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**Fighting for a Role:
The Lives of *Anka-Pulemetchitsa***

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Fighting for a Role: The Lives of *Anka-Pulemetchitsa*

After seeing the movie *Chapaev*, Nina Onilova decided to become a machine-gunner. She was inspired, like many Soviet women at the time, by the character of Anka the Machine-Gunner (*Anka-pulemetchitsa*), an industrial textile worker who volunteers to fight with Chapaev and insists on being taught how to operate a machine gun. Whether by accident or fate, Onilova ended up assigned to the 25th Chapaev Division: the unit organized and commanded by the famous Civil War commander before his death in 1919. Known affectionately as “Our Anka,” Onilova forged her own name through some of the most brutal combat of World War II.¹ Wounded during the defense of Odessa, she went on to play a crucial role defending the city of Sevastopol during the first and second German assaults, where she is estimated to have killed anywhere between 500 and 2,000 Germans with her machine gun before dying in battle on March 8, 1942.²

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.”³ Onilova refers to Miasnikova as ‘the real Anka’ (*nastoiashchaia Anka*) even while acknowledging that she was only an actress. This tendency to insist on the intrinsic reality of the Vasiliev Brothers’ 1934 film was a curious element of its broader reception. *Chapaev* was one of the first large scale productions to incorporate the naturalistic usage of new sound technology, adding substantially to the overall impression created by the actors and actresses on screen. The state augmented this effect through

1 Ia.Vas’kovskii, Iu.Novikov, *My Chapaevtsy—dokumental’naia povest’* (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo DOSAAF, 1968), p.125.

2 NA IRI-RAN—f.3, op.3, d.63, l.2; Avtor-sostavitel’ sbornika podpolkovnik V.I. Kovalev, *Chapaevskaia—Gvardeiskaia* (Politpravlenie Kievskogo Voennogo Okruga), 44-45; Liudmila Pavlichenko, *Geroicheskaia byl oborona Sevastopolia 1941-1942gg.* (Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’stvo Politicheskoi Literatury: Moskva, 1958), p.34.

3 Liudmila Pavlichenko, *Geroicheskaia byl oborona Sevastopolia 1941-1942gg.*, p.35.

its reportage, which repeatedly described the audience's inability to distinguish between the screen and reality (thereby emphasizing the event as a miracle of Soviet technology).⁴

While Onilova's letter reflects this broader phenomenon, it also indicates the absence of a more obvious recipient. There was, strictly speaking, no such person as *Anka-pulemetchitsa*. According to the Vasilievs, "Anka actually hung somewhere between heaven and earth." She was a character, created "to vindicate the right of women to serve in the army."⁵ Yet, as this vague description indicates, she was not entirely fictional either. 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. More than anyone else, it was Furmanov's wife, Anna Nikitichna Furmanova, who inspired this prototypical Soviet icon of female independence. The story of Anna and Anka reveals a marked ambivalence about the place of women in Soviet society: truly hanging somewhere between heaven and earth.

Mitya and Naia—A Civil War Romance

In the spring of 1919, an ambitious young Dmitrii Furmanov began his assignment as the political commissar of the 25th Division under the command of Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev. With him came his wife Anna Nikitichna, with whom he had a passionate, if sometimes frustrated, relationship. Writing on May 13, Furmanov demonstrates the intensity typical of most diary entries he placed under the heading of 'Naia' (his pet name for his wife). "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."⁶ 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 to her, but

4 While sound had been previously incorporated into a handful of films, it tended to be highly experimental: reflecting widespread concerns that the naturalistic usage of sound would detract from the visual language of cinema, creating mere onscreen theater.

5 RGALI-f.2733, op.1, d.428, l.43.

6 NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1,5.

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."⁷

His cool response did not 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 "lousy 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".⁸ 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.⁹

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."¹⁰ The entry ends with a monologue, addressed to Naia

7 NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1, 6.

8 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), pp.13, 28 & 67.

9 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.

10 Ibid, 8.

(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 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.”¹¹

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 1905.¹² 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.¹³ 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

11 NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1,8. “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), pp.204-5.

12 NIOR—f.320, k.17, d.2, l.37.

13 Ibid, 38.

future husband.¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵ She apparently resisted his advances, and it is unclear to what extent 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.¹⁶

It seems 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. Although this passage was written years after the couple’s interlude with Chapaev, it provides considerable insight into Furmanov’s thinking about his wife, which is highly relevant to events which transpired between the couple

14 NIOR—f.320, k.17, d.2, l, 39.

15 Ibid, 42-3.

16 Ibid, 12.

and the commander during the summer of 1919.

After receiving several letters from Naia (who in 1921 was serving in Central Asia), 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?”¹⁷

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

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.”¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹

17 NIOR—f.320, k.7, d.4, l.33.

18 Ibid, 35.

19 Ibid, 34.

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!”²⁰ 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.

Mitya, Naia, and Chapai—A Bolshevik Love Triangle

In the midst of his pleading with Naia not to ‘do it’, Furmanov begged her to think back on their time “in 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.”²¹ 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

20 NIOR—f.320, k.7, d.4, l, 36.

21 Ibid, 34.

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”.²² 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.²³ 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 June 9th, the day that the 25th Division liberated Ufa, Furmanov wrote a long and bitter diatribe under the heading ‘Jealousy.’ 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.”²⁴

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

22 NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1, l.14.

23 Ibid, 22.

24 Ibid, 27.

even closer.”²⁵ 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.”²⁶ 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”.²⁷

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...”²⁸

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.”²⁹ His evidence is largely derived from looking deeply into Chapaev and Naia’s eyes, in the manner of his intended ‘psychological experiment’. When confronting his wife with Chapaev’s request that

25 NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1, l. 29.

26 Ibid, 29.

27 Ibid, 31.

28 Ibid, 33.

29 Ibid, 35.

she visit him, he had looked “intently” into her eyes to discern the effect on her.³⁰ 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.”³¹

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.”³² 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.”³³ 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

30 NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1, l. 31.

31 Ibid, 36.

32 Ibid, 43.

33 Dmitrii Furmanov, *Chapaev*, p.256.

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.³⁴ 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.³⁵ 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 remove unreliable elements of the command staff and replace them with our own, with communists.”³⁶

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.”³⁷ 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*).”³⁸ 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.”³⁹ 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,

34 NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1, l.44.

35 Ibid, 47.

36 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.

37 Ibid, 48.

38 Ibid, 54.

39 Ibid, 58.

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!"⁴⁰

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 instead 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:

Anna Nikitichna. 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

40 NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1, l. 62.

few words, then give your answer, I feel that we will soon be separated forever. I'm waiting. Love,
Chapaev⁴¹

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.⁴²

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.⁴³ 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.”⁴⁴

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

41 NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1, l. 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.

42 NIOR—f.320, k.15, d.7, l.9.

43 NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.1,l.68

44 Ibid, 83 and 87.

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 had not said anything earlier, because he did not want to trouble 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.⁴⁵ 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.”⁴⁶

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.”⁴⁷ 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

45 NIOR--f.320, k.2, d.12, l.2

46 Ibid, 3.

47 NIOR--f.320, k.6, d.1, l.72.

seemed to relish in the fact that he was essentially attempting a *coup d'état*.⁴⁸ 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.”⁴⁹ Another claimed that Chapaev was “a hooligan, not a commander,” who was guilty of “unrestrained drunkenness” and conducting “counter-revolutionary plots” that “threatened...the entire revolution.”⁵⁰

Yet Furmanov had miscalculated – 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 the latter’s request to be transferred from the division.⁵¹ In the end, both the commissar 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.⁵² 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

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

49 NIOR—f.320, k.2, d.13., l.1-2. Nestor Makhno and Nikiifor 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).

50 NIOR--f.320, k.2, d.14, l.1-3.

51 *Legendarnyi Nachdiv*, №.239, 184.

52 Dmitrii Furmanov, *Chapaev*, 255.

had previously seemed insurmountable.”⁵³ 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.

Yet, Furmanov clearly considered his reassignment as Secretary of Political Affairs on the Turkestan Front 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 is “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.”⁵⁴ He left the 25th Division in a “state of nervousness, bordering on hysteria.”⁵⁵

In life, Furmanov had left the field of battle in disgrace, but death provided an opportunity to rewrite the tale. On the evening of September 4, 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, 1919.⁵⁶ 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

53 Dmitrii Furmanov, *Chapaev*, 257.

54 NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.2, l. 14-16.

55 Ibid, 1.

56 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.

wounded in the hand and head. His body was never found.⁵⁷

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.”⁵⁸ 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”).⁵⁹ With the threat of Chapaev removed, Furmanov’s jealousy no longer had an object. Even Naia’s “immediate participation” in “the scandal” could now be framed as an act of salvation: “It seems that my life was saved by my dear Naia, my benevolent genius, my radiant fairy.”⁶⁰

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, and 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 to form a new political staff and “return to

57 A. Kononov, *Rasskaz’e o Chapaeve* (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), pp.328-333. *Legendarnyi Nachdiv*, pp.245-247.

58 NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.2, l.11.

59 Ibid, 14.

60 Ibid, 15-16.

my native division!”⁶¹ 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.⁶² 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.⁶³

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.⁶⁴ 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 and barely mentioned the broader events tearing the nation apart.⁶⁵ 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,

61 NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.2, l.11

62 Ibid, 21.

63 DOTsMVSRF--4/16.206=2.

64 NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.2, l.38.

65 Ibid, 45-6.

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 (*vpolnost’iu*),” but he “had no time or patience” for “totality (*polnost’*)” anyway.⁶⁶

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 versions, called “Stepan’s Love (Notes of a Commissar),” the names of the characters have all been changed.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ 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.”⁶⁹

Ultimately, 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.

66 NIOR—f.320, k.6, d.2, l.46.

67 NIOR--f.320, k.9, d.20, l.1.

68 NIOR--f.320, k.9, d.21, l.1.

69 NIOR--f.320, k.9, d.20, l.12.

The truly substantial ideological conflict, that between the commissar and his wife, was seemingly much too real for fiction. Naia's brief cameo in the novel, the character of Zoia Pavlovna, can only be discerned by one familiar with the history. Zoia, like Naia, is the leader of the division's cultural section. She has no romantic connections to either the commissar or the commander. Like Naia, she is present at the bridge in Ufa alongside Klychkov (Furmanov) and there is, perhaps, a nod to her independent streak in the reference to her being "always on horseback."⁷⁰ In her most important scene, Zoia is called to the stage by Chapaev after a performance. The commander presents her with a bouquet of flowers and the hall erupts with "loud cries and desperate applause," which constitutes "her greatest and most unforgettable reward from the red soldiers."⁷¹

"There were also women" (byli i zhenshchiny)

Shortly after her husband's death (at the age of 35) from meningitis in 1926, Anna compiled and published selections from his diaries during the period from March 1917 to November 1918 under the title, "The Path to Bolshevism." As the name implies, the collection was heavily edited to give a sense of unity and teleology which does not come across in the unprocessed version. 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."⁷²

Over the course of decades, Anna continued to promote this image of her husband as the quintessential Soviet subject through 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,"

⁷⁰ Dmitrii Furmanov, *Chapaev*, p.248.

⁷¹ Ibid, 230.

⁷² Dmitrii Furmanov, *Put' k Bol'shevizmu-Stranitsy dnevnika* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1928), pp. 9-10.

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.”⁷³ 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.⁷⁴ Her many portrayals of Chapaev were equally influential. In Furmanova’s accounts, the commander 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.”⁷⁵

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?*’).”⁷⁶ 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 requests to accompany them on horseback as they survey the troops, she “jumped on a horse without waiting for permission.”⁷⁷ The commander is clearly impressed and eventually becomes one of her “biggest supporters” in the division.⁷⁸

Most importantly, Furmanova’s accounts offer constant reminders of the fact that “there were also women” in the 25th Division.⁷⁹ There was Marusia Riabinina, who rallied the scattered and disoriented Chapaevtsy with her cry “Follow me comrades!” before charging across a river during the battle of Buguruslan. Her companions successfully forded the crossing under heavy machine-gun fire, but Marusia was killed in the process.⁸⁰ Furmanova claims there were “many

73 NIOR—f.320, k.16, d.13.

74 Ibid—f.320, k.16, d.12, l.6; f.320, k.15, d.10, l.6.

75 NIOR—f.320, k.15, d.8, l.10.

76 Ibid—f.320, k.15, d.7, l.6.

77 Ibid—f.320, k.17, d.2, l.21-22.

78 Ibid—f.320, k.15, d.7, l.9.

79 Ibid—f.320, k.15, d.8, l.19.

80 Ibid—f.320, k.11, d.26, l.3.

such women” willing to “fight for their homeland” and to “give all for the Revolution.”⁸¹ There was “Zinaida Patrikeeva,” captured by the Whites who carved a red star in her forehead, and Tatiana Petrovna, 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.⁸²

There was also 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*).⁸³ In 1929, Anna Furmanova was the acting chair of the Society 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.”⁸⁴ By April 11, 1930, her authority had been thoroughly undermined by “an atmosphere of bickering” and “intrigue” attributed to “the arrival of Popova in the Society (*zemliachestvo*).” 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.⁸⁵

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 the film.⁸⁶

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

81 Ibid—f.320, k.15, d.8, l.19-20.

82 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.

83 RGALI—f.2655, op.1, d.538, l.95.

84 RGVA—f.28361, op.1, d.4, l.69.

85 Ibid, 85 and 134.

86 RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.747, l.52 ; RGALI—f.2733, op.1, d.435, l.28.

explaining that the sides of the gun are called “cheeks” (*shchechki*). 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 surrounding the issue of women ‘in the ranks’ 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.⁸⁷ 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.⁸⁸

Despite her influence on the character of Anka, Furmanova would never be publically linked to her. That honor increasingly went to Maria Popova. Her matronly visage appeared above the heading “the prototype of Anka-pulemetchitsa” in anthologies about the Chapaevtsy.⁸⁹ Her numerous articles assured generations of Soviet readers that “We Chapaevtsy” were “all one big family.”⁹⁰ 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.”⁹¹

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

88 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.

89 *Govoriat Chapaevtsy—Dokumenty, Vospominaniia, Materialy* (Bashkirkoe Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo: Ufa, 1971), p.162.

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

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