

## Dead Souls

by Jaroslaw Anders

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### *Monumental Propaganda*

By Vladimir Voinovich

Translated by Andrew Bromfield

In 1999, in the Siberian town of Ishin, some 1,250 miles southeast of Moscow, a three-foot-tall bust of Stalin was discovered buried in a local garden. Apparently, it was hidden there by an anonymous idolater at the time of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign. For years the tyrant's name was unmentionable, and his effigies were scrupulously removed from public view. Under Brezhnev, he enjoyed a partial comeback as the nation's great war leader, but it was only in the new and supposedly free post-communist Russia that Stalin's likeness could be displayed once more. In Ishin, the local "Committee to Study Stalinist Heritage," led by a feisty pensioner named Tamara Sazhina, had the miraculously recovered bust mounted in a city square as part of a monument to the heroes of World War II.

This true story illustrates a phenomenon that the Russian commentator Eugenie Ikhlov calls *Stalinshchina*, "Stalin fashion" or "Stalin nostalgia." It can be seen in the growing popularity of Stalin memorabilia and repeated calls to restore Stalin's name to various monuments and public facilities. Groups of World War II veterans have been demanding for some time that the city of Volgograd restore its wartime name of Stalingrad. That has not happened yet, but the appellation was recently placed on a plaque in the Kremlin commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of what was possibly the bloodiest battle in the history of humanity.

According to an opinion poll conducted in 2003, fifty years after Stalin's death, 53 percent of Russians think positively of his historical role. Only 33 percent condemn him. For many his name became a synonym of all the things supposedly missing in today's Russian life: public order, decent living standards, a sense of national solidarity, collective dignity and strength. Even Russian youngsters point out that it was under Stalin that their country achieved superpower status "on a par with America."

What it all means is another matter. Ikhlov cautions that *Stalinshchina* should not be confused with true Stalinism, which also exists in today's Russia, but luckily at the far political margins. Stalinism, he says, is an ideology that preaches collectivism and ruthless discipline as the only way that Russians can achieve great historical goals. *Stalinshchina*, on the other hand, is a mythology. It is the absurd, anachronistic, corny cult of an enlightened and egalitarian absolute leader--not the real, historical Stalin, but a Stalin-like manifestation of a figure from Russian fairy tales, a "people's czar" who comes to humble the parasitical privileged classes. In this sense, say some Russian observers, the apotheosis of a brutal strongman is the flip side of the Russian distrust of all hierarchies. Daily humiliations at the hands of arrogant bureaucrats and the new rich make the common Russian long for someone before whom even the mightiest tremble. This dream of universal mortification may explain the surprisingly mild reaction to Vladimir Putin's increasingly authoritarian rule and the inimitable public delight at his rough handling of obnoxious oligarchs.

Vladimir Voinovich's new novel reads at times like a clinical study of the *Stalinshchina* infection. Its main plot, in fact, is almost identical to the events in Ishin, though in the novel the Stalin likeness is no mere bust but a huge cast-iron monstrosity dominating the city square in the town of Dolgov, a stagnant, muddy epitome of the Russian provinces. It was erected in 1949, on the occasion of Stalin's seventieth

birthday, through the relentless ministrations of Aglaya Stepanovna Revkina, a local party leader and former anti-Nazi partisan. The unveiling is accompanied by portentous events and induces in some participants a kind of religious psychosis. The monument's creator, a pitiful hack of an artist, almost collapses in rapture. Others sense that the figure radiates "a mysterious power" and evokes "inexplicable fear" that makes them recall their real and imagined trespasses "against their wives, their motherland, their Party and Comrade Stalin in Person." And Aglaya Stepanovna quietly falls in love with the iron monument.

After Khrushchev's denouncement of "the cult of the individual," when the party hastily begins to return to its "Leninist roots," Aglaya for the first time in her life refuses to toe the line. Brought up in absolute obedience, she becomes recalcitrant and rebellious. She refuses to renounce her idol and is dismissed from her job and from the party. When she learns that the statue is on its way to the junkyard, she has it moved into her own apartment, where she intends to preserve it until the eventual--and, in her view, inevitable--rehabilitation of her leader and of herself. In the meantime she spends her days trying to memorize, with scant effect, Stalin's opus, *The Foundations of Leninism*.

Aglaya's infatuation with Stalin, or rather with his effigy, has little to do with ideology or politics. She is too primitive to ponder the issues of freedom, authority, collectivity, and individuality. Her approach to Stalin is basically metaphysical, and as with many mystics it has a strong libidinous component. Most of all, she believes that "her" Stalin will somehow save her from her misery, redeem her meaningless life, lift the burden of her memory, and cure her perpetual sense of frustration. Aglaya also believes that all the higher ideas she was taught to venerate, and for which she made heroic sacrifices, somehow lose their sacred purity if people are allowed to think about and talk about them freely. Freedom--or, as classical liberals would say, negative freedom, with nobody telling people what they are actually free for--is for the heroine of Voinovich's wicked novel an absurd and dangerous proposition.

Needless to say, the life that unfolds around her in post-Stalinist Russia proves her absolutely right. As soon as Stalin's statue is pulled down, the city of Dolgov begins to sink into chaos and degradation. Stupidity and vice take the place of fear and discipline. "Beginning in the fall of 1961," says the narrator of the novel, "many inhabitants of Dolgov--or more precisely all of them--began to get the feeling that some irreparable dislocation had occurred in the life of the town and the district. When they removed the monument, it was like taking the axle out of a wheel." Children defy their parents, the consumption of alcohol increases, and there is an unusual epidemic of crime and sexual deviancy, while the comical "Baldie"--that is, Khrushchev--bustles about trying to turn the country into one huge field of corn. So freedom, even in small, controlled doses, obviously does not do anybody much good. And the post-Stalinist "liberalization" proves only a prelude for the real pandemonium of greed, violence, and indescribable vulgarity that follows the fall of communism in 1991.

**O** vicious former apparatchik--the only character in his book who is endowed with a semblance of integrity and dignity. All the rest lack even rudimentary convictions and any goals beyond simple survival and going along to get along. When loud applause follows the denunciations of Stalin's "errors and distortions," Aglaya is quite sincerely perplexed: "Did they really not believe what they were saying? Were they all really lying?" she asks. "I don't understand--when were these people being sincere, now or then?"

Those who believe that they live for higher goals are not much better. Aglaya's neighbor and frequent antagonist Mark Semyonovich Shubkin is a seemingly decent fellow, a polymath and an ardent though talentless poet who under Stalin spent some time felling trees in the Gulag for unspecified ideological trespasses. After his release he is offered a job as a schoolteacher and occupies himself writing letters to newspapers declaring his absolute devotion to "Leninist humanism." After *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* is unexpectedly published in the official Soviet press, he decides to join what he sees as a coming literary wave and write his own "camp story." But without his consent someone publishes his work in the West, which makes the hapless Shubkin the town's only certified "dissident." Even among the outcasts, however, he seems to be always in the swim, always following the latest oppositional fashion. The fervent Leninist turns democratic socialist, then Orthodox Christian, and finally he becomes a pious Jew. His changing political costumes are matched by changing portraits of his heroes on the walls of his apartment, and the constantly rewritten ending of his camp story.

The rest of the citizens of Dolgov consist of the familiar array of drunks, nuts, petty thieves, and nasty autocrats that inhabit almost every Russian satire since Gogol. The only character whom Voinovich seems to treat with some respect is another former Gulag inmate, a linguist and literary critic named Alexei

Mikhailovich Makarov, known as the Admiral. (He is obsessed with the sea, which he has never seen.) He spends his pre-retirement years as a night watchman in a lumberyard, and whenever the story needs something like an authorial commentary, he obliges with an invariably pessimistic view of Russia, the world, and the human condition in general.

But it is the monument that is the main character of *Monumental Propaganda*. Its awkward size, its crushing weight, its total uselessness, and the fascination that it evokes in friends and enemies alike--all this provides a narrative anchor for many seemingly disjointed incidents. The monster simply refuses to go until a decision is made to restore it to its old pedestal in a solemn ceremony officiated by the new "democratic" leaders of Dolgov and blessed by an Orthodox priest. But the re-dedication of the monument is prevented by an apocalyptic event that destroys both Aglaya and the monument.

Voinovich's novel is always engaging and often hilarious. He creates his grotesque, distorted world inhabited by grotesque, distorted people with considerable skill. He clearly possesses the Gogolian gift of finding the commonplace in the uncanny and the uncanny in the commonplace. Like many masters of the Russian grotesque, he can create characters that are simultaneously repulsive, pitiful, and strangely appealing. Aglaya's wasting away in alcoholism and madness is as funny as it is heartbreaking, even if it is deserved. Shubkin, with his delusions of greatness, evokes more sympathy than derision. Voinovich has a flair for an easily forgotten aspect of life under communism: its absolute idiocy that left normal, educated adults on both sides of the political divide eagerly trading in clichés and communicating in a crude and juvenile language.

**M**people conditioned to living in dull, predictable slavery. It reminds us that "positive" freedom, creative freedom, is a matter of culture rather than politics--it can be exercised only in a pre-existing framework of internalized norms, traditions, and social expectations. But what if this intricate scaffolding, which is the grammar of liberty, is weakened, warped, or missing altogether? This question should probably lead to other, more specific questions. Why have the Eastern European liberal elites--seemingly so honest, brave, and highly respected--proved so pitifully ineffective on the political stage? Why were the apparently strong cultural traditions that helped the enslaved people survive the worst of times so easily replaced by the most vulgar forms of consumerist selfishness? What is the answer to Eric Hoffer's famous dictum that "when freedom destroys order, a society's need for order will destroy freedom"?

There is no reason why those questions should not be explored in an Eastern European novel. But Voinovich is not really interested in critical explorations of the new reality of the post-communist world. He is in it for some laughs, and for easy drama; and so he retreats to historical fatalism of a familiar, anti-liberal scent.

Of all people, it is the novel's sage and former dissident, the saintly Admiral, who delivers the lines that seem to justify Aglaya's passionate contempt for liberty and validate the cynicism of the novel's other characters. In his opinion, the fall of communism was nothing more than the decentralization of terror and the privatization of violence. Once the monopoly of power is broken, "anybody at all can sentence anybody else at all to death for anything at all." Freedom works only for the strong and ruthless. "And now that we've seen this freedom and experienced this fear, we're wondering if it might be better to go back to our cages and put the predators back in theirs as well. They'll still feed them on us, but in regulated amounts." The utopia of absolute social justice, of "happiness for all," has been discredited, but only temporarily: it will be back, because "individual human beings, when gathered together, are transformed into the people. And the people is a naïve creature, willing to be deceived a thousand times over and then believe again for the thousand and first time." So everything that Sakharov and Havel and Milosz and the others told us was bunk. Liberty, democracy, individual rights, self-responsibility, freedom of expression--all this was just stage decoration, a disguise for a new social Darwinism.

Apart from Aglaya, Shubkin, and the Admiral, Voinovich introduces one more character whom it is possible to see as the representative of yet another side of contemporary Russia, or maybe the contemporary world. Vanka Zhukov is a scientific genius and a printer of underground dissident literature. Betrayed by his best friend, he is arrested and, instead of prison, sent to Afghanistan. He returns a horribly mangled human wreck, and immediately he puts his scientific talents at the service of the business and mafia clans as a highly regarded and very expensive bomb maker. He prides himself on the fact that his devices never harm anybody they are not meant to harm, but there is little doubt that his laboratory in the basement of Aglaya's tenement house is a bunker in his private war against the world. (He maintains an intimate e-mail

correspondence with his American Unabomber-like equivalent.)

It is Vanya's lab that provides the apocalyptic conclusion of the story, while granting Aglaya her most intimate wish at the moment of her death. But the author leaves no doubt about what will eventually rise out of the rubble. As the narrator, who researched these events for his book, leaves the town of Dolgov, he casts a parting glance at the empty space in the center of the park. "And then, above the pedestal, fashioned out of foggy vapor and my no-doubt-fevered imagination, a figure took shape. Something human in form. It watched me as I drove away, grinning and waving with its raised right hand."

**W**hat is troubling about this clichéd apocalypse is not so much the fact that we have read it all before, but that we seem to be reading more and more of it in, of all places, the literature of the former Soviet empire. Catastrophism seems to be the rage of the allegedly liberal day. Visions of moral decline and social breakdown turn up in all possible variations: comic, melancholy, fantastic, postmodern, realistic, gruesomely violent, pornographic. This kind of literature seems to relish the agony of a dream, the final days of the experiment with freedom.

The Cassandric incantations and apocalyptic visions in so much of today's Eastern European literature are presented by their creators as examples of critical thinking, but in truth they contribute to the lack of serious reflection that they bemoan. They smack of self-fulfilling prophecy. They certainly attract attention, and deliver a dramatic punch, and can be quite amusing, while requiring less effort and less knowledge than a more rigorous and compassionate investigation of what Lionel Trilling famously called the "variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty" of the world. Of course literature may permit itself moments of relaxation and irresponsibility, and we must not overestimate its power to shape reality; but literature is also a part of reality. The private mind of the writer becomes part of the public mind of the society. Literature can show, perhaps better than any other form of discourse, that the disorderly world of freedom is not necessarily doomed, that even the disharmonious can carry its own beauty and promise.

What is wrong with the post-communist vogue in apocalypse is its laziness, its unwillingness to be exigent and accountable. It is often witty and imaginative, but it is never really smart. Finally it is a coarse and shallow treatment of a coarse and shallow reality. Reality, especially the still-fluid reality of the new Eastern Europe, deserves better. It is too early to excuse oneself from what one of Trilling's teachers called "the moral obligation to be intelligent." It is not over yet.

[JAROSLAW ANDERS](#) 's study of modern Polish literature will be published by Yale University Press.