

LIVING SOULS

DMITRY BYKOV



ADVANCE READING COPY



ALMA BOOKS

ALMA BOOKS LTD
London House
243–253 Lower Mortlake Road
Richmond
Surrey TW9 2LL
United Kingdom
www.almabooks.com

Living Souls

Russian text Copyright © 2006 by Dmitry Bykov
Translation rights into the English language are acquired via
FTM Agency, Ltd, Russia, 2007
English translation rights © Cathy Porter 2010

Dmitry Bykov asserts his moral right to be identified as the author of this work in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

This advance reading copy printed in UK by MPG Books Ltd

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise), without the prior written permission of the publisher.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not be resold, lent, hired out or otherwise circulated without the express prior consent of the publisher.

PART ONE

Departure

CHAPTER ONE

In the Camp of the Russian Warriors

“All go unto the same place; all are of
the dust and all turn to dust again.”

Ecclesiastes 3:20

I

By evening Gromov and his unit had taken the village of Degunino again. He had to hurry, he hadn't enough men to attack at night and they were all exhausted, and if it dragged on to the next day it might cut short his leave. He had to take it by the evening of 17th July, and he made it, with practically no casualties. The architect Krasnov twisted his ankle on the slippery clay of the famous Hill 16 and limped to the medic, who bandaged him up and sent him back. The rest were uninjured and already shacked up in their usual billets: it was the twelfth time they'd taken Degunino, and they all had a woman there.

It had poured with rain for three days without stopping, just slowing to a drizzle every so often to gather strength and throw it down again. The river Dresva burst its banks and became a foaming yellow torrent, and it sickened Gromov to have to wade across. Normally it was just a trickle, too shallow even to

swim in and cool down from the heat, and they would simply have jumped it: now it meant a whole fording manoeuvre that he would have to put in the report.

Lance corporal Gannushkin distinguished himself during the operation by bursting into song to raise company morale. “He set off at night on the night train!” he bawled raucously, slithering around the bottom, and continued with a lewd version about his testicles.

“What are you so happy about Gannushkin?” snapped Gromov. He was in a foul mood.

“I’m laughing, Captain!” Gannushkin grinned. “I’ll be tucked up bed with her soon, ready for some action!”

“Never mind that, I’ll give you action. Company, keep tight!”

Last time they were driven out of Degunino was a week ago, in a surprise attack by Ataman Batuga and his Cossack eagles – plump, well-fed youths smelling of hashish, home brew and meat, who had galloped up early in the morning, silently dispatched the patrols and driven the sleepy soldiers from their familiar haunts with whips. Most of Gromov’s men didn’t have time to grab their weapons – Batugin’s boys

just burst into the cottages and yanked them by their collars from their stoves and beds. It was humiliating. Gromov hadn’t slept, for two months he had been plagued by insomnia, waiting for his leave that could at any moment be cancelled, and he acted bravely too; in other circumstances he would have at least received a mention in the bulletin.

But they ended up looking like a bunch of idiots. He had taken out two, but they had to withdraw and the Cossacks hadn’t even chased them, and he dug in three kilometres from Degunino in a flat field of sunflowers to plan his counterattack. He had no idea how many men Batuga had, and the Command hadn’t sent reinforcements. There were fifty left in his company, theoretically enough to drive them out, but who knows how many Batuga had conscripted from the neighbouring villages.

On the 17th, his scout Redkin reported that after five days of revelries and firing rifles in the air the village was quiet. “They’re knackered, boss,” he said, with the familiarity of a friend. “We’ll take them with our bare hands, they’re too pissed to move.”

Gromov pondered. He didn’t like the quiet. In war things were never based on calculation, always on

intuition. His leave was in three days, and he knew his men were sick of sitting in their dugouts in the rain, and they had to take the village before the Cossacks sobered up. But he hung on another day, playing beggar-my-neighbour in his tent with his orderly Papatya, and only at 20.00 hours gave the signal to attack.

In the mauve half-light of dusk, under pounding streams of warm rain, they scrambled up Hill 16 a line abreast and advanced to the village, and discovered not one of Batuga's men there; the Cossacks had had their fun and galloped off.

Gromov was glad it hadn't come to a battle, but he knew Batuga wouldn't have simply retreated; it was a fair bet his boys had polished off all the meat and alcohol in Degunino and moved on to raid Khabarov or Pereyaslov, leaving Gromov and his men to suck their paws – after the Cossacks, as with Astrid Lindgren's Karlsson, there was never anything left.

He sat on the bed in his room, under a portrait of a fat whiskery peasant bearing an uncanny resemblance to the Bolshevik hero Marshall Budyonny. “What a cock-up, eh Redkin?” he asked his unfortunate scout in a weary voice, pulling off his muddy boots with a grimace of pain and pleasure.

“It was all quiet, comrade Captain!” his young friend said, forced out of embarrassment to address him more formally.

“All quiet,” he mocked him. “When will we learn to fight, Sergeant? Are we going to be Muscovites all our life?”

Soldiers from Moscow were despised in the army, but they fought no worse than the others; after three years of war the Federal Guard was in a pitiful state and anyone could send them packing.

“Government rabble. What shall I tell the Command, that the village was taken without a battle in the absence of the enemy?”

“Can't we just say we drove them out?”

“Better say we turned them into toads, they're more likely to believe us. Right, shove off, get out of my sight!”

Redkin quaked. He had a lovely girl in Degunino, plump and silly and playful, with a golden plait like straw, and he worried Gromov would punish him by sending him off on night patrol and put paid to their romantic meeting. But instead he picked Gannushkin, who he couldn't stand. It wasn't fair of course, but he made up for it by writing him up in the report.

Gannushkin was also looking forward to spending the night with his girl, Travka. She wasn't fussy about who she went with, despite being nothing to look at, and lived next to Degunino's church, a bizarre architectural construction covered in onion domes like a tree stump covered in mushrooms. No other village – and Gromov had seen plenty during the war – had such a hideous church. Travka worked as a cleaner there, and according to some even filled in for the priest who had been called up – a sure sign of the country's collapse; never before had a woman been known to serve in the Orthodox Church.

“Someone on the line for you, comrade Captain!” his orderly Papatya said, handing him his mobile.

“Dawn, Dawn! Earth here, do you hear me?” Colonel Zdrok's shrill voice shrieked in his ear.

“I hear you loud and clear. I'm in Degunino, comrade Colonel.”

“What the hell are you doing there Bonaparte, playing war games? We've captured the locality and we're in Degunino? I order you in plain Russian to advance on Baskakovo and rendezvous with Major Volokhov's Flying Guards and take the locality of Bobra in a joint operation, and they're sitting in Degunino mating

for their weddles? I'll give them the medal of the haemorrhoids First Class!...” (Zdrok tended to mix up his consonants and pronouns when angry.)

He raved on; the call was on Gromov's phone and he hadn't topped it up for a week.

“I had no such order, comrade Colonel...”

“You didn't?” Zdrok rose slowly to the boil. “Well you have now, you Red Army clown, that's why I'm calling you. You're to advance immediately on the locality of Baskakovo! Silently, at the double, under cover of darkness, you hear me Captain?”

“It's night, comrade Colonel, the men are tired,” Gromov protested in vain.

“What, you're questioning me? It's a shambles! Court martial in twenty-four hours!” bawled the Chief of Staff. “Snivelling pansy, dragging them to Degunino to get out of the rain!”

“I had orders to clear Degunino.”

“He had orders! He has a woman there...” Zdrok had reached his climax and trailed off, and was quickly roused again. “His men move three metres and they're tired – you'll soon be too tired to wipe your own backsides! I'm giving you peasants an hour's rest, and in five hours I expect to hear Captain Gromov's unit

has reached Baskakovo under cover of darkness and made contact with Major Volokhov!”

“Right then,” said Gromov lifelessly.

“Right in the neck! I’ll give you medals!...” Zdrok was off again, but at that moment the line crackled and went dead, and he was spared another dose of military folklore.

Gromov loathed Zdrok. It was because of men like the Chief of Staff of the Thirty-Sixth Guards that the army was a shambles. The rot had set in as soon as the war started and had spread exponentially, and there was no chance of military action taking care of him: people like Zdrok were never killed. This man took the most senseless decisions with idiotic stubbornness, and in addition to his strategic incompetence he liked to cause maximum grief to his men. How on earth was he to move them fifteen kilometres at night and link up with the mythical Volokhov? The rain had stopped, the sky was clearing, it was enough that they had taken Degunino for peace and harmony to be restored. The roads however were mud. Gromov cursed through his teeth.

“Konyshhev, get me Baskakovo,” he ordered his signaller.

Konyshhev was one of the few educated men in the regiment; he had all the codes in his head, and quickly dialled the twenty-digit number.

“Duty officer of the regiment here,” said a groggy voice.

“Put Selivanov on the line,” Gromov said.

The duty officer flicked a switch. “Captain Selivanov,” grunted Gromov’s old mate from the Kalashnikov classes.

“It’s me, Gromov. Tell me, is Major Volokhov with you?”

“We’ve been expecting him for two days, he’s supposed to liaise with someone and attack somewhere.” The Captain stifled a yawn. “He’s attacking everywhere with his eagles, he’ll never get here. Elite scum, they’re never on time. Volokhov this, Volokhov that – what exactly has Volokhov done?”

“It’s me he’s liaising with, I’m on my way to you now.”

“Where are you?”

“Degunino. I’ve just cleared it, for your information.”

“Well you won’t go hungry then. Cleared it of who exactly?”

Selivanov could be heard picking his teeth in his Baskakovo headquarters.

“Batuga the Cossack, you know him?”

“I’ll say,” Selivanov sniggered. “He’s been with his Marusya since this morning in Litmanov, the next station from here. How did you do it, Grom? You must mention in the report how he scarpers and this morning he’s in Litmanov. Mighty Gromov, conqueror of space and time, driving Batuga out with his shrieks!” He expanded at length on the subject; apparently it was the talk of the army.

“Knock it off!” Gromov interrupted him. Selivanov was cackling unpleasantly, imagining Batuga galloping from Degunino at the speed of light, with Gromov chasing behind in an ox cart. “He sent his men in – I never said he fought. I’m advancing at dawn.”

“Advance, advance, no point hanging around if you’ve eaten.”

“Right, over and out.”

Gromov wondered gloomily how he would break the news to his men. They had already turned in for the night and were dreaming round Degunino’s warm stoves, with their equally warm landladies, who bedded and boarded all the warring sides in turn, and

had already dragged up from their cellars what was left from Batuga’s revels.

At the thought of the march ahead and the general grumbling, he felt sick to his stomach. He decided to say nothing that night, and to raise the alarm at three in the morning. There was no point in him sleeping, it would be easier to stay awake than having to drag himself out of bed after a few hours.

“Okay, pack up in the next room and if there’s anything urgent call me.” He dismissed his signaller. “Papatya, tell Galya to get me something to eat.”

He always stayed in the same squat, stout, spacious cottage, with squat, middle-aged Galya, and he could never get over her endless supplies. No matter how many armies, bands and hordes passed through Degunino, she would bring pickled cucumbers and cabbage from the cellar for all of them, and various infusions and mysterious gruels the Muscovite Gromov had never tasted before, and Degunino’s thick sour cream and ice-cold milk, and there was always a pot of potatoes on the stove and a pie. “Eat, liberators, I put them on when I heard you were coming,” she would say.

It was all the more remarkable too in a village in which a quarter of the homes were burnt to the ground and a

good half had been pulverized in battles, with windows smashed and the whole side of one cottage missing.

Gromov had a good idea why all the armies liked to take Degunino. Despite countless lectures by Moscow political instructor Ploskorylov about the strategic importance of the area, and the wedge the masculine North was driving into the feminine South, at the very point where Hitler was driven back in '42 – and the outcome of that last war would otherwise have been very different – it was clear everyone had just one thing in mind: stuffing their faces. It's a major factor in war, and none of the neighbouring villages offered the same opportunities to sleep, guzzle and cuddle peasant women by the fire.

In three years he had taken no less than fifty localities, survived outside Oryol, and surrendered Trosno four times and recaptured it, and for the past six months, circling in the Degunino cauldron, his company had blessed their fate. In other villages people cursed them, or welcomed them grudgingly after suffering at the hands of the Cossacks or the Khazars, but nowhere else had he encountered the docile compliance with which Degunino welcomed its successive soldiers like an easygoing mistress.

All in turn were fed and given beds to sleep in and the delicious local mint vodka to drink, and however much Ploskorylov demanded that everyone who collaborated with the enemy be shot, even Zdrok turned a blind eye to things. It seemed to Gromov (he was drifting off to sleep now, with a pleasant heaviness in his stomach from Galya's smoked bacon and potatoes) that even if Ploskorylov's lousy plan to shoot every woman in Degunino was carried out, and by some miracle one of them hid in the orchards and survived, she would still have vodka and bacon and potatoes for the next happy heroes and would take them all on the stove, muddy and stinking and desperate for love.

Gromov knew he mustn't sleep, but he slept anyway, with his head slumped on the hefty, scrubbed-clean table – nowhere else had he seen such enormous tables, they seemed designed for a giant's banquet, and were an essential feature of every Degunino cottage. And as he dozed off, he could hear Galya talking in the next room with her neighbour Panya. No one knew Panya's full name, she was just Panya, a jolly snub-nosed woman who could have been thirty or forty, or even older, only in his dream she was different, sadder and more serious, and it was as if Galya, away from

people and on her own with her friend, had discarded her squat stout body and had become young and slender again, almost like a child.

They were talking in the bedroom she had shared with her husband, who she said had been conscripted (although according to Gannushkin all the peasants from Degunino were partisans in the surrounding forests, and their wives were feeding them). She slept alone there now, and Gromov didn't bother her; what would he want with this burly, uncommunicative forty-year-old woman, whose only words to him were "eat" and "stove"? And in his sleep he heard Galya and Panya quietly complaining and consoling each other in their high, girlish voices, just as girlish it seemed to him as their magically altered bodies. It was definitely Russian they were speaking, but he only had a vague sense of what it was about, although he could hear them as clearly through the thick log wall as if there was nothing between them. He couldn't make out what was so special about their language, only that it was extraordinarily powerful and precise and would have been impossible in real life, without Ploskorylov's bombast or the soldiers' smut, or the sprawling jargon of the official reports, as if they had had total command

of it since childhood, and were giving each thing its proper name. Some words he couldn't understand, others were familiar to him but used in unfamiliar ways, but he could guess their meaning just from the sound of them: calling oven tongs a little moon for instance, or a chicken a cauliflower, seemed so appropriate and natural he couldn't think why he hadn't used them himself. Oven tongs had an unpleasant angular ring to them, and the heavy casserole was always placed so readily on the table, gleaming in the moonlight. He smiled in his sleep as he heard them call a formation of soldiers a "buttock" for some reason, and there was something friendly and comforting about the chicken-cauliflower. He couldn't make out the actual subject of their conversation though, just that life wasn't easy for Galya and Panya, and as they poured their hearts out to each other, it was as if they were bracing themselves for endless new captures and surrenders of Degunino.

It seemed to him too that what they were talking about was the earth's capacity to thrive. There had been no one to farm it since the start of the war, yet miraculously things seemed to grow here even better now, without all the authorities that had wrecked it with ploughing and

chemicals and incessant commands, crushing its will to survive. It seemed so obvious to him in his dream – there was no need to do anything, tons of fruit and crops would grow all by themselves, like the magic stove and the apple tree in the fairy tale saying “eat my pies” and “pick my apples”. And talk of this inexhaustibly fertile earth became a song whose meaning he couldn’t quite grasp, he just followed its mood of melancholy joy, as when two people are saying goodbye before a long parting and things don’t turn out as they expect. Galya took the melody, and Panya wove the second part around it, and there was so much age-old joy and grief in it that his heart followed it like a sunflower turning to the sun.

He could make out separate words, all two syllables long, with the stress on the first – rowan, nettles, sorrow – and at the sound of them a soft green light soothed his tired eyes, and he saw an overgrown graveyard opening onto an orchard, and the abandoned parks he had seen in the liberated towns of Central Russia, and he wanted the rowan and the nettles and the sorrow to be braided into a plait and never end.

But already Papatya was shaking him, and with each shake the correct beautiful Russian words for

things flew out of his mind. He woke up and threw off his dream, remembering only that Papatya was the proper word for a sort of thyme, and glanced at his commander watch. It was ten to three.

“Raise the alarm!” he grunted at his orderly, going out to the porch to splash his face with cold water from the bucket.

“Alarm!” Papatya shouted, tearing down Degunino’s main street firing wildly in the air in accordance with the rule book, gleefully anticipating the delightful spectacle as he dashed into the cottages with deafening cries of “Get up!”

Gromov’s company, remembering their recent disgrace at the hands of Batuga, hurtled from their stoves and beds and jumped into their boots without tying on their footcloths, not wanting to be chased out again with whips.

Gromov waited in front of the village shop where they always lined up, and five minutes later (six, to be accurate, but even double the three-minute norm was a big improvement), his men stood sleepily before him in two columns.

The sky had cleared, and a few wispy clouds drifted over the roofs, and the night air smelt of grass, earth

and woodsmoke – he could have stayed there for ever. He remembered the dacha, marvelling at the power of smells to evoke memories. So much had happened, for three years there had been nothing but war, and still he remembered the dacha, and suddenly he was five years old again, kneeling on the old bentwood chair by the open window, looking out at the stars, his freshly washed feet stung by nettles and mosquitoes, and they were the same stars and the same smells, and soon his mother would read to him and he would feel the cool linoleum under his heels as she shooed him to bed – he should have been under the covers long ago instead of staring out of the window...

“Company!” he barked.

They all stood to attention.

“Very sloppy,” he said, inspecting them with a practised disdain. “Look at you Voronin, button up your shirt. Barannikov, you think the rule book doesn’t apply to you? Ogureev, you haven’t cleaned your boots. Two penalty points!” Lanky Ogureev coughed nervously. “Our orders are to rendezvous in two hours with Major Volokhov’s detachment near the village of Baskakovo for a joint strike at the enemy in the appointed place, to be indicated to us later. It’s fifteen

kilometres from here to Baskakovo, the roads are a swamp. What enemy, you ask? Who knows. We’ll be informed by the relevant people at the relevant time.” He ironically rapped out the stock phrases from the military rule book. “Look sharp, take it on the chin, march briskly, bear all hardships bravely. All clear, my little eagles?”

The men laughed. They all liked Gromov and knew he was all bark and no bite.

“Le-ef-t....” he paused for effect, ending with a flourish. “Turn!”

The men turned two abreast in the darkness, in the direction of Baskakovo.

“A one two three! A one two three!” he commanded, noticing with pleasure his eagles’ bulging gas-mask bags: their hostesses had evidently sent them well supplied with bacon, bread and apples from their fruitful, uncultivated earth.

They marched on at a brisk pace. Far off in the eastern sky, the dense night was beginning to fade, like a blocked nose slowly clearing when someone turns over in the night.

“Panya, Panya!” called a hoarse familiar voice.

Panya, who had just returned from Galya’s and was about to go to bed, jumped up and ran to the window.

“Misha!” she whispered.

“Let me in, Panechka!”

She dashed to the door and quickly slid back the lock. Her husband grabbed her in his arms and embraced her, grunting with pleasure.

“Oh Misha, I didn’t heat you a bath...”

“It’s not a bath I want. I want you, my sweetheart,” he murmured. “Has everyone left?”

“All of them!” Panya nodded happily. “First the Cossacks, now the others.”

“I wanted to come yesterday, but I couldn’t risk it,” Misha explained, still holding his wife. “Wait, darling, I’ll give the signal.”

He went to the street and fired three shots from the pistol hanging at his belt, and soon bearded men in quilted jackets slowly appeared from the forests around Degunino, and the male population made their way back to their homes.

The Degunino peasants had been inspired to become partisans by their strong aversion to joining

the army. Each new wave of liberators rolling through the village had orders to conscript the local people, and the women would tell all of them their husbands had already joined up. If anyone asked why so many were pregnant, they would bashfully explain that there were a lot of soldiers, and if they found some attractive they wouldn’t say no, and the men would spit and throw up their hands.

“We’re used to it Panechka. It’s as if I was born in the forest,” her husband said, gulping down his noodle soup. “If only you were there it would be heaven.”

“I missed you Misha,” Panya smiled.

“Oh my darling,” he sighed. “Let’s lie by the stove. Tomorrow we can sleep...”

II

Major General Paukov was proud of his name's resemblance to that of his great idol in the last war, Marshal Zhukov.¹ He saw the connection as highly symbolic, and the difference seemed to sum up the difference in their tactics. While Zhukov had rolled the dung ball of the masses to the gleaming heights of victory against Hitler, General Paukov had woven a vast net of spies and agents throughout the land in which to trap the enemy. This new enemy was cunning, and came entirely from within; it was a long time since foreigners had invaded Russia's bewitched landscape, for fear of being caught in Paukov's web. The internal enemy had to be monitored, split up, encircled, immobilized and smashed: these were his five points, the main rules he had formulated in his new rule book, which he and Ploskorylov knew by heart.

Paukov regarded Priest Captain Ploskorylov as the ideal political instructor. Twenty-seven years old, plump and inclined to breathlessness, Ploskorylov understood the sacred or, as he put it, the sacramental significance of every letter of the rule book. Most of it

¹ Paukov and Zhukov mean, respectively, "spider" and "beetle" in Russian.

would seem gibberish to a civilian, and it was indeed gibberish, but this was a secret known only to the few. The great systematizing power of gibberish was truly understood only by soldiers, and Ploskorylov was a true soldier, with his civilian demeanour, his soothing expressive voice and his inability to fire a shot.

His grandfather had been a staff officer, and his great-grandfather a White general who had gone over to the Reds, successfully surviving Stalin's terror and dying in a hunting accident, mauled by a wild boar: the perfect death for an officer, thought Ploskorylov, who considered death in battle unworthy of a general.

Ploskorylov also knew the Philosophy of the Common Cause, the supreme staff discipline taught only at the theological faculty of the Military Academy and inaccessible to Paukov, although Ploskorylov assured the Major General he had an instinctive grasp of it. All Paukov's commands so manifestly served the Common Cause that Ploskorylov blessed his foresight in having invited himself to join his staff; undoubtedly there was only one brilliant Russian general in the army now, and that was Paukov.

Paukov was definitely brilliant, with his sweet smell of chypre aftershave and his square bristling tunic on

his square, slightly lopsided figure. He spoke abruptly, and gave orders with the ferocity of someone who had loathed his officers and soldiers all his life. In this he was a true Teuton, a natural northerner, whose purpose was not so much to expel the enemy and grab land as to exterminate his own men with maximum efficiency.

Ploskorylov was twenty years younger than his divisional commander, and had only just received his priest captain's stars, and although he felt slightly awkward about knowing more than Paukov, Paukov seemed to know things even he hadn't grasped yet at his Sixth level.

The Seventh, final stage of the Initiation was very rare in the military, and even at the highest levels of government few achieved it. Ploskorylov had recently made friends with one who had, Military Inspector Gurov, who would visit from Moscow from time to time for a personal inspection. The Inspector would chat frankly with him when they met, and had clearly singled him out. He wore spectacles and dressed casually in a service jacket, and like all Seventh-level Teutons he had a shaven head and a small goatee; Ploskorylov was looking forward to growing one himself, but wasn't allowed to yet at his level.

Gurov had promised to put him forward for initiation to the Seventh at the beginning of August, and Ploskorylov was as happy as a child at the prospect. He had no idea what it entailed, but he expected miracles. He imagined the world pouring into his open heart and sharing its secrets with him, revealing the full majesty of its starry brilliance. Before his eyes would appear ice mountains and sharp crystal needles, the crunch and the glitter, and the violet aura of the polar brightness. And at the end of the world at the magnetic Pole, raising his hands to the black velvet of the heavens where the lines of force meet, the starry Teuton and Supreme Prophet, Father of the peoples of the North. And for him they would conquer the earth and the seas and lay at his feet all the flags of the world, replacing them with one, the black-and-blue one, and tell of the End of Days and a new age of Titans....

Ploskorylov knew he would live to see this black-and-blue day, but for now he merely hinted in his lectures at the tasks of the army and the purpose of the war, and those who understood him would be discreetly promoted to the Academy. Sadly there were few true Teutons in the army now. It wasn't that they

were wiped out in the first three years of war, the elite didn't perish in battle; in critical situations an officer must always think first of his own life. There are many men, and only one officer; this summed up the classic relationship of the occupying forces with the natives, and was best expressed in the Varangian motto "You are many, I am One. Our God is One, there is no other." (The Varangians liked to stress words on the second syllable, and it pleased them that the mighty Norse god Odin was the same as the Russian word for "One" if pronounced this way.)

In fact there were only two numbers in the ancient Russian language, One and Many, the leader and the led. The Varangian, born to lead the masses, did not have the moral right to risk his life and abandon the wretched flesh beneath him, and Ploskorylov liked to illustrate this to his officers with a children's story:

"A mother walks at night with her child through a forest full of dangers, and they are attacked by wolves. What should she do? In the ideologically dubious anti-Russian version, the mother throws herself to the wolves so the child can escape from the forest full of dangers and run to safety. But with no one to protect it the child is soon lost, and if it does survive how will

it manage without its mother? Whereas if the mother had thrown it to the wolves and saved herself, she could have escaped from the forest full of dangers and gone on to serve her country. An officer has no right to leave his men alone in the world, and like a true mother must put his own safety first to preserve the integrity of the officer corps. Think how much the state has spent training an officer, and what a waste it would be if he sacrificed himself according to some Khazar notion of Christianity!"

No, the reason for the Varangians' present low morale wasn't that they were being killed; in almost every war Russia had fought, the population of the North remained virtually untouched. The Varangian, a true warrior of Odin, tended to meet his end feasting, hunting or womanising, but dying in battle would be more shameful than ploughing, or heaven forbid darning his socks. Alas the fact was that the men of the north had for too long been frivolously mixing with the native people, whose weak will had entered their blood, and they had become decadent. A nation is generally renewed and purified by war, but this one was radically different from those preceding it, in that the officers not only had trouble kicking their men

battle, they had no appetite for it themselves.

It wouldn't do for a political instructor with a higher military-theological education to take up arms, but observing manoeuvres at a distance through his telescope, Ploskorylov was appalled. He had tried to boost morale with regular public executions, and could boast over twice as many of his men killed in the first year of war by his firing squads as by the Khazars and the mountain people, but they had no effect. The Khazars' propaganda leaflets spoke of Russians being slaughtered by their own brothers, but he laughed at them. How could the feminine South, trembling for its wretched existence, defeat the titanic Varangians, for whom a soldier's life was worth no more than a corn of barley!

Yet in the past year the Varangian strategy had been hard to achieve, and the ancient summons wasn't always heeded; there weren't enough men even for the catering detachment, and the executions could only be carried out on the holiest of holidays. The army was no longer the same, and with each passing day morale declined inexorably. Only Paukov could rouse the troops with his menacing oratory, and even Paukov wasn't the man he used to be.

* * *

Although Major General Paukov had changed, he tried to maintain the manners and decorum of a brilliant officer in the best traditions of the Varangian General staff.

On the morning of 19th July, he rose as usual at 6.30, ordered a bowl of cold water from the Baskakovo well, did some light exercises from Appendix 5 in the officer's manual – twenty stretches to the left, twenty to the right, arms out, arms together, the “swallow”, the “wings”, fifteen sit-ups. Then he shaved himself with his blunt Neva razor and a splash of chypre, put on his uniform, ironed for him by his orderly, and left for his regular morning visit to the actress Guslyatnikova.

Plump forty-year-old Guslyatnikova was in Baskakovo with the actors' brigade. During this lull at the fronts, the men of the Thirtieth Division had been entertained by a stream of actors, sent by Moscow as part of its political education programme. The first to arrive were “Full House”, then the writers came, another entire brigade, seconded to Paukov for some reason, followed by several tours of the Nizhny Novgorod Theatre of the Russian Army. It wasn't

the army any more, just an endless mass-education programme. For all he knew they'd get a brothel next, and there wouldn't be a virgin unfucked in all the villages, and the soldiers would neglect their soldierly hygiene and come out in boils. But the actors were sent with specific instructions from Moscow to feed them and watch the plays. They were hungry of course; in Nizhny, as in the rest of the province, theatres were closing due to lack of audiences, and the only way to survive was by entertaining the troops.

Most of them were frankly atrocious, but not Full House. You could tell by the name. At first they read the soldiers some fables about the bear and the fox; then they performed a specially reworked version of the story 'The Loaf', about the greasy Yds with their briefcases; then an act from the play *The Soldier's Mother* – about a deserter who runs home to mummy, and she hands him over to the Military Commissariat and they pack him off back to the front. The play's political message was excellent, and Guslyatnikova as the soldier's mother was a big hit with the men, with her juicy curvaceous figure. This produced some unhealthy responses from them, and many were heard making lewd comments about how they would like

such a mother and would show her a good time, so the play didn't entirely have the desired effect.

The actors did their three shows and it was time for them to be off, but they were keen to stay; there had been no food in Nizhny for months, and they were on army rations here. The stage manager, Guslyatnikova's son, was the most shameless of them, shovelling down tinned meat until it came out of his ears. Paukov complained to Ploskorylov, who called Moscow, but Moscow insisted if they didn't keep the actors it would wreck their educational programme.

And so they stayed and ate with them another week and performed the entire classical Russian repertoire, and the night before they left, Paukov happily ordered glasses of vodka all round and drank one himself and ended up dancing like a hussar. It was shameful to recall. The brilliant Russian officer drank from a shoe, not a very clean one, size thirty-nine, went down on one knee before Guslyatnikova and picked her up in his arms, almost collapsing from the strain, then clicked his heels and managed to swipe the damn woman with them.

He regaled them with more treats, reciting poems from the *Officers' Anthology* ("The jasmine is a lovely

flower, its smell is very nice”), then at the actors’ request from the *Officers’ Alphabet*: “David played the harp like a god, bored of wanking on the bog.” He cracked jokes and flashed his officer’s wit, and that night Guslyatnikova gave herself to him, and when the others left she stayed on.

At first Paukov was flattered to have a real actress quartered with him, even one from Nizhny Novogorod, and that after three years away from his fat wife and two ugly daughters he had his own field companion, as he read was proper in a real war. Guslyatnikova would put on her velvet concert gown every evening and wring her sweaty handkerchief and recite poems in the villages where the troops were quartered, and they would listen to her instead of watching the news channel on television: “Touching the great oceans she lies...”

Only now they didn’t snigger about where they would like to touch her, because Guslyatnikova wasn’t the soldier’s mother any more but General Paukov’s mistress, and the General didn’t like jokes. The Today programme would have been more interesting in fact, but she evoked memories of civilian life, and ice creams and women in summer dresses...

In the past month she had performed several times in all the villages around Baskakovo, and Paukov had appointed a young soldier named Tulin as her batman, recommended by his own orderly. The first half of the day she would spend basking in the cottage where she was quartered, putting on her makeup and lamenting her fate to Tulin and her landlady. Paukov hadn’t slept with her for two weeks. In the sober light of day he found the soldier’s mother flabby and unattractive, and she was also utterly insatiable. It was hard for forty-eight-year-old Paukov to satisfy her, and it embarrassed him to be seen by his men with this harpy, so he merely visited her once a day.

At first Paukov was perfection in her eyes, then she was hurt and offended with him for avoiding her. Now, after two weeks, she spoke to him in a low breathy voice, opening wide her cowlike eyes and berating him for seducing her and abandoning her.

Paukov was desperate to get her away as quickly as possible, but a heroic Russian officer couldn’t shout at a woman and simply throw her out.

On the morning of the 19th, he went to her as usual and rapped softly on the door of her room with a curled finger.

“Wait, I’m not dressed yet!” she murmured.

He waited five minutes. “What’s she doing, putting her gas mask on?” he muttered irritably, rapping again.

“I’m ready!” she called at last with a rustling sound, and he went in.

She was lying on the wide peasant bed in an alluring pose, wearing a brightly coloured dressing gown and surrounded by artfully scattered garments. He was shocked by her immodesty.

“Good morning General,” she said languidly. Despite the earliness of the hour there was a thick layer of greyish make-up on her face. “I’m flattered by your visit, I so rarely see you these days – does duty call?”

“It’s war,” the General said curtly. “War is our duty, Katerina Ivanovna, and demands our unceasing attention.”

“Yes yes, as you say. But when do you think this frightful war will end?”

“As a military man I’m unable to disclose this information,” Paukov said, using his formulation from the new rule book. “A military man with secret intelligence mustn’t disclose it to anyone. The date of the war’s end can’t be divulged under any circumstances, likewise the numbers, equipment or

designation of the likely enemy or its whereabouts.” He couldn’t resist dazzling this civilian with the rule book.

“I’m so afraid for you,” she whispered.

“Can’t be helped, that’s how it is. But a Russian actress shouldn’t be afraid for a Russian general. From our first meeting I was impressed by your fortitude,” he said, paying her his mandatory morning compliment.

“In the Russian classical theatre we call it bearing,” she nodded.

“Ah yes, the classic feminine fortitude. You mustn’t give in to womanly fears, Katerina Ivanovna. We soldiers must take it on the chin and so must you, it’s our Russian duty.”

A pause hung in the air. He had exhausted his stock of officers’ compliments and paid his respects to the Russian theatre, and was keen to be off to his men. But she was still gazing at him with her moist, cowl-like eyes.

“Couldn’t you at least tell me where the enemy is and if an attack is expected? You must give me plenty of notice, I’m dreadfully afraid of shooting. Your company is precious to me.” She lowered her eyes significantly. “And I’ve grown so fond of your men.”

“Yes yes of course,” Paukov said. “The soldier is an instrument of love for his country and so forth, we are guided by subtle lofty emotions and force fields.” With the mention of force fields he had finally exhausted his civilian repertoire. “We appreciate your courage, Katerina Ivanovna,” he went on in a barking, abrupt tone, with the icy politeness of an old soldier. “But I recommend that you leave your quarters immediately. War is an unpredictable business. None of us can tell today what tomorrow will bring.”

This was another fine military phrase that he intended to popularize at a later date in his communiqués.

“As you never tire of repeating,” she said, peevishly wrinkling her nose. “One would think I was a burden to you.”

“Absolutely not, nothing of the sort,” he said, forcing out the last reserves of his military eloquence. “Just as the flower is not burdened by the bee, the soldier is not burdened by the presence of a member of the fair sex, that splendid bouquet which adorns the loaded table...” (Without realizing it he had slipped into the standard officer’s toast: if a man could repeat the phrase with its treacherous sibilants, it meant he wasn’t drunk yet.)

“And to think I left someone I cared for,” she went on. “A saintly man, a selfless servant of the arts. You say only an officer knows how to treat a woman – but see how you treat me! You promised to care for me and stay with me, and I never see you! Because of your duties you say! What duties can you possibly have between operations? You’re probably drinking with the stupid native girls because you can’t manage an educated woman and feel like a boor in her presence. Yes a boor! I’m locked in this dirty cottage for days on end with stupid Tulin for company – it’s no fun I can tell you! You can’t even make your soldiers sit still when I perform. I bare my soul to them and they’re sewing at the back! I simply don’t understand, I demand...”

“Silence woman! Stand up when you talk to me, I’m a general!” screamed Paukov, flushed with rage. He had been brilliant and courteous with her, but every man has his limits. “I’ll show you touching the oceans you old tart!” And with this he threw a bucket at her and ran out to the street.

III

Meanwhile Ploskorylov was preparing to give his first lecture of the day to the officers of the Divisional Staff. In the yard, the men were sweeping for the third time and repairing the wattle fence, under the watchful eye of their sergeant, while inside the officers had gathered for their geopolitical-studies class.

Ever since he was a child, Ploskorylov had loved the Varangian fighting spirit, the officer's upright bearing and contempt for work, and his attitude to his men as inanimate objects – essential to the Norse conception of the Great Sacrifice. The idea of a professional army was anathema to Ploskorylov and his circle, and an insult to the ideal of war. A soldier's thoughts must be not of his family or financial reward, or even his country, but exclusively of posthumous glory, the kind Ploskorylov was called to bestow, and he didn't let them down.

He worshipped the dead soldier. Only the dead soldier on the plinth in the square, referred to as the "unknown" one and mentioned in his prayers, was the absolute embodiment of the Norse spirit, for he had lost his personality, which he didn't need in war. The commanders needed one, and the political instructor,

and it was essential to agents of the Special Services, or Smersh, but the soldier's personality was superfluous to the Varangian notion of valour. The sole purpose of the ugly little military figure in his grey greatcoat and clumsily tied footcloths (this was Ploskorylov's rather touching image of the typical soldier), was to march as quickly as possible to his end. The enemy wasn't defeated by heroism or acts of initiative (what initiative could there be if the command was given correctly?), but by this living mass of men, who fulfilled the dual task of enslaving the opponent and reducing their own numbers. The road to victory must be paved with bodies, as all the best commanders realized, including Paukov and his idol Zhukov. An action was judged a success or failure in terms of the quantity of blood spilt – not elite Varangian blood of course (Ploskorylov himself traced his lineage to the personal Boyars of the sons of Rurik), but the black blood of earth, the oil of war, the juice squeezed from the ranks. The ranks were like a vineyard that withered if it wasn't harvested; so he had read in the collected sayings of the Arch-Colonel of the Far East, the venerable Evstakhy Dalnevostochny, from whom few returned alive, even in peacetime.

Reducing the population to its ideal size was never easy however; after each war people managed to increase their numbers, and Ploskorylov saw vestiges of barbarism in this. The last great purge had made it easier to breathe in Russia, and as a boy studying history he had loved reading sources relating to the years of the Big Clearout. But things soon became cluttered again, with children and old people whinging in corners, and the life of the masses returned to normal. The elite, called to lead them and bless them, became lost in this blind stirring human herd, hungry for procreation, and lording it over the whole putrefying substructure were the inexterminable Khazars.

And so reasons had to be found for another great campaign, and there was the build-up to war. Yet the more time passed between them, the more unwilling people were to mobilize. The Yds would write them medical notes if they were paid enough, even if they fought desperately themselves, and it wasn't easy to explain its necessity to the ordinary officers, most of whom hadn't graduated from the academies but from military departments in civilian colleges, where they didn't teach the correct worldview. Ploskorylov had tried all sorts of approaches with them, but had drawn

a blank in the face of their boredom and indifference. He couldn't tell them the truth yet: the reason for the Varangian occupation was taught only at the Fifth level – until then students genuinely believed Russia's native population to be the Russians.

Despite all this he enjoyed giving lectures. He saw himself as the father of these men, and even their mother. All thinkers construct the world according to their own temperament, and Ploskorylov was born to bless those going to their death. He loved the dead, with a tender, delicate love, and enjoyed being in their presence; they weren't bored by him and couldn't answer back, and he prided himself on his flowing, womanly voice with them. In his voice spoke the Mother in the famous poster, calling the next generation of her shamelessly multiplying sons to the grave, and as he imagined them dying bravely in the name of the Russian Cause, he even mourned his officers a little, sitting in their still-imperfect living state in the stuffy hut he had kitted up as the Russian Room.

He had hung portraits on the walls of Leontiev, Spengler, Weininger, Nietzsche and other great Norsemen dear to his heart, and on the blackboard,

expropriated from the abandoned school, he had sketched a chart of the battle between North and South. The subject of today's lecture was the anniversary of the tank battle of Kursk in the last great war. He had to be careful in depicting the Norse concept of this war – they didn't understand yet the true tasks of the opposing sides, and the Norse spirit that united them. He merely alluded to the base role of Britain in stirring up discord at the last minute between the two titans and their pact of eternal love, choosing his words in such a way that the more thoughtful of them would understand him and the others would notice nothing. (The Yds were in cahoots with the British of course, knowing this alliance between the Aryan peoples would be the end of them.)

“Gentlemen, please!” bawled warrant officer Kruglov, on duty in the Russian Room.

The officers stood up. Ploskorylov, in his flowing cassock and gold peaked cap, held out his moist hand for the warrant officer to kiss, then blessed them with a gracious nod, and felt a flood of warm feelings come over him. It was extraordinarily pleasant, although a huge responsibility, to be ministering to them at the age of just twenty-seven; there was stiff competition

for places at the theological faculty of the Military Academy, and only one in twenty was accepted.

“Dear brothers, I want to discuss with you today the idea of the North,” he began, in his musical, priestly voice. “For many years Khazar propagandists have distracted us from the main battle, between North and South, foisting on our Russian consciousness the wholly artificial battle between East and West. East and West were united in the last mighty clash of the people, which the conquerors' heirs revere to this day. No, this was not the clash between some mythical East and West. A deep consanguinity linked the combatants, these two titans of the North, great brothers who had become crowded living together on the same planet, colliding like clouds in the sky to produce thunder and lightning, and the spectators marvelled at God's power. The Russian spirit blocked the path of the mighty German, and the Russian brother planted a deadly kiss on his Teuton foe, who expired in his steely embrace. The enemies of both regimes tried to exploit the fruits of Russia's victory, and the Khazars rejoiced, but the far-sighted Leader deported them to a distant reservation, and the Russian-Teutonic work continued for forty years.

“Much was accomplished in those years – space-travel, man’s first steps into the icy abundance of the Cosmos. But the Khazar revenge halted the triumphant march of Fate. The South is now striving once more to rob humanity of its civilized values and replace them with a primitive, animal lust for life, which is aimed above all at us, the last bastion of the world spirit. History is being made here today in the Degunino cauldron, where North and South come face to face. Degunino is the geopolitical heart of Eurasia, and whoever controls it will be master of the world...”

He had spoken for exactly twenty minutes, leaving the last ten for questions. The officers were always astonishingly inventive with these. If there were none Ploskorylov would inform HQ and they would get a carpeting, and it would be goodbye to their leave.

“Can you please explain the United States’ war against Islam in terms of the North-South battle, and how it ended and who won?” asked Captain Selivanov. “The men want to know.”

“Your little soldiers would do better to study their marching drill as the basic military discipline of the Russian spirit,” Ploskorylov said severely. “If you allow them to ask general political questions, Captain,

I recommend you tell them they’ll find all they need in the rule book. A thorough reading of the rule book will provide answers to any question, from the practical to the theological. I refer you to Paragraph Fifteen of the drill ordinance, from Paisy Zakavkazksy: ‘Whosoever doubts his military might in fear of the advancing foe, may he suffer the shame and curses of his comrades and three penalty points.’”

Selivanov was frightened into silence. Ploskorylov had no way of answering this tricky question. Islam had suffered much, but was now our friend and ally and outpost in the East, although it wouldn’t do to say so publicly. Islam hadn’t stood a chance ever since phlogiston was discovered and the rest of the world no longer needed the black blood of the earth, and Russia’s complete isolation let it play out its splendid mystery unhindered, and had occurred solely because it was one of only a small number of countries without it.

It was hard to believe that somewhere God had so richly blessed with oil, hemp and forests could have missed out on this invisible substance which mysteriously powered the rest of the world. Cars ran on it, and smokeless factories, and people made crazy

money from it – and Russia still ran on petrol, which it had plenty of now that no one was buying oil any more. Phlogiston had been discovered everywhere, in the United States and Africa, even the Antarctic; the Khazar Kaganate had so much of it you couldn't move for boreholes. The only places without it were the Muslim East and the vast territory of Russia, right up to its borders. By a cruel trick of nature it started just over the border in despised Poland. The damn thing had put paid to America's promising wars in the Middle East, where it was now hopelessly bogged down, and Islam had already been demoted from a major religion to something parochial and harmless, even vegetarian. Ploskorylov detested phlogiston and thought it was probably another Yd lie, although he had no way to explain how cars ran on it.

He knew his reply to Selivanov was vague and evasive, but the basis of Varangian counter-propaganda was precisely its vagueness. It wasn't information his officers needed, it was power. It was a weak counter-propagandist who answered questions about the enemy's successes or the Khazar way of life with facts and figures; the political instructor should either kick the questioner in the balls, or if he was squeamish

like Ploskorylov, who was inclined to be asthmatic, he would hand him over to Smersh, where soon all became clear, since a man understands everything before death, even if he has no one to share it with.

The officers knew they must phrase their questions carefully. Ploskorylov wouldn't report them in so many words of course, an officer must be protected, as he himself had taught them, but he might let something slip to the commanders and it was easy to fall under suspicion, any excuse would do. So after Selivanov no one asked anything interesting, apart from whether it was right to punish the men by banning their letters home, or if this merely encouraged desertion. Ploskorylov was pleased to report that the number of deserters had almost halved in the last year, and that the head of the Mothers' Committee, Strelnikova, had been captured at the Chinese border after escaping from jail and was now in a hard-labour camp in Chita.

He saved this happy news for the end, but there was something even better in store, and this was the Maiden Ira.

Maiden Ira had been doing the rounds of the divisions for over six months now. Until the age of fifteen she

had developed normally, but in the third year of war she started having visions and hearing voices. She left home, and at first she lived on the streets, where she was arrested and questioned, and soon came to the attention of the General Staff who couldn't resist the chance to meet her. Ploskorylov had attended her first show in Moscow, in the clubhouse of the theological faculty. Unlike the Maiden Zhanna, Maiden Ira was no beauty, with her thin adolescent figure, her small features and mousy hair, but all this was redeemed by her huge grey eyes and her cracked metallic voice – the voice of a patriotic child and a true Varangian. She sang nostalgic popular songs she heard on late-night radio programmes, such as 'Little Fire', 'In a Sunny Glade' and 'Dark Night'. Ploskorylov didn't think much of these songs composed in the trenches, so different from 'The People's War', with its Teutonic beat. But in Ira's rendition they acquired a wild, almost Dostoevskian pathos. So might a Varangian child sing, spilling her last tear before being immolated by the Khazars. Ira didn't bother with complicated musical arrangements, she just twanged the strings of an old guitar. Anything else would have drowned out her weak tinny voice, like a jangling weather vane. Yet there was such power and

emotion in it; in such a voice someone might shout their last words as they were executed, or cry "Fire!" as they shot the enemy within.

This sacrificial image expressed perfectly the Varangian ideal, and she knew it instinctively; there was nowhere you could learn it, certainly not at the Academy. Only voices could transcend the icy world of absolute beings, and Maiden Ira's excruciating childish alto had been recorded on three hastily released discs and flew round the country for the enjoyment of the troops.

After singing she would fall into a trance: "I see... I see..." She would see all there was to see – the velvet blackness of the sky pricked with stars, the Pole of magnetic power, the jagged tops of the pine forests against the rosy sunset, the deserted mountains and the soaring eagle, ancient people praying in a frenzy of rapture to inscrutable stone idols of extinct giants...

Maiden Ira could have been speaking directly from Gorbiger, whom she hadn't read of course, and his visions of a time when Earth was populated by Titans who spent their days in mighty single combat. They strode across the bristling undergrowth, laughingly sprinkling lakes and juggling mountains, and we see

the remains of their games today in the Alps. Then came the geopolitical catastrophe of the Great Freeze, and the people of the North were forced to move South, where they died out in the warmth, and their legacy was debased by the low people and the dull servants of profit.

“We conclude our discussion, gentlemen, with a true miracle,” Ploskorylov said, in the tone of a loving nanny about to present a child with a treat, a barrel of sturdy birch rods soaked in brine perhaps. “You have doubtless heard of this miracle, but few of you have witnessed her with your own eyes. Today a Russian marvel will sing for us, a young muse of the war and the voice of the Russian resistance, the Maiden Ira!”

The officers rose noisily as Ira’s mother Efrosinya opened the door and pushed pale Ira in on her bowed legs.

Efrosinya was a stiff heavy woman of indeterminate age, with a grey face and a grim mournful mouth, the ideal of the Varangian widow, clutching a child’s guitar in her left hand. Ira’s eyes wandered round the walls before she fell into her trance. Efrosinya pushed her to the blackboard, and Ploskorylov obligingly moved his chair to the corner, waiting for the holy music to start.

Ira distractedly plucked the strings of the guitar a few times and shook her head, then started singing:

“A soldier of wa-ar,
Beside the sho-ore,
An grey army coat he wo-ore...”

Ploskorylov closed his eyes and saw the boundless Russian landscape, the grey river and the grey sand of the shore, and the infinitely small grey figure of the soldier marching along, an insect of war. The soldier was doubtless marching to his death, and he was moved by a sudden unexpected pity for him, consoled only by the thought that he would soon acquire granite immortality.

Ira’s voice gathered strength:

“The soldier marching knows no fe-ear,
Saving the land he holds so de-ear...”

She paused (the officers tactfully didn’t break the silence by clapping), and twanged her guitar with her thumb:

“From the birch tree flutters a yellow leaf,
An old accordion plays ‘Autumn Dream’,
The soldiers listen, free of grief...”

While she sang, Ploskorylov pictured himself in an autumn clearing with an accordion for some reason, playing ‘Autumn Dream’, although he had never played an instrument in his life. And as he played, his men left the clearing and melted into the yellow foliage leaving a slightly musty smell behind, disappearing silently and uncomplainingly like true soldiers, without even crying “For our country!” at the end. He played on, his music dissolving in the air like Haydn’s ‘Farewell Symphony’, taking them to a state of sad completion, fewer and fewer of them with each note, and as they vanished into the yellow autumn light he finished playing, and was alone in the clearing.

Twilight crept on, and the leaves lost their colour, and the Priest sat alone in the gathering darkness with his silent accordion, the last memory of his men who had died so heroically, and he felt so sorry for himself two tears rolled down his round cheeks.

The officers tactfully averted their eyes and put their hands to their temples. The girl’s singing had

a nauseating, depressing effect on them. It would be different if they liked the look of her, but she made them long for tea and bedtime, anything not to have to listen to her cracked patriotic wailing.

But she had more for them, and there was nothing to beat the bravura and vulnerability of ‘Stars of the North’:

“What stars are these that shine so bright
At the threshold of the Polar night?
The princess on her silver throne,
Jewels flashing on her icy crown.
Oh pampered children of the South,
Nothing is lovelier than the distant North!”

Ploskorylov imagined the Hyperborean North – its severe vertical majesty, its pine trees and rocks, a man with an eagle – and a shudder of ecstasy ran up his back and made his hair stand on end and he had an urge to salute. But the officers would have followed suit, clicking their heels and breaking the mood, and he wanted her to sing on.

“Comrades!” Ira cried suddenly, jumping from her chair, her unseeing eyes fixed on the far corner of the

Russian Room. “Comrades, we must all die! We must die for what is Holy! We must die for what is Pure! We must all die! Steel... pierced by steel... Bliss!...” And with that she fell unconscious on the floor.



dmitry bykov is the author of five novels, a biography of Pasternak, winner of the 2007 “Big Book” Prize and the National Bestseller Prize, two collections of short stories, two volumes of essays and eight collection of poetry. He writes for various literary publications, hosts a weekly radio show and appears regularly on Russian television.

www.almabooks.com

