A Russian village where the Revolution went to die

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a review of

Chevengur by Andrei Platonov. NYRB 2023 (Originally published 1929)

In his 1920 essay, "Anarchists and Communists," journalist, engineer and author Andrei Platonov wrote "True Anarchy is the understanding that all power and authority on Earth is unnecessary and harmful, that people do not need to be led."

Platonov evidently devoted much time and thought to exploring the effects of the 1917 Russian Revolution upon its native participants' sense of themselves as historical actors. His novels and stories are full of characters grappling with the ways in which the revolution both granted freedoms and took them away.

If you want to feel something of the apocalyptic quality that social transformation had on its adherents, there may be no better place to start with than *Chevengur*, his longest and most ambitious novel. It's there where it is most immediately clear why the Communist authorities suppressed Platonov's writing and, in his anguished exploration of the debilitating effect of the distance traveled between ideal and reality on the believer, that he most clearly anticipates the Revolution's failure.

Readers coming to Platonov must accommodate themselves to a prose style that appears to have more in common with modernist 20th century stream of consciousness writing than say, the heightened emotional realism of Dostoevsky or Turgenev, but Platonov is no modernist or avant-garde.

Instead, traditional writerly goals of description and action are simply less important to him than depicting the inner psychic life of his characters. His blending of technical language with the colloquial speech of peasants, proletariat, and Bolshevik, creates a remarkable poetic effect, the disassociation of language from its familiar use mirroring the new zones of freedom created by the destruction of traditional boundaries and social roles in the wake of the Revolution.

It's a useful shock to understand that Platonov's characters can speak of and understand communism as an actual physical object, something with a distinct taste or feeling that can be held, found, molded, created or changed. This idea and many of the more seemingly outlandish theories present in the novel, such as the belief that one may kill without guilt in anticipation of human resurrection or the anticipation of solar and wind power as inevitable replacements for human labor, emerge not from poetic notions, but from Platonov's own experiences as an engineer and scientist.

It comes as well from the ideas of 19th century Russian philosopher Nikolai Fyodorov, whose unique blending of scientific positivism, Christian mysticism and labor and communist theory, whose influence on Platonov is lucidly discussed in the contemporary writer Vladimir Sharov's essay "Platonov's People," that is appended as an afterword in the new NYRB edition reviewed here.

Chevengur's microcosm of Utopia might almost be hilarious were it not so heartbreaking, sometimes resembling the social satire of pessimists like Jonathan Swift in its deadpan insistence on taking the theories of communism to their absolute literal conclusions.

Take the abolition of labor which has been removed in *Chevengur* (the novel's namesake and the fictional village where most of the latter part of its action takes place) for instance. One character explains it as "a surviving remnant of bourgeois greed and animal exploitative voluptuousness, since labor led to the creation of property and property to oppression. The sun itself issued rations entirely adequate to support people, and any augmentation of these rations through deliberate human labor merely fed the bonfire of class warfare, since it led to the creation of superfluous harmful objects."

Never mind then that these superfluous harmful objects are often living men and women. In order for Chevengur to be made ready for its utopian state, the town must be prepared, first by violently evicting and murdering the bourgeois class, then relocating the "half bourgeois" or middle-class to a camp outside of town and finally, in one of the novel's most chilling passages, casually massacring them by machine gun.

Eventually, Chevengur is entirely emptied except, in an echo of the Christian myth, by eleven Bolshevik apostles. Urged to go out and find proletariat to repopulate the town, one party member returns with a people completely stripped of life by hunger and want: the others, "worse than proletariat; no one and nobody."

Motherless, fatherless, and "born with no possibility of any gift," the others are the intended raw material of the new Communist world, yet they are so starved for food and human contact that they cannot function as human beings, let alone builders of the revolution. In the end, the experiment is doomed to failure. An ambiguously described force, perhaps the counter-revolutionary Whites or a Bolshevik detachment sent to cleanse the town, attacks and kills all the inhabitants.

Platonov's depiction of his characters struggles with the internal contradictions of the Communist project constitutes the heart of *Chevengur*, but his main preoccupation in all his work is the problem of happiness. This question of whether contentment can coexist with the revolution is debated spiritedly throughout the novel. In a characteristic passage, an inhabitant of Chevengur exclaims:

"The moment there is bread and property, that's the end of every true human being…Thought loves grief, it loves lightness…Has there ever been a time when people with well-lined stomachs have lived in freedom?"

In other words, the moment that the revolution expends its last bit of energy destroying the old world and must begin the process of rebuilding it, it becomes decadent. Platonov's revolutionaries are caught in a trap of their making, unable to ever meet the impossible requirements they have set for themselves. The psychic cost of this internal contradiction is movingly described in a passage referring to an inner being called the "Eunuch of the Soul" whose anguish anticipates the parables of alienation found in later writers like Kafka:

"Inside every man there also lives a little onlooker. He takes no part either in his actions or in his suffering and is always dispassionate and always the same. His work is to see and to witness, but he has no say in a man's life and no one knows the reason for his solitary existence."

Chevengur has much to tell us about the fate of those who choose to sacrifice everything for a dream. Perhaps it is only thanks to such onlookers as Platonov that we now know more about the sacrifices made for those beliefs, and can decide for ourselves whether it was worth the cost.

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