Stalin's First Five Year Plan struggled to reignite the revolutionary fervor which had characterized the Civil War, a wide variety of individuals and institutions dedicated their energies to commemorating the conflict. The process involved the creation of veterans' societies and museum exhibitions, the organization of lectures, the publication of documentary and literary works, and the production of films-- culminating in the release of *Chapaev* in 1934. . These vast efforts partly competed with, partly shaped, and partly helped to condition the reception of, the Vasil'ev brothers' landmark film.

Former members of the 25th Division commemorated the year 1928 as the tenth anniversary of the division's founding.³⁴⁶ That year they became one of several former divisions to form a Veterans' Society (*zemliachestvo*) under the auspices of the Museum of the Red Army in Moscow. Such groups occupied a tenuous position in the Soviet state, which consistently opposed the creation of any social group that might serve as the basis for an alternative (not strictly Soviet) sense of identity.³⁴⁷ The veterans' societies organized by the museum functioned as both a release valve for the organizational aspirations of Civil War veterans and a resource for the production of Civil War history.

The veterans' societies were "created in the manner of a social initiative" with the expressed "goal of helping the museum to educate the public about the history of the Revolution and the Civil War through the collection, development, and systematization of historical materials." The Red Army Museum thus provided a space in and through which the veterans were supposed to organize their activities. They were instructed to establish contacts with other veterans in order to solicit memoirs and historical documents, to organize museum expositions, "memorial parties (*vechero-vospominanii*), and anniversary celebrations", and to serve as "consultants on literary projects and film scripts" in order to ensure "the correct portrayal of the history of the Revolution and the Civil War." They were not to have any "special rules or benefits" and were forbidden to conduct activities independent of the museum.³⁴⁸

Yet the boundaries of legitimate museum work were far from clear. Many of the activities undertaken by the *Zemliachestvo* of Former Chapaevtsy, including protracted fundraising campaigns to raise money for the construction of airplanes, tanks, and tractors named after Chapaev or the Chapaevtsy ("*traktor imeni 'Chapaeva'*", "*samolet 'Chapaevets'*"), were only tangentially related to the Red Army Museum in Moscow.³⁴⁹ The Society also worked

³⁴⁶ The year 1918 was not technically the year of the division's founding, although it did witness the formation of smaller partisan units under the command of Chapaev, many of which would form the nucleus of the division founded in 1919. Only after Chapaev's death in late 1919 was the division officially named 'the Chapaev Division'.

³⁴⁷ In his work on veterans of the Great Patriotic War, Mark Edele found that it was extremely difficult for veterans' organizations to receive official sanction. He claims that "the formation of veterans as a distinct social group was not completely controlled by anyone" and that "the state often yielded to it as a force beyond its control". See Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 16.

³⁴⁸ RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.767, l.56a.

³⁴⁹ RGVA—f. 28361, op.1, d.772, 61 and 96.

collectively to secure the privileges of individual members. Indeed, the mission to safeguard the ‘correct’ portrayal of history could have very unusual implications in the tense atmosphere of the late 1920s in the Soviet Union. Historians have long noted the symbolic continuity between the social mobilization and frenzied activity of Stalin’s First Five Year Plan and the revolutionary fervor of the Civil War years, emphasizing the need to provide an outlet for the revolutionary aspirations of a generation raised under NEP, eager to create stories of heroic struggle equal to those of their fathers and elder brothers. If the activities of the Society of Former Chapaevtsy are any indication, these years also witnessed a concerted effort by many former participants in the Revolution and the Civil War to connect their heroic past to the emerging story of the heroic future.

Such aspirations, clearly encouraged by the state, fell under the purview of The Red Army Museum. In a letter to the Chapaev *zemliachestvo* in 1930, the People’s Commissar of Military and Naval Affairs recounted the distinguished history of the 25th Division and called on the former Chapaevtsy to go to “the front of socialist construction” where they would serve as an “example of revolutionary devotion”.³⁵⁰ “Front of socialist construction” was an encompassing formulation, perhaps deliberately so. During the previous year, the *zemliachestvo* had, seemingly on its own initiative, become actively involved in the state’s massive effort to collectivize agriculture. On July 28, 1929, the chairman of the society issued a letter to the membership in which he claimed to have learned “from the newspapers” about the government’s intention to collectivize the region of the lower Volga: including “regions which had once constituted the main base of operations” for the volunteer units organized by Chapaev. Rather than dwelling on the combat history of the division, which was “known to all”, the chairman instead recounted the history of its demobilization, when “Chapaevtsy returned to their homeland and all too often found that not only their property, but even their families, had been completely destroyed.”

By framing the division’s history this way, the chairman suggested that its Civil War struggle (and thus the war itself) was not really over. Since these regions had “played such a decisive role” during the years of the Civil War, Chapaevtsy “had a right to be the first in line” to receive help in the reconstruction of their economies.³⁵¹ Over the course of 1929 and 1930, the *zemliachestvo* issued numerous reports from the front, proudly chronicling the progress of collectivization in the “Chapaev region” and the role of the Chapaevtsy in the violent struggle against the “kulak elements” who had “intensified their struggle” against the region’s poor and middling peasantry, many of whom were fellow veterans of the 25th Division.³⁵² Here, the ‘correct’ presentation of History is a narrative which justifies and facilitates the correct history of the present and provides the narrative of the Civil War with an appropriate denouement: the destruction of the kulaks as a class.

Such flexible definitions of museum work and historical interpretation, although useful to the state collectivization drive, inevitably left the door open for activities that might be viewed as challenging state authority. The primary imperative of the Red Army Museum was to provide social cohesion through the presentation of a unified historical narrative. The Red Army long served as a model for a harmonious mass society, and its history needed to emphasize the unity

³⁵⁰ Ibid, 14.

³⁵¹ Ibid, 6.

³⁵² Ibid, 116.

of the struggle above the particular experience of individuals or units. And yet a degree of particularism was unavoidable, especially for such a storied unit as the 25th Division. The *zemliachestva* were supposed to function as a relatively benign outlet for these impulses by channeling them into the production of a centrally controlled historical narrative.

The production of ‘correct’ history required the maintenance of a delicate balance and, often, a mediator. In 1931, Maxim Gorky turned to the *zemliachestva* to help him collect material for his multi-volume *History of the Civil War*: an ambitious attempt to make history “easy to read” and “comprehensible to all” through the “employment of our all our best artists of the word”.³⁵³ In their petitions for documents and memoirs from their comrades, the *Zemliachestvo* of Former Chapaevtsy specifically requested documents that were atypical of the common experience: they wanted stories about “all of the difficulties and misfortunes” encountered by the division, in order to emphasize the heroism of their ultimate victory.³⁵⁴ Working with these documents, Gorky’s artists not aestheticized and simplified the language, but sought to harmonize the particular historical experience with a unified narrative of the Red Army. In this new, more centralized environment, the *zemliachestva* had to be reminded that they operated strictly under the control of the museum, with which they were now required “to register and maintain regular contact”.³⁵⁵ One year later, the *zemliachestva* were given instructions about the necessity of organizing their workers into brigades subordinated to the center as a “guarantee against the influence of illegal, anti-party, and opportunistic historical questions.”³⁵⁶

While these instructions no doubt reflect perennial Soviet anxieties about the maintenance of centralized control, there are numerous indications that the *Zemliachestvo* of Former Chapaevtsy frequently engaged in the kind of independent action and pursuit of ‘special benefits’ they had been forbidden from exercising. The Chapaev *zemliachestvo* repeatedly advocated on behalf of crippled veterans of the 25th Division. They petitioned the People’s Commissariat of Social Security to provide spa treatments for one Comrade Pronina.³⁵⁷ They asked the Registration and Distribution Department of the Central Committee of the Communist Party to admit their comrade Matiushin to an industrial academy in Moscow, and requested that the Presidium of the Moscow Soviet provide living space for him. Matiushin’s service history was used to establish his right to such benefits. He was “one of the old members of the 25th Division”, “served in all the battles on Eastern Front”, and worked as a commissar in the division’s “special section” (*osobyj otdel*), where he participated in the “liquidation of the Sapozhkov uprising”. The *zemliachestvo* concluded that Matiushin’s current situation “did not correspond with his great service to the revolution” and expected the state to remedy this affront to its own history.³⁵⁸ Soldiers who had fought for the promised new world were supposed to be first in line for its bounty, not neglected and passed over.

The case of the former brigade commander, Egor Fedorovich Kon’kov, illustrates the intermediary function played by the *zemliachestvo*. Kon’kov had written a plea to the staff

³⁵³RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.13, l.1.

³⁵⁴RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.772, l.133.

³⁵⁵RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.13, l.4.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 25.

³⁵⁷ RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d. 767, l. 57.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 53-54.

headquarters of the 25th Division, complaining that he had been “thrown in the trash heap”.³⁵⁹ Despite eight years of service in the Red Army, where he was wounded sixteen times and “lost 85% of his labor capacity” (*trudnosposobnost*), he received only a meager pension of 25 rubles, which was not nearly enough to support his wife and two small children.³⁶⁰ Unsure how to help Kon’kov, the staff of the 25th Division turned to *zemliachestvo*, believing that they would “undoubtedly be able to obtain support for this helpless former *chapaevets* from the local authorities.”³⁶¹

By advocating on behalf of wounded veterans like Kon’kov, the *zemliachestvo* was keeping the history of the Civil War alive. By the same token it went beyond its charge to engage in museum work. Among the documents associated with Kon’kov’s case is an anonymous piece, “The White Calf”, written under the pen-name Diogenes.³⁶² Here, Kon’kov’s long years of dedicated service are contrasted with his treatment by the authorities. His pleas for bread “disappeared among the tobacco smoke” of the Riazan chancellery. Although he “wrote a letter to Comrade Voroshilov”, the People’s Commissar of Military Affairs and Chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council, “people there (*tam*’— i.e. in the centers of power) are overloaded, and don’t understand local life and conditions.” Such cases, claims Diogenes, were far from unique. The piece ends with a call to redress this miscarriage of Soviet justice, where citizens who had “earned the right to receive support a hundred times over” were reduced to a “pointless trek from agency to agency” in search of aid.³⁶³

The hostility between center and periphery reflected in Diogenes’ critique replicated a similar dynamic from the years of the Civil War: one in which Chapaev himself had participated. The commander had been a constant critic of the center for its failure to provide essentials like food, fuel, and ammunition: even going so far as to threaten Bolshevik officials and forcibly requisition supplies from government depots. The legacy of this resentment was surprisingly long. On March 3, 1934, the Chapaev *zemliachestvo* hosted Comrade Petrov, an official responsible for provisioning the 25th Division during the war. Petrov’s long address, which attempted to explain the complexities and constraints he had operated under, was met with open disdain by many of the veterans. One respondent told Petrov that his explanation contained many “suspicious moments” and that it was “impossible to trust” him.³⁶⁴ Another took offense at Petrov’s characterization of the division’s gratuitous transportation needs, arguing that “this was not ‘superfluous ballast’, but our families”.³⁶⁵ The exchange ended with one member angrily claiming that “if the peasantry hadn’t supplied us...we would have lost the war.”³⁶⁶

This was hardly the kind of historical narrative intended by the Red Army museum. If the Chapaev *zemliachestvo* was any indicator of broader trends, it is not surprising to find an order dated December 1934 demanding the “liquidation of all *zemliachestva* operating in the Central Museum of the Red Army” by no later than January 10, 1935.³⁶⁷ While this was no

³⁵⁹ RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.772, l.10

³⁶⁰ Ibid, 12.

³⁶¹ Ibid, 9.

³⁶² A founder of the Cynic school of Greek philosophy notorious for his critiques of power and authority.

³⁶³ RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.772, 14.

³⁶⁴ RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.779, l.31.

³⁶⁵ Ibid, 47.

³⁶⁶ Ibid, 49.

³⁶⁷ RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.5, l.121.

doubt connected to the broader social crackdown in the aftermath of Sergei Kirov's assassination on December 10 (during which all organizations --including the Communist Party-- came to be seen as potential havens of spies and counterrevolutionaries), it also coincided with the release of *Chapaev* on November 5. The Civil War now had its definitive exhibition. All archival and financial assets gathered by the *zemliachestva* were to be retained by the Red Army museum in Moscow.³⁶⁸ In a metaphorical sense, the Chapaevtsy had fulfilled their charge – having helped pave the way for the release of *Chapaev* on November 5 1934, they became redundant.

Of Masses and Men (and Women)

Chapaev maintains a subtle dynamic between masses and the individuals who represent them. Despite the obvious shift in emphasis, the mass characters typical of 1920s cinema did not disappear from Stalinist films. The opening scenes introduce the viewer to the first mass, the Chapaevtsy, and their representatives, Chapaev and Pet'ka. Shortly after the rout of the Czechs, the viewer is introduced to the second mass --the proletarian weavers-- and their representatives, Furmanov and Anka. A visual contrast is immediately established between the two groups: the disorganized, elemental force of the Chapaevtsy (flowing downhill like a wave) is juxtaposed with the machine-like discipline of the weavers, who march onto the screen singing in unison. The film establishes a subtle hierarchy which includes the audience itself. The difference between city and countryside ultimately appears less consequential than that between the leadership, represented by Chapaev and Furmanov, and their subordinates, Pet'ka and Anka.

While the leaders are the dominant source of the film's narrative tension, primarily responsible for moving the plot forward, the viewer is not immediately prompted to identify with either of them. In the opening scenes, when the Chapaevtsy speak with Chapaev, the camera adopts their perspective (i.e. the audience sees the leader as if through their eyes). Yet when the shot is reversed, the camera is positioned above and behind Chapaev: we see the Chapaevtsy, but not from Chapaev's perspective.³⁶⁹ When Furmanov and Chapaev first meet, the camera keeps both men onscreen at the same time (i.e. the viewer is in no way implicated in the exchange). The visual contrast between the two masses is now transferred to the leaders: an erect Furmanov takes up the entire left-hand side of the screen, while Chapaev slouches on the railing of the bridge, trying his best not to acknowledge the presence of this new threat to his personal leadership. The scene identifies each man with his respective mass, while simultaneously barring the audience from the perspective of either leader.

The case of Pet'ka and Anka is entirely different. Although Pet'ka has been onscreen since the opening scenes, he never speaks before meeting Anka. After the leaders have made their introductions, Furmanov tells Chapaev about his volunteer weavers and the camera cuts to a wide shot of a horse-drawn wagon. A figure with its back turned to the camera is sitting in the back of the wagon struggling to put on an overcoat. Pet'ka approaches the wagon and reaches out to pat the figure on the back. The camera cuts to a medium close-up of the figure just as Pet'ka's hand roughly connects with it. His first words, "So you've arrived" (uttered off-screen) coincide with the figure's bemused female face being fully exposed to the screen. She awkwardly responds in the affirmative and the camera cuts to a close-up of Pet'ka's face, which

³⁶⁸ Ibid, 117.

³⁶⁹ This is not an accident. The device is used repeatedly, including immediately after the battle, when Chapaev reviews his troops.

comically morphs from an expression of confusion to one of amused, thinly-veiled sexual interest. Although the perspectives in this shot-reverse shot are not emphatically those of Anka and Pet'ka (neither looks directly into the camera), this new perspective invites the viewer to identify with each character on an intimate level, as though standing right at their side.³⁷⁰ This clever usage of the cinematic device subtly synthesizes individual and mass, while establishing a hierarchy between the masses (audience) and their representative leaders.

The subsequent development of a romantic plot between Pet'ka and Anka further reinforces the sense that the audience is intended to identify with them. This marks a clear shift from Furmanov's novel, in which the commissar was the main protagonist. It is also ironic in light of the fact that the historical romantic plotline involved a love triangle amongst the leadership. The film includes romance, while making sure that such profane details do not enter the sacred plotline of the political/power struggle.

The emphasis on audience was, in part, an obvious matter of ideology. Yet identification with Pet'ka and Anka also had a more popular impetus. Although Furmanov's novel had established a popular narrative about the peasant commander, it was far from being universally accepted. Especially among veterans of Chapaev's division, there was a pronounced dissatisfaction with Furmanov's representation coupled with the desire to produce a more 'complete' history of their unit (i.e. one less dominated by the personal imperatives of their former commissar). On August 10, 1928, Chief Military-Commissar Zamilatskii of the 25th Division, now based in the Poltava region of Ukraine, wrote a letter to the *Zemliachestvo* of Former Chapaevtsy expressing his desire for a new history of the division. While he acknowledges the "magnificent propaganda and artistic" merit of Furmanov's work, he claims that it was "unable to satisfy the desire for a more complete and detailed history of the division."³⁷¹

The extent to which this 'more complete' history was perceived to be in direct conflict with the narrative established by Furmanov was particularly evident on February 17, 1929, when the *zemliachestvo* met to discuss the merits of several potential screenplays and scenarios (one of which was tellingly entitled, "The 25th Chapaev Division"). Ivan Kutiakov, who had taken over

³⁷⁰ This is a perfect example of 'suture.' For any film to make sense, the viewer must spontaneously identify with the perspective of the camera. Experimental filmmakers, like Dziga Vertov, saw this process as holding out the possibility of improving human perception and consciousness by wedding it to that of the machine (i.e. the camera). His films do not 'mask the device', but frequently employ impossible perspectives which force the viewer to consciously identify with the camera (enabling a kind of cyborg perception). The shot/reverse shot between Anka and Pet'ka is much more subtle: intimacy and identification are established without the spectator's perspective being fully equated with that of either character. It is likely that the Vasilievs considered complete identification to be too jarring: unsettling the viewer, unmasking the device, and undermining the narrative. Yet as Kaja Silverman shows in her analysis of Hitchcock's *Psycho*, where the director deliberately toys with shot/reverse shot and suture by adopting the perspective of inanimate objects and their owners, killers and their victims, etc., the psyche still rushes in to fill the gap and preserve the narrative illusion. The dramatic tension is ironically increased in the process. Kaja Silverman, "Suture[Excerpts]" in *Narrative, Apparatus, Ideology: A Film Theory Reader*, Philip Rosen, ed. 222-227.

³⁷¹ RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.772, l.166. The irony here is striking. A 'complete' history of the division was contrary to the needs of the Soviet state because it discredited that state's ability to provide for the collective (see for instance, Diogenes' critique and the roasting of Comrade Petrov in the previous section). Yet Furmanov's history, which had been written in the service of very personal concerns and ambitions (see the previous chapter), easily aligned itself with the imperatives of a state increasingly made in the image of man (anthropomorphized with a single will, consciousness, etc.).

as commander of the 25th Division after Chapaev's death, claimed that according to Furmanov's book "the only dedicated person in the entire division was the author himself." Using the familiar diminutive form of Dmitrii's name, Kutiakov said that "Mityai was too puffed up. It seems that without him, the division would have ceased to exist. And yet the division fought heroically for an entire year before his arrival." He hints at an argument between the author and himself, during which Furmanov had apparently excused himself on the basis of artistic necessity. If such elaborations were acceptable for aesthetic purposes, "from the perspective of history, his work is inaccurate and this is the opinion of all the guys" (*takovo mnenie vsekh rebiat*).³⁷²

Present at this meeting was Dmitrii Furmanov's wife, Anna. Shortly after his death (at the age of 35) from meningitis in 1926, Anna had taken on Furmanov's mantle, promoting and elaborating upon the narrative he had created. The image of her husband as the quintessential Soviet subject was largely the product of her efforts: beginning with a collection of his diary entries edited and released under the title "The Path to Bolshevism", and continuing through numerous articles, biographies, lectures, and a screenplay which served as an early version of the Vasiliev Brothers' script. "Many of us have read Furmanov's works", said one participant in a gathering dedicated to the author, "but these wonderful recollections of Anna Nikitichna have once again resurrected his image before us."³⁷³ Anna's images, of Furmanov evolving inevitably towards Bolshevism, of Furmanov's "figure flashing by on horseback" and seemingly "everywhere", of Furmanov on his death bed uttering the tragic last words "I still haven't said everything", defined his legacy ever after.³⁷⁴

Anna had opened the *zemliachestvo* meeting by reading a script of her own, which was broadly criticized for failing to incorporate sufficient historical material about the division.³⁷⁵ Apparently, "many comrades were of the opinion that Anna Nikitichna portrayed herself as a kind of Joan of Arc, while the roles played by everyone else, including Chapaev himself, were reduced to nothing." Her script was ultimately considered so divisive that the *zemliachestvo* declared that there was "no satisfactory reason for further work on it".³⁷⁶

This campaign against the Furmanovs reached beyond the boundaries of the Chapaev *zemliachestvo*. During the screenplay discussion, Maria Popova, a soldier in the 25th Division famous for penning the song "Chapaev the Hero Walked through the Urals" (*Gulial po Uralu Chapaev-Geroi*), claimed that Furmanov's novel had no "mass character" and that these "gaps" could "only be filled by the memories of living participants."³⁷⁷ This criticism was markedly similar to one she would use to challenge Furmanova's authority as the acting chair of the Society (*zemliachestvo*) of Female Participants in the Civil War, founded with the goal of compiling accounts of female service in order to "use their experiences to popularize the idea of the universal military preparation of women."³⁷⁸ By April 11, 1930, Furmanova's position had been thoroughly undermined by "an atmosphere of bickering" and "intrigue", attributed to "the

³⁷²DOTsMVS RF--4/15.176-1, 1.10.

³⁷³NIOR—f.320, k.16, d.13.

³⁷⁴NIOR—f.320, k.16,d.12, 1.6; f.320, k.15, d.10, 1.6.

³⁷⁵Ibid.,9.

³⁷⁶Ibid, 10.

³⁷⁷RGALI—f.2655, op.1, d.538, 1.95 ; DOTsMVS RF 4/15.176-1, 1.9.

³⁷⁸RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.4, 1.69.

arrival of Popova in the Society”. Popova accused Furmanova of having “never participated at the front” and lying about her service in order to gain her position as chair. Since “the *zemliachestvo* [was] supposed to be an example to everyone”, Furmanova was apparently not fit to represent it. By no later than September of that year she was removed from leadership.³⁷⁹

Not easily deterred, Furmanova continued to pursue a version of the film which maintained the narrative established by Dmitrii, but also included significant innovations of her own. In Furmanova’s accounts, Chapaev has a quaint charm and admirable passion for learning that is largely absent in her husband’s characterization. In one scene, Chapaev discovers that Furmanov is writing a novel about him. Later, Anna sees him writing and asks what he is doing, to which Chapaev responds “It’s not just for you intellectuals to write novels. I’m going to write one of my own.”³⁸⁰ Such a sentiment no doubt resonated with Furmanova. She recalls that on first meeting Chapaev, the commander “looked at me suspiciously, as if to say ‘What’s with the chick?’ (‘*A eto chto za baba?*’).”³⁸¹ This first meeting becomes an opportunity to prove herself as an equal, worthy of serving alongside the men. When both Chapaev and her husband refuse several request to accompany them on horseback as they survey the troops, she “jumped on a horse without waiting for permission.”³⁸² The commander is clearly impressed, and eventually becomes one of her “biggest supporters” in the division.³⁸³

Most significantly, Furmanova’s accounts offered constant reminders of the fact that “there were also women” in the 25th Division.³⁸⁴ There was Marusia Riabinina, who, during the battle of Buguruslan, rallied the scattered and disoriented Chapaevtsy with her cry “Follow me comrades!” before charging across a river. Her companions successfully forded the crossing under heavy machine-gun fire, but Marusia was killed in the process.³⁸⁵ There were, claims Furmanova, “many such women” willing to “fight for their homeland” and to “give all for the Revolution”.³⁸⁶ There was “Zinaida Patrikeeva”, captured by the Whites who carved a red star in her forehead, and Tatiana Petrova, a seventeen year-old scout who, despite being raped and tortured, “gave not a word, not even a sound” to her tormentors, but wrote “Long Live Soviet Power” in her own blood on the wall of her cell before dashing her head against it.³⁸⁷

In 1932 Furmanova and the chief historian of the Red Army museum, Comrade Trofimov, collaborated on a screenplay of her husband’s book. Furmanova gave this screenplay to the Vasiliev Brothers, along with a play she had written and numerous other materials related to the history of Chapaev and the 25th Division. Although the directors made numerous adaptations and rewrites, they repeatedly acknowledged the importance of Anna’s contribution to

³⁷⁹ Ibid, 85 and 134.

³⁸⁰ NIOR—f.320, k.15, d.8, l.10

³⁸¹ Ibid—f.320, k.15, d.7, l.6.

³⁸² Ibid—f.320, k.17, d.2, l.21-22.

³⁸³ Ibid—f.320, k.15, d.7, l.9.

³⁸⁴ NIOR—f.320, k.15, d.8, l.19.

³⁸⁵ Ibid—f.320, k.11, d.26, l.3

³⁸⁶ Ibid—f.320, k.15, d.8, l.19-20.

³⁸⁷ Ibid, l.20-21. This story of Tatiana Petrovna is strikingly similar to the famous account of Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya’s martyrdom during World War II. Furmanova’s account dates from 1940, about one year before Kosmodemyanskaya’s death and two years before the *Pravda* article which immortalized it.

the film.³⁸⁸ In more ways than one, this included the character of Anka. In the film, Anka's desire to operate the machine gun is explicitly linked to sex. When she asks Chapaev's eager young orderly, Pet'ka, to teach her how to operate it, he uses the opportunity to grope her breasts while explaining that the sides of the gun are called "cheeks" (*shchekki*). Anka is properly outraged, but nevertheless demands that Pet'ka teach her how to use the gun...appropriately. The inevitable romance that develops between them redirects the sexual tensions away from the ideological struggle between the commissar and the commander. This dynamic is perfectly encapsulated in a bizarre scene involving Anka, Pet'ka, and the machine gun inside a cozy hut adorned with all the trappings of peasant domesticity. In earlier versions of the script, Anka had a baby.³⁸⁹ In the film, the machine gun sits prominently on a table in the center of the room, with the proud and loving couple hovering nearby.³⁹⁰

Despite her influence on the character of Anka, Furmanova would never be publically linked to her. When the female machine-gunner Nina Onilova died during the defense of Sevastopol in 1942, found among her possessions was a letter addressed "to the real *Anka-pulemetchitsa* from the Chapaev Division, who I saw in the film *Chapaev*", which she had apparently intended to send to the actress Varvara Miasnikova. "I know you are not the actual Anka, not a real *Chapaev* machine-gunner", she wrote. "But you played the role so authentically that I have always envied you. I long dreamed of becoming a machine-gunner and fighting so bravely."³⁹¹ Onilova refers to Miasnikova as 'the real Anka' (*nastoiashchaia Anka*) even while acknowledging that she was only an actress. The letter reflects the lack of a more obvious recipient. There was, strictly speaking, no such person as *Anka-pulemetchitsa*. It was Dmitrii Furmanov's 1923 novel about his experiences serving as Chapaev's political commissar that was the basis for the later film, yet *Anka Pulemetchitsa* did not appear in this book. According to the Vasilievs, "Anka actually hung somewhere between heaven and earth." She was, in their words, a character created "to vindicate the right of women to serve in the army."³⁹²

Such statements indicate Anka's fictional nature and reinforce the idea that she was somehow an exclusive product of Stalinism, or perhaps even of Stalin himself. Although it was Furmanova's efforts and historical experience which had helped to produce a genuine, unprecedented, and hugely influential Soviet heroine, it was not the one she had intended. *Anka pulemetchitsa* remained a contested fiction in a story shaped by men. Unlike most of the male

³⁸⁸ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.747, l.52 ; RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.435, l.28. In addition to this, and other places where the directors mention their creative debt to Furmanova, she is referenced in the film's credits.

³⁸⁹ RGALI--f.2733, op.1, d.435, l.57-58.

³⁹⁰ In the 2003 pornographic parody of the film, the scene is taken to its logical conclusion: a somewhat mechanistic and unenthusiastic act of domestic sex.

³⁹¹ Liudmila Pavlichenko, *Geroicheskaia byl oborona Sevastopolia*, 35. Wounded during the defense of Odessa in 1941, Onilov went on to fight in the defense of Sevastopol during the first and second German assaults, where she is alleged to have killed anywhere between 500 and 2,000 Germans with her machine gun before dying in battle on March 8, 1942. Avtor-sostavitel' sbornika podpolkovnik V.I. Kovalev, *Chapaevskaia—Gvardeiskaia* (Politpravlenie Kievskogo Voennogo Okruga), 44-45; Liudmila Pavlichenko, *Geroicheskaia byl oborona Sevastopolia 1941-1942gg.* (Moskva, 1958), 34; Ia.Vas'kovskii, Iu.Novikov, *My Chapaevtsy—dokumental'naiia povest'* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo DOSAAF, 1968), 125.

³⁹² RGALI-f.2733, op.1, d.428, l.43 (Personal archive of G. and S. Vasiliev). The historian Anna Krylova rightly refers to Anka's cinematic image as *the* prime example of the kind of unique gender identities enabled by Stalinism, a cultural system she claims to be defined by its inherent contradictions. See Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge, 2010), 20-24.

characters in the film, Anka had no concrete historical counterpart. Furmanova received no credit for her and the role of ‘real historical Anka’ would itself become an object of controversy and struggle. Beginning in the 1960s, Anka began to take on the less flattering aspect by which she is most widely recognized today: as the butt of countless bawdy jokes and misogynistic representations mocking the image of a woman in combat.

In the postwar period, the honor of embodying the sacred trajectory of Anka increasingly went to Maria Popova. Her matronly visage appeared above the heading “the prototype of Anka-pulemetchitsa” in anthologies about the Chapaevtsy.³⁹³ Her numerous articles assured generations of Soviet readers that “We Chapaevtsy” were “all one big family.”³⁹⁴ By taking on the mantle of Anka, Popova publically identified herself with a unique, possibly even unprecedented, representation of a woman in combat. In the process, she consciously identified herself with a fictional character. By the 1950s, most references to Anka as a fictional character had disappeared. Maria Popova was now “the living history...the wide eyes, the willful expression, the proud erect posture---yes, it is her, Anka—*pulemetchitsa*, the woman with a gun.”³⁹⁵

The Potato Scene: Laughter and History as Improvisation

Anna Furmanova’s contributions to the screenplay ensured the continuing influence of her husband, as well as herself, on this most significant iteration of the Chapaev mythology. Yet the film was an inherently collective endeavor and bears the traces of many influences, some of which changed the story (and the image of its hero) dramatically. The most striking difference between Furmanov’s novel and the film is the deeply comic nature of the latter. The first joke occurs just minutes into the film and is directly related to the competitive dynamic already evident between Chapaev and Furmanov at their first meeting. Prior to the arrival of the weavers, Chapaev had learned that several of his men had thrown, or lost, their weapons in the water during the battle (a sign of the unit’s disorganization/the commander’s lack of disciplined leadership) and he ordered them to be recovered. At the end of the first meeting between commander and commissar, Furmanov sees one of Chapaev’s soldiers emerge suddenly from the water: his face completely obscured by wet hair, he cocks his rifle (which is covered in wet weeds) and quickly dashes towards the shore as though charging at the enemy. When Furmanov asks Chapaev what the man is doing, the commander sarcastically replies that he is swimming because it is hot. The humor derives in part from the obviousness of the lie (the contrast between the visual and its explanation); yet the overall effect is largely derived from the irritated body language and tone of Boris Babochkin, the actor who plays Chapaev. Babochkin’s performance gives the message multiple meanings (a hallmark of humor): it is both an absurd, implausible explanation and an invitation for Furmanov to shut up and mind his own business.

The next scene involves a series of role reversals and illustrates the film’s reliance on ironic contrasts and open (in the sense of having multiple interpretations) phrases for much of its humor. The camera opens on a festival village atmosphere, as the Chapaevtsy celebrate their

³⁹³ *Govoriat Chapaevtsy—Dokumenty, Vospominaniia, Materialy* (Bashkirskoe Knizhnoe Izdatel’stvo: Ufa, 1971), p.162.

³⁹⁴ “Rodnia Komdiva”, *Izvestiia*, 10 fevralia 1967.

³⁹⁵ NA IRI-RAN—f.23, op.5, d.315, l.4, *Moskovskaia Pravda*, 5 noiabr’ 1958.

recent victory against the backdrop of peasant huts and accordion music. The camera cuts to a porch just as Pet'ka bursts from the door, fires his pistol in the air and with a look of extreme gravitas announces "Silence! Chapaev is going to think! (*Chapaev dumat' budet*)."

The matter is indeed serious (the commander and his staff are planning the division's next course of action), but Pet'ka's phrasing makes it seem like the act of Chapaev thinking was a matter of such importance that all activity had to stop –implying that it was a rare occurrence. The effect renders Pet'ka's seriousness comical, and he ultimately breaks into a shy smile. Meanwhile, inside the meeting, Furmanov makes a very unfunny attempt to deceive Chapaev and his staff. Chapaev asks him his thoughts about military strategy and Furmanov tries to seem like he knows what he is talking about –leaning over the map with a serious expression before awkwardly, if somewhat honorably, giving up the ruse and deferring to Chapaev. Taken as a whole, these scenes clearly establish the film's humor as the exclusive domain of the folk (i.e. the Chapaevtsy).³⁹⁶ They can make jokes, and the directors can make jokes at their expense, but Furmanov and Anka (the representatives of the working class) must maintain their dignity throughout.

The film's humor eases the conflict (between center and periphery, city and countryside, Soviet past and Soviet future) at the core of the Chapaev narrative. Perhaps most significantly, it redeems Chapaev, and with him, the image of the People's Hero. In letters and diary entries written during his service with Chapaev, Furmanov had characterized the commander as "an opportunist and a careerist... completely without guiding principles."³⁹⁷ By writing a novel about these experiences, Furmanov had made himself typical of the Red Army's struggle against so-called 'atamans' (largely autonomous peasant or Cossack warlords like Chapaev), which was itself symbolic of the central Soviet struggle with its historical preconditions. Although in both life and art, Furmanov would temper his criticisms of the commander with a hesitant praise, this was largely done after Chapaev's death, when the hero lost the ability to shape his own story. In Furmanov's telling, Chapaev's heroism was located in the Soviet past, not its present or future.

If Furmanov had resurrected the hero in ink, so that he could rewrite a troubling personal episode and further his own career, the Soviet state would do the same in celluloid: using the film about Chapaev to restore symbolic harmony between the city and the countryside by resurrecting the image of the People's Hero (*narodnyi geroi*). By 1934, the Soviet peasantry had been thoroughly subordinated by the state through a brutal process of collectivization involving the deaths of millions. The insular structure of the village was broken and reorganized around the needs of Soviet industrialization, while the rural elite were killed or exiled to Siberia as 'kulaks' (literally 'fist'—this was a largely imaginary social category intended to equate economically prosperous peasants with exploitative capitalist bosses). And whether it was because peasant heroes no longer represented a threat now that the peasantry had been broken, or because continuing peasant hostility to the state was still perceived to be a potential problem, a collective laugh between city and countryside probably seemed like a historical necessity.³⁹⁸

³⁹⁶ One exception to the Chapaevtsy's monopoly on humor involves a scene with the division's doctors, who Chapaev has threatened to shoot for their refusal to confer the status of doctor upon a local peasant. Their blustering, outraged dignity offers something of a jab at the era's bourgeois specialists.

³⁹⁷ NIOR--f.320, k.2, d.12, l.2-3.

³⁹⁸ The 'source' of *Chapaev*'s laughter is difficult to establish precisely, but there probable links to Stalin. One of the Vasilievs' earlier films, *Sleeping Beauty*, was based upon a screenplay by Eisenstein's co-director, Grigorii

One of the film's most iconic moments, the 'potato scene' is a perfect example of Chapaev's redemption through laughter. It begins as an absurd debate over whether a soldier should be chastised for being shot in battle. One of Chapaev's officers, Elan (the historical Ivan Kutiakov) enters the commander's hut with a wounded arm and Chapaev scolds him, telling him he does not have the right to get shot. This absurd logic is then made coherent and serious through an absurd demonstration, with Chapaev arranging and rearranging potatoes on a table to represent different combat situations and repeatedly asking "Where should the commander be? (*Gde dolzhen byt komandir*)". Visually ridiculous, the scene simultaneously manages to confirm Chapaev's tactical brilliance---in each situation he is able to respond so as to maximize the survival and success of himself and his men. The lesson ends with Chapaev explaining that when the enemy is routed, the commander should always be out in front so as to be the first into the city to receive the praise of the populace. At this point, the scene again turns comical. Chapaev's thirst for glory (Furmanov's primary criticism of him) becomes the punch-line of a joke, when Elan points out that the commander is lying because regardless of the circumstances, he is always out in front. Chapaev breaks into a sly grin, realizing that he has been caught, and responds "If necessary" before his infectious laugh finalizes this conversion of a dangerous character flaw into an endearing, even heroic, trait.

According to Boris Babochkin, the actor who played Chapaev, "the scene with the potatoes" was an example of many moments in the film that "we discovered accidentally." During the summer of 1933, members of the crew were waiting for the sun to come up in a peasant hut on a collective farm near the village of Marino, so that they could begin shooting an outdoor scene. The various film props scattered around the room, "grenades on the table, machine-gun belts and rifles piled in the corner", transformed the "peaceful *kolkhoz* hut into a red partisan staff headquarters." As their hostess heaped boiled potatoes she had prepared for them on the table, "one of them rolled forward and someone said: 'The detachment marches forward, led by the commander on a spirited horse.'" When the hostess added cucumbers, someone else joked that "The enemy" had "arrived." Sometime later, back at the studio in

Aleksandrov. During the 1930s, Aleksandrov directed a series of films, *Jolly Fellows*, *Circus*, and *Volga Volga*, which defined the genre of Stalinist musical comedy. In his biographical account, Aleksandrov claims that, during a meeting with Stalin in 1932, the leader told him that: "Our people ... have every reason to look with optimism to the future... Art, unfortunately, has not kept up with the tempos of economic construction... It's well known that the people love hearty, cheerful art, but you [artists] don't yet take that into account. More than that... in the arts those people who suppress everything amusing have not yet become extinct." Quoted in Anne Nesbet, *Savage Junctures: Sergei Eisenstein and the Shape of Thinking*, 158-9. Whether or not this account is completely accurate, the issue of laughter was clearly important to the producers of Soviet culture in the early 1930s. In the years prior to his death in 1933, the Commissar of Enlightenment, Anatoly Lunacharsky had become increasingly preoccupied with the issues of humor and satire --setting up "a government commission to study satiric genres" and working "on a book called *The Social Role of Laughter*." According to the literary scholar Michael Holquist, Lunacharsky's thesis that "carnival was a kind of safety valve for passions the common people might otherwise direct to revolution, flew directly in the face " of theories being formulated by the Soviet literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin, who saw carnival as not "an impediment to revolutionary change" but "revolution itself." See the prologue to Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: University of Indiana Press, 1984), xviii. Lunacharsky's thesis indicates that the need for a film like *Chapaev* was a response to continuing fears about social unrest in the countryside: but still keeps attributes agency to the state, which provides the humor to preempt revolution. The implications of Bakhtin's thesis shift the agency away from the state, making the peasant laughter in the Vasiliev's film an irresistible force emanating from the people: something the state could not keep a lid on forever, and couldn't really control once it had been let loose. This will be particularly relevant to later chapters of this work.

Leningrad, the moment was recalled and the entire potato scene was shot “in one take, without interruption or repetition”.³⁹⁹

This characterization of the scene’s genesis in an ‘accidental’, spontaneous moment is contradicted by Ivan Kutiakov (i.e. the wounded officer Elan), who claimed that Chapaev’s explanation of “where the commander should be in every phase of the battle” was “written on the basis of my account.”⁴⁰⁰ He claims that “Chapaev’s philosophy” about the proper placement of officers in battle “was not only caused by my wound” but was a response to the loss of three officers and the wounding of two others during August and September of 1918. After this, Chapaev “began to punish and berate commanders who were frequently wounded in battle.” Yet, “this did not mean that Chapaev respected caution to the point of cowardice.” If a commander had never been wounded in battle, Chapaev refused to recommend them for an Order of the Red Banner, “even if they were a gifted commander who never once lost a battle.”⁴⁰¹

The space between contradictions is the film’s creative center, and reveals much about its production, as well as its production of a certain Soviet reality (i.e. Socialist Realism).⁴⁰² Babochkin and Kutiakov both were and were not describing the same moment: the former refers to the scene with the potatoes, while the latter speaks of the scene where Chapaev describes where the commander should be at every phase of battle: one is the product of artistic inspiration, the other of a historical moment.⁴⁰³ The potato scene was not an isolated instance: the planned accident was an integral part of the film’s artistic process. Babochkin’s first meeting with the Vasilievs is one such moment. The directors invited him to read for the role of Pet’ka at the apartment of Illarion Pevtsov, an actor with whom Babochkin worked at a local theater (and who would ultimately be cast in the role of Chapaev’s nemesis in the film, Borozdin). Knowing that “Babochkin loved to drink (*liubit vypit*)” the directors, understanding that “it is also necessary to take such things into account...succeeded in organizing a comfortable atmosphere.” Once everyone had read their parts, the group proceeded to “talk until seven o’clock in the morning” until “under the influence of conversations and friendly stuff (*druzheskikh veshchei*)” the Vasilievs and Babochkin sauntered out onto the street. As they walked, they continued to talk “about Chapaev, about the Chapaevtsy, about how wonderful the time had been” until “Babochkin suddenly said: ‘You know, Chapaev would have worn his hat just like this’ and, completely spontaneously, made a gesture with his hand” inspired by the slouch of his cap. “That was the key---this man understood.”⁴⁰⁴

If it was a spontaneous drunken moment which confirmed Babochkin as the lead for their new film, what then was that film’s relationship to history? The directors admitted that in some

³⁹⁹ RGALI—f.2655, op.1, d.82, l.66. Babochkin would later claim that this was only due to his intercession with the directors, who were determined to re-shoot it—establishing himself as the famous scene’s primary inspiration.

⁴⁰⁰ SOMK---f. 15875, l.4

⁴⁰¹ Ibid, 12-13.

⁴⁰² The tie-in to Socialist Realism will be explained gradually.

⁴⁰³ There was a prominent debate between Vsevelod Pudovkin and Sergei Eisenstein about whether the essence of montage lay in the similarity between two shots (Pudovkin) or the differences between them (Eisenstein). While the majority of theorists have tended to side with Eisenstein (it is, after all, the difference between shots that contributes most to the illusion of life and movement), both must be true for film to have its effect. Frame after frame of discreet material would not produce the illusion of reality.

⁴⁰⁴ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.428, l.24-5.

ways it would have been easier to “name Furmanov Borsov, and Chapaev Ivanov” because then you could “treat them arbitrarily” whereas “making a picture about real existing people imposed certain restrictions which could not be violated.”⁴⁰⁵ They apparently went to great lengths to discover what these restrictions might be. The film was much more extensively researched than Furmanov’s novel, which was primarily based upon the author’s experiences (and ambitions). The Vasilievs “rummaged through museums and archives”, “read practically every book about the Civil war” and engaged in “numerous discussions with participants in the events --- Chapaevtsy, Red partisans, and political workers.”⁴⁰⁶ According to Ivan Kutiakov, the directors “made every effort to uncover the living image of Chapaev--how he moved, his gestures and habits.” He claims that they travelled from Leningrad to Moscow to visit him so many times -- hoping to learn “how he got angry, how he cursed, whether he pronounced his ‘a’ like an ‘o’, whether he drank vodka or smoked”-- that their presence began to annoy him.⁴⁰⁷

Yet, despite their extensive research, the Vasilievs had no desire to merely “copy Chapaev” or to “provide a photographic replica” of him. They perceived Chapaev “as a standard person (*kak cheloveka standartnogo*), typical of the entire proletarian mass that participated in the Civil War.” Their intensive investigation into the details of Chapaev’s personality was not undertaken to resurrect an historical individual, but to create a heroic type.⁴⁰⁸ The Vasilievs saw in Chapaev something of a blank heroic slate: “practically no one knew anything about him, what kind of person he was. Yet everyone knew he was some kind of a hero.” The majority of people imagined a standard heroic “type (*shtamp*)... with some kind of marvelous eyes and a scythe draped across their shoulders”. Yet, while such a “hero on stilts” might be acknowledged by the audience as authentically heroic, they would nevertheless look at him and think, “I myself could never be like that”.⁴⁰⁹ Getting the audience to make this identification, to believe in the possibility of their own individual and collective heroism, was central to the film. If Furmanov’s novel had used Chapaev’s flaws in order to expose him as a false hero, in the Vasilievs’ film, the commander’s quick temper and desire for personal glory (seasoned with a dash of comic relief) serve to make him a hero accessible to the masses.

The Vasilievs claimed that Babochkin’s method was that of “a comedic actor”, and there is no doubt that the comic element he brought to Chapaev was central to the character’s broad appeal.⁴¹⁰ Yet, although he did some satirical work, Babochkin never considered himself to be an inherently comic actor. He was always, first and foremost, a serious theater actor, considering even film acting to be a “second profession”.⁴¹¹ His career in the theater began in 1919, when at the age of fifteen he began working at a studio in his home town of Saratov. Within a year, he had moved to Moscow, where he studied under Mikhail Chekhov (a relative of the writer and playwright) who “did not teach movement or the direction of voice, but only the Stanislavsky system.”⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid, 16.

⁴⁰⁶ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.431.

⁴⁰⁷ Ivan Kutiakov, “Chapaev i «Chapaev»”, in *Chapaev—o fil’me* (Kinofotoizdat, 1936), 33.

⁴⁰⁸ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.428, l.20.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid 18-19.

⁴¹⁰ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.428., 25.

⁴¹¹ RGALI—f.2655, op.1, d.538, l.81.

⁴¹² Boris Babochkin, *V teatre I kino* (Moskva: Vserossiiskoe teatral’noe obshchestvo izdatel’stvo «Iskusstvo», 1968), 20-22 ; Boris Babochkin, *Bez skidok na vozrast* (Moskva : «Molodaia gvardiia», 1986), 141. Chekov had

There is a curious parallel here. After his death in 1938, Stanislavsky was canonized as the theoretical leader of the Soviet stage, while others (most notably the other great name in Soviet theater, the great experimentalist Vsevolod Meyerhold) fell prey to the eras numerous campaigns against ‘formalism’. It is therefore not surprising to find that Babochkin’s memoirs, written well after this moment, are full of references to Stanislavsky and his system as “the soul of Socialist Realism in the art of theater”.⁴¹³ Nevertheless, the accounts of both Babochkin and the Vasilievs about their artistic process in making *Chapaev* (most of which were written several years before Stanislavsky’s canonization), do bear a strong resemblance to many of his theories.

If the Vasilievs, Babochkin, and Stanislavsky all managed, in the words of Katerina Clark, to “match... the historical moment well”, this was about more than a shift in cultural emphasis from ‘outer to inner’, or from “the mask” to “the ‘face’ beneath”.⁴¹⁴ The stereotypical dichotomy attributed to Meyerhold and Stanislavsky, in which the former is all about external form and movement while the latter is primarily concerned with inner truth, was heavily influenced by the rhetoric of the anti-formalist campaigns during the mid-30s. In reality, Stanislavsky’s theories make rigid control over external factors like movement and costume a prerequisite of the inner becoming manifest. He was not opposed to masks: on the contrary, in his account of the artistic breakthrough which first enabled him to fully inhabit a character, it was only after he had created a mask and a costume for himself that the character was born.⁴¹⁵ The maxim that “every actor should so harness his gestures that he will always be in control of them and not they of him”, established carefully practiced conscious control of external movement as a prerequisite for “the transfer of the inner life of a part to its concrete image”.⁴¹⁶ There was, in other words, a dynamic relationship between form and content in Stanislavsky’s method, which was minimized in his official representation in order to make him more representative of Socialist Realism.

Likewise, *Chapaev*’s tenuous balance between facts and history was complicated by its release in the immediate aftermath of the August 1934 Writers’ Congress, which effectively created Socialist Realism. The Vasilievs’ subsequent descriptions of their artistic process (if not the product itself) were inevitably influenced by the new artistic environment. Ironically, these efforts to harmonize the production history of their film with the new political realities make *Chapaev* a true exemplar of Socialist Realism. At its inception, Socialist Realism was nothing if not a constant improvisation between life on the ground and the life of the mind, whose final product was fixed by the state so as to harmonize with its version of History.

been one of Stanislavsky’s most notable pupils at the Moscow Art Theater in the nineteen-teens. He later moved to America, where his ‘Technique’ continues to provide actors with a close alternative to Stanislavsky’s ‘System’. See for instance, <http://www.michaelchekhovactingstudio.com>.

⁴¹³ Boris Babochkin, *V teatre I kino*, 29.

⁴¹⁴ Katerina Clark, *Moscow-The Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 229-30.

⁴¹⁵ Constantin Stanislavsky, *Building a Character* (New York: Theatre Art Books, Robert M. MacGregor, 1949), 14. In the account, the character of The Critic emerges only after Stanislavsky had smeared green paint all over his face and, in a manner reminiscent of Babochkin’s drunken improvisation with the Vasilievs, set his “hat at a slightly rakish angle”. In Stanislavsky’s system, the “characterization (an artistic persona created through careful control of movement, gesture, speech and costume) is the mask which hides the actor-individual” so that “he can lay bare his soul down to the last detail.” *Ibid*, 28.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid*, 69.

The Vasilevs claimed that one of the most “complicated questions” they faced involved how to “preserve the reality of historical facts, so that the viewer believed in their historicity” without allowing these facts “to hinder their artistic plan.”⁴¹⁷ The distinction here between historical facts and historical truth is significant: the primary function of historical details is to make the film-world more believable, but it was ultimately the artistic plan (the film world in which ‘reality’ conforms to ideology) which was the true locus of historical truth.⁴¹⁸ The Vasilevs claimed that “Soviet artists had absolutely no need to distort the facts of reality” because these facts “coincide with our plan, work for us”.⁴¹⁹ Even if they embellished details or took artistic license, they were incapable of distorting History because “we must speak artistic truth, and this is not at odds with the true reality.”⁴²⁰ Distorting facts and distorting historical ‘reality’ was not the same thing.

This same logic would also apply to the ‘history’ of the film itself, where the central ‘truth’ became the collective Soviet experience of watching it. Discussing his personal relationship with his onscreen image, Babochkin claimed “I have never seen one of my own films even once. Of course I screened pieces of them during production, but I have never sat with the public and watched one of my films in the movie theater....Why? I will answer openly...I am too afraid, I don’t have the courage.”⁴²¹ And yet later, when speaking of the historic moment when *Chapaev* was released, he had no shortage of personal anecdotes about the history of that transcendent collective experience, which he describes as nothing short of “a miracle.” He claims that “when the word[s] ‘The End’ (*Konets*) appeared on the screen, there was an unusual scene---the audience remained in their seats, as if they did not want to part with the feelings that had just been awoken by the film. And when someone from the administration informed them that the film was over, the hall erupted in an applause that I will never forget.”⁴²²

Sound and Internationalism: By the Rivers of Babylon?

By 1934, the ‘true reality’ of the Soviet Union was interpreted/determined by Stalin, who now declared the conflict between city and countryside to be in the past. The time had come for the ‘People’s Hero’ (*narodnyi geroi*), that ‘dangerous’ heroic type feared by Furmanov because of its hypnotic appeal and fundamental unreliability, to enter the Soviet pantheon. This was more than just rehabilitation: *Chapaev* was part of a broader shift away from a more universal image of the working class hero towards the depiction of local historical types as surrogates for an international socialism which no longer seemed imminent. This is evident in Maxim Gorky’s speech to the Writers’ Congress, where he claimed that “folklore, i.e., the unwritten compositions of toiling man, has created the most profound, vivid and artistically perfect types of heroes...images in the creation of which reason and intuition, thought and feeling have been harmoniously blended.” “Such blending”, Gorky claims “is possible only when the creator

⁴¹⁷ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.428, l.16.

⁴¹⁸ The details of history serve to make History seem more historical.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid, 17-18.

⁴²⁰ Ibid, 18. These descriptions are very close to Zhdanov’s claim that being “engineers of human souls” means “knowing life so as to be able to depict it truthfully in works of art, not to depict it in a dead, scholastic way, not simply as “objective reality,” but to depict reality in its revolutionary development.” See A. Zhdanov, Maxim Gorky, N. Bukharin, K.Radek, A. Stetsky, *Problems of Soviet Literature: Reports and Speeches at the First Soviet Writers’ Congress* (London: Martin Lawrence Limited), 21.

⁴²¹ RGALI—f.2655, op.1, d.76, l.37-8.

⁴²² Ibid, 8-9.

directly participates in the work of creating realities, in the struggle for the renovation of life.”⁴²³ Here, the improvisational nature of folkloric creation ---in which the new arises from the coincidence of well-rehearsed patterns (oral traditions passed down through the ages) and the spontaneous invention of the individual tale-teller—is held up as a model for aspiring engineers of the Soviet soul. The common toiler, producing his own reality through his daily labor, has the proximity to ‘real life’ lauded by Zhdanov, and is thus able to spontaneously harmonize the old forms with the needs of the present moment.⁴²⁴

In 1934, the perceived needs of the Soviet Union were changing. Those familiar with the history of Soviet film know that the ‘turn towards the image of man’ would ultimately become a turn towards Russian history-- away from the international industrial proletariat towards a more ethnically, or historically, defined hero.⁴²⁵ *Chapaev* was made in the midst of this process and contains elements of both trends: this particular moment in Soviet development required open, flexible heroes. One of the film’s more memorable scenes involves a moment of collective singing, which would have been particularly notable at the time because of the relative novelty of sound technology. In several early versions of the scene, it is an episode marked by a curious internationalism:

“The yard in front of headquarters. In different corners---groups of Red Army men. In one group a young voice begins to rise in song. The song is happy, but the words are incomprehensible---foreign, not Russian. A Magyar (Hungarian) is singing. The people in the various groups carefully listen to his song. Then...a new voice... It sings a long, sorrowful melody. A Czech is singing...Anna and Pet’ka enter the yard and stop, listening to the many-voiced/discordant (*raznogolosnoe*) song.”⁴²⁶

In another version, the negative connotations of this confusion are emphasized:

“The international regiment—Relaxing. They begin to sing. The Hungarian songs are happy...The Czechs sing long and sadly. The Germans sing perched on stools...two Chinese also join their simple tonal melody to the discordant choir. A cleaning woman exits the headquarters carrying a bucket and stops, bewildered by the discordant singing. ‘Eesh—how they sing! And each in their own way! It’s just like Babel! Like it says in the Bible’ ...but her eyes are full of love and affection.”⁴²⁷

This is clearly intended as a melancholy moment. The use of sound technology here enables simultaneous comprehension and confusion. The tone of the individual songs (sad,

⁴²³ A. Zhdanov, Maxim Gorky, N. Bukharin, K.Radek, A. Stetsky, *Problems of Soviet Literature*, 35-6.

⁴²⁴ Later in his speech, Gorky claims that “Myth is invention. To invent means to extract from the sum of a given reality its cardinal idea and embody it in imagery—that is how we got realism. But if to the idea extracted from a given reality we add...the desired, the possible, and thus supplement the image, we obtain that romanticism which is at the basis of myth and is highly beneficial in that it tends to provoke a revolutionary attitude to reality, an attitude that changes the world in a practical way.” Zhdanov, Maxim Gorky, N. Bukharin, K.Radek, A. Stetsky, *Problems of Soviet Literature*, 44. Here, myth is the source of both realism and romanticism, and is typified by a distinctly improvisational ‘invention’.

⁴²⁵ Any identification of a ‘turning point’ will inevitably meet with exceptions. *Chapaev* does not represent the turning point in Soviet film as a precise moment. It is historically significant because it bears the marks of both trends.

⁴²⁶ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.26, l.21 and 32.

⁴²⁷ RGALI---f.2733, op.1, d.36, l.48.

happy, simple) enables a level of communication that is beyond words, and which could not be communicated without the advent of sound. At the same time, the use of sound introduces the confusion of languages, and there is something inherently sad about the inability of the different singers to understand each other (or sing in unison).

The presence of a female observer in each version of the scene indicates that it is intended as a commentary about the future of the Soviet Union. This connection is more emphatic in the final version of the scene used in the film. Here, the collective singing takes place indoors and the interior is distinctly peasant: dimly lit with by firelight, with the Chapaevtsy in various states of folksy repose, reminiscent of an earlier scene where a comic contrast is established between the inter-title 'The Chapaev Division advances forward' and the subsequent scene of a dingy peasant interior with soldiers and hay strewn all over the floor. There is nothing comic about the present scene, which has a distinctly timeless feel to it. It comes shortly after the victorious battle for Ufa, where Anka saved the day through her courageous handling of the machine-gun. She has now been thoroughly integrated into the Chapaev family: the last time we saw her she was waving goodbye to Furmanov, who had been called off to other tasks. The new commissar is an afterthought, and hovers uncomfortably in the background of the scene. Anka and Pet'ka are curled up next to each other in the firelight, and Pet'ka is leading the Chapaevtsy in song. There is nothing discordant in this version of collective singing: the language and the melody are Russian, and the various voices blend together in beautifully layered harmonies.

The directors clearly intended this moment to reflect important meta-questions about the past, present, and future of the Soviet Union. Although the Soviet Union in 1934 had by no means abandoned its international aspirations, the emphasis had decisively shifted towards Socialism in One Country, and the scene reflects a sense of uncertainty about the implications of this for Soviet internationalism. On another level the scene is very much about the specific concerns of Soviet cinema and its relationship to the advent of sound technology: revealing a significant correspondence (improvisation?) between political and technological change during the early Soviet 1930s.

Prominent Soviet filmmakers had long predicted the introduction of sound film to be a potential death knell for the inherent internationalism of the film medium. In the introduction to his controversial experimental silent film, *Man with a Movie Camera*, screened completely without explanatory texts, director Dziga Vertov proclaimed the work to be the next step towards the creation of "a truly international film-language, absolute writing in film, and the complete separation of cinema from theater and literature".⁴²⁸ Vertov, as usual, was merely the most extreme/experimental version of common trends within Soviet film, which had long held the aspiration of creating a universal visual language. Because Soviet technology lagged behind the West, the approach of sound was anticipated by the film industry several years before it became a reality. In 1928, Sergei Eisenstein, his assistant director Grigorii Alexandrov, and the great director Vsevolod Pudovkin issued a "Statement on Sound" which warned that "the mere *addition* of sound to montage fragments increases their inertia as such and their independent

⁴²⁸ Dziga Vertov, "The Man with a Movie Camera (A Visual Symphony)" in Anette Michelson, ed., *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1988), 283. His aversion to theater and literature was, at least in part, about their subordination to verbal language---which itself was captive to old patterns of thinking.

significance” which would be “undoubtedly detrimental to montage which operates above all not with fragments but through the *juxtaposition* of fragments.”⁴²⁹ To combat this, the directors advocated “only the contrapuntal use of sound” which “must aim at a sharp discord with the visual images.”⁴³⁰ The fear of ‘independent fragments’ was the fear of a film world that masked its device: montage constantly reminds the viewer that the film world is a construction, a piece of art. Montage ‘speaks’ by organizing the visual in a distinctly unnatural way, while the ‘inertia’ of an independent fragment is its ability to suck the viewer in to an illusion of reality.⁴³¹

As artistically brilliant (and even successful) as these attempts at creating a new visual language often were, it was a language that, in the words of the 1928 Conference on film, largely failed to be ‘intelligible to the millions’, either within the Soviet Union or abroad. While some early attempts at sound film attempted to use it contrapuntally (for instance, Vertov’s *Enthusiasm*, Kozintsev and Trauberg’s *Alone*), the trend towards increased naturalism and intelligibility for domestic audience was largely inevitable given the Party’s stated goals for film.⁴³² Although they were largely unknown at the time, the Vasilievs also released a statement on sound in 1928, in which they compared keeping sound out of cinema to a one-eyed man refusing a second eye. They saw the introduction of sound as holding limitless possibilities for the expansion of film art, and advocated a “parallel montage” between sound and image in which both elements developed their montage themes in conversation with the other. The introduction of sound would enable the director to become “the composer of the film in the truest sense of the word.” Yet they also warned against the mere addition of sound to film, which would repeat the earlier mistake of “merely transferring theatrical elements to the screen.”⁴³³ Limiting the vast potential of sound by only using it to “giving voice to actors”, threatened to destroy the breakthroughs silent film had made in human understanding of non-verbal communication. The directors affirmed that the sound film should not threaten “the international visual culture of the cinema” which “had the right to an independent existence and should continue to live”.⁴³⁴

The Vasilievs’ use of sound in *Chapaev* certainly elevated the role of individual actors – Babochkin’s command of voice truly brings the commander to life in a way that was unprecedented for the Soviet screen. Whether or not the audience was consciously aware of the fact, the film’s sound also introduced a new and subtle level of meaning to the film. The sound of bells at the film’s opening is juxtaposed with various visual shots to produce a distinct message: Chapaev and his men are a force of nature. In contrast, both the visual and audio presence of the weavers establishes them as highly organized---a force of man. Yet the bells had an additional layer of significance: according to the directors, they also made the film

⁴²⁹ Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Grigori Alexandrov, “Statement on Sound” in Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896-1939*, 234.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 234-5.

⁴³¹ While Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* was easily the most deliberately Constructivist Soviet film, and he frequently accused directors like Eisenstein of being too theatrical (i.e. masking the device, creating an illusory film-world), the ethos of montage in the Soviet Union was broadly Constructivist. See Vance Kepley, Jr., “Kuleshov in the Land of the Modernists”, in Anna Lawton, ed., *The Red Screen: Politics, Society, Art in Soviet Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992); while Dovzhenko’s *Zvenigora* relied on long ‘poetic’ shots more than most of his contemporaries, his temporal montage (juxtaposing different eras of Ukrainian history in a non-linear way) was just as deliberately ‘constructed’ (and incomprehensible to the common spectator).

⁴³² A few others films, like Lev Kuleshov’s *Horizon* and Alexander Dovzhenko’s *Ivan*, used sound more naturalistically (although the latter was filmed in Ukrainian, which certainly hindered its Soviet universality).

⁴³³ Brat’ia Vasiliev, *Sobranie sochinenii : Tom Pervyi*, 556.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.*, 55

subliminally Russian. The sound of bells was “associated with such famous songs as ‘he rides, he rides and he has his cap on’ (*edet, edet on I shapka na nem*)” and this adds a “familiar...Russian level” to the scene, “even if the viewer doesn’t recognize” why.⁴³⁵

The ambiguities of sound, coupled with the inherent ambivalence of Chapaev’s heroic image, held out the possibility of both particular and universal symbolism.⁴³⁶ In the ‘reception’ of Chapaev (largely orchestrated by the state), there was a constant tension between the international and national valences of his image: with the emphasis often changing according to time or place. The representation of Chapaev as distinctly, ethnically Russian always coexisted with a hope that this image had international appeal—that the Russian people could be both an exclusive ethnicity and a multi-ethnic collective identity. In the words of Boris Babochkin, “Chapaev is deeply national, and that is precisely why he is international.”⁴³⁷

This statement, made in 1964, is in many ways typical of the thirtieth anniversary of the film, when the international success and popularity of *Chapaev* was a dominant emphasis. Maria Popova published a story about her experience in 1936 watching the film in Stockholm, where it was released under the title “*Anka-pulemetchitsa*”. She claims that after screening the film for over six months, Swedish theaters stopped showing it only to be bombarded with popular demands that it continue. “It’s not only us”, she wrote, “but in other countries too, they watch this film five, six, seven times.”⁴³⁸ Other authors gushed about the influence of the movie on the burgeoning film industry in the Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, the enthusiasm of visiting Chinese delegates after watching it, or the fact that it had graced screens from Asia to Africa to North and South America.⁴³⁹

Although the international emphasis of Chapaev in 1964 was in many ways the product of that specific historical moment, the film (and the character) had an international dimension from the beginning. On January 13, 1935, the *New York Times* ran an article on the film, which, although not effusive with its praise, was generally positive. The author writes that “a year which has modestly been credited as Soviet apprenticeship to the full mastery of sound film—comes to an impressive close with the release of *Chapaev*” and claims that “if it were possible in the realm of art to plan and predetermine the quality of artistic creation, the Soviet cinema could not possibly have hoped to achieve a more telling climax for their production plan.” Even though the author claims that even “the most confirmed skeptic cannot help but realize that this film has made Soviet cinema history,” the overall tenor of the review is patronizing and ultimately far from the ecstatic Soviet descriptions of the film conquering the screens of the world.⁴⁴⁰ The

⁴³⁵ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.435, l.55-6.

⁴³⁶ In life, Chapaev had crafted a heroic image of himself based upon Cossack heroes of the frontier steppe where he lived and fought. Because of the Cossacks’ peculiar historical legacy (both rebels against, and defenders of, the Russian state, both ethnically Slavic and non-Slavic), their cultural image was inherently ambivalent, giving it broad appeal in the multi-ethnic Russian Empire. The Cossack combination of Slavic and Turkic cultural elements symbolically “helped reconcile at least two major sets of related opposites that plagued [Russian] society: Asia and Europe, and repression and freedom.” See Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *The Cossack Hero in Russian literature: A Study in Cultural Mythology* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 15.

⁴³⁷ RGALI—f.2655, op.1, d.538, l.54.

⁴³⁸ Sovetskaia Kul’tura, 5 noiabr’ 1964.

⁴³⁹ Kino, 7 noiabr’ 1969 ; Sovetskaia Kul’tura, 5 noiabr’ 1964 ; Sovetskii ekran, №10 mai 1964 ; RGALI f.2655, op.1, l.60.

⁴⁴⁰ The *New York Times*, January 13, 1935.

author concludes that “in spite of the furor it has created, “Chapaev is not a spectacular film.”⁴⁴¹ It is characterized as a distinctly Soviet achievement, not an achievement for cinema at large. Ultimately, the film seems to have gone largely unnoticed by American audiences. An announcement about *Chapaev's* imminent closure in the back pages of the *Times* one week later referred to it as “a Russian documentary film.”⁴⁴²

Soviet aspirations for it were clearly higher. *Chapaev* headlined the first Moscow International Film Festival, held in February of 1935: clearly emphasizing the hope that the advent of Soviet sound film did not mean the death knell of an international visual culture. Perhaps the best evidence of the film's early appeal outside the Soviet Union comes from Spain, where *Chapaev* became an emblem for Republican forces fighting Franco. Long before intervening militarily, the Soviet Union made a concerted effort to intervene in the sphere of propaganda and culture. Upon the outbreak of war in 1936, the “first noted Soviet figures to arrive in Spain were neither diplomats nor military personnel, but journalists and filmmakers.”⁴⁴³

In his *Spanish Diary*, one of these journalists, Mikhail Kol'tsov, describes the first screening of *Chapaev* in Madrid as a significant moment of mass enthusiasm, with “three thousand” spectators collectively cheering the heroic exploits of Vasiliï Ivanovich onscreen.⁴⁴⁴ On November 11, 1936, 625 anti-fascist fighters from twenty one different countries gathered in Spain to form an international brigade named after *Chapaev*. Evald Fischer, the battalion's war commissar, described the unit as “Twenty one nationalities in one battalion—a genuine Babylonian pandemonium, a confusion of languages from which we needed to forge a strong fighting unit.”⁴⁴⁵ They chose to name themselves after *Chapaev* because he “embodied all of the highest virtues valued by the partisan: courage, assertiveness, decisiveness, a thirst for knowledge, and dedication to the people.”⁴⁴⁶ Another important element of his international appeal was the fact that he was a peasant. In explaining the decision to adopt his name, Alfred Kantorovich, chief of the battalion's information section explained that *Chapaev* was “a partisan, a shepherd, who barely knew how to read and write” but nevertheless became “the leader of one of the toughest and fiercest divisions in the Soviet Red Army.”⁴⁴⁷ The reference is particularly telling here because there is no mention in any of the Soviet material about *Chapaev* being a shepherd (which was synonymous with the image of a peasant in many parts of Spain).

As the Babochkin quote above suggests, an emphasis on the international appeal of *Chapaev* did not preclude his representation as distinctly Russian. An article in *Teatral'naia zhizn'* explained that “Depth and simplicity is the foundation of this image. Every aspect of his character is, by itself, very ordinary. But the combination of these ‘ordinary’ characteristics is

⁴⁴¹ Ibid. Here ‘spectacular’ is used in the sense of ‘showy’ or ‘gaudy,’ but arguably also serves to diminish the film's aspirations at novelty or innovation.

⁴⁴² The New York Times, January 20, 1935.

⁴⁴³ Stanley G. Payne, *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union, and Communism* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 2004), 135.

⁴⁴⁴ Mikhail Kol'tsov, *Ispanskii dnevnik* (Sovetskii Pisatel': Moskva, 1957), 261.

⁴⁴⁵ *Chapaev Batal'ion dvadtsati odnoi natsional'nosti—Rasskazy boitsov batal'iona*, Alfred Kantorovich, ed. Rita Rait, trans. (Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo “Khudozhestvennaia Literatura”: Moskva, 1939), 10. According to a note at the end of the book dated February 1938, the first edition of the book was published in Madrid at a printing press located just seven hundred meters from the front line.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid, 16.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid, 15.

very peculiar, forming the unusual and distinctive character of the true Russian. Babochkin's Chapaev is surprisingly multi-faceted, and at the same time unified."⁴⁴⁸ Here the language of artistic improvisation (strikingly similar to that used by Babochkin and the Vasilievs to describe their artistic process) is used to describe the inherent features of Russian nationality. At the time of the film's release, its Russian referents were primarily subtle allusions and there were few, if any, references made to the film's specifically Russian character. Stalin himself had applauded its universal appeal, calling it "a film for the entire proletariat."⁴⁴⁹ Yet, within three years of the film's release, Soviet heroism had become distinctly Russian and descriptions of Chapaev's image followed suit. By 1937, the Vasilievs were referring to the distinctly Russian nature of the bells, pointing out the similarities between Chapaev and the traditional folk hero Ilya Muromets, and describing how they had "generously endowed Pet'ka and Chapaev with such characteristics" in order to "mark them as representatives of the nation."⁴⁵⁰

The curious tension between the national and the international in Chapaev was the product of a highly improvisational moment in the history of the Soviet state. Furmanov's novel provided the perfect template for such a moment: it too was a story about the past and future of the Soviet state, tailored to the needs (both individual and collective) of the present. Likewise, the film was intended to be something new, and its genre-busting pretensions gave it enormous flexibility. *Chapaev* was declared to be "a fresh perspective on the Civil War" which combined "the epic and the romantic" into "a unified style."⁴⁵¹ Even more than Furmanov before them, the Vasilievs used the story of Chapaev to blur the boundaries between different artistic genres, as well as those between art and life. They proudly claimed their film to be a generic hybrid combining humor and seriousness, legend and reality, the epic and the mundane.⁴⁵² "You all know the old debate about *fabula*, *siuzhet* and other amenities (*prelesti*)", they said in a conversation with members of the State Institute of Cinematography in 1934. "To us it is clear that these questions should not become dogmatic for Soviet cinema...Such dogma is intolerable for Soviet art. Our Soviet reality is diverse (*mnogoobrazna*)...To represent one event or one corner of our reality it may be necessary to use a strictly chronological (*ostro-fabul'naia*) narrative, while for another part of our reality this would not do: it demands some kind of change."⁴⁵³

Death, Resurrection, and Typecasting

For both novel and film, the fact that Chapaev dies at the end was the one unavoidable fact of history. Chapaev's death enabled Furmanov to deconstruct the hero's image for both personal and ideological reasons, while the film, which takes a more positive stance towards Chapaev, could not have been made if the hero still lived because Stalin would never have tolerated the competition—especially from such an ambivalent figure as Chapaev. The different emphasis of the Vasilievs' film makes the hero's death an aesthetic problem. In Furmanov, Chapaev's death is intrinsic to the story, due in no small part to the author's personal desire to diminish the stature of his rival: the entire narrative therefore serves to explain the historical

⁴⁴⁸ RGALI—f.2655, op.1, d.538, l.10.

⁴⁴⁹ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.434, l.20.

⁴⁵⁰ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.435, l.32.

⁴⁵¹ RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.426, l.18-19.

⁴⁵² RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.428, l.26.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid*, 13-14.

necessity of this moment. The Vasilievs, on the other hand, used Chapaev to resurrect the image of the People's Hero: their Chapaev is a comic hero who laughs and with whom the audience laughs knowingly. In the film, the hero's flaws are less tragic than humanizing—serving to make him approachable (unlike the commissar, who comes across as condescending and aloof). And yet, he was also a tragic hero doomed to die because only his actual death enabled his story to be told in Stalin's state. The tragic function of his death was thus largely extrinsic to the film narrative (i.e. non-diegetic).

The construction of the death scene deliberately amplifies its jarring effect. This is especially true when juxtaposed with the action sequence which precedes it---the battle for Ufa. This scene, usually referred to as the 'psychic attack', relentlessly increases the tension through a carefully crafted audio-visual montage. The white forces march towards the Chapaevtsy in tightly organized waves--visually reminiscent of the weavers in the opening scenes of the film---seemingly unhindered by the shells and bullets they face. The vaguely Wagnerian music increases the sense of impending doom until, suddenly, the music is interrupted by the sound of the machine-gun. The camera cuts to a close-up of Anka, who is mowing down the rows of white troops with her machine-gun: woman visually merges with machine to destroy the old order and its illusion of invincibility. The tide again turns when Anka runs out of ammunition and the enemy cavalry charges to the renewed accompaniment of brooding music. The camera cuts to Anka's horrified face before cutting to the penultimate image of Chapaev as hero: the music becomes suddenly triumphant as the commander and his men charge up and over the crest of a hill on horseback ---Chapaev at the head in all his glory (sword outstretched, black cape flowing). The camera then cuts back to Anka, whose horror is transformed into ecstasy as she realizes she has been rescued.⁴⁵⁴

The moments leading up to the death scene establish a similar dynamic. Chapaev and Pet'ka have fought heroically, but Chapaev has been wounded and needs to be helped to the bank of the river where he demands that he swim across on his own ---giving the viewer hope that he might not be so badly wounded after all. Pet'ka stays behind to cover the commander's retreat. The expression on his face gradually changes from concern to joy as he easily picks off enemy soldiers on the bluff and Chapaev continues to make good progress across the river. When Chapaev claims "You'll never take me" it seems like the scene's dialectic tension has culminated in another happy ending. But then the camera suddenly cuts to Pet'ka just as he gets shot and falls into the river. The music swells tragically as the camera cuts between two white soldiers on the bluff with a machine gun and Chapaev being strafed in the water before disappearing below it. The final moments of the film abruptly shift the emphasis back towards the mass-oriented heroism of earlier Soviet film. The only recognizable face is Elan (Kutiakov), who has been a very minor character in the film providing no biographical details to the narrative. In several very brief shots he directs the Chapaevtsy to charge and the artillery to fire, but the ending is otherwise dominated by extreme wide shots of horses, troops, and cannons. The film ends almost unexpectedly with enemy soldiers on the bluff of the river being hit by an artillery shell before the screen goes black and 'The End' (*Konets*) appears.

⁴⁵⁴ This moment is the closest the film comes to the conventions of American popular film---the transformation of Anka's face is highly reminiscent of typical 'damsel in distress' scenes. The previous moment's bold assertion of new gender norms is thus sublimated by a typical cinematic convention in which it is the 'paterfamilias' who ultimately saves the day.

The ending is a stark contrast to the conventional resolution of the Ufa battle scene and reveals that the hero's (and the audience's) tragic flaw is being lulled by a naïve belief in happy endings. It is in many ways Pet'ka's death that is the most unexpected. Chapaev's death had been hinted at several times---most recently during the singing scene which immediately precedes the end. While the Chapaevtsy sing and Anka looks down lovingly at the reclining Pet'ka, "Chapaev follows her gaze. 'You will be happy'" he says. "She stops singing and leans towards Chapaev. 'What?' Chapaev repeats. 'I said you and Pet'ka will be happy. You are young, all of life is before you!' [Anka] smiles, 'Are you really so old Vasilii Ivanovich?'"⁴⁵⁵ At this point Chapaev becomes serious and starts to hint at his impending demise. He again foretells the couple's happy future --"The war will end, you will get married...work side by side...Your life will be miraculous!"⁴⁵⁶ If, in earlier versions of this scene, it is the dissonance of the confused languages which provides the tragic element, in the film the scene is truly tragic only in retrospect. Although the song is melancholy (about the heroic death of the Cossack hero Ermak), the scene is overwhelmingly pleasant and cozy. The commissar recommends that Chapaev double the guard, but the warning goes unheeded. After Chapaev tells his happy tale of the future, everyone falls asleep---leaving them vulnerable to the enemy attack.

The film's ending ultimately implicates its own narrative structure in the hero's fatal flaw. Its dependence on individual biographies --the development of Chapaev's character, the romance between Anka and Pet'ka---are shown to be dangerous distractions during a time of war: the film's ending destroys the biographical impulses upon which it was built. The critics praised "the good taste" of the artists in "refraining from the traditional kiss with which pictures usually end."⁴⁵⁷ Yet, the directors had written several alternate endings that did end with such a 'kiss'--- Anka and Pet'ka playing with their children underneath a tree, directing the final charge, etc. ---indicating that the decision to kill biography was not integral to the script, but rather an improvised solution to the aesthetic problem posed by Chapaev's historical death.⁴⁵⁸

The directors had feared the effects Chapaev's death would have on "weakening the enthusiasm" of the audience, which had been so carefully "developed over the course of the film." Ultimately, they decided to go all in with a scene which would maximize the audience's "hatred---which is also a kind of enthusiasm" and remind them of the need to "fight the class war to the very last moment".⁴⁵⁹ They accomplished this by killing off both Chapaev and Pet'ka. The first death was necessitated by history and foreshadowed in the structure of the film. The second was jarring and counterintuitive: destroying the romantic plotline that embodied the bright future being fought for.

Yet if Pet'ka's death was the more unconventional, it was nevertheless Chapaev's which met the most resistance. It seems that, once resurrected, the People's Hero could not be killed

⁴⁵⁵ RGALI--f.2733, op.1, d.36, l. 33. There are several versions of this scene. In the one used here, the dialogue is almost identical to that in the film, but Anka is called Marfa. In another, the dialogue remains the same, yet it occurs next to a river, where Chapaev finds the couple gazing into the water. RGALI--f.2733, op.1, d.28, l.51.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid, 34.

⁴⁵⁷ RGALI--f.2733, op.1, d.426, l.6.

⁴⁵⁸ Julian Graffy, *Chapaev—The Film Companion* (NY: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 66. Graffy claims that in the end, "the traditional preference of Russian audiences for sad endings prevailed." Yet there is overwhelming evidence that this ending was not preferred by Soviet audiences. A common refrain among fans of the film was a secret desire to see Chapaev make it across the river every time they watched the film.

⁴⁵⁹ RGALI--f.2733, op.1, d.435, l.37-8.

off again so easily. By implicating the audience in the hero's fatal flaw (their desire for a 'final kiss' is the same preoccupation with happy endings that lulls Chapaev to sleep), the hero's death becomes the product of momentary human weakness, rather than a historical necessity---meaning he can still, in effect, live on as a model for the present and the future. In the Vasiliev depiction, Chapaev's death becomes deathless: critics compared his slow struggle towards the opposite shore with Lenin's favorite Jack London story, *Love of Life*, where the hero's tenacious crawl across the ice becomes an epic struggle of man vs. nature and fate.⁴⁶⁰ Symbolically, there could be no better indication of Chapaev's heroic rehabilitation---the once ambivalent historical figure was now an immortal hero of the Soviet Union posthumously sanctioned by Lenin.

When asked to explain his desire to repeatedly watch the Vasiliev Brothers' film, a young boy allegedly answered, "maybe this time he'll swim across!"⁴⁶¹ For decades to come, the official popular reception of *Chapaev* would echo with similar sentiments: newspaper reports, memoirs, and histories consistently described spectators unable to distinguish the action on screen from reality, or unable to comprehend that Boris Babochkin and Chapaev were not the same person. Babochkin reportedly received "Not hundreds, but thousands of letters...many, very many of which seemed to merge (*sovmestit'*) illusion and reality, art and life" and testified to the "extraordinary power of illusion" and "the hypnotic mystification contained in film."⁴⁶² Elsewhere, he would claim that, in his opinion "the public during the 1930s did not interpret *Chapaev* as a work of art. For them, everything that happened on the screen was an undeniable, actually existing fact. It was a real slice of life (*kusok zhizni*), exciting, tragic, and triumphant."⁴⁶³

Such a longing for real life to be 'exciting, tragic, and triumphant' was a popular prerequisite for Socialist Realism: accomplished through the elision of Civil War and Stalin Revolution. Likewise, the widespread desire for Chapaev to make it across, or for the world on the screen to be real, does not seem to have been the exclusive product of top-down imperatives. In a letter to Babochkin written sometime between 1935 and 1936, Petr Georgievich Petrov asked "Why has Chapaev's image become so beloved by millions of people?" This often repeated question was no doubt stoked and perpetuated by the state media. Yet, when Petrov claimed that "even though I last saw the film more than half a year ago, all the same, I still feel that Chapaev is alive" this seems to be an authentic exploration of his own spontaneous response to the film.⁴⁶⁴

In an unusually candid moment, Boris Babochkin later wrote, "I love that role and my work on it, but I was burdened by the commotion (*shum*) surrounding it. After thirty years, I have the right to speak about this openly." His overwhelming desire was "to remain the person I

⁴⁶⁰RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.426, l.7. This corresponds nicely with Evgeny Dobrenko's claim that *Chapaev* represented the polar opposite to the "new history" produced by Eisenstein in his 1937 film *Alexander Nevsky*. Whereas *Nevsky* "transform[ed] myth into history by means of cinema", *Chapaev* "distill[ed] history into myth." See Evgeny Dobrenko, *Stalinist Cinema and the Production of History: Museum of the Revolution*, 78.

⁴⁶¹ "Nash Zemliak V.I. Chapaev", *Molodoi kommunist-organ Chuvashskogo Obkoma VLKSM*, 8 fevral' 1957; "Legendarnyi nachdiv K 90-letniiu dnia rozhdeniiq V.I. Chapaeva", *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 9 fevral' 1977.

⁴⁶² Boris Babochkin, *V teatre I kino* (Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo izdatel'stvo "Iskusstvo": Moskva, 1968), 51.

⁴⁶³ RGALI—f.2655, op.1, d.53847

⁴⁶⁴ RGALI—f.2655, op.1, d.340, l.1.

was before *Chapaev*.⁴⁶⁵ The introduction to a 1968 volume of his writings reminded readers that “Babochkin is not only Chapaev. He is an actor of wide range, a thinker, a director, and a major figure in the world of Soviet art.”⁴⁶⁶ When writing about the problems facing Soviet theater, he identified the “typecast” (*shtamp*) as “the main enemy...just as it was in the days of Stanislavsky.” He believed that a “sincere theatrical genius” should direct “all of their strength towards destroying, discrediting, and ridiculing the typecast acting (*akterskie shtampy*) of the last twenty years—the very same types (*shtampy*) that Stanislavsky once fought against.”⁴⁶⁷

Yet, in spite of the apparent desire to disentangle himself from the role which had defined his career, Babochkin’s image ultimately belonged to the Soviet Union. The thirtieth anniversary of the film in 1964 inaugurated a new flood of articles about and interviews with Babochkin. The journal *Teatr i Zhizn’* declared that “In the eyes of millions of viewers, he ceased to be Boris Babochkin the artist. He became Chapaev, the legendary commander, in whose death, countless ecstatic and youthful viewers, both then and now, refuse to believe...Who can imagine another Chapaev? Even those who knew Vasilii Ivanovich personally remember him as Babochkin played him.”⁴⁶⁸

Another reporter prefaced his interview with the actor by noting that “Thirty years after *Chapaev* appeared on the screen and it seems that Babochkin—Chapaev hasn’t changed at all. There is the same movement---soft, flexible, yet containing a sense of strength, discipline, and will. He is like a coiled spring, ready to leap at any moment. And his eyes are the same as in the film—sharp and virile...And, of course, I could not resist asking the question: what role did this film play in the life of the artist?” Babochkin assured him that it was “huge (*gromadnyi*)” and proceeded to play the part: “To this day I still receive letters from viewers. Many are convinced that *Chapaev* was not a work of art, but a documentary film. I will never forget how a veteran of the Chapaev division cried on my shoulder after ‘recognizing himself’ among the heroes of the film. And there were many such incidents. In September of last year, *Chapaev* was shown in Algiers and strangers would approach me on the street crying ‘Greetings Chapaev!’ Chapaev has become my second ‘I’ (*Chapaev stal moim vtorym ‘Ia’*).”⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁵ Boris Babochkin, *Vospominaniia, dnevniki, pis'ma* (Moskva: “Materik”, 1996), 34.

⁴⁶⁶ Boris Babochkin, *V teatre I kino* (Vserossiiskoe teatral'noe obshchestvo izdatel'stvo “Iskusstvo”: Moskva, 1968), 5.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid, 30.

⁴⁶⁸ RGALI—f.2655, op.1, d.538, l.10.

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid, 81. It was later in this same article that Babochkin claimed that film was his ‘second profession’ (*vtoraia professiia*).

Chapter 4—A Home for the Hero: Cheboksary and the Fate of the Soviet Homeland

V.V. Vladimirov was a Soviet hero. During World War Two, Vladimirov served in the 23rd Motorized Brigade of the 3rd Tank-Guard Army on the Voronezh Front where he was wounded, “looked death in the eye,” and was awarded the Order of the Great Patriotic War First Class “for bravery” (*za otvagu*).⁴⁷⁰ After the war, Vladimirov became a teacher and, eventually, the director of a school. During the early 1970s, he began a series of summer pilgrimages to the places where Chapaev had lived and fought: trips he would continue to take for at least a decade. His notes, later published as a travelogue, reflect Vladimirov’s sense that visiting these places connected him to Chapaev in some tangible way. Standing by the banks of the Volga in the summer of 1974, he looked at the railroad bridge Chapaev would have crossed on his way to the front sixty years earlier and tried to imagine what it must have been like to leave this river (beside which he had lived his entire life) behind him. In August of 1977, he tried to swim near the place where the wounded Chapaev had drowned while trying to flee the approaching Whites. “It was late at night,” he writes, “eleven o’clock. Dark. There, at the very edge of the water, on the clean sand, I began to take off my shirt. Three or four meters away an engine started. A Kazakh, busying himself with his water-pump, turned his face to me and said in the darkness, ‘It is forbidden to swim here. This is where Vasily Ivanovich Chapaev drowned!’”⁴⁷¹

This is a strange scene. Since Chapaev’s body was never recovered from the river, the prospect of swimming there at night evokes images of submerged corpses, or bones that might be accidentally stepped on or bumped into. This is only the most extreme example of a general trend in the travelogue. Throughout Vladimirov’s narrative, the ghost of Chapaev seems to hover over every place that he inhabited. This sense of disembodiment seems intentional: deliberately emphasizing the fact that there was no gravesite for Chapaev and pointing to the need for an alternative.⁴⁷²

Vladimirov’s pilgrimages are linked to his own experiences of war in a fundamental way: providing the effective credentials for him to serve as the seeker and defender of Chapaev’s memory. His connection to the hero is quasi-spiritual, a duty performed for a fallen comrade. Chapaev’s body was never found, a fate now shared by millions of Soviet citizens.⁴⁷³ Vladimirov’s attempted late night dip was symbolically charged: such an avid Chapaev enthusiast would not have been ignorant of the location’s significance. Yet, the fact that he is

⁴⁷⁰ V.V. Vladimirov, *Tam, gde zhil I voeval V.I. Chapaev-Putevye zametki* (Cheboksary, 1997), 81.

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁷² Beginning at least as early as the 1877 funeral of the poet Nekrasov, Russian revolutionaries commemorated departed heroes as martyrs, and envisioned their afterlife as continuing the revolutionary struggle for which they had given their lives. All modern states have an element of secular religion: mystifying the bond between state and people by extending it into the past and the future through the lives of great men. This dynamic seems more jarring in the case of a state self-defined as non-religious, but the existence of a secular religion of the state in the Soviet Union is by no means an exception. Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth Century Russia* (New York, NY: Viking, 2001), 74-91. Even an atheist state, it seems, could not sever its ties to the dead, or to some concept of immortality. But this is less surprising that it might seem on the surface. Studies of Soviet attitudes towards death and the afterlife, while insightful and innovative in certain respects, have too often focused on the apparent incongruity of this phenomenon while neglecting the longer history of revolutionary culture and its relationship to immortality. See my review of Karen Petrone’s *The Great War in Russian Memory*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011) in *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research*. 2015. 7(3): 185-187.

⁴⁷³ As late as the 1990s, there were still an estimated 2-3 million unburied soldiers. Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead* (Basic Books: 1994), 12.

warned not to swim there suggests that the river is an inappropriate site at which to commune with Chapaev. Here, the image of his death would always be more tangible than any imagined resurrection.

The entire organization of Vladimirov's travelogue is, in fact, structured to draw attention to the 'true' center of Chapaev commemoration: the V.I. Chapaev Museum in the capital city of the Chuvash Republic, Cheboksary. His account begins with the story of the discovery that the hero was born in the Chuvash capital. Exactly half-way through the book, there is an account of his chance meeting at the Chapaev monument in Cheboksary with a former member of Chapaev's division (a *Chapaevets*), who proceeds to tell him tales of his personal experiences with the legendary commander. Finally, the book ends with a description of the museum's founding in 1974, and the moving of the hero's childhood home to the grounds of the museum in 1986. Taken as a whole, Vladimirov's work suggests that, while there may be many places where one might commune with the memory of Chapaev, Cheboksary is his true home.⁴⁷⁴

The desire to give Chapaev a home was intimately connected to the vast socio-cultural upheaval of World War II and its aftermath. The war, "a climactic watershed in the Soviet epic," inevitably influenced the image of Chapaev as it transformed the entire mythology of the Soviet state.⁴⁷⁵ The memory of the war would subsume all other mythologies, even that of the Revolution itself. In the case of Chapaev, the process began even before the outbreak of hostilities. On February 22, 1939, the Red Army newspaper published an article called "Fathers and Children" (*Ottsy i deti*), about the children of fallen Civil War heroes like Frunze, Shchors, and Chapaev, and the how they were "continuing the work of their fathers" by joining the *Komsomol* and serving in the military.⁴⁷⁶ The image of Chapaev, "dashing and cheerful, with eternally smiling gray eyes," was remembered not only "by his own children" but also "many millions of other children, for whom he procured the right to a free and happy life." Arkadii Chapaev assured readers that "like millions of other patriots from the land of socialism, we, the sons of Chapaev, are willing to give the last drop of our blood for the Homeland, for the Party, for Stalin, for Communism."⁴⁷⁷ He would die several months later on July 7, 1939 during a flight training accident.

An important aim of the 1934 film had been to generate and foster a military spirit among the younger generation that would prepare them for the inevitable battle with fascism. Now that this conflict had arrived, Soviet propaganda needed its most popular hero more than ever. The image of Chapaev was almost immediately employed in an effort to bolster morale. Barely one month after the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Lenfilm released a short agitprop piece entitled "Chapaev Is with Us", in which Chapaev (again played by Boris Babochkin) rises from the Ural River to lead the charge against the invaders. In July 1941, the Red Army newspaper, *Krasnoarmeets*, published about a lecture Chapaev supposedly gave to his troops about the fact that it was easier for one soldier to fight off seven than for seven to defeat one: "Seven need to find cover in seven places in order to shoot, and you only need one. It's always

⁴⁷⁴ V.V. Vladimirov, *Tam, gde zhil i voeval V.I. Chapaev-putevye zametki*, 3, 49, 77-78.

⁴⁷⁵ Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 18.

⁴⁷⁶ A Erlikh, *Krasniaia armia*, "Ottsy i dety," 22 fevraliia 1939.

⁴⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

possible to find one cover position, but to find seven is difficult.”⁴⁷⁸ Here the ‘wisdom’ of the commander is perfectly tailored to the catastrophic context of the wars first months, when the Soviets faced overwhelming odds.

Also in 1941, *Sovietskii pisatel’* published accounts about Chapaev fighting the Germans during World War I called *Chapaev on the German Front*. The opportunity to fight the Germans was presented as an opportunity to participate in the Chapaev story and perhaps achieve the heroic status of one who was famous “not only in Russian, but throughout the entire world!”⁴⁷⁹ It was now time for Soviet citizens to stop being spectators of past glory and take center stage for the greatest act in world history. In a famous wartime propaganda poster, the spirit of Chapaev (with the face of Boris Babochkin) hovers over Red Army troops, whom the caption refers to as “Chapaev’s Children.” The image of Chapaev mediates between the Soviet present and the Russian past, connecting the current struggle, not only to the grand narrative of the Revolution, but to historical defenders of Russia like Alexander Nevsky and Alexander Suvorov.⁴⁸⁰ The war inextricably connected Chapaev, not only to the sacred pantheon of Russian/Soviet History, but to the emotional resonance of home. If earlier representations had emphasized him as a warrior for the bright communist future, from this point on Chapaev increasingly connoted a more traditional defender of the homeland.

Chapaev’s tragic death at the end of the 1934 film, which had brought his image to life in such a memorable way, had jarred Soviet audiences. His resurrection in wartime propaganda was a welcome innovation. In the words one devotee, Chapaev would “continue to live in the memory of the people, as long as the people live. And the people are eternal.”⁴⁸¹ Postwar representations would perpetually recycle the motif of Chapaev rising from the dead that had first appeared in wartime. Countless newspapers rehashed the story of a young boy who, when asked why he continued to watch the Vasiliev Brothers’ film so often, naively answered, “maybe this time he’ll swim across!”: a hopeless desire that was allegedly shared by many fans of the film.⁴⁸² In Mikhail Chekhanovskii’s 1957 cartoon film, *Skaz o Chapaevе*, Chapaev rises from the river, and with the help of animals and forest spirits, reverses the traditional ending of his story by driving the Whites into the river to their deaths.⁴⁸³

The end of the war brought new expectations with new symbolic representations. Since the earliest days of the Revolution, Soviet propaganda had prepared the public for an epochal showdown with the forces of capitalism and promised a new world of peace and stability on the other side. Wartime propaganda had emphasized the defense of the homeland. Once that defense had been achieved, it was time to settle down and enjoy it. Postwar propaganda increasingly emphasized the domestic: soldiers were to be fathers and mothers, engineers and teachers.

⁴⁷⁸ *Krasnoarmeets*, №14—iiul’ 1941, 1.23.

⁴⁷⁹ N. Nikitin i V. Lebedev, *Chapaev no Germanskom fronte* (Sovietskii pisatel’: Leningrad, 1941), 3.

⁴⁸⁰ See David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 115-132.

⁴⁸¹ A. Kononov, *Rasskazy o Chapaevе*, 52.

⁴⁸² “Nash Zemliak V.I. Chapaev”, *Molodoi kommunist-organ Chuvashskogo Obkoma VLKSM*, 8 fevral’ 1957; “Legendarnyi nachdiv K 90-letniiu dnia rozhdeniia V.I. Chapaeva”, *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 9 fevral’ 1977.

⁴⁸³ RGALI—f.2627- op.1- d. 66.

Postwar reconstruction and urban development accommodated the nuclear family, shifting the Soviet ideal away from the communal apartment.⁴⁸⁴

Making a house into home sometimes involves reconciling with ghosts. Although the Soviet government initially sought to suppress the identity politics and traumatic memories associated with the war and its commemoration, by the 1960s an officially sanctioned “quasi-metaphysical system of memory and communion with the dead” had become almost “a living religion for those still trying to cope with the scale of the horror.”⁴⁸⁵ Peaceful homes for the living usually occupy a continuum with peaceful homes for the dead. In modern European cultures this has especially been so in the case of the famous dead, buried “in magnificent spaces” where they function as “the bodies of the nation.”⁴⁸⁶ A modern state which does not honor its fallen heroes is rarely seen as a fit place to make a home.

Vladimirov’s travelogue, uniting his experiences of the Great Patriotic War with the life, death, and symbolic home of Chapaev, reflects the connection between the war, the pervasive memorial culture which succeeded it, and the increasingly domestic emphasis of postwar culture.⁴⁸⁷ The chronicle begins with his demobilization in 1946, when he travelled to Chapaev’s birthplace of Cheboksary to study at the Chuvash State Pedagogical Institute.⁴⁸⁸ His fascination with Chapaev memorial sites thus began at the same moment as his postwar career in education—effecting the ideal Soviet masculine transition from protector to cultivator, warrior to educator. Decades serving as a teacher, school director, and regional educational supervisor would be punctuated by trips to Romania, the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, and various cities and small towns in the Volga basin, in search of the places where Chapaev had lived and fought. The nexus, of course, was the place he started out from: Cheboksary, the capital of the Chuvash Republic and Chapaev’s real home town.

According to local legend, the town had learned of this connection during the screening of the film there in 1934, when relatives in the audience revealed that Chapaev had been born in a small village on the outskirts of Cheboksary. Whether true or not, the city began to cultivate an imagined relationship with the fallen hero in earnest at least as early as the war years, when young soldiers from Cheboksary and Chuvashiia were encouraged to fight like Chapaev ‘*nash zemliak*’ (from the word *zemlia*-earth). This phrase can be translated ‘our countryman’, but has more of a connotative link to a shared connection in the physical environment. After the village of Budaika, where Chapaev was born, was incorporated into Cheboksary, the city began to integrate its status as the birthplace of Chapaev into its official Soviet identity: a process which culminated in 1974 with the construction of the largest Chapaev memorial complex in the Soviet

⁴⁸⁴ See Vera Dunham, *In Stalin’s Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

⁴⁸⁵ Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 9.

⁴⁸⁶ See Thomas W. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead: A Cultural History of Mortal Remains* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 213. Part II of Laqueur’s work is devoted to “Places of the Dead” and chronicles the increasing importance of commemorative spaces for the dead to the symbolic legitimacy of modern states.

⁴⁸⁷ Although his recollections were published in 1997, the similarities to the themes and rhetoric associated with Chapaev memorial culture in the postwar decades is striking and the publication was likely based, at least in part, upon notes taken at the time. The date range at the bottom of the last page reads 1973-1986, reinforcing the impression that the text is based upon old travel notes.

⁴⁸⁸ V.V. Vladimirov, *Tam, gde zhil i voeval V.I. Chapaev-putevye zametki*, 3.

Union. This museum imagined itself, and by extension the town in which it was located, as the center of Chapaev commemoration: as the hero's earthly home.

There are both particular and general stories here. On a local level, rooting the hero in Cheboksary and Chuvashiia was about making these communities 'matter' in the broader Soviet context: about a periphery connecting with its center. It is also about a network of peripheries connecting with each other through, and competing for central status in, Chapaev's mythology. Numerous other locales tried, with varying degrees of success, to use Chapaev's historical legacy to link their local identity to the mythology of the center. Other cities where Chapaev had lived, like Balakovo, or lived and fought, like Chapaev's early Civil War base of operations, Pugachev, established Chapaev House-museums and vied for the status of being his home town. Regions as far from Moscow as the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Kazakhstan, where the town of Lbishchensk (later renamed Chapaev) found itself after 1936, likewise used its historical connection to Chapaev to elevate its symbolic status in the Soviet landscape. And this is ultimately but one example of a much broader phenomenon. The home provincial home towns of Soviet luminaries like Lenin, Stalin, Gorky, Gagarin, etc. all repeated the same dynamic. And there were countless lesser deities who tried.

At the national level, this impulse to locate Chapaev in a particular place was mirrored in the increasing 'domestication' of his official image: a growing emphasis on Chapaev as father and teacher, on including scenes from family life alongside scenes from wartime. This move was not only a response to expectations about the nature of postwar life, but increasingly reflected broader social concerns about the younger generation's apathy towards the state, exemplified by the proliferation of jokes, about Chapaev and other prominent Soviet symbols, starting in the 1960s. The museum in Cheboksary was part of a larger effort to reinvigorate the Soviet family as one way of keeping the revolutionary flame alive. Yet, these goals were not always compatible. Bringing Chapaev 'home' to Cheboksary required making him ethnically ambiguous, ultimately leading to the downplaying of his Russianness and the emphasizing of his imagined links to the Chuvash people. This contradicted Chapaev's image as the spirit of the Soviet people, who were not supposed to be ethnically defined.

The concept (and reality) of home is often complicated by its many meanings and "it all depends on what you mean by home."⁴⁸⁹ Home is, most obviously, a physical place. Buildings, towns, and entire landscapes (home, hometown, homeland) are all understood as somehow sharing in the larger sense of home. Home is a geographical center: "really the center of a series of radiating circles of hominess."⁴⁹⁰ It is a place that, when you return to it, you are somehow returning to an integral part of yourself. It is the extension of the individual identity to the physical world.⁴⁹¹ This, in turn, is connected to the concept of home as a site of identity formation. A childhood home, like Cheboksary for Chapaev, is the place where a person first

⁴⁸⁹ Robert Frost, "Death of a Hired Man", in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Volume D (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2003), 1181.

⁴⁹⁰ John Hollander, "It All Depends" in Arien Mack, ed., *Home: A Place in the World* (New York, NY: New York University Press), 33-35.

⁴⁹¹ Amy C. Singleton, *No Place Like Home: The Literary Artist and Russia's Search for Cultural Identity* (Albany, NY: New York State University Press), "People need to give meaningful structure and symbolic significance to the relationship between themselves and their environment (the human 'condition')" and "the house gives concrete shape and form to the individual and cultural values that are projected onto space; it is at once a reflection of how people view the world and how they see their relative position in it.", 1-2.

interacts with the world and becomes self-aware (attains consciousness). Finally, home is the space occupied by the family: the first and most durable social unit. It is a place where families are made.

In the end, it was the city of Cheboksary, the capital of the ethnic Chuvash Republic, which won the distinction of being Chapaev's home. The city capitalized on the symbolic valence of 'the birthplace' and the economic opportunities provided by an historic waterfront close to the Volga (and its increasingly lucrative tourist industry), to become the physical center of Chapaev's memory.⁴⁹² The entire process of finding a home for Chapaev reveals the increasing difficulty the Soviet Union faced in defining its collective identity over time. The transcendent moment of Soviet community aspired to by the promoters of the 1934 film, when the entire country would watch *Chapaev* and realize their unity was far from the realities of the Soviet Union's latter decades, when regions increasingly struggled to carve out a particular place for themselves within the vast expanse of the empire. Although Cheboksary could draw on the unifying elements of the Chapaev myth, and combine them with the transcendent historical moment of the Great Patriotic War, the most resonant concept of home was increasingly regional and ethnic.

Home as Place: Native Soil

Chapaev came home on the silver screen. The residents of regions where he had lived and fought were predictably enthusiastic about a blockbuster Soviet film set in their corner of the Union. Less than a month after the film was released, in a dynamic which would be repeated ad infinitum across subsequent Soviet history, the local newspaper *Pravda Saratovskogo Kraiia* ran a series of stories about Chapaev's connection to the region. The "Chapaevets Timin" wrote about the film had reminded him of his time "together with Chapaev...in the *Zavolzhskie* steppes of Pugachevsk uezd" and about how he had "recently returned to the village of Solyanka" where "together with Chapaev we spent a long time breaking our heads devising plans for an attack on Uralsk." He reminisces at length about the struggles which ensued before concluding "All that was long ago...but when I saw Chapaev onscreen, that great past suddenly came back to life before me."⁴⁹³

In 1938, one year before the town of Pugachev opened the very first Chapaev House-Museum, the local newspaper published a long article celebrating the commander's relationship to the region. The article, entitled "The site of battles past (*Tam, gde byli bitvy*)" begins with an ode to local geography, "The *Zavolzhskie* steppes...a wide, boundless expanse that spreads out for thousands of miles from the Volga all the way to Kazakhstan," before painting a bleak picture of pre-Revolutionary peasants struggling to survive against blizzards, Cossacks, and kulaks. Now, the author affirms, the region has "many places connected to the name of Vasiliï Ivanovich Chapaev" and the residents all remember how Chapaev "freed [them] from the Whites" and "the *Zavolzhskie* steppes...blossom with joy and happiness."⁴⁹⁴ As was typical of

⁴⁹² Balakovo's waterfront was dramatically altered by the construction of the Saratovskii hydroelectric plant during the period from 1956-1971. The course of the river was shifted away from the historic city center and a canal re-routed river traffic through a previously underdeveloped region of the municipality. The historic city center, once vibrant and full of interesting architecture (some of which Chapaev worked on) subsequently stagnated.

⁴⁹³ "Takim byl Chapaev v zhizni," *Pravda Saratovskogo Kraiia*, №265—4 dekabria 1934.

⁴⁹⁴ "Tam, gde byli bitvy," *Kommunist*, №247(1447)—26 oktiabria 1938.

Soviet propaganda prior to the Great Patriotic War, wartime sacrifice (in this instance, embodied by Chapaev) serves as a mediator between the dark past and the bright present/future.

The first Chapaev House-Museum was more about war than peace. It was opened on February 23, 1939, in the house where Chapaev had lived sporadically during 1918, and which had served as his wartime headquarters.⁴⁹⁵ An early description of the museum makes no mention of anything domestic or quotidian. While the first exhibit was about “his working life prior to the Great October Socialist Revolution,” the rest were devoted to various stages and aspects of Chapaev’s Civil War command. During its first six months, 16,246 visitors had come to the museum and learned how “to love their socialist homeland, just like Chapaev, who loved and gave his life for it.”⁴⁹⁶

Prior to the cataclysmic confrontation with Germany, the Civil War represented the most significant collective sacrifice in the history of the state, and sites associated with it carried unique sacral significance. After 1945, this function was shared and eclipsed by thousands of square miles in the Western Soviet Union, where the greatest conflict in human history had played out. The entire western borderland was now a site of supreme sacrifice. Places associated with Chapaev did not lose their interest. Even WWII veterans like Vladimirov continued to visit Civil War sites. In the postwar period, Chapaev memorial sites (both the physical locations and the imaginary space occupied by their perpetual coverage in local newspapers) would increasingly emphasize the non-military aspects of Chapaev’s life. House museums were increasingly places to comprehend the early formation of the hero, even as they continued to reference his heroic acts. An article about the Pugachev museum from 1977 makes sure to mention that Chapaev lived in the house “together with his family” and to remark upon the special position the hero occupied in the hearts of Soviet children.⁴⁹⁷

The most logical site for a museum with this emphasis was arguably the city of Balakovo. The Chapaevs had moved here when Vasilii Ivanovich was still very young and the family lived here longer than anywhere else. Unlike the sleepy village of Budaika (later incorporated into Cheboksary) they had left behind, Balakovo was a burgeoning Volga port where Chapaev had apprenticed as a carpenter.⁴⁹⁸ Not only did it have great potential as a showcase of Chapaev’s ‘working class’ origins, including numerous sites built by him and his father, it was intimately connected to the Civil War. Chapaev’s brother Grigorii, the local Bolshevik War Commissar, had died on its streets during an anti-Bolshevik uprising on February 1918, and Chapaev’s unsuccessful attempt to come to his aid with a detachment of troops was one of his first Civil War exploits.

⁴⁹⁵ “Muzei narodnogo geroia,” *Kommunist*, №48(16446)—26 fevralia 1974.

⁴⁹⁶ “Dom-muzei Vi.I. Chapaeva v Pugacheve,” *Kommunist*, №204(1704)—5 sentiabria 1939.

⁴⁹⁷ “Po zalam muzeia,” *Novoe Zavolzh’e*, №19(9399)—2 fevralia 1977.

⁴⁹⁸ At the turn of the century, Balakovo was the second most prosperous grain and bread market on the Volga, after Samara to the north. Here grain from the surrounding steppe was collected and shipped up and down the Volga, or along other tributaries east all the way to the Ural mountains. This rapidly expanding commercial hub, which had been barely more than a village at the time of the Emancipation, had cobblestone streets and numerous stone houses. It boasted taverns, restaurants, hotels, banks, schools, a telegraph office and even a cinema. E.N. Artemov, *V.I. Chapaev na zemle Saratovskoi* (Saratov: Privolzhskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1974), 7.



All photos in this chapter taken by the author unless otherwise noted

The town of Balakovo, and its Chapaev House-museum, stressed this fact. An article from 1957 with the title “The Carpenter from Balakovo” describes the town, and the little Chapaev house, as the place where the hero “began his working life (*nachal svoi trudovoi put'*)” and claims that “many people in Balakovo remember Chapev as a youth.” It notes that “many things in the city are connected with the Chapaev family” and recounts the story of Grigorii’s death there.⁴⁹⁹ Not only did the House-museum showcase the domestic atmosphere of the Chapaev family and emphasize the fact that the house itself was built by Vasilii Ivanovich and his father and brothers, it displayed several objects made by Chapaev himself.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁹ “Plotnik iz Balakova,” *Trud*, №34(10984)—9 fevralia 1957.

⁵⁰⁰ This fact is mentioned in the 1957 article cited above and was still the case as late as 2013 when I visited.



The museum would continue to be a point of civic pride for decades and was frequently mentioned in local newspaper articles. Yet, even though visitors came to the museum from all over the Soviet Union, from “Moscow, Tashkent, Askhabad, Kursk, Kaliningrad, and other cities,” by 1961 a local newspaper was complaining about the fact that the “hedges” were “gray and unrepresentable” and the lawn was “overgrown,” and noting that many of the guests were shocked by the increasingly dilapidated state of the property. The article scolds the local

government and demands that they begin “to take care of the House-museum of the legendary Civil War hero.”⁵⁰¹ A similar fate befell the town of Lbishchensk far to the south in the Soviet Socialist Republic of Kazakhstan, where Chapaev had made his last stand and Vladimirov had his memorable late-night swim. Despite changing its name to Chapaevo, commemorating a House-museum in Chapaev’s old headquarters, and erecting a monument near the site of his death, this was not enough to make it a tourist haven. By 1969, the square around the statue was littered with “thin, stunted trees” and surrounded by “a gloomy fence.”⁵⁰² Just as in Balakovo, the sad state of its Chapaev memorial only accentuated the distance from the center.⁵⁰³

The tourist potential of a memorial site required more than just symbolism. This had to be combined with accessibility to the centers of Soviet civilization. In Chapaev country, this was increasingly determined by accessibility to riverboat traffic. Soviet citizens wanted to visit Civil War sites and Chapaev House-museums, but many of them wanted this to be part of a leisurely family cruise down the Volga. Balakovo’s potential as a major site for tourism was undermined by the construction of the Saratovskii hydroelectric plant during the period from 1956-1971. The course of the river was shifted away from the historic city center and a canal re-routed river traffic through a previously underdeveloped region of the municipality. The historic city center, once vibrant and full of interesting architecture subsequently stagnated.



Grass and tress now grow on what was once the main street in Balakovo and much of the old center is a ghost town.

Settling Down: Chapaev and Cheboksary

The fact that Cheboksary ultimately won the distinction of being Chapaev’s hometown was a product of equal parts good fortune and civic initiative. At the same time that Balakovo’s museum was falling into disrepair, the small capital of the Chuvash Republic to the north was actively bolstering its credentials as a center for the commemoration of Chapaev. In 1960, the

⁵⁰¹ “O Dom-muzee V.I. Chapaeva v Balakove,” *Kommunist*, №201(12630)—25 августа 1961.

⁵⁰² “Tam, gde pogib Chapaev,” *Literaturnaia gazeta*, №33(4215)—13 avgusta 1969.

⁵⁰³ Worse still was the fate of destinations farther east. In 1968 the journal *Voprosy istoriia*, published an article about the “Siberian Chapaev...Petr Efimovich Shetinkin, whose monument in the town of Minusinsk in Siberia was connected to other Shetinkin monuments in “Achinsk, Novosibirsk, and Ryazan.” “Sibirski Chapaev P.E. Shetinkin,” *Voprosy istorii*, №11, Novmbar 1968

first step in Chapaev's long homecoming to Cheboksary was taken when the city obtaining the Chapaev statue which had previously adorned the Volga pavilion at the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition in Moscow. This was a highly significant symbolic victory. The Exhibition was itself a symbolic microcosm of the Soviet Union, and by laying claim to the Chapaev statue, Cheboksary was asserting its exclusive rights to him.

While the acquisition of the statue was a symbolic coup, it could not serve as Cheboksary's foundation myth about its relationship with Chapaev. Although there is no contemporary evidence for it, the story of Chapaev's homecoming to Cheboksary, about the discovery during a local screening of the film in 1934 that Chapaev had been born in the small village of Budaika on the outskirts of Cheboksary, would be repeated endlessly. First appearing just years prior to the acquisition of the statue, the story tapped the mythology of the film to dramatize the town's relationship with the hero: connecting itself not only to Chapaev himself, but to his apex moment in Soviet culture. According to a local newspaper story from 1957, the film had "quickly became more popular than any film before it" in the region.⁵⁰⁴ It was shown twenty-nine times over the course of eight days during 1934 at the *Rodina* theater in Cheboksary, and was seen by 12, 514 people: including almost 200 *kolkhozniks* from neighboring collective farms and a large number of peasants from surrounding villages.⁵⁰⁵ One of these peasants, "a grey-bearded old man", upon seeing Chapaev on the screen for the first time, grabbed his neighbor's hand and shouted: "Oh!...Vasiatka!...My cousin! (*plemianik*)."⁵⁰⁶ The next day, an argument broke out at the entrance to the theater. When the ticket-collector attempted to obtain the entrance fee from a large peasant woman, he was greeted with confused outrage: "What is the meaning of this?" she screamed, "We have to pay money to see Chapaev?... What is he some kind of tsar? He's one of us, from our village, our cousin. Give me a ticket for my whole family!"⁵⁰⁷

Accounts of what followed the peasant woman's outburst vary. According to one, the woman --later identified as Nadezhda Nikifirova, the daughter of the peasant, Gavril Afanas'ev, who had so enthusiastically recognized his relative on the screen the night before-- went to the local administration to demand free tickets for herself and her family. Although her request was denied, it prompted officials to conduct an investigation into her claims that Chapaev was from Budaika, which were eventually verified through a search of church documents from the Budaika parish.⁵⁰⁸ Another account claims that the impetus for the search was a letter to the editor of the newspaper *Krasnaia Chuvashiia*, written by Komsomol members from Budaika, who reported that, in the aftermath of the film screening, the village was buzzing with rumors that Chapaev was a local.⁵⁰⁹

However it happened, the discovery that Chapaev was born nearby was a moment of great significance for Cheboksary. In the summer of 1940, the village of Budaika had been

⁵⁰⁴ "Chapaev rodilsia v Budaike", *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*-27 ianvaria 1957.

⁵⁰⁵ "Chapaev rodilsia v Budaike", *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*-27 ianvaria 1957.

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁷ "Nash zemliak V.I. Chapaeva", *Molodoi kommunist*-8 fevralia 1957.

⁵⁰⁸ "Nash zemliak V.I. Chapaeva", *Molodoi kommunist*-8 fevralia 1957. While the story of their discovery is unlikely, these records exist and are contained in the State Archive of the Chuvash Republic (GACHR) f. 557, op. 8, d. 265.

⁵⁰⁹ "Priglaseniie na 'Chapaeva' --K sorokaletiiu pervogo pokaza fil'ma v Cheboksarakh," *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 4 dekabria 1974.

incorporated into Cheboksary.⁵¹⁰ Although they may not have known it at the time, the capital of the small ethnic republic had gained a famous son with strong connections to the Soviet center. Like most of the smaller nations within the Soviet Union, the Chuvash people occupied a position on the periphery that long predated the revolution. The Chuvash are a Turkic speaking people, who were incorporated into the Russian state during the reign of Ivan IV, during his conquest of the khanate of Kazan in 1552. Unlike many other Turkic peoples in the Volga region, the Chuvash were animists rather than Muslims, and were actively proselytized into the Russian Orthodox Church. By the early 20th century, the Chuvash were nominally Orthodox, although animist practices still persisted and continue to. Their embrace of Orthodoxy gave them leverage against their non-Orthodox, primarily Muslim, neighbors. Yet the Chuvash were still treated as backwards by many of their Russian neighbors. The Chuvash ethnographer, G.I. Komissarov noted at the turn of the century that it was not uncommon for Russians to mock the Chuvash as “Vasilii Ivanoviches” or “Chuvash hicks” (*Chuvashskie lapotniki*). A Chuvash walking down the street might be taunted by groups of Russian hooligans or schoolchildren yelling “Well, Vasilii Ivanovich!...Where are you going? To Cheboksary? To your capital? Cheboksary has more *bast* sandals (a universal symbol of peasant backwardness) than all other cities combined!”⁵¹¹

The situation of the Chuvash changed dramatically under Soviet rule. On June 24, 1920, the Chuvash autonomous oblast was created from territory that had historically been divided between the provinces of Kazan and Simbirsk, and on April 21, 1925, the Chuvash were given their own autonomous national republic.⁵¹² For the fiftieth anniversary of Soviet rule in Chuvashiiia, the local government proudly published collections of colorful diagrams and graphs, charting the astonishing development: from 30,000 students and 900 teachers in 1914, to 297,600 students and 14, 000 teachers in 1967; from 3,000 tractors in 1934, to 12, 000 in 1967; and so on.⁵¹³ The capital of Cheboksary grew from a small settlement to a city of hundreds of thousands over the course of the same period (the village of Budaika, which had been outside of the city limits in 1934, was the center of the city by the 1960s).

Yet such growth was commonplace, and similar statistics functioned as the standard introduction to virtually every region of the Soviet Union in official descriptions. Other than being the capital of the Chuvash Republic, Cheboksary had little to distinguish it from a myriad of Soviet cities, many of which were also the capitals of proud peoples whose noble traditions were to be admired and celebrated. It was Chapaev that truly put Cheboksary on the Soviet map. Citizens could now proudly claim him as ‘*nash zemliak*’. Chuvash soldiers during World War II allegedly drew upon their imagined connection with Chapaev as a source of strength and inspiration. As one soldier wrote, “We battle the enemy, just as our fearless countryman (*nash besstrashnyi zemliak*) Chapaev did.”⁵¹⁴ In an open letter their children at the front, Chuvash

⁵¹⁰ Chapaev rodilsia v Budaike”, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiiia-27* ianvaria 1957.

⁵¹¹ G.I. Komissarov, *O Chuvashakh: issledovaniia, vospominaniia, dnevniki, pis'ma* (Cheboksary, 2003), 207.

⁵¹² *Chuvashiiia za 50 let Sovetskoi vlasti (v tsifrah)* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1967), 5.

⁵¹³ *Ibid*, 106-7.

⁵¹⁴ *Chuvashskaia ASSR v period Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny: sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1975), 434. It is impossible to verify the veracity of this collection. If genuine, such accounts indicate that the town was aware of its connection to Chapaev at least as early as the 1940s.

parents implored: “Hurry son of the Chuvash people!...In your heart burns the unquenchable courage and valor of our brave countryman Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev.”⁵¹⁵

In later years, an operatic rendition of Chapaev’s story would become Cheboksary’s most prominent cultural export. Almost every time a new staging was launched, and there were many of them, local papers would proudly herald Chapaev’s arrival in the cultural centers of Moscow and Leningrad: always with the implicit understanding that his journey originated in Cheboksary.⁵¹⁶ Chapaev even managed to connect Cheboksary and Chuvashiia directly to the spiritual heart of the Soviet Union: Lenin himself. In 1979, a Chuvash researcher excitedly shared his discovery of a book with pages devoted to “the son of the Chuvash soil... Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev” in Lenin’s personal library.⁵¹⁷ Just as with the Chapaev opera playing in the Kremlin, the relationship suggested here posits Chapaev as the link between the Chuvash periphery and the Soviet center: he was, in effect, the face of Soviet Chuvashiia.

Whenever they were discovered, the existence of Chapaev’s birth records was not enough to adequately signify the legendary hero’s eternal bond to his native land. Several years after local newspapers announced the fact that the hero had been born in Budaika, the city of Cheboksary decided to reinforce their connection to what was essentially an abstraction by erecting a monument.⁵¹⁸ The idea was initially the brainchild of Ivan Alekseevich Zakhartsev, former director of the Chapaev Industrial Union, who claimed that he was determined to “establish a monument to our celebrated countryman (*znamenityi zemliak*) from the first days of [his] directorship.”⁵¹⁹ After learning from Chapaev’s daughter, Klavdiia Vasilievna Chapaeva, that the monument to her father outside the Volga pavilion at the All-Soviet Agricultural Exhibition in Moscow was soon to be taken down along with the pavilion, Zakhartsev vowed to acquire it for his city. He arrived in Moscow only to learn that he was too late. The monument had been given to the city of Pugachev, where Chapaev had lived and fought during the Civil War. Undeterred, Zakhartsev informed the local Komsomol in Cheboksary of his predicament on the day of his return. The Komsomol determined to send a delegation to the Komsomol Central Committee in Moscow (TsKVLKSM) under the strict orders “Do not return without Chapaev!” The expedition was ultimately successful, and on June 24, 1960, the monument was unveiled at the center of the city’s new Chapaev square. Cheboksary was now an undeniable link in the Soviet network of sacred spaces. The myth of Chapaev as ‘*nash zemliiak*’ now had undeniable substance, and could be physically extended to connect Chuvashiia to the broader heroic pantheon of the Workers’ state. “I’ll never forget how I felt” said Ivan Alekseevich,

⁵¹⁵ Ibid, 441.

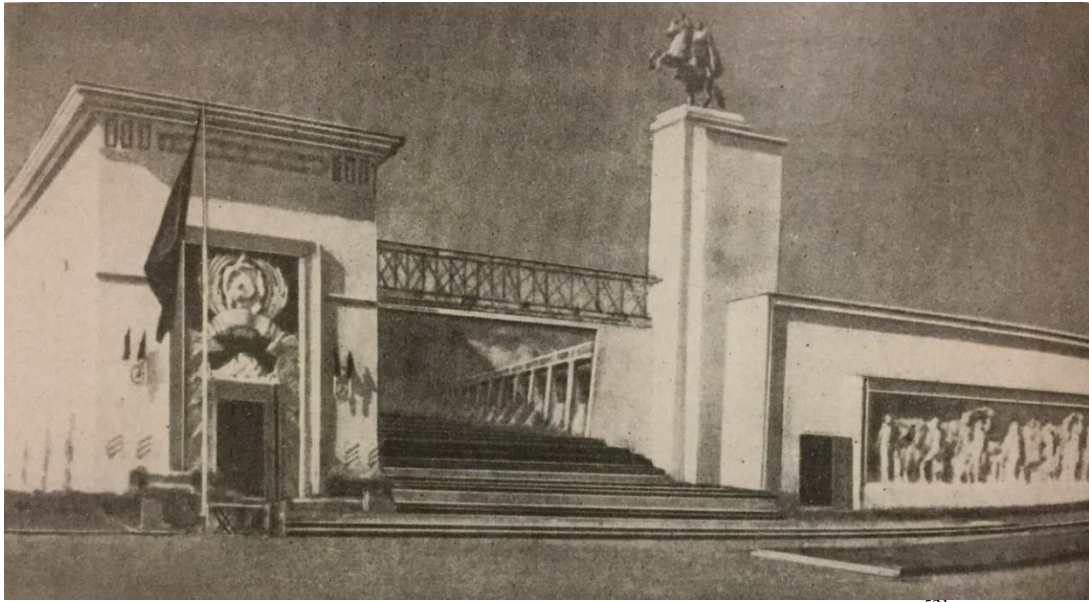
⁵¹⁶ “Eto—Otradno: ‘Chapai’ budet pokazan v Kremle”, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 11 marta 1962; “S prazdnikom Cheboksary!”, *Sovetskaia Rossia*, 25 sentabria 1969; “Novaia vstrecha s ‘Chapaem’”, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 25 fevralia 1970.

⁵¹⁷ “Chapaevskaia stranitsy biblioteki Lenina”, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 22 noiabria 1979.

⁵¹⁸ Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public feeling in America* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 38. Monuments have frequently played a role in the creation of modern societies, giving abstract concepts the appearance of concreteness. This dynamic was certainly not lost on Lenin, whose “monumental plan of propaganda” sought to turn Moscow (and eventually every Soviet metropolis) into a “talking city” full of statues that would serve as “constant reminders for the pupils of his gigantic new revolutionary school” of History’s material presence. Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 88-89.

⁵¹⁹ “U pamiatnika svoia sud’ba”, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 27 oktiabria 1984.

“standing at the Lenin Memorial in Ulianovsk with a copy of our monument dedicated ‘To Lenin from the Workers of Chuvashiia’.”⁵²⁰



Chapaev's statue on the Volga Pavilion at the Exhibition in Moscow⁵²¹



The statue outside the museum in Cheboksary

The monument quickly became an important site of social interaction: a nexus for *Chapaevtsy*. The term, which initially referred specifically to those who had served under Chapaev during the Civil War, eventually came to embrace all veterans of the 25th Division (even those who had enlisted long after Chapaev's death). After it was placed under the

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

⁵²¹ E. Shapochkina, ed. *Zerkalo tekhnicheskogo progressa* (Tipografiia VDNKh: SSSR, 1970), 62.

patronage of the Chuvash Komsomol in 1965, a “tradition” began, wherein those with “the honor of serving in the famous Chapaev Division” swore “an oath to prove themselves worthy of the hero’s name.”⁵²² Eventually, anyone with a passion for Chapaev, who had somehow internalized his ‘spirit’, could count themselves among the ranks of the *Chapaevtsy*. As V.V. Vladimirov discovered, there was now no better place to connect with the memory of Chapaev than at his monument in Cheboksary. Here anyone could suddenly find themselves listening to one of Chapaev’s living contemporaries describe their personal impressions of him.⁵²³ The monument was also intended as a site where the Soviet identity of Cheboksary could be realized collectively. On Chapaev’s birthday, large gatherings of local residents, workers’ delegations, and officials met at the statue, sometimes joined by Chapaev’s son Alexander, or his daughter Klavdiia. Here the community was to reflect on its mutual connection to their legendary *zemliak*, visibly constructed around his image and his memory.⁵²⁴

Yet the monument was only the beginning. Several years later, in 1967, the Chuvash Komsomol held a republic-wide competition for the best architectural design for a Chapaev Museum in Cheboksary. After three rounds, the project was awarded to I. Gavrilov and A. Kuz’min, from the institute “*Chuvashgrazhdanproekt*”.⁵²⁵ Local *komsomoltsy* actively raised funds for the project. In one day, *komsomoltsy* from a railway repair factory gathered scrap metal, which they then sold for 600 rubles and donated to the museum fund. *Komsomoltsy* from a teacher’s vocational school donated 950 rubles (such ‘volunteerism’ was usually encouraged [mandated] by the authorities to give civic projects the necessary appearance of popular support). Within a short time, they had raised more than 2,000 rubles, and construction was under way.⁵²⁶ Gavrilov and Kuz’min’s design envisioned the museum as an extension of the monument. Together, they would be a “unified architectural ensemble,” reinforcing the reciprocal symbolic relationship between Chapaev and Cheboksary. By providing a home for the hero, Cheboksary simultaneously domesticated his image and established itself as the hero’s home.⁵²⁷

When it opened in 1974, local newspapers proudly heralded the V.I. Chapaev museum as “the pride of Cheboksary and Chuvashiia.” In the first decade of its existence, the museum attracted more than one million, seven hundred-thousand visitors. Among these were numerous veterans of the Civil War, veterans of Chapaev’s division, generals, artists and officials. Chapaev’s son and daughter were frequent visitors, participating in museum programs and donating materials about their father to the museum’s collection. The museum’s guestbook was filled with expressions of gratitude from both locals and those who had traveled great distances to visit the childhood home of the great Soviet hero. The poet Vladimir Razumnevich wrote “Those who live in the land of Chapaev (*na zemle Chapaia*), learn from their legendary hero how to live and serve their country like brave and honorable people... To love Vasily Ivanovich means to love the Soviet nation. Thank you museum, for imparting that love to your visitors.”⁵²⁸ This recognition by the Soviet center was a tremendously valuable source of political capital for local leaders: such prominent visits were hardly accidental.

⁵²² “Vsadnik na letiashchem kone”, *Molodoi kommunist*, 11 fevralia 1982.

⁵²³ V.V. Vladimirov, *Tam, gde zhil I voeval V.I. Chapaev-Putevye zametki*, 49.

⁵²⁴ “Volozenie venkov k pamiatiku V.I. Chapaevu”. *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 10 fevralia 1972.

⁵²⁵ “Posviashchaetsia Chapaevu”, *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 26 dekabria 1968.

⁵²⁶ “V fond muzeia V.I. Chapaeva”, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 5 dekabriia 1967.

⁵²⁷ “Takim budet muzei legendarnogo Chapaia”, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 2 dekabriia 1967.

⁵²⁸ “Spasibo tebe, muzei!”, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 25 maia 1984.

Attracting visitors (i.e. tourists) was clearly important, and was certainly part of the motivation behind building the museum. In his proposed plan, chief-architect Gavrilov argued that the monument had already brought “large numbers of tourists” to Cheboksary, and that “the construction of a Chapaev museum [would] only heighten their interest in the homeland (*rodina*) of the legendary Civil War hero.”⁵²⁹ There was an entire tourist industry, complete with ‘Chapaev cruises’ along the Volga stopping off at Cheboksary, Kazan, Saratov, and other cities where the hero had lived or fought.⁵³⁰ Revenue was certainly an important consideration here, but the impact on civic pride and identity should not be underestimated. Being a Soviet tourist destination made Cheboksary ‘matter’ in the Soviet context. It was no longer just a provincial backwater, or a city whose primary significance was restricted to a small ethnic minority within the Soviet Union. It was the homeland of one of the most important heroes in the Soviet pantheon.

In the museum, Chapaev’s childhood was (and is) exhibited as Cheboksary’s history. Pictures of Chapaev as a boy and a copy of his birth records hang beside a map of Budaika from 1874. Even though the Chapaevs never lived in Cheboksary, old pictures of the city are displayed alongside pictures of the young Chapaev and his family. From here, the exhibit transitions to a copy of the newspaper article announcing the discovery that Chapaev was born in Budaika, and telling the story of the 1934 film screening. This episode, which occurred long after Chapaev had died, is inserted into a narrative that is otherwise chronologically linear: bookmarked on one side by artifacts from the period of Chapaev’s early childhood, and on the other by his young adulthood and early military service.⁵³¹ By nesting the story of the screening into a chronological narrative of Chapaev’s life, Cheboksary’s historical relationship to Chapaev is made more ‘real’ than it was in fact.⁵³² While it is probable that he was familiar with the town, he lived in Budaika, and Budaika wasn’t made a part of Cheboksary until long after his death.

The museum was thus a significant step towards building a concrete home for Chapaev in Cheboksary. It made the city a major destination for Chapaev enthusiasts and Volga package tours, and its various pedagogical programs worked to reinforce the connection between Chapaev and the town in the minds of locals (especially children). Yet the material link was still tenuous. To really be Chapaev’s home, Cheboksary needed his house. Even though the former site of the home was known by at least 1955, when a memorial plaque was erected there, the whereabouts of the house itself remained a mystery. In 1965, a journalist named Nikolai Sturikov began an investigation and, based upon the recollections of former Budaika residents, learned that the home had been sold to one I.N. Nikiforov, who had moved it to his village of Knutikha, which was later incorporated into Cheboksary (the sources say nothing about how or why someone would move an entire house and treat the whole thing as a matter of course). When Nikiforov was tracked down, he explained that he sold the house to a man named G. P. Petrov, who had moved it to his village of Tokhmeevo. On May 15, 1975, a reporter for

⁵²⁹ “Takim budet muzei legendarnogo Chapaia”, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 2 dekabriia 1967.

⁵³⁰ “Krus—k Chapaevskim mestam”, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 25 aprilii 1977.

⁵³¹ V.I. Brovchenkova, *Muzei V.I. Chapaeva: putevoditel’* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1980), 6-9.

⁵³² Contemporary museum scholarship emphasizes the historical role of museums as “institution[s] for the construction, legitimization, and maintenance of cultural realities” which “use theatrical effects to enhance a belief in the historicity of the objects they collect”, Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, eds., *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited), 2, 13. Museums represent/construct a seemingly natural relationship between their objects and a given historical narrative.

Sovetskaia Chuvashiia traveled with Nikoforuv to Tokhmeevo and found the G.I. Petrov, and with him, the Chapaev family house. The next day, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia* published an article about the discovery of the house, accompanied by a photograph of an old log cabin with the caption “Here it is, the Chapaevs’ house.”⁵³³

It now time to bring Chapaev’s home ‘home’, that is, to the premises of the Chapaev Museum in Cheboksary. But, before this could be done, the house needed to be restored. What this meant in practical terms was far from straightforward. According to Chapaev’s relatives in Budaika, the Chapaevs had been extremely poor: their house didn’t even have a functional roof. It was, in fact, very small, without the entrance hall that the existing house in Tokhmeevo now had, and the interior had been almost completely empty. Was this truly the hero’s home that Cheboksary wanted to exhibit? Shortly after the house was discovered, V.A. Nesterov, an official with the Chuvash Central State Archive, expressed concern about how it could be integrated into the Chapaev Museum while remaining an accurate historical representation of Chapaev’s early life in Budaika.⁵³⁴

Nesterov’s concerns spoke to the heart of what it meant for Cheboksary to be Chapaev’s home. Was the emphasis to be on historicity or symbolism? Was Cheboksary to reconstruct the house of a dead man as it existed when he lived there (a space that was historically separate from the present), or was it to provide a home for a hero whose ‘spirit’ was still very much alive, whose relationship to his homeland was dynamic? Museum scholar Stephen Bann argues that the “poetics” of the modern museum lie somewhere between the depictions of history as separate and history as present (i.e. between History/history and Memory). This is represented in the two kinds of museum exhibits: one in which historical objects are displayed in a linear narrative progression, and the other, in which a room (or house) is recreated ‘as it was’ at some point in history: asserting “the experiential reality of history.”⁵³⁵

While both elements had been present in Soviet museums from the beginning (as they are in all modern museums), the question of how to “increase the exposure of the dialectical historical process” through museum exhibits was a central concern in the 1930s.⁵³⁶ Yet by the 1970s, this focus had clearly shifted. In 1970, the Soviet Ministry of Culture marked the one hundredth anniversary of Lenin’s birth with a ‘Lenin inspection’ (*Leninskii smotr*) of Soviet museums. The inspection concluded that the most important task facing Soviet museums was the need to make the connection between museum visitors and history “more emotional”.⁵³⁷ The best way to achieve this was through the immersive historical exhibit, typified by the memorial house museum, or the memorial room. Here the visitor was to connect with past in an experiential way by interacting with the material reality of history.

To be fair, these discussions (just as Nesterov’s report) stressed the importance of historical accuracy in renovation and reconstruction. Nevertheless, the creation of an emotional

⁵³³ “Kak nashli dom Chapaevykh”, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 16 maia 1975.

⁵³⁴ ChKM 11097/44, papka No. 49, f. 448, V.A. Nesterov, “K voprosu o dome Chapaevykh.”

⁵³⁵ Stephen Bann, “Poetics of the Museum: Lenoir and Su Somnard”, in Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, eds., *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, 77, 81.

⁵³⁶ V. Glagolev, “Kontsentratsiia i kontrat v istoriko-revoliutsionnoi ekspozitsii” in *Sovetskii muzei No. 2*, (Moskva: sektor nauka Narkomprosa, Mart-Aprel’ 1932), 18.

⁵³⁷ I.A. Anoshchenko, “Leninsketeranov revoliutsionii smotr muzeev” in *Muzeinoe delo v SSSR* (Moskva: Tsentral’nyj Ordena Lenina Muzei Revoliutsii SSSR—TRUDY, 1971), 12.

response to history was clearly a priority, and this left the door open for ‘creative’ interpretation. When the Chapaev house was finally opened to the public on May 8, 1986, it was quite different from the dirty, empty, roofless little hut described by the Chapaevs’ relatives. It maintained the entrance hall that had been added to the back of the house after the Chapaevs sold it. It had a roof. The inside was clean and filled with numerous reproductions of peasant artifacts and improbable decorations. Yet, while it may not have been an accurate representation of Chapaev’s actual living conditions, the house clearly reproduced a common ideal of the house as sanctuary. Actual peasant homes were often dirty and oppressive: filled with smoke, animals, and family members rather than knickknacks and colorful fabrics. This, on the other hand, was a cozy little nest.



The addition of the Chapaev house completed the symbolic process. By this time, the museum had received more than 2.5 million visitors “from every corner of [the] country”.⁵³⁸ The city could truly claim itself as the center of a vast symbolic network of Chapaev memorial sites throughout the Soviet Union, which collectively constituted a vast Soviet space.⁵³⁹ In 1988, the museum’s director, Valentina Ivanovna Brovchenkova, published an article in which describes the relationship between the Chapaev Museum and the broader memorial network in precisely these terms. Her narrative chronicles “the second life of the legendary Civil War hero”, which began, she says, with the decision to name the 25th Division, the ‘Chapaev Division’, shortly after his death in 1919.⁵⁴⁰ After this, Chapaev’s name was given to “rivers, villages, collective farms, sanatoriums, streets, squares, parks, pioneer battalions, etc.” in “all of the places where he had lived or fought.”⁵⁴¹ During World War II, Chapaev’s “warrior tradition”, inspired acts of heroism amongst members of the division which bore his name, and, after the war, the monuments dedicated to their exploits further expanded the symbolic space of the Chapaev network. By ending her narrative with the adoption of the 25th Division by the

⁵³⁸ V.I. Brovchenkova, “Chapaevskie pamiatnye mesta v SSSR i Muzei V.I. Chapaeva v Cheboksarakh”, in *Legendarnyi geroi grazhdanskoi voiny V.I. Chapaev* (Cheboksary: Ordena ‘Znak Pobedy’ Nauchno-issledovatel’skii institute iazyka, literatury, istorii i ekonomiki pri Sovete Ministerov Chuvashskoi ASSR, 1988), 55.

⁵³⁹ Michel Foucault claims that just as history was the “great obsession of the nineteenth century... the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space.” This epoch, he says, “is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites.” Michel Foucault, “Texts/Contexts: Of Other Spaces” in Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, eds., *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, 371-2.

⁵⁴⁰ V.I. Brovchenkova, “Chapaevskie pamiatnye mesta v SSSR i Muzei V.I. Chapaeva v Cheboksarakh”, in *Legendarnyi geroi grazhdanskoi voiny V.I. Chapaev*, 51.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid*, 54.

Chuvash Komsomol in 1965, and the construction of the Chapaev Museum in 1974, Brovchenkova closes the symbolic circle: Chapaev's 'second life' now had physical home.

Home as Process: Site of Development

A home is much more than a place. To some extent, it is the activity that takes place within it that makes a home what it is. Frequently, home is represented as a place where consciousness is formed. This is especially true of the childhood home: the place where an individual became self-aware, cognizant of the wider world around them and their particular place within it.⁵⁴² Home is, in this sense, part of a process of becoming. The theme of personality formation, of coming to consciousness, was an important component of Chapaev's representation in the city of his birth. Visitors to Cheboksary could tour the house where Chapaev formed his first impressions of the world. Through the museum's exhibits, they could "trace, on a documentary basis, the formation process of a heroic personality from a simple working boy to a tempered Bolshevik, a distinguished Civil War commander."⁵⁴³ While Furmanov's novel had depicted Chapaev's attainment of working-class consciousness after he had already become a Bolshevik commander, later stories directed at children detailed his youthful intolerance of bourgeois oppression and his early realization that, as a worker, he was different than them.

For the Chapaev Museum, this theme was especially important, and helped to facilitate the revolutionary pedagogy that all Soviet museums were expected to provide. The role of the Komsomol in obtaining the monument, sponsoring the 25th Division, and providing the incentive for the construction of the museum is worth noting in this respect. If true, these stories reflect the deep connection between Chapaev and Soviet youth, among whom he was incredibly popular. Yet even if these stories were exaggerated, this only highlights the importance placed upon associating the image of Chapaev with the youth of Chuvashiia in official representations.

Soviet museums had always seen the education of Soviet youth as an important part of their mission. On September 4, 1931, the Central Committee of the Communist Party declared that regional museums were to act "as fulcrums for schools in the process of polytechnicalization" (*politekhnizatsii*).⁵⁴⁴ During the 1930s, museums struggled with the problem of capturing and maintaining the interest of children while simultaneously communicating complex concepts like the historical development of nature and dialectical materialism. Exhibits for children were told to "avoid monotone classifications, and strive to capture the eye with clear, fresh contrasts in material, form, color, scale, construction, etc."⁵⁴⁵ While tapping the emotions of children was important, this was primarily to prevent them from becoming bored with Marxism-Leninism.

⁵⁴² According to historian John Randolph, scholars of the home have described it as "the bearer and producer of certain practices and ideals" and a "stage for modern self-creation and performance." John Randolph, *The House in the Garden: The Bakunin Family and the Romance of Russian Idealism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 5.

⁵⁴³ V.I. Brovchenkova, "Chapaevskie pamiatnye mesta v SSSR i Muzei V.I. Chapaeva v Cheboksarakh", in *Legendarnyi geroi grazhdanskoi voyny V.I. Chapaev*, 56.

⁵⁴⁴ E.S. Radchenko, "Muzei i shkola", in *Sovetskii muzei No. 5 sentiabr'-oktiabr* (Moskva: sektor Narkomprosa, 1932), 3.

⁵⁴⁵ Ia. Meksin, "Iz opyta muzeino-vystavoshnoi raboty s det'mi", in *Sovetskii muzei No.2 mart-aprel'* (Moskva: sektor Narkomprosa, 1932), 40.

By the end of World War II, museums had begun to shift the emphasis away from using emotion as a way to make theoretical education more palatable for children, towards harnessing emotions as a way of establishing a connection between Soviet children and their state. This tendency had, of course, long been present in many spheres of Soviet education, including museums. But by the beginning of the postwar period, there was a new emphasis in Soviet museum literature on the need for museum exhibits to instill the values of bravery, courage and love of country, over the teaching of Marxism-Leninism. After repelling the largest military invasion in the history of the world, the Soviet Union was understandably concerned with the need to maintain a strong and committed defensive army. The increasing apathy of the younger generations must have been particularly alarming in this context.

During the 1970s, there was a notable increase in the construction of memorial museums. In the first five years of the decade, almost one-hundred museums were founded in the Russian Federation alone, and many of these museums were self-classified as ‘memorial’. The term became so widespread that one museum official felt compelled to write an article strictly defining the term and providing a list of six degrees of ‘memorial-ness’.⁵⁴⁶ This phenomenon (which one scholar has dubbed ‘memorial mania’) is often attributed to “anxieties about national unity...unleashed by the rapid advance of modernism, immigration, and mass culture.”⁵⁴⁷ In the Soviet Union during the 1970s, concern about the apathy of the younger generation and their growing preference for western mass culture clearly fit this pattern.⁵⁴⁸

The Chapaev Museum in Cheboksary was well-suited to the task. The museum was opened to the public on May 9, 1974: the twenty-ninth anniversary of the Soviet victory over the Nazis. A newspaper article chronicling the ceremony described the museum as a “memorial complex” dedicated to the “first defenders of Soviet power” and the “glorious warrior tradition of the Soviet Union---a tradition which was developed repeatedly during the years of the Great Patriotic War.”⁵⁴⁹ Illustrating how this warrior tradition linked ‘the first defenders of Soviet power’ to the defenders of Soviet power during World War II was central to the museum’s overall structure. By moving through the space of the museum, young visitors were to internalize this process, and to thereby continue it.

Through the museum’s exhibition of photographs, documents, and personal objects, visitors were to trace the formation of Chapaev’s personality “from a simple working boy to a tempered Bolshevik, a distinguished Civil War commander.”⁵⁵⁰ This process was (and is) represented architecturally in the contrast between the Chapaev’s peasant hut and the ultra-modern building of the Chapaev Museum. In Chapaev’s childhood home, visitors could marvel

⁵⁴⁶ S. Kasparinskaia, “Sozdanie memorial’nykh muzeev” in *Muzei i Sovremennost’, vypusk II* (Moskva: ministerstvo kul’tury RSFSR nauchno-issledovatel’skii institut kul’tury, 1976), 85-88.

⁵⁴⁷ Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 27-8. So many statues and memorials were erected in France that 1911, the Paris City Council passed an ordinance banning busts, bas-reliefs and statues from public places for the next ten years.

⁵⁴⁸ S. Kasparinskaia, “Sozdanie memorial’nykh muzeev” in *Muzei i Sovremennost’, vypusk II* (Moskva: ministerstvo kul’tury RSFSR nauchno-issledovatel’skii institut kul’tury, 1976), 85; F.L. Kurlat, V.G. Lur’e, “Vospitanie molodezhi na revoliutsionnykh boevykh i trudovykh traditsiakh Sovetskogo naroda” in *Muzeinoe delo v SSSR* (Moskva: Tsentral’nyi ordena Lenina muzei revoliutsii SSSR—TRUDY, 1971), 93-97.

⁵⁴⁹ “Podvig zhizni narodnogo geroia—V Cheboksarakh otkryt muzei V.I. Chapaeva”, *Unknown article from the collection of the V.I. Chapaev Museum in Cheboksary*.

⁵⁵⁰ V.I. Brovchenkova, “Chapaevskie pamiatnye mesta v SSSR i Muzei V.I. Chapaeva v Cheboksarakh”, in *Legendarnyi geroi grazhdanskoi voiny V.I. Chapaev*, 56.

at his humble origins while remembering stories they had read about his experiences there. Accounts of Chapaev's youth often described how his poverty influenced the development of his personality. Some even described this process as an awakening of working-class consciousness. In Z. Likhacheva and E. Matveeva's *Detstvo Chapaia*, a tale of Chapaev's childhood set in Budaika, the young Chapaev (here Vasia), tells his grandfather how his classmate Fed'ka Efremov (who figures prominently in the role of evil kulak child) told him that he had no family name:

“What do you mean no name? –asked Grandpa in astonishment.---Our family name is Chapaev!

Vasia blushed: Grandpa, Fed'ka Efremov said that it's not a name at all, only a nickname (klichka)... Chap'-Chap'.

Fed'ka spoke the truth. It was my nickname...I worked towing lumber down the Volga. We Budaikovites all know that 'chap, chapai' means 'hold on, don't let go!' There is nothing shameful about it; it's a worker's word (trudovoe slovo). I consider, Vasiatka, having a worker's nickname to be a mark of great honor! It means a man understands what he is.”⁵⁵¹

The conversation marks a turning point for the young Vasia. He begins to connect his various struggles against Fedka and his father (who repeatedly oppress and humiliate the poor villagers) to the larger patterns of injustice in society (i.e. he attains working-class consciousness).

While this story is obviously fictional, it is quite representative of the popular image of Chapaev's childhood by this time. The portrayal of Chapaev as quasi-working-class is in fact closer to reality than Furmanov's depiction of him as a peasant bumpkin. The history of the 'working' origins of the family name can be traced to an account given by Chapaev's brother.⁵⁵² Chapaev's grandfather, Stepan Gavrilov, actually had worked as a barge hauler on the Volga, and his father, Ivan Stepanovich, was a travelling carpenter who journeyed up and down the Volga looking for work.⁵⁵³ Before joining the army, Vasilii Ivanovich worked alongside his father and, according to various accounts, was a gifted craftsman. This fact no doubt influenced the ultimate decision to reconstruct the house as a pristine example of turn-of-the-century peasant architecture, rather than to return it to the dilapidated, roofless state described by contemporaries. The desire to represent the Chapaevs as workers (clean, industrious, resourceful) ultimately trumped the need for historical accuracy.

As visitors left the house and made their way to the museum standing opposite, the movement between these two spaces represented symbolic movement through time: from backward pre-revolutionary Budaika to modern Soviet Cheboksary. This trip, visitors were to understand, was only possible because of revolutionary heroes like Chapaev. After entering the museum and following the exhibition of Chapaev's development from poor child to glorious hero, visitors then passed into another hall and the exhibition “Chapaev Is with Us.” Here they encountered a series of photographs, displaying many of the places (streets, towns, cities,

⁵⁵¹ Z. Likhacheva and E. Matveeva, *Detstvo Chapaia-povest* (Volgograd: Volgogradskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1962), 13.

⁵⁵² A.V. Chapaev, K.V. Chapaeva, Ia. A. Volodikhin, *Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev: Ocherk zhizni, revoliutsionnoi i boevoi deiatel'nosti* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1987), 17.

⁵⁵³The image of the Volga barge-hauler was romanticized by Russian socialists in the 19th century. They were seen as embodying the toughness and fortitude of the Russian spirit. Ilya Repin, who painted the iconic painting of the 'Volga Boatmen' described his first meeting with them in ecstatic terms: “What beautiful, burly people!...Where did they acquire such independent and cheerful speech? And such a full and dignified bearing?” From Ilya Repin, *Burliaki na Volge: vospominaniia* (Moskva: gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo iskusstvo, 1941), 38.

squares, *kolkhozy*) bearing Chapaev's name, followed by various exhibits dedicated to the veterans of World War II (especially those who had fought in the 25th Division or contributed in some way to the founding/maintenance of the museum). It was a place where all Soviet youth, especially "the youth of the city", could learn about the "revolutionary and worker traditions of their fathers and older brothers," especially those who had carried on Chapaev's legacy by fighting to defend the Soviet Union during World War II.⁵⁵⁴

Visitors to Chapaev's childhood home could therefore participate in a process of awakening similar to that experienced by Chapaev in *Detstvo Chapaeva*. The museum was frequently described in local newspapers as a "warrior school" or a "school of patriotism...for the education of young people" who came to the museum with a desire to "connect with the heroic experiences and times of the Civil War." According to A. Zerniaeva, a museum employee, "every year our museum is named the best school in the city."⁵⁵⁵ The museum frequently organized outreach events for local youth, inviting veterans of the Chapaev Division (from both the Civil War and World War II) to meet with them and inspire them to acts of heroism and patriotism. Chapaev's children frequently came to the museum to meet with visitors and tell about their father. Such meetings were described as "lessons in courage."⁵⁵⁶

For a graduate education in courage and patriotism, the youth of Chuvashiia could enroll in the region's other Chapaev school: the 25th Division. During World War II, the division had proved itself worthy of the "Chapaevtsy warrior tradition", by playing an important role in the early defense of Odessa and Sevastopol, as well as the later liberation of Kharkov and Budapest.⁵⁵⁷ In 1965, the Chuvash Komsomol became the division's sponsor, and "every year" from this point on, "the best representatives of Chuvashiia were chosen to serve in the division and bring glory to the immortal name of their countryman."⁵⁵⁸ The 25th Division was described in similar terms as the Chapaev Museum: it was "a school of moral-political training and courage for numerous young people of the Chuvash ASSR."⁵⁵⁹ The museum and the division worked in tandem: educating and inspiring Soviet youth (particularly those from Chuvashiia) to defend their homeland by carrying on the Chapaev tradition.

This link between home and school was not superficial, but was in fact an integral part of an emerging discourse about Chapaev and his relationship to Soviet youth. As officials sought to harness his popularity with children in order to address their concerns about the stability of the Soviet family and its ability to transmit the official value system to the next generation, Chapaev's image became increasingly domestic. Chapaev was now a good father: one who taught his children the value of education and always helped them with their homework. According to his daughter, Klavdiia Vasil'evna, Chapaev was angered by what he perceived as sexual discrimination at their local school. While the boys were encouraged to work hard, "the girls spent more time playing with dolls than studying." Chapaev examined his daughter, and when he found that she couldn't even read the letter 'o', he decided to pull her out of school and

⁵⁵⁴ Vladimir Dolgov, "Podviga, muzhestva shkola", *Molodoi kommunist*, 17 iulia 1976.

⁵⁵⁵ "Oveiano slavoi k legendarnomu nachdivu", in *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 9 fevralia 1982.

⁵⁵⁶ "Geroi v iunykh sertsakh" in *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 28 sentabria 1976.

⁵⁵⁷ V.I. Brovchenkova, "Chapaevskie pamiatnye mesta v SSSR I Muzei V.I. Chapaeva v Cheboksarakh", in *Legendarnyi geroi grazhdanskoi voiny V.I. Chapaev*, 53.

⁵⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁹ "Shkola muzhestva/sluzhat rodine zemliaki", in *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 8 fevralia 1978.

have her educated at home. Her brother Alexander would now be responsible for teaching her the things that he learned at school.⁵⁶⁰

As an adult, Klavdiia was particularly active in propagating the image of her father as domestic, educated, and interested in education. She traveled to various archives, collecting documents about her father which she spread in an effort to combat Furmanov's portrayal of him as an irrational peasant partisan.⁵⁶¹ Even before the museum was founded in Cheboksary, Klavdiia donated to the city copies of over four hundred documents related to her father. These documents supposedly confirmed that Chapaev was never a partisan leader, but rather an official emissary of the Party with a "great knowledge of the art of war" who always "conducted battle according to a plan."⁵⁶² During her visits to local school children in Cheboksary, she told them that as "young Chapaevtsy" they "should be first not only in their labor, but also in their studies" and that this "would be the best memorial of Vasiliu Ivanovich Chapaev." Those who would be a part of Chapaev's family, she claimed, had to follow the rules of the house. Children of Chapaev, both actual and spiritual, were to be hard-working, studious, honest, brave and patriotic if they were to make their father proud.⁵⁶³

Home as People: the Chapaev Family

As the space where the family lives, home is perhaps the most significant space humans construct. Since the family is the primary unit of society, the home ultimately "organizes not only relations of family, gender, and generation, but also relations of class [and] is the principle product of human endeavor."⁵⁶⁴ Beginning in the late 1930s, newspapers began to use Chapaev's children to reinforce the official image of the Soviet family and to connect that image to the state. As the situation in Europe deteriorated, the children began to appear in the role of model Soviet youth in agit-prop pieces aimed at preparing the country for war. Just as Chapaev had come to represent the soul of the Soviet people, his children gradually came to symbolize the people's children. This dynamic was reinforced by the fact that Chapaev's wife, Pelageia Nikanorovnaia (who apparently left him for another man while he was at the front) is virtually absent from discussions of his family. In 1939, Chapaev's sons Arkadii and Alexander appeared alongside the children of Mikhail Frunze (Chapaev's superior) and several other Civil War heroes in an article entitled "Fathers and Children" (*Otsy i dety*). The primary focus of the article was to demonstrate how the descendants of fallen Soviet heroes continued the work of their fathers by enlisting in the military, serving in the Komsomol, etc.⁵⁶⁵

This proved to be a compelling paradigm. In the early days of the Leningrad Blockade, the slogan "We fight magnificently, we slash frightfully (*otchaianno*), we are the grandchildren of Suvorov, the children of Chapaev!" could be seen on posters plastered to the sides of

⁵⁶⁰ "Chapaev I ego deti", in *Sem'ia i shkola no.2*, 1967.

⁵⁶¹ According to the museum's current director, Valentina Ivanovna Brovchenkova, Klavdiia used to covertly copy restricted documents and sneak them out by hiding them in her clothing.

⁵⁶² "Klavdiia Chapaeva rasskazyvaet ob otse", in *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 15 sentabria 1957.

⁵⁶³ "Vstrechi s iunymi Chapaevtsami", in *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 8 fevralia 1967.

⁵⁶⁴ Tim Putnam, "'Postmodern' Home Life", in Irene Cieraad, ed., *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 144. For a fascinating study of the influence of the home upon the creation and propagation of the American middle class, see Mary P. Ryan's *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Tamara K. Haveven, "The Home and the Family in Historical Perspective", in Arien Mack, ed., *Home: A Place in the World*.

⁵⁶⁵ "Otsy i detu", *Krasnaia armia*, 22 fevralia 1939.

buildings throughout the city.⁵⁶⁶ The image of Soviet warriors as descendents of historical heroes like Alexander Nevskii, Kutuzov, Suvorov, and Chapaev were prominent in wartime propaganda.⁵⁶⁷ Yet Chapaev was different from these heroes, in that he was the only one who was a Bolshevik. Although his image was often distinctly Russian, this never completely replaced his revolutionary aspect. From the time of his appearance in Furmanov's 1923 novel, Chapaev had been associated with the attainment of revolutionary knowledge. His story was the story of the creation of a new Soviet man: the blending of spontaneity and consciousness. Although he subsequently took on many shades and forms, he never completely lost his connection to ideology or became a primarily Russian hero. Rather, he seemed to represent the "new imagined community composed of the 'soviet people'", which, although never as powerful as traditional nationalism, was able to offer many in the postwar Soviet Union, "an alternative sense of identity".⁵⁶⁸

During the postwar years, the image of Chapaev's children as the people's children, of Chapaev's family as the model Soviet family, was reinforced through numerous newspaper articles across the Soviet Union. In these accounts, each child symbolically continued a particular legacy of their father. Several years before the war, Arkadii Chapaev's airplane went into a tailspin and crashed into a peat marsh, killing him at the age of 25. Shortly thereafter, the town near the crash site erected a memorial obelisk to him.⁵⁶⁹ Through his tragic death, Arkadii had carried on his father's legacy of self-sacrifice: he was Chapaev the martyr. Alexander Chapaev quickly rose from the rank of captain to general during the early stages of the war, participating in numerous battles "from the walls of Moscow to the shores of the Baltic."⁵⁷⁰ Three times he was awarded the 'Red Banner' (*Krasnaia Znamia*), as well as the orders of Suvorov, Alexander Nevskii, and the Great Patriotic War.⁵⁷¹ The soldiers in his brigade, eight of whom had served under his father during the Civil War, proudly fought under the slogan "Where Chapaev is, there is victory." Upon meeting Alexander for the first time, an enthusiastic reporter claimed, "When the door opened and we met with a slender, medium-height, affably smiling man, there was no doubt whatsoever that this was the son of Chapaev, so much did he look like his father."⁵⁷² His noble figure, clothed in the full regalia of a decorated general, was captured in a life-sized portrait that and hung at the entrance of the *Chapaev s nami* exhibit in the Chapaev Museum. Alexander had carried on his father's legacy of martial glory: he was Chapaev the war hero.

⁵⁶⁶ "Vdokhnovlial zashchitnikov Leningrada", in *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 14 ianvaria 1982.

⁵⁶⁷ This imagery is largely typical of nationalist propaganda, in which the nation (often defined ethnically) assumes the role of 'meta-family'. According to David Brandenberger, it was such wartime propaganda that truly "catalyzed the formation of a sense of Russian national identity on the popular level" for the first time in history. David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956*, 226.

⁵⁶⁸ Ibid, 243.

⁵⁶⁹ "Iz roda Chapaevykh", in *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 14 apreliia 1982.

⁵⁷⁰ "Chapaev i ego deti", *Sem'ia I shkola*, no.2-1967.

⁵⁷¹ "Deti Chapaeva", *Neva*, no.7 1962.

⁵⁷² "Narodnyj geroi—K 75-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia V.I. Chapaeva/rasskazyvaet syn legendarnogo komandira", *Moskovskaia Pravda*, 9 fevralia 1962; "Gde Chapaev-tam pobeda", *Pionerskaia Pravda*, 8 fevralia 1978.



The role played by Klavdiia Chapaeva was different. The pre-war *Krasnaia Armia* article, “*Otsy i deti*”, had included daughters as well as sons. Tatiana Frunze declared that both she and her brother Timur, both *Komsomoltsy*, were willing to die defending their homeland.⁵⁷³ Klavdiia, however, was not a warrior, and she was not included in this article. She cut a much more domestic, more traditionally feminine, figure: by devoting herself to the preservation of her father’s memory through collecting and disseminating documents about him, and engaging in educational outreach to Soviet children, she kept the home fires burning. While there is no portrait of Klavdiia hanging in the Chapaev Museum, she, more than either of her siblings, was actively concerned with making a home for their father’s memory and perpetuating the Chapaev family.

By the 1960s, the image of Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev promoted by his children was becoming increasingly domestic. Chapaev’s role as a good father, who took an active interest in the lives of his children, gradually began to complement his traditional image as a fearless leader. “We children,” claimed Klavdiia, “played with our father.”⁵⁷⁴ She tells how he often came home to visit them on leave, and that, even though he was often completely exhausted, “he never drove his children away from him, but gave them all of his free time.”⁵⁷⁵ He was not only interested in his children’s education, but from a very early age sought to instill in them a love of work.⁵⁷⁶ Alexander describes how his father actively encouraged him to be a brave warrior so that he could one day defend his homeland. On one occasion he returned home from the front with an old rifle and, after pinning one of the three crosses of St. George he had earned in World

⁵⁷³ “Otsy i detu”, *Krasnaia Armia*, 22 fevralia 1939.

⁵⁷⁴ “V sem’e Vasiliia Ivanovicha Chapaeva”, *Semia I shkola*, no.2 1962.

⁵⁷⁵ “Chapaev i ego deti”, *Sem’ia I shkola*, no.2 1967; “Deti Chapaeva”, *Neva*, no.7 1962.

⁵⁷⁶ “Deti Chapaeva”, *Neva*, no.7 1962.

War I on Alexander's chest, gave it to him. It seemed to his son that he was "very satisfied with my warlike appearance."⁵⁷⁷

The roles played by Chapaev's children could be played by any Soviet citizen. The image of Chapaev as a spiritual father for all loyal Soviets, prominent during the war years, was reinforced through subsequent representations that portrayed the 'true' Chapaev family as always having been a relationship based on comradeship and shared values, rather than blood. According to numerous accounts, during World War I Chapaev promised a dying comrade that he would look after his orphans. Klavdiia Chapaeva claims that her father loved these two children as if they were his own, and never treated them any differently from the rest. In another account, she tells how her father chided her and her classmates for cheering at the news that their teacher had fallen ill and class would be cancelled:

"Chapaev stood silently, looking around at everyone, and then asked:

--Raise your hand if you have a holiday in your family when your grandfathers, grandmothers, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, or even acquaintances get sick!

Everyone was silent. Nobody raised their hands. After waiting a few moments, Chapaev continued:

--Does that mean there are no such families? I thought not! Then tell me, from whom did you learn this example? Who taught you to be happy about the unhappiness or misfortune of others? Are you still silent? Maybe you are just afraid of work? For studying is also work---difficult work! Do you all want to be little lords? To run through the streets all day? Happy in your idleness, you celebrate the unhappiness of your teacher---the eldest and dearest person in your family! I say 'your family' because all of you sitting here are one family! We, your fathers, grandfathers and older brothers are also one family. We fight together so that you will be able to study and become genuinely good people, literate and knowledgeable."⁵⁷⁸

Chapaev goes on at length about the new future they were fighting for in which everyone would live as brothers and sisters. He asks them how they think he would feel if he should die the next day, knowing that he had made the sacrifice for a bunch of ungrateful children. "From that day on", says Klavdiia, "we all found a new, big, wonderful family."⁵⁷⁹

The most common image of Chapaev's 'spiritual' family was the *Chapaevtsy*. This was a fluid concept that initially referred to those who had fought under Chapaev during the Civil War. Klavdiia and Alexander describe her father's soldiers as relatives. There were apparently always Red Army men at the home. When Chapaev played with his children, several *Chapaevtsy* would often join in the games.⁵⁸⁰ Alexander remembers that, when their father died, it was the *Chapaevtsy* who looked after them.⁵⁸¹ And just as the soldiers he commanded now cared for his children, the division Chapaev founded safeguarded his spirit. Eventually, even those who served in the division long after Chapaev's death would be known as *Chapaevtsy*: they fought under his name and were responsible for living up to it.

In 1965, the Chuvash Komsomol became the headquarters of the 25th Chapaev Division and, soon after, the monument in Cheboksary became a traditional meeting place for its veterans.

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁷⁸ "V sem'ia Vasiliia Ivanovicha Chapaeva", *Sem'ia i shkola*, no. 2 1962.

⁵⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁸¹ "Chapaev i ego deti", *Sem'ia i shkola*, no. 2 1967.

The Chapaev Museum in Cheboksary regularly received visits from *Chapaevtsy*: both those who had served under Vasilii Ivanovich, and those who had fought in his name during the Second World War. They would meet with local children and tell them stories of Chapaev or their experiences in combat.⁵⁸² Yet, as Chuvash children were repeatedly encouraged to be like Chapaev, the precise boundaries of the *Chapaevtsy* became less clear. Children learned that the young Komsomol member Anatoly Merzlov, from the ‘Chapaev *kolkhoz*’, who died in a farming accident, was “a real *Chapaevets!*”⁵⁸³ Iakov Alekseevich, a member of the Chapaev Pioneer squad in Cheboksary exhorted his comrades to “Be real Chapaevtsy” and emulate their “legendary countryman (*zemliak*)” who could “never in any way endure falsehood.”⁵⁸⁴

Despite the broader non-ethnic emphasis of the Chapaev ‘family’, those who lived in Chuvashiiia, especially Cheboksary, often saw themselves as having a special claim to Chapaev’s family by virtue of their birth. Every year, Chuvashiiia’s best and brightest were enlisted into the 25th Division.⁵⁸⁵ Those from Chuvashiiia and Cheboksary, where there was no shortage of organizations and entities named after their native son, were far more likely than the average Soviet to belong to an organization bearing his name. While tourists from all over the Soviet Union visited the Chapaev Museum, residents from Chuvashiiia were far more likely to do so. The children of Cheboksary particularly, for whom the museum frequently organized programs or otherwise made its space available, were encouraged to self-identify with Chapaev’s extended family.

Chapaev could never be made explicitly Chuvash, for such an open declaration would quickly have been met with irrefutable evidence to the contrary. Instead, the explicit question of his ethnicity was largely avoided. This ambiguity allowed for a subtle, largely unspoken, understanding of Chapaev’s connection to the Chuvash people. An open letter sent on June 7, 1943 by the people of Chuvashiiia to their sons serving at the front, exhorting them to be steadfast and brave in their defense of the Soviet Union, reveals that this tendency was already prevalent long before the construction of the Chapaev Museum. The letter makes explicit reference to the Russian people and the Chuvash people, claiming that these two nations had a long history of fighting side by side. In a paragraph that opens with the sentence “Together with the Russian people (*s russkim narodom*) our people (*nash narod*) joined the battle against the exploitation of man by man in the memorable year of 1917”, the letter goes on to describe how Chapaev was born “on the Chuvash soil” and how “Chuvash warriors” (*boitsy-chuvashi*) now fight the enemy as did their “fearless countryman Chapaev.”⁵⁸⁶ The letter ends with the exhortation “hurry son of the Chuvash people! (*chuvashskii narod*)...In your heart burns the unquenchable courage and valor of our brave countryman Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev.”⁵⁸⁷ Chapaev is never explicitly made Chuvash here, but the implied link is quite obvious.

⁵⁸² “Zdravstvuite, Chapaevtsy!”, *Molodoi kommunist*, 26 Oktiabria 1967.

⁵⁸³ “Podviga, muzhestva shkola”, *Molodoi kommunist*, 17 iulia 1976.

⁵⁸⁴ “Vstrechi s iunymi Chapaevtsami”, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiiia*, 8 fevralia 1967.

⁵⁸⁵ V.I. Brovchenkova, “Chapaevskie pamiatnye mesta v SSSR I Muzei V.I. Chapaeva v Cheboksarakh”, in *Legendarnyi geroi grazhdanskoi voiny V.I. Chapaev*, 53.

⁵⁸⁶ “Pis’mo Chuvashskogo naroda svoim synam-frontovikam s prizyvom muzhestvenno srazhat’sia s fashistskimi zakhvatchikami” in N.M. Semenov, sostavitel’, *Chuvashskaia ASSR v Period Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voyny* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1975), 434.

⁵⁸⁷ *Ibid*, 441.

This understanding would be reinforced year after year, through hundreds of newspaper articles in local papers. Every time the mantra of Chapaev as ‘*nash zemliak*’ was repeated, it carried with it a possible ethnic interpretation without overtly describing it. Strangely, even Chapaev’s own children (who actively promoted their father as the leader of a non-ethnic Soviet family based upon shared ideals) participated in this process. In an interview with *Pionerskaia Pravda*, Alexander Chapaev launches into a discussion of Chapaev’s relationship to Chuvashiia and the Chuvash people. “My father”, he claims, “was born, and lived for ten years in the Chuvash village (*chuvashskoe celo*) of Budaika.” Alexander was well aware of the fact that Budaika had been an exclusively *Russian* village. In a book he later wrote with his sister, he describes how Budaika was one of the many Russian settlements established in Chuvashiia by Ivan IV in 16th century as ethnic Russian outposts.⁵⁸⁸ While Alexander may be referring to the fact that Budaika was located in Chuvashiia, his statement gives the false impression that Chapaev’s neighbors were all Chuvash. Later, he explicitly says that his father “grew up among the Chuvash, was educated with them and spoke their language.”⁵⁸⁹ A possible clue to these statements lies in their timing: the interview was conducted in 1978, several years after the opening of the Chapaev Museum. Alexander and Klavdiia were closely involved with the operations of the museum, and may have supported efforts to connect their father to the Chuvash Republic in the popular imagination. By the time their book was published in 1987, this concern may no longer have been necessary.

Many Chuvash clearly internalized the relationship between their people and Chapaev that was implied through such statements. While conducting research for his project about Chapaev, the Chuvash historian Valentin Grigorievich Burnaevskii wrote a series of letters to Klavdiia Chapaeva describing the significance of his project, which was to be the first history of Chapaev in the Chuvash language.⁵⁹⁰ In one letter, Burnaevskii ecstatically announces “the goal of [his] life is to say a new word about the legendary hero” and claims that anyone attempting such a project needs a “special upbringing” (*Ia schitaiu, chtoby napisat’ kapital’nyi trud o nem—nado spetsial’no rodit’sia*).⁵⁹¹ The word I have translated here as ‘upbringing’, *rodit’sia*, is more commonly rendered ‘to be born’, and contains the root ‘*rod*’ (‘generation, birth, origin, stock, family’) which is also the root of many other words pertaining to the family. Burnaevskii seems to be indicating that, by virtue of his birth in Chuvashiia (or because of his Chuvash ancestry), he was specially equipped to say a ‘new word’ about Chapaev. Who better than family?

Conclusion: the Home Front

Chapaev’s homecoming to Cheboksary changed him. This symbol of forward movement, standing up in the saddle with saber outstretched, had become a symbol of domestic stability sitting at the kitchen table with his daughter helping her to read the letter ‘o’. The fiery, irrational peasant had become a disciplined working-class officer concerned with the state of his children’s education. Furmanov’s unruly partisan leader, who became enraged at any effort to undermine his exclusive authority, now lectured local schoolchildren about the importance of respecting one’s elders and submitting to the rule of the Party in all aspects of life. The rootless

⁵⁸⁸ A.V. Chapaev, K.V. Chapaeva, Ia. A. Volodikhin, *Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev: ocherki zhizni, revoliutsionnoi i boevoi deiatel’nosti* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1987), 16.

⁵⁸⁹ “Gde Chapaev—tam pobeda”, *Pionerskaia pravda*, 8 fevralia 1978.

⁵⁹⁰ GACHR—f.1817, op.1, d. 9.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*

warrior, whose many battles had taken him from the Carpathian Mountains in present-day Romania, to the banks of the Ural River in contemporary Kazakhstan, was now forever rooted in the flourishing little Chuvash capital on the Volga.

Chapaev's homecoming changed Cheboksary as well. This city, whose primary significance had been to the tiny Chuvash nation, was now associated with one of the most recognizable heroic figures in the Soviet Union. He represented them at cultural festivals in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where famous opera stars wearing his trademark moustache, *burka*, and *papakha*, sang arias about machine guns and cavalry charges. He connected his hometown to a network of sites bearing his name, making it the center of a vast imagined Soviet space. Cheboksary had become a tourist destination, attracting many thousands of visitors every year. His attributes had become theirs. If he was brave, they were brave too. If he was talented and cunning, this was a no wonder, for he had grown up amongst the Chuvash and could speak their language.

While many of the new elements of Chapaev's image were in fact true (he really did adopt the children of his fallen comrade, and really had been a tradesman who worked mostly in small cities), it would be naïve to ignore the extent to which this new Chapaev was also shaped by larger concerns. The Chapaev Museum in Cheboksary was built during a period characterized by a marked increase in the construction of museums and memorials. As a self described 'memorial complex', it was clearly part of this larger pattern. Such fervent memorialization is often typical of societies in flux, or even crisis. The need to reinforce a common identity with stone and brick often reflects a fundamental uncertainty about what that identity actually is, or what it is becoming. The Chapaev Museum in Cheboksary expressed a desire for the stability of home, but home is not a stable concept, and Chapaev's was no exception.

The attempt to carve out a fixed place for this ubiquitous icon of official Soviet culture made his identity paradoxical. Rooting him in a particular place contradicted his traditional function as an image of dynamism. The most common images of Chapaev show him with saber outstretched, at the front of a huge cavalry charge. As such he embodies forward momentum and leads the way to the future. Bringing Chapaev home marked a shift in emphasis from offense to defense. The front was now home: heroes fought to preserve the status quo, not to build the world of the future. But bringing Chapaev home attached him to a local ethnic identity which undermined his status as the spirit of the Soviet people, defined multi-ethnically. While many representations of Chapaev's symbolic family depicted it as universal, based on ideas rather than blood, in Cheboksary it was somehow simultaneously represented as exclusively Chuvash. Even more troubling, as the hero settled down into a cozy paradigm of domesticity in Cheboksary --his image sanctified by structures and ceremonies-- he was simultaneously becoming a prominent character in the jokes and anecdotes so typical of the ironic desacralization of regime symbols in the last decades of the Soviet Union.

Postscript

"Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."—Lev Tolstoy

Several years after Klavdiia Chapaeva died in 1999, a Russian newspaper ran a story about her relatives arguing over her Moscow apartment.⁵⁹² According to “a close friend of the family,” numerous “scandals” had ensued over the years from Klavdiia’s public role as the preserver of her father’s memory. She apparently amassed an archive about her father based upon materials she had collected over the years, some of which were allegedly based on documents she secreted into archival bathrooms and copied covertly. She used to turn her home into an “apartment-museum,” an exclusive destination where “people for whom the memory of Chapaev is dear would gather from all over.” A book Klavdiia wrote about her father apparently so enraged her brother Alexander with its “embellishments and inventions” that he henceforth refused to appear with her in public. After Klavdiia died a new “scandal ensued among the ‘Chapaevtsy’” about how to divide up her apartment and its contents. The inheritance fell to her granddaughter Evgeniia. The ‘close friend of the family’ claims that Evgeniia always “loved to live large (*liubila zhit’ na shirokuiu nogu*).” She apparently sold the apartment and moved with her daughter to Paris. In 2005, she published *My Unknown Chapaev (Moi neizvestnyi Chapaev)*, a ‘history’ about her great-grandfather.⁵⁹³



Evgeniia Chapaeva and the family archive⁵⁹⁴

⁵⁹² While the story is unverified, it represents in itself a significant evolution of the Chapaev mythology. This is how I intend it here.

⁵⁹³ “Potomki Chapaeva rassorilis’ iz-za kvartiry,” <http://www.eg.ru/daily/politics/30160/>. Feb 8, 2012. Retrieved 1/31/17.

⁵⁹⁴ Ibid.

Chapter 5—Vasilii Ivanovich and Pet’ka Save the Galaxy: Chapaev as Soviet History

“A certain form is transferred to a different position, acquiring a new meaning, or simultaneously retaining an old one.”

“A way of life and religion die out, while their contents turn into tales.”-- Vladimir Propp.⁵⁹⁵

Chapaev’s mythology outlasted the Soviet state which created it. In his structural analysis of Russian folktales, Vladimir Propp noted the existence of special cases, in which certain tales, because of their “artistic vividness...became subjectively fixed as a special type of tale, a special independent theme which can have its own variants.”⁵⁹⁶ This is an apt description of the Chapaev phenomenon, but its longevity in Soviet culture had just as much to do with the vividness of Chapaev’s historical person as with the artfulness of the stories about him.⁵⁹⁷ Over the course of the Soviet epoch, the commander’s story accumulated a variety of independent themes as it was interpreted and reinterpreted to suit particular moments in Soviet history. Beginning as an official narrative (in so far as Furmanov was motivated by a will to power within Soviet politics) about the death of the old heroism and the advent of a new Soviet hero, by the early 1990s Chapaev had become the most recognizable parody of official symbolism and perhaps the only Soviet hero still recognized by a broad range of society as ‘one of us’ (*svoi*). By the turn of this century, he was the preeminent symbol of postmodern, post-Soviet Russian consumer culture. The only way to understand this phenomenon is to historicize it.⁵⁹⁸

Beginning in the 1960s, a profane incarnation of Chapaev’s mythology, in the form of bawdy and/or absurd jokes, began to supplement his popular status. This was the product of a long historical process with origins in the man himself. Over time, the intrinsically subversive aspects of the myth began to take precedence over its sacred qualities. Thus Chapaev the rebellious partisan began to overshadow Chapaev the Defender of the Homeland. But this transformation was never an either/or process: the subversive aspect has coexisted with the official one at every stage of the myth’s evolution. Even as Chapaev’s comic aspect began to take precedence during the 1960s, he still maintained his sacred status in pilgrimage centers such as Cheboksary, Balakovo, or Pugachev. Nor was this an isolated phenomenon. During the same

⁵⁹⁵ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (University of Texas Press, 1988), 70 & 106.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 9.

⁵⁹⁷ Readers of Furmanov seem to have been motivated more by a desire to learn about the historical Chapaev than to read a great novel. Likewise, the most poignant moment in the film –Chapaev’s ill-fated escape across the Ural River—actually happened.

⁵⁹⁸ In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes claims that myth is a kind of condensed symbolic speech that distorts signifiers and strips them of their ‘history.’ “Mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication.” Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1972), 110. Myth is always “a double system” which makes use of symbols that already have content by deforming their original signification. “The signifier has, so to speak, two aspects: one full, which is the meaning (the history of the lion, of the Negro soldier), one empty, which is the form (*for my name is lion; Negro-French-soldier-saluting-the-tricolor*). What the concept distorts is of course what is full, the meaning: the lion and the Negro are deprived of their history, changed into gestures,” *ibid*, 122. The lion refers to a passage in a textbook, where the phrase ‘for my name is lion’ is primarily significant as an example of Latin grammar, rather than as a literal statement. Likewise, the ‘Negro Who Salutes’ refers to a magazine cover where an individual soldier becomes a symbol of French imperialism by being stripped of his biography. While I do not agree with every claim made in *Mythologies*, I do think that Barthes accurately describes the highly condensed (often convoluted) meaning contained in modern symbols (especially visual ones) and seek to restore Chapaev’s history so as to fully comprehend his significance.

period, a broad swath of sacred symbols in the Soviet Union were subjected to varying degrees of comic reinterpretation.

While figures like Lenin, Stalin, and Brezhnev all made prominent appearances in Soviet jokes, none were re-imagined as profane comic heroes to the same degree as Chapaev and his sidekicks from the film, *Pet'ka*, and Anka. Lenin, Brezhnev, Stalin and others all made prominent appearances in Soviet jokes, but they remained parodies of an existing mythology. Chapaev, on the other hand, managed to become the subject of his own comic mythology: transitioning over time from being a parody of the dominant narrative, to a peculiar grand narrative in its own right.

A Soviet Folk-Hero

The Vasiliev Brothers' 1934 film was part of a broader Soviet turn towards folklore, as attested to in Maxim Gorky's speech at the First Congress of Soviet Writers that same year.⁵⁹⁹ The process had begun as least as early as 1931, when Iurii Sokolov, "Russia's leading folklorist" began to assert folklore's "value in promulgating party doctrine among the masses."⁶⁰⁰ Sokolov and other Soviet folklorists "abandoned the longstanding assumption that the *bylina* [the traditional Russian epic] arose in the retinues of medieval Russian princes" and began to argue for an origin among the masses. This new "emphasis on the role of the people in the creation of heroic poetry was in part a rejoinder to earlier characterizations, by RAPP and other groups, of the masses as lacking creative talent."⁶⁰¹ By 1935, a new genre—the *noviny*: "new poetic works composed by narrators of byliny and performers of laments"—began to appear in the pages of *Pravda*.⁶⁰² Chapaev quickly became one of the most prominent characters in these new folk tales, and Chapaev folklore expeditions, beginning shortly after the release of the film, would occur in every subsequent decade of the Soviet Union's existence.

In 1936, "sixty young commanders...in gas masks" traveled more than 1300 kilometers on skis "across the collective farm fields of Kuibyshev Krai, across the steppes of Kazakhstan and the Lower Volga...to those places where the legendary hero Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev fought."⁶⁰³ These were places where "many of those who had lived and fought with Chapaev still lived [and] preserved artifacts and objects which vividly evoked the unforgettable memory of the heroic days of the Civil War."⁶⁰⁴ While gathering folklore does not appear to have been the primary emphasis of the expedition (which seems to have been more concerned with instilling military discipline and patriotism), it becomes an almost inevitable byproduct. Although the article does not specify, the young commanders were most likely members of the Communist youth organization, Komsomol. While "on the trail" the participants engaged in

⁵⁹⁹ In his introduction to Frank Miller's *Folklore for Stalin: Russian Folklore and Pseudofolklore of the Stalin Era* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1990), William E. Harkins claims that "for much of the Stalin era no film could be made without a folklore episode...The vogue seems to have begun with the film *Chapaev*", ix.

⁶⁰⁰ Frank Miller, *Folklore for Stalin*, 7.

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid*, 10.

⁶⁰² *Ibid*, 11-12.

⁶⁰³ *Kommunist*, 22 marta 1936. At the time it was common for soldiers, and even civilians, to train in gas masks in anticipation of the impending conflict with fascism.

⁶⁰⁴ *Ibid*.

“immense work,” including “lectures, rallies, and reminiscences” all of which was clearly intended to impart military discipline, fitness, and morale.⁶⁰⁵

According to the article, every participant in the expedition kept a diary “in which they recorded accounts of Chapaev’s comrades about different episodes of the war.” These diaries were “of great interest” because “as the years go by, there are fewer remaining contemporaries of the legendary commander and it is extremely important to preserve their memories.”⁶⁰⁶ The article cites at length the diary of Comrade Gritsko, who recorded the memories of one Lavrichev, a Chapaevets who still lived near the village of Lbishchensk (the site of Chapaev’s last stand) when the expedition passed through. This account describes Chapaev’s last moments exactly as they are portrayed in the film. Chapaev and “his favorite orderly Pet’ka” remain behind to cover the retreat of Chapaev’s staff before making their desperate, ill-fated, attempt to escape across the Ural River. Lavrichev claimed that it was “impossible” for him to “forget what unfolded before my eyes” as the “wounded Chapaev, at the limit of his strength, flung himself into the river and began to swim across.” Just as in the film, Pet’ka covered the commander’s retreat before falling in battle. Lavrichev claims to have lost consciousness just as the enemy was concentrating its fire on Chapaev in the middle of the river.⁶⁰⁷

This conflation of remembered experience with a scene from the Vasiliev’s film was a regular feature of Chapaev’s memory, especially during the Stalin period. While it is likely that some veterans innocently fused moments from the film with their memories of the lived experience, there seems to have been an overarching imperative (on the part of those publishing ‘documentary’ material about Chapaev) to affirm the events portrayed in the film as historically accurate. This coexisted with the imperative to transform the historical Chapaev into an epic folk hero, ironically completing the reversal of Furmanov’s original intention to use Chapaev to deconstruct the *narodnyi geroi* and replace him with a new, Bolshevik hero.

Two years later, in 1938, *Sovetskii pisatel’* issued *Chapai*: “a collection of folk songs, fables, tales and memoirs about the legendary hero of the Civil War, V.I. Chapaev” which were “collected during a folklore expedition” during the summer of 1936, organized by the Kuibyshev regional Union of Soviet Writers under the leadership of a senior scholar at the State Literature Museum named V.M. Sidel’nikov.”⁶⁰⁸ The “aim of the book” was to “piece together (*vossozdat*) the collective folk image” of the commander. To accomplish this, the collection was divided into two parts: the first section was devoted to folklore about Chapaev and the second contained the reminiscences of those who knew or had encountered him in life. Although these memoirs often had “little to distinguish them from the tales contained in the first section,” the point was not to “document this or that fact,” but to reproduce the image of the commander through the eyes of the workers and peasants who knew him.⁶⁰⁹

Many of the stories in *Chapai* are clearly deliberate re-workings of existing folk stories and motifs, and were most likely the work of individual authors. Frank Miller claims that the

⁶⁰⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁰⁸ V. Paimen, ed., *Chapai: Sbornik narodnikh pesen, skazok, skazov I vospominanii o legendarnom geroe grazhdanskoi voiny, V.I. Chapaeva* (Moskva: Sovetskii Pisatel’, 1938), 3-4.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid, 4. This statement is reminiscent of Dmitrii Furmanov’s claim that his novel was a documentary history, composed of memories without artistic embellishment.

“practice of printing works of individuals and calling them folklore had begun in the 1920s, when local publishing houses asked *Komsomol*...organizations, workers’ unions, young workers, peasants, and soldiers to transcribe the songs people were singing.”⁶¹⁰ In some cases, performers “who had begun of their own volition to compose contemporary works also received help and advice from folklorists, who made certain that all thoughts were expressed clearly, correctly, and in proper form.”⁶¹¹

In *Folklore for Stalin*, Miller provides a detailed analysis of the work created by famous individual *noviny* composers, such as M.S. Kriukova, P.I. Riabin-Andreev, and M.M. Korguev, all of whom featured Chapaev prominently in their work. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Miller finds widespread similarities between the motifs and depictions of Chapaev and standard tropes and characters from Russian folklore: “Chapaev’s horse talks to him. A black raven asks that its life be spared and in return warns Chapaev’s helper Petrushka of the approaching enemy.”⁶¹² In other tales, Chapaev possesses “a magic ring that protects the hero as long as he is on land” or makes it across the Ural River, where “he receives a steed and a rifle, both magical, from a friendly old Kirghiz.”⁶¹³

The appendix of *Chapai* reveals that several of the songs and poems included in the collection were in fact written by Kriukova and Riabin-Andreev, neither of whom lived in the Kuibyshev region where the collection’s materials were supposedly gathered. The endnote to “A Bylina about Chapaev” discloses the fact that it was written by “the third-generation storyteller” Riabin-Andreev and first published in the newspaper *Severo-Zapadnyi vodnik* on March 3, 1937.⁶¹⁴ Likewise, the note for the bylina “Chapai” reports that it was written by the “famous northern storyteller Martha Semionovich Kriukova, in the city of Arkhangelsk during the Olympiad of Folk Art.”⁶¹⁵ The inclusion of these notes is curious as it seems to undermine the collection’s sense of collective folk composition. The average reader would no doubt miss the reference, accepting the tales as part of the material gathered during the Kuibyshev expedition. The endnotes are presumably there for the benefit of scholars, and the fact that they convey honest information about the non-folk origins of these examples indicates a gesture towards academic rigor. This is further reinforced by the fact that all of the tales in the collection are cited, and most are indeed attributed to individuals, or groups of individuals, from the Kuibyshev region.

The tale, “How Chapaev Became Brave,” is attributed to Vasilii Grishkov and Petr Budaev, both of whom lived in the village (*selo*) of Kopylovk in Kuibyshev oblast.⁶¹⁶ The tale contains numerous common motifs from Russian and European folklore adapted to include Chapaev. In the tale, a young, poor Chapaev goes in search of work. While resting on a riverbank, he began to eat a piece of bread, which was quickly covered with flies. He used his belt to shoo them away, managing to kill one hundred of them with one blow. Afterwards, he

⁶¹⁰ Frank Miller, *Folklore for Stalin*, 12-13.

⁶¹¹ *Ibid*, 12.

⁶¹² *Ibid*, 51.

⁶¹³ *Ibid*, 89.

⁶¹⁴ *Ibid*, 184. The fact that Riabin-Andreev’s father and grandfather “were also storytellers (*skaziteli*) of heroic Russian byliny,” adds a veneer of authenticity to his tale about Chapaev: the Riabin’s generational transmission of occupation substituting for the story’s lack of genealogy.

⁶¹⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶¹⁶ V. Paimen, ed., *Chapai*, 183.

wrote the phrase “One Hundred with One Blow” (*Odnim pomakhom sto pobivakhom*) on a piece of paper and attached it to his belt. Shortly thereafter, Chapaev encountered a giant (*velikan*), who read the note and was terrified by it. Chapaev is bolstered by this demonstration of fear and courage as products of the mind and becomes brave thereafter. The tale is distinguished from the famous Russian folktale *Ivan-durak* (Ivan the Fool) only at the very end.⁶¹⁷ Upon learning that the giant uses his strength in the service of a prince, Chapaev decides that “With my courage and daring I will serve not a king, but the people” and proceeds “to serve the working people until his glory became great, though he himself was small. But the giant, although he was big and strong, retained for himself no glory of any kind.”⁶¹⁸

The *Chapai* collection is notable, not just for its attempt to assert such tales as authentic folklore, but also for the extent to which it obscures the distinction between folkloric and historical accounts. The above example is taken from the first section where, under the category of “tales (*skazki*),” it exists alongside other, less obviously fictional stories like “A Daring Commander” and “Chapaev and the General” which describe plausible episodes from the Civil War. The materials in section two are immediately marked as historical, documentary materials by their prevalent usage of dates and place names (none of the ‘tales’ have dates attached, although some do refer to specific places). Of the first twenty accounts contained in the second section, almost all contain a date in the first line—often as the second or third word in the sentence. After this point, dates become increasingly rare: the section’s sense of historicity has been established and the first person narrative voice suffices to maintain it.

The vast majority of these memoirs deal with the period prior to Furmanov’s tenure as commissar and emphasize Chapaev’s role as an independent revolutionary leader: an image in stark contrast with his portrayal in the film as a politically uneducated bumpkin who requires an urbane Party representative to discipline him. In “Give All for the Revolution,” the narrator recalls meeting Chapaev at the beginning of 1918 as part of a volunteer detachment:

“We found Chapaev in Nikolaevsk, where he was lodged (*tam on kvartiroval*). He approached our guys and asked:

--Where are you from, my children (*deti moi*)?
 --We have a commander, Vasilii Ivanovich, ask him.
 --And who is your commander?
 --I am, Comrade Chapaev, answered Toporkov.

Chapaev spoke with him for awhile before turning again to the detachment:

⁶¹⁷ “He grabbed a whip, lashed one side of his horse, and killed a host of these bugs; he lashed the other side of his horse and killed forty gadflies. He thought to himself: ‘Here with one stroke I have killed forty mighty knights and a countless host of lesser warriors!’” Aleksandr Afanasev, ed., “Ivan the Simpleton” in *Russian Fairy Tales* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1945), 142. According to Andrei Siniavskii, *Ivan-durak* is “the favorite...the most popular and most colorful character in folklore.” A.D. Siniavskii, *Ivan-durak: Ocherk russkoi narodnoi very* (Moskva: Agraf, 2001), 37. A representative of the “lowest rung on the social ladder,” he is usually lazy, incapable or unwilling to work, prone to drunkenness, etc. The fact that fortune usually smiles on him, turning the fool into a hero, undermines the established order and makes Ivan inherently subversive and comical. The association of *Ivan-durak* with Chapaev is therefore telling: the commander is also identified as a ‘Last Who Becomes First,’ a politically unreliable peasant who becomes the most prominent hero of the Worker’s State. The pattern of this particular *Ivan-durak* story (in which the hero kills a large number of flies and passes the achievement off as the conquest of an equal quantity of warriors in order to trick a giant/hero-warrior) bears many similarities to German and British folktales like *The Brave Little Tailor* and *Jack the Giant-Killer*.

⁶¹⁸V. Paimen, ed., *Chapai*, 16-18.

--And upon whose horses, my children, have you come?
 --Our own, and those of the bourgeoisie, Vasilii Ivanovich.
 --Don't you regret bringing your own horses?
 --We give all for the Revolution, Vasilii Ivanovich, not just horses...
 --This is exactly the kind of fellows I need. Let all the working people join the fight for the Revolution. The more the falcons fly, the more the white crows will recoil. I order you, Comrade Commander, to divide the detachment into pairs and distribute equipment.

And so our guys became Chapaevtsy.”⁶¹⁹

The language in this memoir is reminiscent of the Gospels, with Chapaev acting as a kind of Christ figure drawing revolutionary disciples to Himself. He refers to the detachment as his ‘children.’ They know his name in advance, indicating that they have specifically come in search of him (rather than a movement or party), and he tests them with dark sayings to determine their resolve before accepting them into the fold.

Many of the memoirs follow a similar pattern, with titles like “He Instilled in Us a Love of the Motherland” or “And Everywhere Those Who Were Unhappy with the Old Life Came to Chapaev” indicating the tenor of the content. In “When There is No War,” Chapaev responds to the question, “Will we fight for a long time, Vasilii Ivanovich?” with the answer “When we are finished with the capitalists and landowners, when not one of them remains, then there will be no more war in the world.”⁶²⁰ In “We will Live Like in a Fairy Tale,” Chapaev tells the troops relaxing alongside him that “None of us will be crushed. We are undefeatable. Come to me and we will always be victorious (*Idite ko mne, i my vseгда pobedim*).” After singing *Black Raven* (the melancholy Cossack melody sung by Babochkin’s Chapaev in the film), Chapaev assures his followers that “He who lives until that time, will live as in a fairy tale.” The author, speaking from the perspective of the mid-1930s, feels compelled to add “He spoke the truth.”⁶²¹ In collections like *Chapai*, just as in the Vasiliev’s film, Chapaev embodied a distinctly Stalinist ‘truth,’ in which the distance between history and folklore, the present moment and the promised fairy tale future, was eradicated by decree and embraced as an article of faith.

Writing in 1951, T.M. Akimova (the editor of *Skazy o Chapaevе*, a recent collection of stories about Chapaev) could refer to the “uninterrupted history of Chapaev’s artistic image” which “lives in ...dramatic productions, poems, stories, tales for children, and a large number of songs” as well as “in paintings and figurines (*plastiki*).”⁶²² For Akimova, this was not only evidence of Chapaev’s popularity, it was a testament to Maxim Gorky’s theory about the folk origins of all great art. Her introduction to the collection begins with an extensive citation from Gorky’s 1908 article “The Destruction of Personality (*Razrushenie lichnosti*)” in which the author explains that the essential characteristics of Othello and Hamlet, Don Juan and Don Quixote, and all “the best productions of the great poets of every country” were worked out in the folklore of the people, prior to being fixed by the likes of Shakespeare, Byron, and Cervantes.⁶²³ And just as these characters testified to the life of the common people during the era in which they were created, so too did the many representations of Chapaev’s image reveal the essence of “socialist society” where “the working masses, freed from economic and spiritual

⁶¹⁹ Ibid, 73-4.

⁶²⁰ Ibid, 93.

⁶²¹ Ibid, 122-3.

⁶²² T.M. Akimova, ed., *Skazy o Chapaevе* (Saratovskoe oblastnoe gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo: 1951), 15.

⁶²³ Ibid, 3.

oppression, produce from their midst talented people, richly endowed by nature, like Chapaev.”⁶²⁴

In life, Chapaev had drawn on the imagery of steppe warriors and Cossack heroes, linking himself to a heroic tradition extending into the nomadic prehistory of the region. Unlike most Soviet heroes, the image of the ‘People’s Hero’ (or folk hero) was able to represent more than just a discrete moment in Soviet history: it represented the timeless and intangible ‘spirit’ of the populace. Early on, memoirs about Chapaev characterized his life as evidence of the genius of the masses unleashed by the Revolution. Folklore about him (whether real or manufactured) brought the mythology full circle, using stories about him as evidence of the creative potential of the Soviet people. Unlike other kinds of heroes, who represent an idea or a moment, folk heroes are virtually indestructible. Destroying them is equivalent to destroying the essence of ‘the people.’

In the 1951 edition of *Skazy o Chapaevе*, Akimova’s assertion about the essentially realistic nature of the stories in the collection is immediately followed by Stalin’s assessment in the 1938 *Short Course on the History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks)* that “among the various factors” behind the Red Army’s victory in the Civil War was the fact that it included in its ranks “such talented heroes...as Chapaev.”⁶²⁵ According to David Brandenberger, the *Short Course* epitomized the ideological establishment’s post-Terror abandonment of “its hard-won emphasis on heroes and individual heroism and retreat back to sterile schemata and anonymous social forces.”⁶²⁶ He claims that “attention to individual agency...vanished in a sweeping depersonalization of the text” and says that “by the time he finished editing the text, Stalin had eliminated mention of well over half of the book’s protagonists and malefactors.”⁶²⁷ This only highlights the significance of Chapaev’s continuing status (in Stalin’s own words!) as an individual Soviet hero: no longer just an image of the Civil War, his fate was now inextricably linked with that of Stalinism.

This is evident in Chapaev’s ability to transcend the symbolic watershed of the Great Patriotic War. Barely a year after Germany’s invasion of the Soviet Union, the cataclysmic conflict had already begun to eclipse the Civil War as the central symbolic moment in Soviet History.⁶²⁸ Unlike those “civil war buffoons” who represented the discredited “anarchic ethos of that era,” Chapaev had long since ceased to be a mere representative of the Civil War cult. The film had amplified the folk attributes attached to him, and, combined with the proliferation of imagery and tales, it made his figure far too prominent in the popular imagination to be erased.

⁶²⁴ Ibid, 4.

⁶²⁵ Ibid, 8.

⁶²⁶ David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927-1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 4.

⁶²⁷ Ibid, 206.

⁶²⁸ The rapid domination of Soviet mythology by the events and memory of the Great Patriotic War is the central thesis of Amir Weiner’s *Making Sense of War*. Beginning in August 1942, *Pravda* (under orders from Stalin) began to publish serial installments of Oleksandr Kornichuk’s play *The Front*, “a direct attack on the way warfare was conducted by army commanders of the civil war generation, who were portrayed as those responsible for the Red Army’s initial defeats. Simply put, they were remnants of bygone years who could not successfully confront the realities of modern warfare. The conclusion was inevitable. The civil war generation had to step aside and give way to the very people it despised most—the new cadres of professional officers who had emerged from the Soviet military academies.” Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 43.

Chapaev was too firmly associated with the culture of Stalinism to be discredited. Instead of being eclipsed, Chapaev became the symbolic father of the war generation.

Remarkably, the demise of the Stalinist culture that had in many ways produced him did not lead to Chapaev's demise. In 1957, a new edition of Akimova's *Chapai* anthology was published as *Skazy i pesni o Chapaevе* (Songs and Stories about Chapaev). While the majority of the Akimova's introduction to this collection is identical to the 1951 version, there are some subtle, yet notable, differences. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this edition published four years after the death of Stalin (during the same year that Khrushchev's Secret Speech inaugurated the Soviet De-Stalinization campaign) contains no references to Stalin. More interesting is the admission that "after 1934, when everyone was excited by the living truth of the wonderful film about Chapaev, the folk tales unwittingly began to incorporate individual elements and episodes from the film."⁶²⁹

As an example of this, Akimova refers to the story of a battle near the village of Tavolozhka, where the White troops are described as attempting a "psychic attack" just like the one portrayed in the film, complete with waves of fearless, well-disciplined troops being mowed down by a single machine gun.⁶³⁰ She claims that "in reality, this attack occurred near Ufa, during a completely different operation" and explains that "the spectacle of the 'psychic attack', as presented in the film, evidently struck the imagination of the storyteller to such an extent that he described the battle of Tavolozhka under the impression created by it."⁶³¹ In spite of this surprising admission of the film's influence on the tales (i.e. of the potentially manufactured nature of his folk status), Akimova nevertheless affirms that the "veracity" and "historical significance" of the tales remained unaffected.⁶³²

As Polly Jones argues in her recent work on De-Stalinization, although "the Secret Speech intervened in the mythology of the Stalin cult by subjecting Stalinism to historical analysis...and attacking Stalin through a series of scandalous, sarcastic anecdotes (almost all inserted by Khrushchev)" it did not replace the grand narrative it had destroyed with a reliable and stable version of the Soviet past.⁶³³ Instead of being denounced definitively, the Stalinist legacy was repeatedly argued over and reinterpreted to suit the political needs of the moment. In "the absence of a single, clear calculation of Stalin's legacy...historians and journalists had to negotiate between the many images of Stalin that had accumulated in the years since his death."⁶³⁴

This uneven deconstruction of the Stalinist grand narrative had profound implications for Soviet culture. In the field of Soviet folklore, the process had begun "immediately after Stalin's death" when scholars began to "refer to the new works of Soviet folk performers not as folklore, but as pseudo-folklore and folklore stylizations." Prominent folklorists now "declared that the *noviny* and Soviet tales were artificially brought into the world by folklorists and had nothing in

⁶²⁹ T.M. Akimova, ed., *Skazy i pesni o Chapaevе* (Saratovskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo: 1957), 7.

⁶³⁰ Ibid, 7-8.

⁶³¹ Ibid.

⁶³² Ibid.

⁶³³ Polly Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma: Rethinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953-70* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 24.

⁶³⁴ Ibid, 104.

common with the true folklore of the Soviet people.”⁶³⁵ Within a relatively short period of time, “almost all examples of Soviet folklore published from the mid 1930s up to Stalin’s death were either discredited as falsifications or relegated to the field of artistic literature.”⁶³⁶

In the case of Chapaev folklore, popular and official post-Stalinist incarnations soon diverged in their representation of the Truth. Official narratives increasingly replaced the fantastic, folkloric element with children’s stories, while popular (unofficial) narratives were soon dominated by bawdy, irreverent jokes. Most likely, the folklore had always been intended to appeal to children as well as adults, just as young viewers had been a target for *Chapaev’s* filmmakers, who wished to inspire the next generation of Soviet soldiers in the defense of their homeland. The folklore collections of the late 1930s, too, played a dual role, satisfying historical curiosity even as they transmitted a heroic Soviet ethos deeply rooted in a traditional pride of place. If the culture of De-Stalinization no longer granted academic sanction to these narratives, their primary didactic function as alleged manifestations of popular genius was easily filled by children’s stories, which did not carry the same burden of proof (and could still be ‘true’ in a ‘spiritual’ sense).

In 1958, the Soviet animation studio *Soiuzmul’film* produced *Skaz o Chapaevе* (A Tale About Chapaev), a cartoon adaptation of Chapaev folklore by Mikhail and Vera Tsekhanovskii, with Boris Babochkin as the voice of the hero. The opening of the Tale is structured by the same act of audience wish-fulfillment as mirrors the Stalinist agitprop piece, *Chapaev s nami*. Instead of drowning, Chapaev emerges alive from the Ural River, in an uncertain resurrection enabled by the magic of film/animation:

“Prologue

Much water has flowed since the time that Chapaev died. The children of that time are now adults, and the youths have become old.

Eagle: Only we, the eagles, saw how he died. Among the people who survived, there were few who could see.

Soloist: Tell us, Ural-River, how you carried off the enemies and whether Chapai drowned in the river, or if Chapai yet lives?

Choir, speaking as the Ural-River: Perhaps he yet lives—I do not know. I searched for days, but nowhere found Chapai!”⁶³⁷

The eagles apparently saw him die, but the river couldn’t find him. This is enough of an opening for the will of the people, personified by the Russian land itself, to emerge in a moment of wish-fulfillment and bring the hero back to life:

“The grass and stones, trees and winds, earth and water, remember him, as if he only just rested under that oak or walked along that road.

⁶³⁵ Frank J. Miller, *Folklore for Stalin*, 99. Academic debate about the boundaries between ‘authentic’ and ‘fake’ folklore are perennial across the discipline, but there seems to be relatively universal consensus about the collective nature of the real thing. Under Stalinism, there was a departure from this understanding rooted in the romantic idea that the inspired (or conscious) individual (like Dmitrii Furmanov) could capture the essence of the folk spirit. As in the film, here again there is an emphasis on improvisation in the production of Soviet art/culture.

⁶³⁶ *Ibid*, 100.

⁶³⁷ RGALI—f. 2627, op.1, d.66.

Choir: Answer us, wind! Did your wintery gales blow upon Chapai in the nineteenth year?

I blew and blew, answered the wind. I think Chapaev still lives, and is only resting. Not only the entire earth, but even the stars say that Vasili Chapai never died, but remains alive.

Let us say one more time, remembering those years; in the heart of each one of us you will find Chapai.

Choir: In each of our hearts you will find Chapai.”⁶³⁸

Chapaev swims across the Ural River, but he arrives on the other shore weak, unarmed and barely clothed. Eagles bring him his cape (which can now turn into a bear). An oak tree turns into an old man, who causes a magical sword to rise from the earth and gives it to Chapaev. Later, when the Whites attack the old man, a giant Chapaev rides out of the sky and chases them off a cliff into the Ural River where they drown. The spot is an exact copy of the location in the film from which the White machine-gunners kill Chapaev—not only has he arisen, he has avenged his own death. With the victory now won, Chapaev hovers in the night sky like a constellation, watching over the Soviet people and their land.

In the postwar, Chapaev’s mythology fluctuated between the overtly fantastic and the more plausibly historical. A new collection, *Stories About Chapaev (Rasskazy o Chapaevе)*, published in 1965, promised to fill the gaps in a well-known story and focuses primarily on episodes from the Civil War. Unlike most illustrations of Chapaev from the time (including, especially the Soiuzmul’film production) in which the commander’s image is modeled on Babochkin, in this collection his image is historical: he looks a lot like the actual Chapaev.



A. Kononov, *Rasskazy o Chapaevе* (Izdatel'stvo «Detskaia Literatura»: Moskva, 1965), title page.

Yet this is not entirely consistent. In moments with a strong connection to the film—for instance, where Chapaev is speaking from his *tachanka*-- he bears more of a resemblance to Babochkin.

⁶³⁸ Ibid.



A. Kononov, *Rasskazy o Chapaeve*, 18

The stories contained in the collection follow a similar pattern. In some ways it resembles the 1938 ‘folklore’ collection *Chapai*, with historically plausible episodes (reinforced by the specific names of people and places) existing alongside less probable anecdotes. Nevertheless, the only truly ‘fantastic’ episode comes towards the end of the collection, immediately following Chapaev’s death, and is clearly delineated by the heading *Skazka* (A Tale).



A. Kononov, *Rasskazy o Chapaeve*, 53.

The introduction to the tale emphasizes its separateness from the preceding narratives:

“Ivan Egorovich, an old stableman from the Lenin Collective Farm (*kolkhoz*), lived a long life. He was a shepherd, a soldier, a carpenter, and, while fighting to establish Soviet power, saw Chapaev himself.

The children of the *kolkhoz*, knowing about all this, came to Ivan Egorovich and asked:

--Tell us about Chapai. Is it true that he drowned?

But Ivan Egorovich was not only an excellent stableman, he was also renowned for knowing many tales and songs. He himself loved to hear stories, almost as much as he enjoyed telling them.

And that evening, when the children came to him asking to hear about Chapai, the old man honored their request.

--Chapai did not drown in the Ural River. Such a thing could never be..."⁶³⁹

He then goes on to repeat a story similar to the one depicted in the cartoon, *Skaz o Chapaev*: Chapaev crosses the river and is rescued by a bear that takes him to meet an old Kirghiz man, who gives him a silver sword with which to defeat the Whites. Interestingly, the children are wise enough to realize that this is just a tale. They ask Ivan Egorovich where he heard it, and he assures them that he is only passing on what he has heard from "the people (*narod*)."⁶⁴⁰ He admits that the story is "a tale," but assures the children that "there is much truth in every good tale. You only need to think about it, and the truth will reveal itself to you."⁶⁴¹

In 1965, the same year that the Ivan Egorovich encouraged Soviet children to seek the hidden truth in his tale about Chapaev, the tide that had led Stalinist folklore to be discredited turned once again.⁶⁴² Every decade after 1965, a new folklore expedition would set out to 'collect' tales from the countryside. In 1987, members of the Saratov Pedagogical Institute embarked on an expedition to mark the 100th anniversary of Chapaev's birth: travelling to places where Chapaev lived and fought, visiting Chapaev museums, and gathering stories from local residents who still maintained and passed on tales about the legendary commander.⁶⁴³



Members of the Saratov Pedagogical Institute's 1987 Chapaev expedition (from *Kommunist* June 24, 1987)

Rural inhabitants remained self-confident about the value of their tales, and the folklore scholar Alan Dundes helps explain why. He argues that "fakelore," the literary reworking or fabrication of oral tradition, has "been intricately and inseparably involved with the study of folklore from its very beginnings at the end of the eighteenth century."⁶⁴⁴ Such productions are typically symbiotic with genuine oral tradition, not pure invention. Rather than discarding the phenomenon as inauthentic, he subjects it to the same academic scrutiny and concludes that "if folklore is rooted in nationalism...fakelore may be said to be rooted in feelings of national or cultural inferiority." Under such conditions "a folk...would be so anxious to prove its equality—or better yet, superiority—that its self-appointed representatives would take the responsibility on themselves to consciously manipulate or even fabricate materials to offer as proof."⁶⁴⁵

The context of the Soviet Union, in which such popular 'representatives' were not only 'self-appointed,' but often commissioned by the state, does not change this underlying dynamic.

⁶³⁹ A. Kononov, *Rasskazy o Chapaev*, 53-54.

⁶⁴⁰ Ibid, 58.

⁶⁴¹ Ibid.

⁶⁴² According to Miller, the discrediting of Stalinist folklore effectively "ceased at the beginning of the Brezhnev era in 1965" Frank J. Miller, *Folklore for Stalin*, 108.

⁶⁴³ *Kommunist*, June 24, 1987. "The pull of ritual is toward pure cyclical narrative." Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 105. Chapaev folklore and tales express an aspiration towards the natural world and a predictable symbolic order.

⁶⁴⁴ Alan Dundes, *Folklore Matters* (Knoxville, TN : University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 40-42.

⁶⁴⁵ Ibid, 51.

The anxiety here was, at least in part, about asserting the very existence of the Soviet folk.⁶⁴⁶ Chapaev's popularity, although shaped and harnessed, was never fabricated from scratch. It served as evidence that there was a spontaneous collective along the lines of a Soviet folk, and that it embraced official culture as its own. Yet, a collective of Soviet Chapaev enthusiasts was not sufficient as far as the official media were concerned. In the early 1960s, Soviet newspapers continually assured their readers that the People's Hero also had an international following.

Vasilii Ivanovich Goes to Algiers: A Stalinist Rerun?

In September, 1964, Boris Babochkin traveled as a cultural ambassador to the capital of the newly independent Republic of Algeria. This was far from a typical diplomatic mission. Newspapers in both the Soviet Union and Algeria announced his imminent arrival in the new nation, still flush with its hard-won victory over France. Citizens of Algeria "are not only able to watch a film about our legendary commander" proclaimed one Soviet newspaper, they could also "meet him".⁶⁴⁷ The newly independent republic stood on the verge of a new era as it prepared to construct an independent Algerian culture. And the Soviet Union would show them how.

The film was imagined as "a kind of window onto the development of Soviet film" through which the young republic could learn how to construct its own revolutionary culture.⁶⁴⁸ In Algerian papers, it was often the context of 1934 (i.e.-the time of *Chapaev's* production) that was emphasized above the events in the film itself. In these accounts, the film is relevant to the Algerian experience because it was the product of "the era of Soviet construction" and spoke of the artistic heights that could be achieved even "in a country beset by technological difficulties".⁶⁴⁹ Chapaev's visit to Algiers thus represented a curious role reversal for him: no longer a symbol of peasant ignorance, he was now *the* symbol of Soviet cultural and technological prowess abroad. And if Chapaev looked more like his former commissar Furmanov, he was surrounded by shades of his former self. "Algeria is an exceptional country" claimed one member of the delegation, "we are surrounded by marvelous (*chudesnye*) people".⁶⁵⁰

Beginning in 1964, the Soviet public was repeatedly informed about how *Chapaev* had "marched triumphantly across the screens of the world, testifying to the power and beauty of Soviet film." The trope was repeated *ad nauseam*, as authors gushed about the enthusiasm of visiting Chinese delegates after watching the film, or the fact that *Chapaev* had graced screens from Asia to Africa to North and South America.⁶⁵¹ As late as 1969, readers were informed about the influence of *Chapaev* on the burgeoning film industry in the Soviet republic of

⁶⁴⁶ Dundes, who is widely considered to be the founder of modern folkloristics, worked to replace outdated conceptions of 'the folk' as a primarily rural, non-literate collective with "a modern conception of folk" as "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor" and share a "common core of traditions...which help the group have a sense of identity." Alan Dundes, *The Meaning of Folklore: The Analytical Essays of Alan Dundes* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2007), 230.

⁶⁴⁷ RGALI--f.2655, op.1, d.538, l.33.

⁶⁴⁸ Ibid, 40.

⁶⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁵⁰ Ibid, 41.

⁶⁵¹ Ibid, 26

Azerbaijan, where even in “the remotest corners of the republic” people were able to watch it in their own language.⁶⁵²

One anniversary article recounted how, in 1936, *Chapaev* was shown to a detachment of Spanish republican partisans in the mountains of Asturias, about twenty miles from the city of Oviedo. During the ‘psychic attack’ scene, where the dramatic tension peaks as the *Chapaevtsy* hold their fire in the face of the White assault, three shots rang out in the darkness of the theater. After the film was stopped and the lights came on, it was revealed that the culprit was a Moroccan peasant named Ibrahim. But this was no hooligan: he was a courageous fighter who had proven himself numerous times. “I couldn’t hold on any longer, I had to shoot. I just had to,” he cried.⁶⁵³ This alleged inability to distinguish between the events on screen and reality, whether true or not, is in both cases intended to highlight the pedagogical power of the film, and thus Soviet culture, for particularly peasant audiences.

Yet, as a representative of Soviet culture abroad, Chapaev’s appeal could not be confined to freedom fighters and the developing world. In 1964, Maria Popova (by this point the uncontested official prototype of Anka) published a story about watching the film in Stockholm, where it was allegedly released in 1936 under the title of “*Anka-pulemetchitsa*”. She claimed that after showing the film for over six months, Swedish theaters discontinued it, only to be bombarded with popular demands that screenings resume. “It’s not only us,” she wrote, “but even abroad they watch the film five-six-seven times.”⁶⁵⁴

Such reports reveal a desire not only for foreign recognition of a popular Soviet film, but for non-Soviet audiences to mimic *Chapaev*’s domestic reception. Thus the tendency to blur the distinction between reality and the screen, so prevalent in domestic coverage of the film, was exported to Algeria, where audiences allegedly demonstrated a similar inability to distinguish between the dead commander and the actor who played him. If official coverage of the film’s original screening in 1934 served to reinforce the collective identity of the Soviet people, the anniversary reportage seemed intent on convincing the Soviet people that this identity was cosmopolitan (simultaneously accessible to both ignorant peasant partisans in Spain, and urbane, gender-conscious Swedes in Stockholm who thought the film was all about Anka).

The rerelease of *Chapaev* coincided with another, even more significant, reincarnation of the People’s Hero: as the comic protagonist of innumerable jokes, many of which satirized official symbols and/or profaned its sacral culture. The fact that Babochkin’s Chapaev was already a comic figure certainly contributed to this dynamic, as did the film’s frank depictions of sexual and romantic tension between Pet’ka and Anka (one of the most fertile subjects for Chapaev anecdotes). The film was in many ways an exercise in systemically constitutive laughter—symbolically integrating rural peasant culture into the workers’ state in the aftermath of Collectivization. Anniversary coverage inadvertently associated this laughter with the entire system of official representation, rather than a pardoned segment of Soviet society. Most Soviet citizens would have been keenly aware of the fact that Babochkin’s peasant mannerisms in the film represented the antithesis of Soviet cultural norms and aspirations. If the reportage was careful to emphasize that it was the technical achievements of the film that were to be celebrated,

⁶⁵² Ibid, 50.

⁶⁵³ Ibid, 67.

⁶⁵⁴ Ibid, 58.

there was still no avoiding the fact that the image of Chapaev as a Soviet cultural ambassador was incongruous, and therefore inherently comical.⁶⁵⁵

This reception was also conditioned by the particular historical moment of post-Stalinism. The credulity of Stalinist culture (in which the center dictated Soviet reality, which was received passively) no longer functioned in the same way after Khrushchev's revelations of 1956. It is significant that Popova's story about Stockholm, which allegedly occurred during the 1930s, was not published until the 1960s. By this point, Khrushchev had not only undermined the Stalinist grand narrative upon which the Soviet state was built, he had actively sought to replace it with an exceedingly optimistic narrative based upon the imminent material transcendence of the West. Although all Soviet grand narratives, including especially the Stalinist one, had material competition with the capitalist world as an intrinsic feature, Khrushchev's symbolic platform tended to compete with the West on its own turf: in the kitchen, the cornfield, and, in the case of *Chapaev*, at the blockbuster film screening.

Articles about Chapaev abroad were essentially Soviet commercials, intended to convince domestic audiences about the competitiveness of Soviet culture on the international market. There is nothing inherently inconsistent about a Soviet commercial. In the earliest days of the Soviet project, prominent representatives of the artistic avant-garde had struggled to create socialist advertisements, which would enable the state "to produce a socialist form of consumption that would equal and surpass the capitalist one."⁶⁵⁶ This form of consumption was not to be superior in terms of quantity, but of quality: it was to be a fundamentally different kind of consumption. Whereas capitalist consumption 'tricked' the consumer by manipulating their desire for various objects, socialist consumption would engender an entirely different relationship with the world of objects. Socialist objects would be comrades, helpers rather than overlords, and socialist advertising would further this goal by exposing the "powerful hold" that "objects of industrial mass culture" have over "human subjects."⁶⁵⁷ By foregrounding the mechanisms of desire, instead of masking the device to turn a profit, socialist advertising and consumption would work to free humanity from its enslavement to commodities even as it stimulated the Soviet economy.

Such projects were very much in the vein of New Economic Policy (NEP) gradualism, instituted during the 1920s to stabilize an economy ruined by civil war and slowly train all aspects of it towards socialism. The Stalin Revolution had prioritized the rapid transformation of the economic base in the belief that the superstructure (including consumer desire and culture among other things) would follow suit. In true Bolshevik fashion, History would be overcome by the elite management and revolutionary will. In the meantime, the gap between 'is' and 'ought to be' would have to be stitched.⁶⁵⁸ While Stalin certainly borrowed much from the

⁶⁵⁵ "Ambiguity and incongruity are central to most jokes, for jokes depend on the teller playing with hidden meanings that are suddenly revealed in an unexpected way. Typically a joke consists of a single text which is compatible with two different scripts that are radically opposed to one another." Christie Davies, *Ethnic Humor Around the World: A Comparative Analysis* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 7.

⁶⁵⁶ Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2005), 172.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 190.

⁶⁵⁸ Discussions about alleged continuities between the avant-garde project of the 1920s and Stalinism, or the extent to which Stalin betrayed the avant-garde, are useless if reduced to an either/or, when the case is clearly one of both/and. The largely unanswered question remains, 'if so, so what?' Boris Groys' claim, in *The Total Art of*

avant-garde, his aesthetic was substantially different. Rather than unmasking the artistic device and using art to train everyday life towards Socialism (a la Constructivism), Stalinism kept its device hidden in order to prevent Soviet citizens from distinguishing life from art and art from life. In this, he had less in common with the ‘avant-garde,’ than with individuals like Dmitrii Furmanov (who passed off art as life in order to rise in politics).⁶⁵⁹

In the aftermath of Stalinism (and in no small part because of the ambivalent handling of its legacy) Soviet citizens increasingly “experienced official ideological representation of social reality as largely false and at the same time as immutable and omnipresent.”⁶⁶⁰ The modern industrial society of the Soviet Union had developed in, and been conditioned by, an environment in which “nearly all mechanisms of representation in the official sphere were centrally controlled,” and “no other public representation of reality” was possible.⁶⁶¹ As the veracity of these representations became increasingly suspect, Soviet popular culture was confronted with the possibility that all official truth, all official history and symbolism, was potentially absurd: meaningless and yet inevitable.

Few official representations had been as ‘omnipresent’ as Chapaev, and few were as well suited to transcend this official reality. From the moment that Furmanov wrote his self-serving obituary for the fallen commander in 1919, official narratives about Chapaev had been defined by the same ambivalent dynamic that now shaped the discourse about Stalin: how to preserve the political and symbolic power of an immensely popular figure while simultaneously diminishing the negative impact of their problematic history. The 1934 film had harnessed the image of the People’s Hero, in part, through the introduction of laughter. But if humor is a “weapon,” as the

Stalinism, that Stalin was the logical conclusion of the avant-garde concept of the artist as demiurge, who remakes the world has a degree of obvious truth. But it is still an oversimplification that largely ignores “the historical record of what artists and theorists actually made and said in the course of the 1920s.” Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, 27. The ‘socialist objects’ created by artists like Alexander Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin, Varvara Stepanova, and Liubov’ Popova have a real-time didacticism that is absent in Stalinist culture, which is concerned not with exposing the mechanics of everyday life, but with “the de-realization of a difficult everyday life” and “its transformation into ‘socialism.’” Evgeny Dobrenko, *Political Economy of Socialist Realism* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2007), 45. “The watchwords of the First Five-Year Plan (“Catch up and get ahead!” “Tempos decide everything!” “Time, forward!”) should not be considered simply to encapsulate an economic program, but an aesthetic program as well. The nature of this ‘history’ is gradually revealed. Indeed, historical narrative creates the illusion of motion in which the tempo of narration and the change of object can be regulated. And it is the tempo of this narrative that does not permit one to see the picture behind the details. It does not allow one to dwell on *when* and *how* everything changes so quickly, if it is chronologically!) clear that *nothing* changes. The problem with this ‘history’ is purely chronological. The ‘happy life’ goes on *at the same time* as the brutal murders, not in any way ‘after’ them.” “The main function of this historical narrative is to...teach one to see the time passing by, and not to see it; it teaches a new vision of the present as the past, shaped in ‘history.’” Ibid, 200-1.

⁶⁵⁹ An equally apt example would be the work of Dziga Vertov, who (unlike Furmanov) was a legitimate representative of the avant-garde. For all its emphasis on unmasking the device (Man With a Movie Camera is arguably the most fully realized Constructivist film ever made), Vertov still relied heavily on cinematic tricks and masterful editing while claiming to represent ‘life as it is.’

⁶⁶⁰ Alexei Yurchak, “The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense, and the *Anekdot*,” *Public Culture* 9, 162.

⁶⁶¹ Ibid, 166.

cultural engineers of early Stalinist culture speculated, it is an exceptionally difficult one to control.⁶⁶²

“The Devil’s Belly-Laugh:” Chapaev as Profane Hero

Theories of humor are ancient (probably as old as laughter itself) and have generally differed over whether humor is essentially subversive or constitutive of social hierarchies. In either case, the fundamental relationship between laughter and the forces of order is not disputed. Two of the most influential contemporary theories were developed in the Soviet context. Mikhail Bakhtin famously claimed that the culture of the carnival is inherently revolutionary as it enacts the “destruction of epic and tragic distance and the transfer of all represented material to a zone of familiar contact” and “celebrates the shift itself, the very process of replaceability, and not the precise item that is replaced.” Humor is therefore the opposite of hierarchy, for it “absolutizes nothing” and “proclaims the joyful relativity of everything.”⁶⁶³

Writing several decades later, Yuri Lotman and Boris Uspenskii cautioned against the unqualified application of Bakhtin’s ideas to the Russian context. Whereas “laughter in the conception of [Western] medieval culture developed by Bachtin [*sic*] is an element that lies outside the severe religious and ethical restraints imposed on people’s behavior at that time,” laughter as it developed in medieval Russian culture was the realm of the Devil and “the blasphemous belly laugh of the Devil does not shatter the world of medieval ideas: it forms part of that world.” This is a critical distinction: since “blasphemy cannot in principle go outside the framework of the religious universe,” it ultimately serves to perpetuate it.⁶⁶⁴

During the 1960s, the telling of *anekdoty*, short humorous narratives which often parodied official culture “became an omnipresent social ritual,” a profane popular mimicry of the omnipresent official culture.⁶⁶⁵ Although the frequency of the ritual was novel, the phenomenon itself was not. The Russian *anekdot* is a genre with a long lineage in folk culture, closely related to “the *bytovaia skazka* (tale of everyday life), one of the three recognized major categories of

⁶⁶² In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the Commissar of Enlightenment Anatolii Lunacharskii, “conceived a book to be titled *A Social History of Laughter* (which he never wrote) and formed a ‘committee for the study of satirical genres’ under the auspices of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. Lunacharskii’s writings on humor characterize it as a ‘weapon’---a metaphor that would be more or less institutionalized.” Seth Graham, *Resonant Dissonance: The Russian Joke in Cultural Context* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 12.

⁶⁶³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 124-5.

⁶⁶⁴ Ju.M. Lotman and B.A. Uspenskii, *The Semiotics of Russian Culture* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Slavic Contributions, 1984), 39-43. This dual valence (subversive and constitutive) is not just specific to Russia, but is arguably an element in most humor. Northrop Frye claims that “all humor demands agreement that certain things, such as a picture of a wife beating her husband in a comic strip, are conventionally funny. To introduce a comic strip in which a husband beats his wife would distress the reader, because it would mean learning a new convention.” Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, 225. Similarly, in the inter-textual world of parody, the parodic version manages to be “both subversive and affirmative,” since “even as it recontextualizes the model, it reinforces its primacy, its claim to aesthetic or ideological significance” and ultimately serves as “the custodian of the artistic legacy.” Karen L. Ryan-Hayes, *Contemporary Russian Satire: A genre study* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 7-8.

⁶⁶⁵ Alexei Yurchak, “The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense, and the *Anekdot*,” 175. This was far from the first instance of humor in Russian/Soviet society. Russian secular literature has deep affinities with humor, and some of its earliest examples were “the so-called ‘satirical tales’ of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. Leslie Milne, ed. *Reflexive Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture* (London: Anthem Press, 2004), 2.

Russian [folk] tales” (the other two being ‘wonder’ or ‘magical’ tales and tales about animals). Both *anekdoty* and tales of everyday life are short narratives with “a preponderance of comic imagery and devices,” themes centering on “human interaction and behavior in mundane situations” and an emphasis on “local color and social relations.”⁶⁶⁶ Over time, these traditional folk forms blended with more serious historical and literary anecdotes, common in elite society since at least the late 17th and early 18th centuries, to produce comic meta-commentaries about Russian everyday life, from the trials of peasants and their wives, to the exploits of tsars and popular heroes.⁶⁶⁷

Although the *anekdoty* which emerged in the 1960s had many variants (featuring politicians, ethnic stereotypes, cartoon characters, etc.), by far the most widespread were those starring Chapaev, Pet’ka, Anka, and sometimes Furmanov. One of the earliest and most common motifs in these *anekdoty* is the image of Chapev and company travelling abroad, or somehow interacting with a foreign culture. In one joke anthology, just the section for the 1960s contains accounts of Chapaev travelling to Paris, New York, Africa, Israel, Italy, and Spain, as well as the following story about Chapaev learning Japanese:

“Vasilii Ivanovich decided to study Japanese, in order to accomplish the Revolution in Japan. He studied and studied, until he was cock-eyed from Japanese grammar. Pet’ka ran to him and cried:

--Vasilii Ivanovich, your horse has fallen!

--Ok, Pet’ka, ok, but I’m trying to learn Japanese.

Pet’ka ran up to him a second time and said:

--Vasilii Ivanovich, the Whites have abducted Anka!

--That’s too bad, Pet’ka, too bad, but stop bothering me. For Christ’s sake, I’m trying to study Japanese!!!

Pet’ka ran up a third time and cried:

--Vasilii Ivanovich! Vodka has gone up in price! A half liter costs five rubles!

--Sikoka? Sikoka???”⁶⁶⁸

This joke contains numerous features which are indicative of broader themes within Chapaev humor, and which complicate an overly simplistic understanding of late Soviet humor as mere protest or subversion. The joke’s subtle word-play serves to indicate that the hero is native (*svoi*—one of us). This is obvious in the mildly racist description of Chapaev as “cock-eyed (*okosel*)” from studying Japanese grammar. Humor frequently draws distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’: between those who understand the joke, and those who do not. In his satirical

⁶⁶⁶ Seth Graham, *Resonant Dissonance: The Russian Joke in Cultural Context* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 22.

⁶⁶⁷ Ibid, 35. According to Aleksandra Arkhipova and Mikhail Mel’nichenko, at the beginning of the twentieth century a new type of anecdote began to appear that was “not based upon traditional subjects.” Aleksandra Arkhipova, Mikhail Mel’nichenko, *Anekdoty o Staline: Teksty, Kommentarii, Issledovaniia* (Moskva: OGI, 2011), 97.

⁶⁶⁸ *Sovetskii Anekdot—Antologiya 1* (Moskva: DataStrom, 1991), 46.

incarnation, Chapaev is not a dissident hero in the sense of standing apart from the Soviet system and pointing the finger at it: the ‘us’ here is the system as a whole.⁶⁶⁹

The image of Chapaev studying derives from specific moments in the novel and the film --such as Chapaev’s description of his time at the military academy or the scene where Pet’ka solemnly fires his revolver into the air and calls for silence because Chapaev is about to think. In this sense, the joke is fully intelligible only to those familiar with the broader mythology, which now included not only the novel and film, but Chapaev folklore, children’s books, cartoons, and the widespread reportage of the film’s thirtieth anniversary in 1964. Even as he satirizes Soviet official culture, he is still a part of it (and is lovingly embraced as such). The more familiar one is with the history surrounding Chapaev (‘our peculiar Soviet history’), the more sense the jokes make. Likewise, the punch-line can only be understood by an insider, which increasingly meant a Russian speaker. ‘Sikoka? Sikoka??’ is a deformation of the Russian for ‘How much’ (*skol’ko*). The joke indicates that, despite being altered by his contact with the outside world to the extent that his speech becomes a parody of Japanese, Chapaev was still Soviet (or Russian) enough to be concerned, above all, by a rise in the price of vodka.

Chapaev’s parodic image combines many features which specifically reference the rural population of the Soviet Union. In the broadest sense, he is stereotypically peasant (i.e. stupid and dirty):

“Pet’ka says to Chapaev, ‘Vasilii Ivanovich, your feet are much dirtier than mine,’

Chapaev explains, ‘Of course, Pet’ka. I’m older than you.’⁶⁷⁰

This lack of intelligence is often associated with things common to urban industrial life:

“Anka received a new apartment and invited Chapaev to a housewarming:

--Get on bus number 93.

Vasilii Ivanovich did not arrive. The next morning, Pet’ka was on his way home with a hangover and met Vasilii Ivanovich at a bus-stop in the city center. Chapaev said:

--It’s good that you made it. The ninety-first bus just left. After one more we will go see Anka.⁶⁷¹

⁶⁶⁹ This dynamic is explored by Yurchak in detail. “Binary accounts of socialism that describe it in terms of truth and falsity or official and unofficial knowledge fail to recognize precisely [the] performative dimension of authoritative language, reducing it instead to the constative dimension...In fact, precisely because authoritative language was hegemonic, unavoidable, and hypernormalized, it was no longer read by its audiences literally, at the level of constative meanings. Therefore, which statements represented “facts” and which did not was relatively unimportant. Instead, Soviet people engaged with authoritative language at the level of the performative dimension” (75-6). Political jokes were common even among committed members of the Communist Youth League (*Komsomol*). People’s relationship to the system was “characterized not by binary oppositions of “us” (common people) versus “them” (the party, the state), but by a seemingly paradoxical coexistence of affinities and alienations, belonging and estrangement, meaningful work and pure formality—the values, attitudes, and identities that were indivisible and constitutive of the forms of life that were “normal,” creative, ethical, engaged, and worth being involved in” (97-8).

Political humor, especially in the case of Russia, is often integral to the system it mocks.

⁶⁷⁰ Seth Graham, *Resonant Dissonance: The Russian Joke in Cultural Context*, 110.

This repeats a pattern common in ethnic jokes, or “in parallel jokes about confrontations between country bumpkins and city slickers,” where stupidity is attributed to an object that is separated from the teller either by the urban/rural divide or an ethnic distinction.⁶⁷² These kinds of generalizations are very old, but the modern versions tend to “refer particularly to an inability to understand and cope with those technical aspects of the modern world that are common to most countries rather than simply to a lack of understanding of local customs, practices, or forms of speech.”⁶⁷³

Yet unlike typical ethnic jokes, or jokes told by the city about the countryside, in which dirtiness and stupidity are marks of ridicule and ‘otherness,’ Chapaev’s actions are celebrated. He remains throughout the People’s Hero—even as an object of self-reflexive mockery. A striking feature of ethnic jokes is “how very similar most of the peoples who are the butts of the jokes are to the peoples who tell the jokes about them...people whom the joke-tellers can regard not as mysterious foreigners but as a kind of inferior [i.e., stupid] imitation of themselves.”⁶⁷⁴ The same dynamic applies to jokes about the city or the countryside: the objects are usually deformations of the self rather than radically alien others.

The undying Chapaev came to represent the irredeemably peasant nature of the Soviet populace. No character in the Soviet saga was as well suited to this function as the hero who had subverted the intentions of his Bolshevik ‘creator’ (Furmanov) to carve out a place for the peasant ‘People’s Hero’ in the worker’s paradise of the Soviet Union. Oft repeated sentiments about how Chapaev would “continue to live in the memory of the people, as long as the people live,” and how “the people are eternal” now took on a playfully subversive valence.⁶⁷⁵ While such “self-inflicted ethnic satire” is not exclusive to the Soviet context, it is relatively rare and seems to have “functioned as an implicit rebuttal of state-produced or state-sanctioned representations of the Russo-Soviet ethnos...by privileging a cluster of behaviors and character traits that were anathema to state discourse.”⁶⁷⁶ Chapaev’s profane image was defined by the kinds of quintessentially ‘peasant’ behaviors and attributes that the Soviet project had sought to eradicate from its inception: dirtiness, stupidity, drunkenness, lasciviousness, and misogyny.

A key feature of many Chapaev *anekdoty* is a hyper-sexualized representation of Anka *pulemetchitsa*. Anka’s voracious sexual appetites usually demonstrate no political loyalty and she is frequently depicted sneaking off to the White camp for sex. In one instance, Chapaev is pleased to learn that Anka is pregnant because this means an expansion of the Red Army. When Pet’ka asks what they will do if the child belongs to a White officer, Chapaev answers that this just means they will have one more enemy in prison.⁶⁷⁷ In another popular joke, Chapaev consoles Pet’ka about the fact that Anka has gone over to the Whites by assuring him this is “a biological attack”.⁶⁷⁸ While many of these jokes flow easily from Anka’s representation in the

⁶⁷¹ *Sovetskii anekdot*, Vol.2, 1.25.

⁶⁷² Christie Davies, *Ethnic Humor Around the World: A Comparative Analysis* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 19.

⁶⁷³ *Ibid*, 15.

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 41.

⁶⁷⁵ A. Kononov, *Rasskazy o Chapaeve*, 52.

⁶⁷⁶ Seth Graham, *Resonant Dissonance: The Russian Joke in Cultural Context*, 95-6.

⁶⁷⁷ <http://www.anekdot.ru/tags/%F7%E0%EF%E0%E5%E2>. (Retrieved 8/3/16).

⁶⁷⁸ <http://petroleks.ru/anekdot/chp04.php>. (Retrieved 8/3/16).

film, where sex is an ever-present subtext, they fit more broadly within an established tradition of village humor that was characteristically hostile to women.⁶⁷⁹

Rooted in the deeply patriarchal culture of the village, this tradition survived, and even thrived, in the urban environment of early 20th century Russia, where the “disoriented male peasants” who increasingly comprised the industrial workforce (compelled by the Tsarist regime to migrate between their home villages and urban factories) “found relief in traditional misogyny.”⁶⁸⁰ Especially in the Soviet and post-Soviet context, sex jokes are typically told from a male perspective and are usually more concerned with “the issue of power in male/female relationship” than with eroticism or sex itself.⁶⁸¹ Their goal is not to “express male sexuality,” but to “reproduce the culture of gender hierarchy” in a society whose essential hierarchies shifted dramatically over the course of the 20th century.⁶⁸² As in the examples above, women are often described as sexually voracious and without discipline (i.e. in constant need of male supervision). Anka, as a prominent symbol of Soviet female equality, was a particularly appealing object of such humor. Even the film that launched her had ultimately relied on sexual humor to make the image of a woman with a gun more palatable.

Another hallmark of Chapaev’s profane essence is drunkenness. Here again, rather than being a source of ridicule, perennial peasant drunkenness becomes a badge of honor that surpasses all other heroic virtues. The following joke parodies a scene from the film in which Pet’ka questions Chapaev about his ability to command units of ever greater size:

“Vasilii Ivanovich, could you drink a liter?”

Sure.

What about two?

Sure.

What about a whole bucketful?

*No, Pet’ka. Only Lenin can drink that much!”*⁶⁸³

This *anekdot* also contains a dynamic that scholars like Alexei Yurchak have characterized as central to the phenomenon of humor in late Soviet society. By parodying the language of the official sphere (slogans, speeches, lines from films), *anekdoty* were humorous on two levels: the immediate level of the joke itself, and “a second level—that of social commentary, where the *anekdot* exposed the ‘social incongruous’” by mirroring the empty regurgitation of official speech so central to everyday life in Soviet society by the 1970s.⁶⁸⁴

Chapaev’s image, which had long served as a symbol of Soviet History, was particularly well suited to this reflexive meta-commentary. The historical development of his mythology provided the perfect material for *anekdoty* about the absurdity of official culture:

⁶⁷⁹ —“The Russian ribald folk tales and erotic proverbs and sayings collected by Alexander Afanasiev and Vladimir Dahl in the nineteenth century also can be traced back to pagan times and had long been a part of Russian everyday discourse,” Emil A. Draitsler, *Making War, Not Love: Gender and Sexuality in Russian Humor* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 260.

⁶⁸¹ *Ibid*, 263.

⁶⁸² *Ibid*, 264.

⁶⁸³ Seth Graham, *Resonant Dissonance: The Russian Joke in Cultural Context*, 108.

⁶⁸⁴ Alexei Yurchak, “The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense, and the *Anekdot*,” 180.

“A guide at the Museum of the Revolution presented his group with the skeleton of Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev.

-- ‘Why is there a little skeleton next to it?’ they asked.

-- ‘That,’ he said, ‘is the skeleton of Chapaev in childhood.’⁶⁸⁵

In another *anekdot*, an absurd meta-commentary on meta-commentary, the process comes full circle as the reflexivity of Chapaev *anekdoty* becomes the subject matter of a Chapaev *anekdot*:

“Chapaev is walking through the village drunk and covered in mud, straw, and shit.

-- ‘What happened, Vasilii Ivanovich?’ ‘The *anekdoty*, Pet’ka, it’s from the *anekdoty*.’⁶⁸⁶

Master of the Void—Vasilii Ivanovich and the Legacy of Soviet History

“‘Historical history’ consists in [the] very history of attempts to overcome history”—Boris Groys.⁶⁸⁷

If the final years of the Russian Empire witnessed an increase in interest and rhetoric about the Apocalypse, the end of the Soviet Union was marked by a rise in scholarly and popular interest in political jokes and a sense that the History of the Soviet Union could be best understood through the lens of humor. On May 17, 1989, *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, posed a question about the status of folklore “in an age of universal literacy,” which was answered prominent folklorist Vladimir Bakhtin, who argued that “folklore continues to live in the form of incisive anecdotes...of the kind usually forbidden from publication.”⁶⁸⁸

In 1990, S. Osovtsov assured readers of the Leningrad literary journal *Neva* that “anecdotes are not just a matter of amusement” but could be extremely significant when viewed from a “serious” point of view, and admitted that it was “sometimes difficult to determine where history ended and a joke began.”⁶⁸⁹ Nevertheless, “anecdotes” were “better, and in all cases more concise” than “whole volumes of research and narrative” at conveying “the aroma of an epoch (*aromat epokhi*).”⁶⁹⁰ The article then proceeds to tell the entire history of the Soviet Union, from Lenin to Gorbachev, through the lens of humor.

When the Soviet Union collapsed numerous collections appeared in which the entire history of the USSR was presented as a farce that could best be understood through jokes. The *History of the USSR in Anecdotes, 1917-1992*, published in Smolensk shortly after the collapse

⁶⁸⁵ *Sovetskii Anekdot—Antologiiia 1* (Moskva: DataStrom, 1991), 49.

⁶⁸⁶ Seth Graham, *Resonant Dissonance: The Russian Joke in Cultural Context*, 187.

⁶⁸⁷ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 105.

⁶⁸⁸ *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, May 17, 1989. The idea that jokes could constitute a modern variation of folklore is now widely accepted. According to the American folklore scholar Alan Dundes there is a “devolutionary premise” in folkloristics which assumes that “the oldest, original version of an item of folklore” is “the best, fullest or most complete one” and that a “change of any kind automatically moved the item from perfection toward imperfection.” Alan Dundes, “The Devolutionary Premise in Folklore Theory,” *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, Vol.6, №.1 (June, 1969), pp.5-19.

⁶⁸⁹ *Neva*, 1/1990.

⁶⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

of the Soviet Union is presented as a new kind of history textbook, one which “our historians broke their heads” trying to fathom. Since “without our sense of humor, our history would have been much shorter,” history and humor become inseparable.⁶⁹¹ The book is arranged chronologically, with the majority of the sections arranged organized under the name of a leader and the suffix ‘ism’ (Leninism, Stalinism, Khrushchevism, Brezhnevism, Gorbachevism). The jokes in each section are either from the time or thematically related to it.

In the epilogue (or, according to the book, instead of one) readers are counseled to wash their hands, brush their teeth, proudly shake their heads and hope that “our subsequent History will be written with more human colors.” They could perhaps take some comfort from the fact that now it was “not necessary to burn [the book] after reading.”⁶⁹² Their “homework (*domashnee zadanie*)” was to “survive” and to answer one last question: “Am I glad that I was born, not earlier or later and precisely in this country?”⁶⁹³ The irony of the question, of course, is that no one capable of reading it would have been born in ‘this country.’ The place of publication was now the Russian Federation, but many of the readers would presumably have found themselves outside of it: citizens of new countries like Kazakhstan, Estonia, Ukraine, or Belarus. ‘This country’ could no longer be specified consistently.

All of the countries which emerged from the Soviet Union now established their legitimacy by stitching the gap of Soviet History, which was now (depending on the context) a tragic farce, a foreign occupation, a Jewish conspiracy, etc. If the Bolshevik Revolution had eradicated previous History in the name of building the Future, post-Soviet states could now return to History only by disowning the recent past. In Russia, this tendency was crystallized in Stanislav Govorukhin’s 1992 documentary *The Russia That We Lost* (*Rossiiia, kotoruiu my poteriali*). The film is stylistically indebted to Ken Burns’ 1990 *The Civil War*, combining pre-revolutionary film footage and photographs with an idyllic narrative about the lost abundance of Russia “where peasants were healthy and happy, workers earned a living wage, projects such as the Trans-Siberian Railroad made Russia powerful, and vibrant aristocratic and intellectual cultures flourished.”⁶⁹⁴ The narrator’s call to his recently orphaned viewers to abandon ideas about Russian history written by ‘her murderers’ and return to ‘Mother Russia’ was hugely influential in shaping the popular historical consciousness of the 1990s.

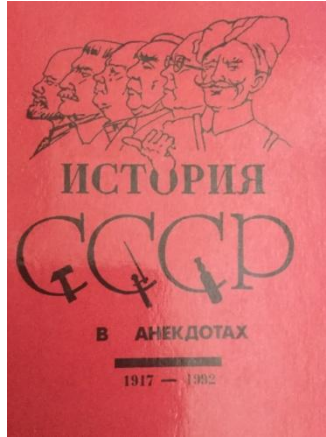
Yet a return to traditional historical consciousness, which dealt with the Soviet legacy primarily by disowning and replacing it with another grand narrative, was not the only form of engagement with the void of Soviet History. For all of its irreverence, the *History of the USSR in Anecdotes* did not skip over the Soviet period, but plunged right in seeking something salvageable. Even as it satirizes the very idea of the grand historical narrative, the collection reinforces a tangible sense of ‘us’—a collective identity defined by Soviet history. The face of this persistent collective is none other than Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev.

⁶⁹¹ A.S. Golubev, red., *Istoriia SSSR v Anekdotakh*, (Smolensk, Rossiiskaia Federatsiia: Izd. “Smiadyn”), 2.

⁶⁹² Ibid, 350.

⁶⁹³ Ibid, 351.

⁶⁹⁴ Stephen M. Norris, *Blockbuster History in the New Russia* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), 19.



The cover of the *History of the USSR in Anecdotes*

As the familiar side profiles of Soviet leaders (from Lenin to Gorbachev) gaze solemnly into the past, Chapaev confronts the reader in the present moment. He is simultaneously part of, and separate from, the History he transcends with a dismissive gesture.

In a seeming paradox, the collapse of the Soviet Union only increased the popularity and relevance of one of its most celebrated heroes, who now appeared as the protagonist in numerous works of adult fiction (rather than of jokes, histories, and children's stories). One of the earliest examples, Alexander Markin's 1994 *The Adventures of Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev in the Enemies' Rear and on the Front of Love*, is an elaborated prose version of the jokes. Chapaev and his companions navigate a carnivalized rural landscape, conquering towns like "Dirty Boxes (*Griaznye Sunduki*)" and "P'ianovo" (from *p'iany*, or 'drunk') motivated by sex, drunkenness, and an aimless revolutionary enthusiasm (which is really just perpetual sex and drunkenness).



Markin, pg.13

Just as in the 'textbook', Soviet History is a prominent object of parody. The 'novel' opens on Vasilii Ivanovich drunkenly contemplating his frayed socks:

"Where exactly he had damaged them remains a perpetually unresolved mystery for historians. Perhaps it had happened ten years ago in a far away Ural village, where the future commander chased girls and learned the fundamentals of military science, and spent most of his time in the guardhouse or cleaning

toilets. Or maybe it had happened last year, when he had drunkenly fallen out of his *tachanka* and had to chase his sissy horse for seven versts.”⁶⁹⁵

The real point of this historical digression, besides mocking Soviet historiography, is to draw attention to Chapaev’s socks, which are the subject of a beloved joke in which the commander demonstrates his ‘logic’ by explaining to Pet’ka that the comparative filth of his own socks are due to the fact that he is the older of the two. In Markin’s telling, Chapaev had meant to wash them, but “the revolution interfered.”⁶⁹⁶

Markin’s treatment of Furmanov similarly combines the literary ‘history’ of Chapaev with prominent themes from the jokes (where the commissar is usually drinking and/or competing for the affections of Anka, who is almost always depicted as a whore). The “writer and political officer Furmanov” (the order here seems deliberate) is first seen sitting a short distance from Chapaev’s staff meeting “taking notes for his future novel” which would “glorify his own exploits, as well as those of the famous commander.” As he writes, he worries about the possibility that Anka might be killed in the upcoming offensive:

“Anka’s death had long been planned in his novel, but in real life he didn’t want it. He was drawn to the machine-gunner by an unexplainable sexual passion.

--‘Anka,’ he said, his eyes boring into her like a drill, ‘a writer needs living characters, heroes and heroines. From flesh and blood. As you know, I am the first Socialist Realist writer. It is necessary for me to see and understand everything, to probe it with my own hands! Let’s go to bed, Anka!’⁶⁹⁷

Anka, who “for some reason did not like Furmanov” tells him to “go fuck [him]self” and the writer/commissar protests that he had only asked “in the interests of literature!”⁶⁹⁸

Such passages belie the ‘novel’s’ apparent lack of seriousness.⁶⁹⁹ The parody of Furmanov is striking in its similarity to the narcissistic image that emerges from his unpublished diaries, and contains a poignant critique of the doctrine and history of Socialist Realism. Furmanov’s claim to be ‘the first Socialist Realist writer’ lampoons the artificiality of attempts to create a pre-history for the doctrine after it was created in 1934, and his confusion of the ‘interests of literature’ with his own private ambitions is an apt critique of both Furmanov’s diaries and Socialist Realism’s subordination of aesthetics to political expedience.

Markin’s novel, and the Chapaev phenomenon more broadly, is characterized by its high degree of inter-textuality, and among these ‘texts’ there is always some artifact of ‘real life’ (an actually occurring historical event). The sexual humor surrounding Anka could easily be explained as a combination of traditional misogyny and the prevalence of sex in the culture of laughter (as the most obvious representative of Bakhtin’s “bodily lower stratum”).⁷⁰⁰ In this

⁶⁹⁵ Aleksander Markin, *Prikliucheniia Vasiliia Ivanovicha Chapaeva v tylu vruga i na fronte liubvi* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo “MIK”, 1994), 12.

⁶⁹⁶ Ibid, 14.

⁶⁹⁷ Ibid, 19-20.

⁶⁹⁸ Ibid, 20.

⁶⁹⁹ “True open seriousness fears neither parody, nor irony, nor any other form of reduced laughter, for it is aware of being part of an uncompleted whole... True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it.” Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 122-3.

⁷⁰⁰ Ibid, 148.

understanding, Anka's parodic image is merely an obvious parody of her mildly sexualized portrayal in the 1934 film: itself a means of dealing with the sexual tension inherent in the prospect of a woman serving 'in the ranks' with other men. While no doubt true, such an analysis neglects the deeper significance of this humor, which emerges from the interrelation of Chapaev texts (literary, historical, and otherwise).

The 'historical' punch-line is that everyone is sleeping with Anka except for Furmanov, who was her historical husband and the representative of the Soviet state. In the film, the ideological imperatives driving Furmanov's character had ultimately flattened him. By casting Furmanov aside, post-Soviet writers like Markov emphasized that the official ideological dimension was superfluous to the mythology's popularity. Chapaev was popular, not because he was a product of Soviet culture, but in spite of this. The sidelining of the commissar had begun in the film: dramatically because his serious onscreen presence was no match for the vibrant comical image of Chapaev, and romantically in order to divert the representation of women away from the issue of political power. This dynamic provided all the sexual tension necessary for countless double entendres. Pet'ka fondles Anka's breast while he is supposed to be teaching her how to operate a machine-gun. Anka arrives as part of Furmanov's urban contingent only to remain behind with Chapaev and Pet'ka. Furmanov rides away in a car, growing ever smaller before the camera cuts to a low-angled shot of Anka waving sadly framed by a cloudy sky. The camera alternates between Furmanov's vanishing car and Anka, who is joined by Pet'ka before the camera fades out on a shot of Furmanov's tiny car on a road to somewhere very far away. The next scene in which Anka appears shows her reclining between Chapaev and Pet'ka, singing songs and dreaming about future domestic happiness.

Anka's joke image easily flows from such scenes, but the character of Anka (as well as the specific scenes in which she appears) was directly influenced by Anna Furmanova (i.e. the historical Anka). The film's romance between Pet'ka and Anka redirects the sexual tensions surrounding the issue of women 'in the ranks' (and the actual, historical experience of Anna Furmanova) away from the ideological power struggle between the commissar and the commander. This dynamic is perfectly encapsulated in a bizarre scene involving Anka, Pet'ka, and the machine gun inside a cozy hut adorned with all the trappings of peasant domesticity. In earlier versions of the script, Anka had a baby.⁷⁰¹ In the film, the machine gun sits prominently on a table in the center of the room, with the proud and loving couple hovering nearby.⁷⁰²

Anna's influence on the script, and on the inclusion of a female character based upon herself in the film, was substantial. But the significance of her aspirations/experience in the larger Soviet narrative was never resolved. The ambivalence she injected into the Chapaev mythos exposed the device established by her husband. His ideological/political/personal fantasy had no room for his living breathing wife and, ultimately, the Grand Narrative of the Soviet Union didn't either. The narrative strain introduced by Furmanova thus helped to produce real-life Soviet heroes like Nina Onilova and Liudmilla Pavlichenko, but it also contributed to the parodic image of a machine-gun toting whore: the comic resolution of male anxieties about female independence.

⁷⁰¹ RGALI--f.2733, op.1, d.435, l.57-58.

⁷⁰² In the 2003 pornographic parody of the film, the scene is taken to its logical conclusion: a somewhat mechanistic and unenthusiastic act of domestic sex.



“I’m pregnant Vasilii Ivanovich...
-- By who?!”⁷⁰³

The parodic image of Chapaev and Company became easily the most usable symbol of the Soviet legacy in the Russian Federation during the 1990s. Collections of Soviet jokes, and Aleksandr Markin’s joke novel, laid the foundations, but it was Viktor Pelevin’s 1996 novel, *Chapaev and the Void*, that transposed Chapaev’s image into (or back into) the realm of art. The novel touched a nerve in post-Soviet society. While Pelevin had already made several attempts to convert the modern Russian experience into postmodern prose, none resonated in the popular imagination quite like his tale narrated by Peter (Pet’ka) Voyd, whose daily experience shifts back and forth between the Civil War in 1918 and the 1990s, when he is a patient in a mental hospital.

Pelevin’s novel is, among other things, a conscious dialogue with Russian History. The concept of Russia as a void, an empty space “placed between the two great divisions of the world, between the East and the West, resting one elbow on China and the other on Germany” was first publically articulated by Petr Chaadaev in 1836: a scandal which earned him the status of ‘madman’ and sparked debates about the nature of Russian identity that shaped the future development of its intellectual history.⁷⁰⁴ In Chaadaev’s description, Russia was “without a heritage, without any ties binding us to the men who came before us on this earth.” History (or “Providence”) has “left us entirely to ourselves...and It has taught us nothing.”⁷⁰⁵ This idea was first described by de Maistre and other “French traditionalists” like De Bonald, who characterized Russia as a land without civilization, “an unformed society” that was shaped by the steppe and “intrinsically ‘nomadic.’”⁷⁰⁶ Chaadaev’s innovation was to give this lack a positive connotation: if it was without a past, Russia could still be the land of the future so long as it avoided the mistakes of others.

There are numerous echoes of Chaadaev in Pelevin’s *Chapaev*. The latter’s postmodern style is an uncanny fit with the former’s description of early 19th century Russian consciousness:

⁷⁰³ Aleksandr Markin, 116-17.

⁷⁰⁴ Petr Chaadaev, “Letters on the Philosophy of History: First Letter,” in Marc Raeff, ed., *Russian Intellectual History: An Anthology* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978), 166. Chaadaev’s philosophy of history was heavily influenced by Hegel and Kant, as well as De Maistre, and believed that “psychology must recognize the heredity of ideas, the existence of a historical memory transmitted from generation to generation.” It was this heredity that he considered to be conspicuously absent in the case of Russia, which was “without historical continuity, and lacked a ‘moral personality.’” Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought: From the Enlightenment to Marxism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 82-3.

⁷⁰⁵ Petr Chaadaev, 167.

⁷⁰⁶ Andrzej Walicki, *A History of Russian Thought*, 87.

“Everyone seems to have one foot in the air...No one has a fixed sphere of existence... We live in a narrow present...all our ideas are ready-made, the indelible trace left in the mind by a progressive movement of ideas, which gives it strength, does not shape our intellect.”⁷⁰⁷ Chaadaev’s letter reads like the memoir of the modern Western, and especially non-Western, subject: a prototype of the ‘Second-hand consciousness’ (the sense of being late to the game of modernity) that has been the experience of much of the world for centuries.

Pelevin’s novel is both a parody of the post-Soviet Russian search for a stable identity in the midst of rapid change and a twist on Chaadaev in which Russia’s existential potential is bound up in its apparent existential flaw: if Chaadaev (Lenin, Trotsky) made Russia’s lack of History an asset for the building of the future, Pelevin makes Russia the avant-garde of the present postmodern moment in which all grand narratives about the past and the future dissolve. Russian Eurasianism is a prime target both because of its popularity in the late/post-Soviet period and the fact that its intellectual lineage stretches all the way back to Chaadaev, easily incorporating the ‘ready-made’ Ur-question of Russia’s essential identity.⁷⁰⁸

The novel opens with a comically-clichéd epigraph attributed to Ghengis Khan, “Gazing at the faces of the horses and the people, at this boundless stream of life raised up by the power of my will and now hurtling into nowhere across the sunset-crimson steppe, I often think: where am I in this flux?”⁷⁰⁹ The narrative fluctuates between Peter Voyd’s mystical voyages across the steppe with Chapaev in 1918 and three tales of the new Russia related by Peter’s fellow post-

⁷⁰⁷ Chaadaev, 162-4. The ‘Postmodern’ like the ‘Romantic’ of Chaadaev’s day is inherently open-ended making all attempts to define it with precision ultimately ironic and self-defeating. More interested in the Sublime (the Beyond description) than the System, both Romanticism and Postmodernism inevitably become formulaic in specific contexts. While not agreeing with the totality of Frederic Jameson’s definition of Postmodernism as the “genuine historical (and socioeconomic) reality as a third great original expansion of capitalism around the globe (after the earlier expansions of the national market and the older imperialist system, which each had their own cultural specificity)”, I nevertheless agree with his description of the present aesthetic as one in which “depth is replaced by surface, or by multiple surfaces” and in which “the waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality...our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time.” Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 49, 12, & 16. Jameson identifies the “postmodernist viewer” with David Bowie watching 57 screens simultaneously in *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, and this is apt. We are “called upon to do the impossible, namely, to see all the screens at once, in their radical and random difference.” Ibid, 31. This reality is accelerated by technology, which continues to push the limits of human consciousness, in no small part (but not exclusively!) because of the profit motive. The rapid influx of consumer capitalism is a prominent theme in much of Pelevin’s work (see *Generation P*). In *Chapaev and the Void* this ‘not exclusively’ is central to Pelevin’s ironic gesture because few places are as well adapted to Postmodernism as post-Soviet Russia. Numerous scholars have attempted to theorize the nature of this relationship. See Mikhail Epstein, “*The Origins and Meaning of Russian Postmodernism*” in Mikhail Epstein, *After the Future: The Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Contemporary Russian Culture* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 207; Mark Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction: Dialogue with Chaos* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999), 17.

⁷⁰⁸ Pelevin thus turns Chaadaev’s critique of ‘ready-made’ ideas imported from the West on its head by incorporating his ‘ready-made’ idea from Russian History (i.e. from Chaadaev).

⁷⁰⁹ Viktor Pelevin, *Buddha’s Little Finger* (New York: Viking, 2000), v. This is the American translation of *Chapaev and the Void*, which seems to have opted for a different title because ‘Buddha’ would be more recognizable to non-Russian readers than ‘Chapaev.’

Soviet mental patients (in the ‘present’).⁷¹⁰ These tales always have to do with questions of identity and transcendence, with the latter usually achieved through madness or intoxication. The first tale, told by ‘Just Maria,’ fits easily within Frederic Jameson’s theory of Postmodernism as the byproduct of the “third great original expansion of capitalism around the globe.”⁷¹¹ ‘Just Maria’ is a gender confused (biologically male) patient who believes he/she is engaged to Arnold Schwarzenegger in his Terminator incarnation. For most of the tale, Arnold’s mirror glasses remain on and inscrutable, but when he finally takes them off “His left eye was half-closed in a way that expressed an absolutely clear and at the same time immeasurably complex range of feelings, including a strictly proportioned mixture of passion for life, strength, a healthy love for children, moral support for the American automobile industry in its difficult struggle with the Japanese, acknowledgement of the rights of sexual minorities, a slightly ironical attitude towards feminism and the calm assurance that democracy and Judeo-Christian values would eventually conquer all evil in this world.”⁷¹² The other eye is the mechanical red laser of the Terminator.

Pelevin’s Russia exists amid the collapse of one symbolic/power system and the rapid introduction of Capitalism’s countless surfaces (Globalization).⁷¹³ But these surfaces are not the only source of symbolic competition/confusion. The second tale, Serdyuk’s drunken escapade with the Japanese businessman Esitsune Kawabata, is perhaps the most emphatically ‘Eurasian’ in theme: “You will not find this void in Western religious painting,” Kawabata said as he poured... ‘The unique vision of reality reflected in these two works of art is common to only you and us, and therefore I believe what Russia really needs is alchemical wedlock with the East... In the depths of the Russian soul lies the same gaping void we find deep in the soul of Japan. And from this very void the world comes into being, constantly, with every second. Cheers.’”⁷¹⁴ Here Russia’s ‘empty space’ becomes the Buddhist void or sublime—the source of all things which is itself beyond representation.⁷¹⁵

The final tale, ‘told’ by the mobster Volodin, is the most thematically ‘Russian.’ It takes place largely in a forest around a campfire, where Volodin and his fellow mobsters are tripping on mushrooms.⁷¹⁶ Describing the winch on one of their amphibious jeeps parked nearby, the

⁷¹⁰ In the novel these narratives are extracted by the experimental psychologist Timur Timurovich and projected into the consciousnesses of the other patients.

⁷¹¹ Frederic Jameson, 49.

⁷¹² Pelevin, 56-7.

⁷¹³ Frederic Jameson talks about “The waning of affect...the waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality...our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time.” *Postmodernism*, 16. Artists (and cultural critics) spend less time exploring psychological interiority, emotional depth, and the subjective and more contemplating the interrelatedness of countless objects or ‘surfaces.’

⁷¹⁴ *Ibid*, 169.

⁷¹⁵ This is just a twist on older ideas, as seen in Fyodor Tyutchev’s claim that “Russia cannot be understood with the mind alone, No ordinary yardstick can span her greatness: She stands alone, unique –In Russia, one can only believe.”

⁷¹⁶ Intoxication as transcendence is a prevalent theme in the novel (as it is in many of Pelevin’s works). In Serdyuk’s tale the narrator explains that “intoxication is by its nature faceless and cosmopolitan. The high that hit him a few minutes later had nothing in common with the promise implied by the bottle’s label with its cypresses, antique arches and brilliant stars in a dark-blue sky, there was nothing in it to indicate that the port wine actually came from the left bank of the Crimea, and the suspicion even flashed through his mind that if it had come from the right bank, or even from Moldavia, the world around him would still have changed in the same fashion.” Pelevin, 154. Serdyuk’s high cannot be adequately represented by the ‘real’ or the physical because it is a transcendent

narrator claims that “anthropologists who have devoted their efforts to studying the ‘New Russians’ believe that these winches are used as rams during the settling of accounts, and certain scholars even see their popularity as an indirect indication of the long-awaited resurgence of the spirit of the nation—they believe the winches fulfill the mystical role of the figureheads that once decorated the bows of ancient Slavonic barks.”⁷¹⁷ Volodin and his fellow mobsters are eminently physical “nothing but an intersection of simple geometric forms” with a “small streamlined head...reminiscent of that stone which according to the evangelist was discarded by the builders but nonetheless became the cornerstone in the foundation of the new Russian statehood.”⁷¹⁸ Pelevin’s ‘New Russians’ thus turn out to be Malevich’s peasants (eminently physical but without depth—they are surfaces, not beings).



Kazimir Malevich, “Peasant in the Fields” c. 1929

Volodin’s tale is bookended and punctuated by references linking the Twentieth Party Congress to Plato’s cave and neo-Platonism. Volodin and his friends sitting by the fire “appeared to be no more than blurred spectral shadows cast on an invisible screen” and “in a certain higher sense, that is precisely what they were.” The Twentieth Party Congress is described as a moment when “the last of the local neo-Platonists...abandoned his shame at possessing a body” and “all of the insights that emerged therefrom” made it nearly impossible for “our neo-Platonist...to have survived” as such.⁷¹⁹ Khrushchev’s De-Stalinization campaign

experience. And Volodin’s mushrooms, like just about everything else in the novel, are also ‘inter-textual.’ On May 17, 1991 (i.e. in the final year of the Soviet Union) the Leningrad television station *Piatoe koleso* aired a mock academic discussion, *Lenin-Grib*, about the ‘fact’ that Lenin was a regular consumer of psychedelic mushrooms and was, in fact, himself a mushroom. For a detailed discussion of this, see Alexei Yurchak, “A Parasite from Outer Space: How Sergei Kurekhin Proved that Lenin was a Mushroom,” *Slavic Review*, Vol.70, №2 (Summer 2011), pp. 307-333. Many of Pelevin’s techniques in *Chapaev i Pustota* mirror the format of the show, in which absurd information is framed in the scholastic genre (the discussants are surrounded by books, experts are called, diagrams are explained and so forth) so that the form imparts an illusion of truth to its content. Similarly, in Pelevin “after declaring Furmanov’s 1923 novel and the Vasilev Brothers’ 1934 film inauthentic, the author of the introduction [Urgan Jambon Tulku VII, Chairmand of the Buddhist Front for Full and Final Liberation (FFL(b))] guarantees (documentarily) the authenticity of the present work.” Viktoria Shokhina, “Chapai, ego komanda I prostodushnyi uchenik. K 10-letiiu vykhoda v svet romana V. Pelevina ‘Chapaev i Pustota’.” *NG. Ex Libris*, №.36, October 5, 2006. Moscow. Urgan Jambon Tulku VII claims that the manuscript of the novel was “written during the early 1920s in one of the monasteries of Inner Mongolia.” Viktor Pelevin, *Buddha’s Little Finger*, vii.

⁷¹⁷ Viktor Pelevin, *Chapaev i Pustota*, 241.

⁷¹⁸ *Ibid*, 246.

⁷¹⁹ Viktor Pelevin, *Chapaev i Pustota*, 240.

thus becomes the Soviet Union's impossible reconciliation with reality: the death of the Grand Narrative and the advent of the absurd as the locus of popular 'truth.'

In typical postmodern fashion, Pelevin attempts to position his Chapaev beyond the dichotomies of real/ideal, character/author, History/mythology, etc. At the end of Volodin's tale (which begins with an overt reference to the relationship between meaning and the position of the observer) it turns out that the observer has been Chapaev: "Chapaev put the manuscript down on the top of his bureau and looked out for a while through the semicircular window of his study. 'It seems to me, Pet'ka, that the writer occupies too large a place in your personality,' he said eventually. 'This apostrophe to a reader who does not really exist is a rather cheap trick.'" ⁷²⁰ While reading Volodin's tale, the reader has unknowingly occupied the position of Chapaev reading. The moment this is revealed, we get the (false, absurd) impression that we are now outside of the text with Chapaev. The author cannot of course write himself out of his text, but Pelevin employs these moves like Zen Buddhist 'pointing,' where the enlightened cannot describe the truth, only indicate it. The point is not the position occupied by the author or the reader, but that occupied by Chapaev. ⁷²¹

Conclusion: PiViCh

In 1998, two years after Pelevin's novel, Buka Entertainment and S.K.I.F. Studio released *Vasilii Ivanovich and Pet'ka Save the Galaxy* (or PiViCh as it is known among fans), a computer game adventure set in the fully realized world of the post-Pelevin Chapaev mythology. The first game opens with an extended animated sequence explaining that when the battleship Aurora fired on the Winter Palace (a seminal moment from the October Revolution) they missed because the sailors were drunk. Instead their shot hit the moon, which, it turns out, is actually an ancient alien spacecraft. The Aurora's shot awoke long dormant aliens, who decided to invade earth, mistaking Chapaev's tiny village of Gadiukino for the capital of world civilization.

The game's engagement with Pelevin is especially evident in the second installment, Judgment Day, which derives important symbolism from 'Just Maria's' fantastic romance with Arnold Schwarzenegger/Terminator. ⁷²² Although Chapaev apparently drowned at the end of the first game, the second game reveals that he was actually beamed up to the alien ship, where the aliens reconstructed him into one of James Cameron's Terminators. As of 2009, the series contained nine titles, including PiViCh 2: Judgment Day, PiViCh 3: The Return of Alaska, and PiViCh 5: The End of the Game among others.

The game's cult status has been widely attested amongst Russian game enthusiasts. When the series was re-launched on the mobile Android platform in 2014, numerous commentators took for granted the fact that "everyone" in their target audience was familiar with the game. According to Irina Smirnova from the Russian gaming news site App2Top.ru, "we do

⁷²⁰ Ibid, 269.

⁷²¹ Making Chapaev postmodern *avant la lettre* ironically undermines Pelevin's aesthetic postmodernism, at least insofar as this move reinvigorates/recasts the commander's mythology and reintegrates it into the trajectory of Russian Intellectual History (via Chaadaev).

⁷²² There are many such nods to Pelevin, including the prevalence of psychedelic drugs and imagery. For instance, Pet'ka's room contains a marijuana plant. Not willing that this should escape the players' notice, the designers made it an essential component of one of the game's many puzzles. The player must take the plant to an alien cave and place it on an altar in order to unlock the next stage of the game world.

not think we will be mistaken if we say that there is no one among you who did not, in their time, save the galaxy together with the irrepressible commander and his faithful squire. Everyone remembers the first adventure at the end of the 90s.”⁷²³ Although the staff at App2Top.ru had anticipated the chance “to play the childhood favorite without having to sift through dusty stacks of obsolete CDs,” Smirnova was ultimately not impressed. “The magic, which in childhood had compelled us to spend hours in the pursuit of yet another ridiculous task, is gone.” For her, the game confirmed the belief that to avoid disappointment, it is “better not to visit the places where you were happy as a child (*luchshe ne byvaet v tekh mestakh, gde ty v detstve byl schastliv*).”⁷²⁴

While rejecting the aesthetics of nostalgia, Smirnova identifies the Chapaev game as a “place” she had visited in childhood. For most other fans of the game, the ability to return to the beloved simulated universe they had explored as children was quite welcome. According to Viacheslav Grishankov from Technodaily.ru, PiViCh was a game which “only the lazy did not play,” and while some “contemporary gamers” might not like the game “precisely because of its complete identification with the retro-game, those who grew up along with the Russian game industry will undoubtedly love the new mobile platform.”⁷²⁵

The reference to ‘retro games’ points to current trends in the global gaming market, which has been flooded in recent years by both new games bearing the aesthetic markers of earlier stages of graphic development and old games re-released on contemporary platforms. On December 7, 2014 the user Eclipse wrote a post to the Russian social networking platform Pikabo, in which they used the technological difference between the mobile platform and the CD version they had played in the 1990s as a marker of their own age and an event in their individual History: “Here’s a real sign of my age, some users of pikabu were not even born yet when the old guard (*staraia gvardiia*) passed hours” with this “Old School (*oldskul*) Old Fogey (*oldfagi*) game.”⁷²⁶

In the attached comments, many other users shared their memories of the game and similarly used it as a marker in their individual histories. Qwovadis remembered the “cool poster of Lenin with the slogan ‘Hicks of all provinces hop into one pile!’, akh, nostalgia.” AirMage remembered playing “Pet’ka in 2000 when I was six years old. Nostalgia” while aksd994 argued that the whole discussion was not a marker of age, but of wealth “because few people had enough money for a computer in those times.”⁷²⁷

⁷²³ Irina Smirnova, “Obniat’ i plakat’: pochemu nam ne ponravilas’ igra ‘ViCh I Pet’ka spasaiut Galaktiku,” from <http://app2top.ru/games-2/obnyat-i-plakat-pochemu-nam-ne-ponravi-45553.html>. (Retrieved 7/17/15).

⁷²⁴ Ibid.

⁷²⁵ Viacheslav Grishankov, “‘Pet’ka I ViCh spasaiut Galaktiku’—legendarnaia bezumnaia adventiura,” from <http://technodaily.ru/?p=24140>. (Retrieved 7/17/15).

⁷²⁶ http://m.pikabu.ru/story/proverka_na_vozrast_2888240#comments (Retrieved 7/22/15).

⁷²⁷ Ibid. Indeed, the year the game was released, 1998, coincided with an acute economic crisis in Russia. This comment thus provides us with an interesting moment. According to Irina Paperno, the “paradigmatic Russian story” is that “of a man forged by history.” Irina Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), 11. “By tracing one’s origins or one’s authorship to such formative moments [usually significant and traumatic moments in Russian history—“the ‘I’ confined to a prison barrack”, etc.] a memoirist makes a claim to personal selfhood and to authorial legitimacy” *ibid*, 17. “What comes through” in the documents Paperno examines “is a sense of self derived from the experience of danger, fear, deprivation, and pressure...a self worthy to be submitted as historical material” *ibid*, 210. She concludes her section on dream analysis with the claim that “thinking of history as a ‘place’ in which we all live—this is a

There is little doubt that the post-Soviet incarnation of Chapaev's mythology has been largely influenced by the kinds of capitalist market forces theorists like Jameson place at the center of the post-modern aesthetic. The prevalence of nostalgia above is a prime example of this. Faced with "the enormity of a situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience" contemporary "producers of culture have nowhere to turn but to the past: the imitation of dead styles, speech through all the masks and voices stored up in the imaginary museum of a now global culture."⁷²⁸

Yet Chapaev is more than one instance of a global culture shaped by capitalism. Jameson describes "a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our own pop images and simulacra of that history."⁷²⁹ But this is precisely the function that Chapaev filled in 1964, when the film was re-released and Soviet fathers brought their sons who "raved about rockets and the cosmos" to see "if *Chapaev* still retained its former magic" (i.e. to experience the History of 1934, when as children they had experienced the History of 1919 and marveled at the technological miracle of the living, breathing, speaking commander on the screen).⁷³⁰ The image of Chapaev was not shaped by capitalism, but by its self-described opposite. The fact that he was so easily adapted to the new market environment indicates the short-sightedness of creating strict binaries between the cultures of market and non-market societies. All are shaped by popular taste, the will to History, and the inevitable march of technology.

posttraumatic nightmare that haunts the Russians even today" *ibid* 208. The comments in this Pikabo thread similarly form their 'I' by connecting it to the simulated universe of PiViCh, which they (along with Irina Smirnova) refer to as a 'place' they occupied in the past. Akxd994 asserts a sense of self that is closer to what Paperno describes: by linking his identity to the 'real' history of Russia through the economic hardships of 1998, he denies the historical authenticity of the thread's imagined community. They are not united by time, only money.

⁷²⁸ Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 21, 17-18.

⁷²⁹ *Ibid*, 25.

⁷³⁰ Klub ljubitelej literatury i iskusstva, 28 noiabria 1964.

Conclusion

I argue that Chapaev has become the most salient signifier of Soviet History: an encyclopedia of the popular Soviet experience. In doing so, I seek to make subtle distinctions between different conceptions of knowledge about the past (such as history and History, or History and Memory) which are admittedly difficult to parse and often bleed into one another. Most contemporary professional historians perceive their work as contrary to the idea of History as a sacred, inviolable, and fixed representation of the past, or as a deep process that can be scientifically mastered and predicted, and understand these to be the domain of politics and/or philosophy. While always mindful of *longues durees* and impersonal processes, the contemporary work of professional history usually emphasizes the contingent nature of our knowledge about the past, understanding that the questions we ask, or the sources we choose to investigate, are inevitably influenced by the issues, opportunities and ‘memories’ of the present moment.

The oft mentioned distinction between memory and history, as that between the contemporary *experience* of the past versus its critical analysis, is a close approximation of my proposed juxtaposition of history and History. But in making this distinction, scholars of memory sometimes come close to replicating a sense of Historical teleology. When Pierre Nora compares memory and history as “lived history and the intellectual operation that renders it intelligible” or “the process that is carrying us forward and our representation of that process,” he comes uncomfortably close to ascribing to history a Hegelian or Marxist dialectic.⁷³¹ The political scientists Georges Mink and Laure Neumayer “speak of ‘veins’ or ‘seams of memory’” as an elaboration of Nora’s *lieux de memoire* and claim that their terms “designate a symbol around which memory can rally, rather than a specific physical site.”⁷³² This comes closer to describing Chapaev’s function in Soviet and post-Soviet culture. Yet, here too, the distinction between history as “a matter of science and memory of experience” is awkward in the Soviet context, where History was often able to freely function like memory (was easily manipulated and appropriated for the political moment) precisely because it was perceived as a science.⁷³³ The quotidian facts of history could be altered so long as the ‘real’ scientific history (the deep structural dialectic of class conflict) remained intact. What was considered professional history (or History) at the time does not fit our contemporary parameters, but neither is it neatly categorized as Memory.

After 1917, the region which had been governed by the Russian Empire experienced the rise and fall of numerous grand narratives about the past (Histories). In the Soviet Union, History was about more than just the past—it was a science with which to explain the present and anticipate the future. For the general population, the rise and fall of the Soviet Union

⁷³¹Nora describes memory as being “in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.” This is distinguished from history, which is the “reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer [and] is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past.” Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*,” *Representations*, №26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (University of California Press, Spring, 1989), 8.

⁷³² Georges Mink and Laure Neumayer, eds., *History, Memory and Politics in Central and Eastern Europe: Memory Games* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 11.

⁷³³ *Ibid*, 5.

required not just the rewriting of History, but a reimagining of what it essentially was. In the margins, stuffed between competing concepts about the relationship between time, events, and ultimate meaning, the everyday issues of sex, love, ambition, jealousy, and gender continued their own entangled existence. History tends to disregard such things, but they are often the stuff of history. In demonstrating how and why the story of Vasiliï Ivanovich Chapaev came to be the most salient signifier of Soviet History in the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia, this dissertation is simultaneously concerned with the text and the margins, the center and the periphery, what was included and what was left out.

In the Soviet Union Marxist History was academic history. In post-Soviet Russia this History no longer served. This did not just mean a battle over memory (over which traces of the past were relevant to contemporary experience), it involved the adoption of an entirely new Historical paradigm—a new grand narrative, a new way of thinking about the relationship between time and events, and organizing memory. Only a history of Soviet History (meaning the totality of Soviet engagement with the past—including memory, philosophy of history, and historical practice) can adequately describe this dynamic, and this is what the history of Chapaev allows me to do.

At every stage of its development, the story of Chapaev and his partisans has been positioned and embraced as an authentic artifact of popular culture that embodies the Soviet, and post-Soviet Russian, experience. Over the course of its lifespan, the Soviet Union produced many heroic myths. Besides the obvious examples of the leader cults, there were countless popular heroes derived from the different eras of the Soviet saga. There was the young martyr Pavlik Morozov, who supposedly denounced his *kulak* father to the political police and was killed for it. There was Aleksei Stakhanov, the coal miner from the Donbass, who, through the conscientious organization of his labor, was able to shatter production records and become the model Soviet industrial worker. The war with Germany produced innumerable heroic examples of suffering and resistance, becoming the bedrock legitimating myth of the state. The conquest of the cosmos produced stellar celebrities like Yuri Gagarin – perhaps the perfect image of the New Soviet Man.

Beginning especially in the era of High Stalinism, numerous pre-revolutionary figures and histories were incorporated into the grand narrative of the Soviet state. In 1937, the 19th century poet Alexander Pushkin was lauded as a spiritual forerunner of Soviet art. Soviet screens were soon inundated with images from Russian history: Alexander Nevsky, the 13th century Grand Prince of Kiev, who turned back the tide of the Teutonic Knights; Mikhail Kutuzov, the Russian general who defeated Napoleon; Emelian Pugachev, the Cossack leader of a peasant rebellion that threatened to overrun the empire of Catherine the Great. Such figures enabled the imagined community of the Soviet people to establish the same mystical connection with the collective past that all modern states rely on for a sense of permanence and stability (although, unlike most states, ultimate legitimacy in the USSR still derived from building the future rather than preserving the past).

None of these heroes or mythologies managed to embody the entirety of the Soviet History like Chapaev. Figures like Morozov, Stakhanov, or Gagarin represented particular moments in the collective saga. While some maintained a degree of niche popularity that outlived their era, as truly popular heroes they had a limited life cycle. Due to the unprecedented nature of his accomplishment, a figure like Gagarin would never fade like the others, but neither

could he trace his lineage to the pivotal early decades of the state. Likewise, while pre-revolutionary figures may have helped to establish continuity with the past and, as in the case of Alexander Nevsky, acquired permanent Soviet connotations, they could never be purely Soviet heroes. They were adopted for their historical baggage, and this could not be jettisoned.

There are numerous reasons for Chapaev's longevity and subsequent ability to signify the span of Soviet History. The explanation is, like any true historical argument, a description of process involving both structural patterns and elements of contingency. An important prerequisite was the fact that the key biographical elements of his narrative took place at the inception of the Soviet state—his life story participates in the actual (rather than metaphorical or spiritual) origins of the polity. Yet, even in life, an important element of Chapaev's popular appeal was his symbolic incorporation of heroic symbolism from the pre-revolutionary past.

Chapter One of this dissertation describes Chapaev's connection to, and engagement with, the region where he lived and fought: a landscape famous as a site and base of support for the most significant popular uprisings against the Russian state prior to the 20th century. In the interlude between two states, in a region famous as a site of anti-imperial popular rebellion, Chapaev crafted a public persona based on the stateless nomadic peoples and independent Cossack hordes who had long lived there. He modeled his image on the Cossack rebels Stenka Razin and Emelian Pugachev, even naming his elite units after them. Not only did Chapaev symbolically reference the heroic Russian past, many of his actions embodied the revolt of the rural periphery against the urban center (i.e. he not only employed the popular imagery of Russian History, he participated in/was shaped by actual historical processes). The commander was a constant thorn in the side of Soviet authorities. He was investigated for numerous violations including the theft of government property, repeated refusal to follow orders, the unsanctioned release of prisoners, and threats made against the lives of Soviet officials.

Chapaev not only recapitulated the historic tension between city and countryside in the Russian Empire, he was representative of a much broader problem facing the new Soviet government during the Civil War. As the leaders of a political project focused on urban industrial workers, the Bolsheviks struggled to gain support in vast rural regions where the majority of the conflict was fought. Although promises of land helped them to gain support amongst the peasantry, most Bolshevik leaders were not at home in the village. They relied upon leaders with a local connection: especially those who, like Chapaev, had a talent for military tactics and a winning combat record. Like Nestor Makhno or Filipp Mironov, Chapaev's independence was tolerated because he was necessary. Chapaev's death in 1919 was perhaps the all that kept him from eventually revolting like Makhno, or being executed like Mironov: both of which would have disqualified him from future heroic status. His death enabled his image to retain its subversive elements while remaining salvageable for posterity as an image of the countryside redeemed.

I argue that these subversive elements are central to Chapaev's popularity and symbolic longevity. Unlike typical Soviet heroes like Morozov or Stakhanov, who represented one-dimensional examples of Communist virtue, Chapaev became a hero in spite (and because) of representing a pre-revolutionary heroic ideal. Chapter Two describes how Dmitrii Furmanov's novel (a critical moment in the development of Chapaev's mythology) was actually a failed attempt to deconstruct the heroic image of the peasant commander and replace it with a new Soviet hero based upon the author. If Chapter One references the deeper, more structural

elements of Chapaev's historical trajectory, the Furmanov chapter emphasizes historical contingency: the centrality of individual action and the convoluted, often inscrutable, nature of human motivations and psychology.

Furmanov's extensive diaries, largely preoccupied with clarifying his own thoughts to himself and 'gathering material' for a future literary endeavor, provide an unusual degree of insight into the mind of an aspiring engineer of the soul. What they reveal, more than anything, is the agency of the repressed, or 'the structuring function of the lack.' Furmanov claimed, and seemed to sincerely believe, that he was writing history. Rather than writing a novel, he was chronicling the last gasps of an obsolete heroic figure from the prerevolutionary past, the 'People's Hero' (*narodnyi geroi*), and documenting the rise of the Soviet New Man—based upon himself. His diaries reveal the extent to which this narrative structure was shaped by ambitions, sexual insecurities, and romantic jealousies that the author was largely unconscious of or unwilling to face, and which never made it into his account. The history of this History discovers real life stuffed between the lines, patched over with ideology and waiting to have out. Rather than what he had intended, Furmanov wrote a story that was popular largely for its descriptions of Chapaev and his military exploits. Rather than burying him forever, the writer had given him new life. His New Man, on the other hand, would go the way of Morozov and Stakhanov.

Chapter Three describes how Furmanov's narrative was adapted to the screen, forever associating the image of Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev with the strange and contradictory culture of Stalinism. This moment, which more than any other established the place of Chapaev's mythology in Soviet culture, was the product of numerous contingent factors-- not the least of which was the medium itself. The realities of cinematic production determined the collective nature of this incarnation. Unlike Furmanov's version, this was the product of multiple sources, including Anna Furmanova, Georgii and Sergei Vasil'ev, Boris Babochkin, and many others.

The Vasiliev Brothers, steeped in the cinematic techniques of their mentor Sergei Eisenstein, crafted a film that was both aesthetically sophisticated and popularly accessible. Chapaev's dynamic image became hallmark of Soviet film, an equivalent of Charlie Chaplin's shuffle. This Chapaev was not an outdated relic of the past doomed to die, he was the peasant hero resurrected for the cinematic age: a visual metaphor of rural energy and potential. Anna Furmanova not only contributed to the positive adaptation of Chapaev's character, she reintroduced critical elements of gender and sexuality that had been suppressed by her husband. Her influence gave rise to the character of Anka Pulemetchitsa and the romance plot between Anka and Pet'ka, which deflected the real-life tensions away the commissar-commander relationship into more acceptable, less politically charged territory. At the same time, the inclusion of this material opened the door to the 'lower bodily stratum'—helping to make the Chapaev mythos a fertile breeding ground for sexual humor in the future.

This combination of high and low, humor and seriousness, echoed the reconciliation between town and countryside at the core of the film's perceived Historical purpose. While it was undoubtedly shaped by the tastes of individual artists, the film was also the imperative of groups like the *Chapaevtsy* veterans, who in many ways still represented a neglected Soviet periphery demanding the support and recognition of the center. The film was perceived as Historical, not just because it told a story about the past, but because it addressed the contemporary Historical need for social cohesion in the aftermath of collectivization. A new

Civil War film was needed to stitch the wounds of the recent civil war between the city and the countryside, to reconstitute (or constitute for the first time) a society torn apart by conflict.

In both life and legend, Chapaev represented the revolt of the periphery. His inclusion in the Soviet heroic pantheon was symbolically risky—injecting an element of subversion into a heroic ideal that prized conformity above all else. Boris Babochkin was chosen for the job because of his skill as a comic actor. His blend of folksy humor and earnest passion made Chapaev's rebellion palatable. This was the mode of Stalin himself: always balancing between a joke and a threat, laughter and cruelty. And by far the most significant factor in Chapaev's elevation was Stalin's recognition of the film's popular potential and decision to promote its screening as a seminal moment in Soviet History, effectively making it so. The screening became a Stalinist moment par excellence: the choreographed historical event—the convergence of contingency and teleology in act of Historical improvisation only the Leader could truly accomplish. The film inextricably linked the image of Chapaev with the culture of Stalinism. Although it would continue to evolve to reflect broader changes in Soviet society and culture, from this point on Chapaev was always potentially a reference to the Stalinist moment, becoming a lens through which to track its subsequent legacy.

The problematic nature of the Late-Stalinist quest for permanence, for a stable socialist homeland, would be reflected in the subsequent development of the image. Chapter Four explores this trajectory through what I refer to as the domestication of Chapaev. In its depiction of the commander as a freedom fighter, a positive force to be harnessed for the construction of the future, the film had departed from Furmanov's original intention to banish the hero (and his pre-revolutionary heroic type) from the Soviet pantheon. This image was nevertheless one of forward movement and momentum, more about the future than the past. Wartime representations emphasized Chapaev's pre-revolutionary imagery, placing him along side historical defenders of the homeland like Alexander Nevsky and Suvorov. He rose from the dead, crawling out of the river to drive out the invaders. No longer a builder of the revolutionary future, he was now a representative of the timeless past—a kind of Soviet nature spirit.

Postwar representations built on this tendency to produce images of Chapaev as a domestic hero, a family man primarily concerned with the education and welfare of his children. The chapter emphasizes this trend through the exploration of Chapaev house museums—sites of historical pilgrimage connected to places the commander had lived and fought, which showcased an idealized version of his everyday through the exhibition of material culture. The construction of these sites reflected the broader effort to build a stable Soviet homeland during the postwar period. The problematic nature of establishing a definitive home for the hero becomes a metaphor through which to discuss the complexity, perhaps even futility, of quest to achieve a stable pan-Soviet identity in the absence of a collective revolutionary struggle. Various peripheral locations competed for the right to claim Chapaev as their own, as their exclusive connection to the center. And yet the city of Cheboksary, which ultimately won this battle, struggled to balance and integrate this connection with its local status as the capital and center of Chuvash culture. In order to be a local hero, the ethnically Russian commander increasingly had to be somehow Chuvash as well. The inherently slippery image of Chapaev (rooted in Chapaev's own appropriation of borderland myth and symbolism) managed to embody this vague ethnic alchemy, perhaps pushing the limits of his official capacity. The state itself would struggle to follow suit.

The fifth and final chapter describes the split between official and popular, sacred and profane, representations of Chapaev: demonstrating how the image's profane trajectory served as a new Historical narrative which transcended the collapse of the Soviet Union. The emergence of a profane trajectory did not preclude the existence of popular official versions, but grew up alongside them over the course of 'Late Socialism.' The official versions had long used Chapaev's mass appeal as a vehicle for state interests. The chapter begins with a discussion of Chapaev 'folklore,' which was collected (and/or manufactured) in the wake of the 1934 film's widespread popularity. Initially embraced as genuine folk productions (which, in some cases, they were), Chapaev folklore increasingly strained the limits of academic credulity in the post-Stalin era. Although such folklore continued to be collected until the final years of the Soviet Union, by the late 1950s it was inevitably associated with the mendacious culture of Stalinism.

The popularity of the Vasilievs' film was augmented and perpetuated by an official culture eager to capitalize on its success. Rather than fading over time, Chapaev's image was continuously recycled in children's books, cartoon's, popular histories, and anniversary screenings. It was an easy transition from this endless repetition to the comic lampoons of official culture which began to emerge in the 1960s. Chapaev was far from the only official symbol to receive the comic treatment, but his prominence in sacral state culture was replicated in the realm of the profane. Chapaev, engaged in countless obscene and absurd scenarios with Pet'ka and Anka, became the face of the Late Socialist culture of irony.

Because it was transgressive, this comic incarnation could bridge the cultural gap created by the Soviet Union's demise: becoming a usable symbol of the Soviet past in the uncertain landscape of the Russian 1990s. Collections of Soviet jokes and absurdist adventures used Chapaev as a vehicle to reinterpret Soviet History through the lens of parody and thereby integrate it with the new reality. The layers of meaning embedded in Chapaev's image could only be understood by those who had experienced Soviet culture, who participated in Soviet history. This image incorporated within it all the stages of Soviet cultural evolution: from the chaos of revolution and civil war to idealistic early efforts to write its History, from the triumphant centralized culture of Stalinism to the era of irony and disintegration. Now, for readers of Viktor Pelevin's cult novel *Chapaev and the Void*, or fans of the computer game *Chapaev and Pet'ka Save the Galaxy*, Chapaev had become the face of the post-Soviet 1990s.

Since his ascendance on New Year's Eve, 1999, Vladimir Putin has sought to stabilize the politics, economy, and culture of the Russian Federation. In more recent years, as economic projections and international politics have become increasingly uncertain, the emphasis on culture has only increased. Cultural stability, especially insofar as it concerns the interests and influence of the state, requires a stable History. Popular culture in the 1990s tended to emphasize "The Russia We Lost," either skipping over the Soviet period entirely or treating it ironically. The Putin administration has actively sought to integrate the legacy of the Soviet period within the broader arc of Russian History. In his 2005 address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, Putin admonished the Russian people to "acknowledge that the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major [or 'the greatest'] geopolitical disaster of the century."⁷³⁴ While

⁷³⁴ "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation, April 25, 2005," <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/22931>. (Retrieved 3/22/2017). There has been controversy about how to render the Russian word *krupneishii*. The Kremlin's official English translation of the speech renders it "a major geopolitical disaster," but the word does signify the superlative.

most of the speech emphasizes the immediate economic and political justifications for this assessment, the underlying concern is clearly with restoring a sense of continuity to the grand Historical narrative.

This function has typically been performed by the memory of the Great Patriotic War, the sacrality of which is uniformly backed by popular consensus. Countless parades, speeches, films, novels and works of scholarship continually bear testament to this seminal moment in Soviet/Russian History. The search for a popular symbol which could transcend the particular moment of 1941-45, and thereby incorporate the entire span of Soviet History, has proved more complicated. Arguably, no other symbol is as suited for the task as Chapaev, and it is no coincidence that Putin has increasingly included it in his symbolic repertoire. As recently as 2009, his favorite film was allegedly *Autumn Marathon (Osenii marafon)*, a 1979 dark comedy, which Putin supposedly claimed to watch at least once a year.⁷³⁵ In 2014, during Putin's annual call-in television appearance, *Direct Line (Priamaia liniia)*, he claimed, apparently for the first time publically, that his favorite film was "Chapaev, of course."⁷³⁶

The extent to which Chapaev functions as a condensed symbolic language is particularly evident in Putin's decision to give a statue of "our beloved hero---Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev" to Genadii Ziuganov, the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, for his birthday. Ziuganov noted that Putin had previously given him a copy of *The Communist Manifesto* and that the present addition was "a serious hint (*seriezny namek*)."⁷³⁷ Putin responded that "in such times" it had become necessary "to somehow orient ourselves in that direction (*Vremena takie, znaete, nado kak-to orientirovat'sia na eto napravlenie*)."⁷³⁸ Here, the inherently slippery nature of Chapaev's image provides a fitting complement to Putin's notorious ambiguity. Although Putin never specified what 'that direction' is, Ziuganov interpreted the statement to mean a "strengthening of the patriotic line."⁷³⁹ Although this statement is hardly much clearer than Putin's, Ziuganov seems to be indicating that, whereas Russian 'patriotism' in the 1990s had typically featured the repudiation of the Soviet legacy, 'such times' as the present required a patriotism without excuses, a History without gaps.

There were more straightforward ways of indicating this, and the elusiveness of Putin's gesture did not go unnoticed. Several days later, the online version of the St. Petersburg journal *City 812*, posted quotes from a variety of political and cultural leaders speculating about the intended meaning. One member of the Communist Party's St. Petersburg committee believed it was meant to symbolize that Ziuganov was a real Communist, "in spite of all the mud flung at him by all the suits and pseudo-communists like Tiulkin and his ilk." Viktor Tiulkin, the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation thought

⁷³⁵ "Kak nemetskii zhurnalst stal zvezdoi *Osenego marafona*," Stat'ia iz gazety: *Ezhedel'nik 'Argumenty i Fakty*, №48 25/11/2009. Retrieved 3/22/17.

Gleb Stashkov, "Pochemu president Putin ran'she liubil odin fil'm, a teper' poliubil drugoi," Blog: <http://www.online812.ru/2014/04/21/010/>. (Retrieved 3/22/17).

⁷³⁶ "Putin skazal, chto ego liubimyi fil'm—"Chapaev", *RIA Novosti*, 17/4/14. <http://ria.ru/society/20140417/1004323786.html>. (Retrieved 12/19/15).

⁷³⁷ "Putin 's namekom' podaril Ziuganovu na iubelei figurku Chapaeva," <http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/1075237/> (Retrieved 12/19/15).

⁷³⁸ Ibid.

⁷³⁹ Ibid.

that Putin's gifts were meant to remind Ziuganov of the communist "ideals and principles" they had forgotten.⁷⁴⁰ Others speculated that it might contain a veiled threat that Putin might send Ziuganov into combat in Eastern Ukraine, while others joked that he was probably just re-gifting the statue. It is equally possible that the gesture was a teasing reference to Ziuganov's peasant origins or to the bumbling enthusiasm of the contemporary Communist Party.

This does not indicate that Chapaev is merely 'a floating signifier.' Much more than that he is a positive symbol of the Soviet legacy that contains enough intrinsic complexity to avoid being easily pigeonholed as crude endorsement of any particular aspect of it. This potential ambiguity has been present in the image from its origins in the man himself. In 2015, the city council of the Eastern Ukrainian city of Volnovakha avoided the destruction of their local Chapaev monument in accordance with Ukrainian de-communization laws by having its name changed to 'The Cossack.'⁷⁴¹ Here Chapaev's utilization of the popular and culturally heterodox imagery of the steppe hero seems to come full circle. Yet in the end, he was too heavily associated with the Soviet legacy to survive in modern Ukraine. In 2016, the statue was destroyed and replaced with a "memorial to the Ukrainian soldiers killed in the zone of the ATO."⁷⁴²

Although sentiments in the Russian Federation are not as polarized as in Ukraine, society is far from having achieved a consensus on questions of History and politics. Despite a sometimes monolithic appearance, Putin and *Edinaia Rossiya* (the United Russia party) must maintain a perpetual balance between forces that are usually far from cohesive. Any unified historical narrative beyond that goes beyond the relative agreement surrounding the Second World War must account for a diversity of opinions and perspectives.

Arguably the most ambitious attempt to achieve this was a much noted retelling of Chapaev on state television that preceded Putin's public embrace of 'the beloved hero.' Between the 13th and 21st of February 2013, *Rossiia 1* released a twelve-part miniseries adaptation called *The Passion of Chapaev (Strasti po Chapaiu)*. A clear departure from previous incarnations, this Chapaev, as played by the Ukrainian actor Sergei Strel'nikov, is a dashing young heartthrob whose 'passion' is just as much a matter of romantic escapades as existential or historical suffering. The series is particularly notable for its inclusion of so many strands of the Chapaev mythology. Numerous episodes missing from the novel and film are contained in the miniseries: including the early life on the Volga, the tension with Trotsky, and the love triangle with the Furmanovs. There is even a nod to the jokes in a scene where Vasili Ivanovich and Pet'ka get drunk and measure their greatness against that of Lenin through reference to how much liquor each can hold.

Opinions of the series varied widely. It was equally loved and hated for its depictions of Reds and Whites, the prominence of romantic and sexual plots, or the neglect of historical accuracy for the sake of entertainment. Numerous critics lamented the fact that the series

⁷⁴⁰ "Chto imel na vidu Putin, podaril Zuiganovu Chapaeva?" Podgotovila Emiliia Kundysheva. <http://www.online812.ru/2014/06/30/007/>. (Retrieved 8/3/15).

⁷⁴¹ "Pamiatnik Chapaevu v Volnovakhe spasli ot snosa, pereimenovav v pamiatnik kozaku," <http://gordonua.com/news/politics/Pamyatnik-CHapaevu-v-Volnovahe-spasli-ot-snosa-postanoviv-chto-eto-teper-pamyatnik-kozaku-105535.html>. 7 noiabria 2015. (Retrieved 8/3/15).

⁷⁴² "Dekommunizatsiia: Chapaeva v Volnovakhe ne spasla I 'maskirovka.'" <https://www.ukrinform.ru/rubric-regions/2092456-dekommunizacia-capaeva-v-volnovahe-ne-spasla-i-maskirovka.html>. (Retrieved 3/22/17).

somehow failed to depict the ‘real’ Chapaev. Viktor Kozhemiako, the author of a critical review in *Pravda*, lamented the fact that no one seemed to be interested in “how Chapaev fought, even though this was the main work of his life.” The review, entitled “Chapai has Returned to a Strange Country,” recapitulates countless Soviet-era articles in *Pravda* and other papers that used re-releases of the film, or anniversaries of Chapaev’s life and death, as opportunities to comment on how much the country had changed in the interim. Here the transformation is negative, as “the majority of contemporary viewers have been raised on the post-Soviet screen, where they have become accustomed to amorous, and above all—sexual, desires.”⁷⁴³ Kozhemiako scolds the creators for neglecting “the fact that the real Chapaev completely abstained from drinking and smoking,” an oft-repeated aphorism from the Soviet era which has no documented basis in historical fact beyond claims first made by his children and other acquaintances in the Stalinist era. Not only had “this new film” distorted the historical figure of Chapaev, “it has destroyed the old one—a genuine classic. The young will watch it and say: ‘Now it is clear who Chapaev was. The portrayal in the Soviet film is completely untrue.’”⁷⁴⁴

The fear that a new incarnation of a beloved work will simultaneously resurrect and kill it is a common byproduct of artistic adaptations. The post-Soviet context added to this an anxiety that this somehow involved the destruction of the Historical past (or of a well-worn heroic mythology). While this has often been the case in the aftermath of the collapse, the purpose of the *The Passion* was arguably quite different. Rather than preserving a particular version of Chapaev, the series aimed to encompass and recapitulate the entire Chapaev Phenomenon: harnessing its popular Historical valence to incorporate the Soviet Historical legacy in a more serious way than Pelevin, or collections of Soviet-era jokes, allowed.

The adaptation of Chapaev could never be just another historical drama on state television. Aleksandr Timofeev, the deputy editor of *Russaia narodnaia liniia*, claimed that “this film” was “without exaggeration, epochal” and represented “a critical moment in the social perception of the conflict between the Whites and the Reds.”⁷⁴⁵ Convinced that the “ideology” of the new Russia had been defined by “anti-sovietism,” the author welcomes as unprecedented a film about the Russian Civil War that does not glorify the Whites or demonize the Reds. In this film, “the Whites shoot women, children, and old people, drink and play cards, engage in lewd conversations, and do not fight for an idea, but only to ‘crush the Red snake’ and take revenge for their relatives.”⁷⁴⁶ The Reds, meanwhile, have meaningful discussions about the existence of god, frequently cross themselves, and kiss icons. The very first episode depicts Chapaev building a church. While the idea of Bolsheviks having any connection with religion may be taken as either ridiculous or blasphemous, the account of Chapaev building a church, while not widely disseminated, was mentioned by one of his close subordinates at least as early as 1934.⁷⁴⁷

⁷⁴³ Viktor Kozhemiako, “Priskakal Chapai, da v chuzhuiu stranu,” *Pravda*, №.25, March 7, 2013.

⁷⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁵ “*Strasti po Chapaiu kak perelomnyi moment*”

http://ruskline.ru/news_rl/2013/02/28/strasti_po_chapayu_kak_perelomnyj_moment/. (Retrieved 8/3/15).

⁷⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁴⁷ One of Chapaev’s junior officers, I.T. Strel’tsov, remembers that he first met the commander while the latter was building a church with the *artel’* in the village of Klintsovka prior to the war. RGVA-f.28361, op.1, d.783 “*Stenogrammy obshchego sobraniia Chapaevskogo zemliachestva. 15 maia 1934*”, 4.

Timofeev claims that, taken as a whole, the goal of the series is “to depict the Russian in the Soviet” and this is not necessarily an a-historical impulse.⁷⁴⁸

Russian society remains deeply divided about the legacy of Soviet History and many have resented the reintroduction of a Soviet popular hero. Others with more pro-Soviet inclinations saw in the film only another effort to demonize the Bolsheviks. One blogger referred to the series as “the apotheosis of falsehood” made up of “historical sources read on Wikipedia” with every aspect calculated to depict the Soviet characters as crude caricatures full of “African passions and drunken Russian debauchery.”⁷⁴⁹ The depiction of a love triangle between Chapaev, Furmanov, and Furmanov’s wife --rather than being taken for the elaboration upon actual events that it is-- is explained as merely a way of lampooning “the jealous commissar---which is just the same caricature (*shtamp*) as the lustful Chekist.”⁷⁵⁰

In spite (and arguably because) of its detractors, the series effectively established a dialogue in Russian society about the relationship between Soviet and Russian History that sometimes managed to transcend the typical binaries. This did not require universal agreement about the artistic merit or historical accuracy of the production. On the contrary, the contemporary internet environment of user-generated content thrives on controversy, and its existence only serves the purpose of generating online discussion---thereby helping to link the new incarnation of Chapaev to its moment.

The fact that many critiques of the series come from outlets like *Pravda* only reinforces a sense of deliberation here. Viktor Kozhemiako’s assertion in *Pravda* that the series should called “How Chapai Chased the Ladies (*Kak Chapai po babam khodil*)” was echoed by the Vice-Prime Minister, Dmitrii Rogozin, on his Facebook page: “All of our films about historical personages (Chapaev, Kolchak, etc.) are ultimately about the same womanizer (*babnik*) with a passion (*so strast’iu*) for changing clothes (*pereodevaniu*).”⁷⁵¹ These critiques of one official outlet in the news feed of the Vice-Prime Minister ultimately lend the series an air of independence and an element of subversion that is critical to popular vitality in the Russian context.

An element of subversion is arguably crucial to popular legitimacy in Russian culture. In order to bridge the epochal shifts which have characterized the history of the region for centuries, a Russian hero cannot wholly conform to the mores and conventions of the present era. This has arguably been a critical factor in the legitimacy and longevity of most truly popular Russian heroes, beginning at least as early as the reign of Peter the Great. The names which continue to resonate over time, from Peter and Pushkin to Chapaev and Putin, belong to those who are, in one way or another, transgressive figures. Chapaev’s transgression was rooted in the fact that he was a peasant hero in a worker’s state, a representative of the periphery who actively resisted the authority of the center. His unlikely ascendance was unwittingly facilitated by Dmitrii

⁷⁴⁸ *Strasti po Chapaiu kak perelomnyi moment*”

http://ruskline.ru/news_rl/2013/02/28/strasti_po_chapayu_kak_perelomnyj_moment/. Retrieved 8/3/15.

⁷⁴⁹ “Apofeoz lazhi. O fil’me «Strasti po Chapaiu»,” <http://www.odnako.org/blogs/apofeoz-lazhi-o-filme-strasti-po-chapayu/>. (Retrieved 8/3/15).

⁷⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁷⁵¹ Viktor Kozhemiako, “Priskakal Chapai, da v chuzhuiu stranu,” *Pravda*, №.25, March 7, 2013.

Aleksander Timofeev, “«Strasti po Chapaiu» kak perelomnyi moment,” *Russkaia narodnaia liniia*, http://ruskline.ru/news_rl/2013/02/28/strasti_po_chapayu_kak_perelomnyj_moment/. (Retrieved 8/3/15).

Furmanov's unsuccessful attempt to appropriate the commander's heroic status for himself. In the film, Chapaev's paradoxical status was enabled by offsetting his subversive potential with comedy: simultaneously associating him with a seminal moment in Stalinist popular culture and making him an ideal candidate for the later carnivalization of that culture. Although Chapaev's official image was increasingly separated from its subversive potential over time (sacralized and domesticated in house museums, children's stories, and triumphal Histories), it was the popular carnival incarnation which transcended the collapse of the civilization that produced it. This subversive element cannot be jettisoned entirely, but like its predecessors serves as a vehicle of symbolic reconciliation.

It is notable that the bulk of the critiques emanating from official sources center on the scandalous inclusion of sexual plotlines. While the inclusion of sex in other historical films might be merely a nod to the westernized tastes of Russian audiences, it is hardly accidental in this context. This is not merely a matter of "dragging out all the dirty laundry."⁷⁵² Tracing the development of *Chapaev* over time not only indicates the centrality of transgression to Chapaev's popular appeal and longevity, it reveals the symbolic importance ascribed to women in the modulation of the mythology's sacred/profane dynamic. The absence or presence of women is never incidental.

Dmitrii Furmanov only made the conflict between himself and Chapaev ideological by excluding his wife from the story. Anna Furmanova's efforts to include a female character in the film adaptation were an important pretext for the creation of the *Anka* character. Yet the inclusion of a woman involved channeling the sexual plotline away from the political power dynamic between commander and commissar, into a strange secondary plotline where the palpable sexual tension centers on the operation of a machine gun. The official trajectory increasingly involved de-sexualized heroines like Maria Popova or, in the case of domestic episodes centering on hearth and home, Chapaev's daughter, Klavdiia, who gradually established herself as the caretaker of her father's sacred legacy. In the profane carnival universe of jokes and parodies, Anka is rendered ideologically unreliable by her uncontrollable sexual appetites which keep her constantly crossing the line of conflict in search of love. Pelevin's postmodern Anka is cold and unattainable, the standard love plot rendered sterile by the apparent disintegration of the epistemological center and attending loss of narrative drive.

Anka's debauched sexuality in the jokes becomes a more generalized feminine heritage in the series. If the ladies love Chapaev too much, the sin is decidedly theirs. He is ultimately presented as less of a womanizer than a victim of feminine lust—which appears conspicuously debauched beside its dashing masculine counterpart. This is most notable in the depiction of his love affair with Anna Furmanova, which is portrayed as entirely her initiative and is exclusively a matter of sex, rather than the emotional intimacy that characterized (and may have been the extent of) the actual relationship. In the end, the sexual plotlines effectively incorporate a permissible degree of scandal: using succubus scapegoats to deflect attention from the more serious political tensions inherent in a Civil War film attempting a positive depiction of the Bolsheviks.

⁷⁵² Comment by a_slavin, February 19, 2013, 06:07:59 UTC, on feed attached to "O teleseriale 'Strasti po Chapaevu'", <http://a-slavin.livejournal.com/37953.html>. (Retrieved 8/3/15).

For all its much noted ‘passion,’ the recent incarnation of Chapaev is still a step in the direction of re-sacralization. Chapaev, although a Bolshevik commander, is essentially a patriotic defender of his homeland: a 21st century Russian male with healthy masculine appetites. Dmitrii Furmanov, for his part, shoots the commander in the back during the course of battle, consummating his long symbolic fall from ambitious ideological paragon to jealous cuckold. In the next incarnation, a 3D animated children’s film slated to come out in 2017, Chapaev, Pet’ka, and Anka face some kind of “dark force” and “Reds and Whites must join together to defeat the forces of evil.” The director claims that, “for us, Chapaev is a gallant and courageous commander who does not know fear.”⁷⁵³ Furmanov is conspicuously absent from the poster, eclipsed by the heroic image of Chapaev, which he failed to master and has proven to be as enduring as the people themselves.

⁷⁵³ Anastasiia Duginova, “V Rossii snimaiut polnometrazhnyi mul’tfil’m pro Chapaeva,” Builleten’ Kinoprokatchika, 20.03.2016, http://www.kinometro.ru/production/show/name/Chapaev_mult_3974. (Retrieved 3/23/2017).

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