

The Commissar

By Szabo Eduard Dragomir

“The Kremlin has ordered the initialization of austerity measures inside the territory of Ukraine. The people of the Soviet Union need all the grain that the land can offer in order to ship it for exportation and benefit the life of honest workers and people. Therefore, you are ordered to confiscate all the food there is. Be advised, anyone who dares keep food to himself is a traitor to the motherland who works against his own people and state and must be punished accordingly. Repress the population and restrict them to their houses, you are to shoot anyone who approaches the grain fields, and no aid is to be offered under any circumstances to the people of Ukraine.

For the people of the Soviet Union. The Holodomor begins.”

These are the grim words that I, Commissar Mikhail Golovin, lay my eyes upon: Somber and damning drops of venomous ink spat upon a piece of paper that I can barely hold on to with my trembling hands as I knew, that for the next months of this death reeking winter I shall be a witness to one of the worst atrocities ever. The Soviet Union, who claims to be the people's union, is now starving its own people to death.

The next days I passed under the numbness of grief and self-loathing for participating in this instrumented genocide. Had it not been for the safety of my family, of my children and beloved wife, I would have never accepted to serve the red demagogues as a commissar of the NKVD.

In the following days, I found I was assigned to a cell that set up operations at some Ukrainian villages not far from Odessa, setting up our headquarters at an old stone house that dotted a nearby hill. It did not take long before we secured a perimeter enclosing the villages, not allowing anyone, under any circumstances, to leave. I could hear the distinct sound of trucks with their rusted wheels drenching down muddy rural roads as they approached these said villages. Officials descended from them, and like hellish locusts, they stripped off the villagers' hard-worked food: Granaries were emptied of their grain, stockpiles were stripped off their contents and cattle were lined up. I remember how fathers felt mortified, incapable of doing anything and how mothers wept fearing for their young while soulless automatons from Moscow confiscated everything they had, leaving them with absolutely nothing but their shattered souls.

All this while we, a dozen of NKVD officers who supervised the operations and guarded the place, lived in the church like demons defiling the sanctuary of God, lounging cozily with lavish food filling our tables while the world outside was left starving in the bitter winter by the ones who claimed to fight for them.

One such night I spent sitting with another Commissar, a convinced red named Ivan Ivanovich, over by the stove's fire. It was exactly two weeks after this infernal intercourse had started and I already grew weary and feverish.

"So, how is your family at home, Ivan?" I asked.

"Excellent. My boy grows healthy, and my wife houses her sister while I am gone. I like to think that I give them everything they need. Bless the motherland and Comrade Stalin for caring for us!" he said.

"But how do you feel about..." I gestured around with my hands. "About all this?" I asked.

"About what?" he appeared to be confused.

"About taking these people's food, Ivan... There are families starving out there, children especially. I never thought I would be asked to do this."

"It is every worker's duty to work with sweat and blood for the well-being of the state and his fellow comrades, Mikhail. You should know..." he said.

Ivan stared directly at me, with cold, scolding, eyes. At that moment I questioned whether I was the only one who cared for those suffering outside, who questions why we must be the sinews to a system of death, impoverishment and oppression.

At that night I slept only barely, for a nightmare most horrifying haunted my mind with vivid images of my dearest son and daughter wandering the Ukrainian plains, naked, with their skin strapped to their bones. Starving, they crawled underneath barbed wire and headed straight into the depths of a wheat field, scrounging for cereals. I then found them leaving the field with their hands full of grain. They froze, staring at me as if they were apprehended by a savage beast. It was as if my mouth was stitched for I could not utter a word thanks to the sheer whirling chaos that filled my head. How could I have left my dearest children to starve to death? How could they see me as a monster? How could I be a monster, me, the father who was supposed to care for them? They continued to sit frozen, with their pale skins as if they were statues of marble that suddenly cracked and fell to the ground, shattering as two gun shots traversed the deafening silence, carving a hole in each of their frail, little heads, and as they fell to the ground, I woke up in convulsions, and covered in sweat.

The next morning I was patrolling the area with Ivan, and we approached one of the villages that were found within our assigned perimeter. We entered it, only to find nothing but empty houses and the whispers of the wind. It was as if every soul hid itself from the purgatory we brought. As we approached the rear of an old orthodox church we finally started to hear inconceivable mutters, subtle though frantic as if they did not want to be noticed. They emerged from the front of the church, where I and Ivan rushed towards. What I discovered there has made me abhor every mirror for it was a sight that could never let me gaze at myself knowing what kind of a monster I have to be to allow such things to happen.

After all, how could I feel comfort knowing that I have three copious meals a day, as a reward for my excellent services for the “people’s” Soviet Union while I stood aghast in front of twenty starving men, women and children, with emaciated bodies, as they tried to share one loaf of bread between them?

But at least, I felt something, unlike my colleague whose foamy mouth yelled like a rabid animal. He lifted his gun into the air and fired warning shots, separating the folk from the loaf of bread, their only food that was probably overlooked.

“What do you worthless runts think you do?” he hollered, kicking an old man in an excess of sadism and fury.

He then grabbed the loaf of bread and threw it in the mud before his feet, right in front of the horror struck crowd who appeared like silhouettes of the undead, skeletons and fleshless phantasms, as they stared mournfully at their loaf of bread, their very food, crushed by my colleague’s feet.

I left that tragic scene soaked eyes, accompanied by my beast of a colleague. Is this the equality and the end of all class struggles we were promised? It all appears to me as if the promised lie of equality was nothing but a charade to drag us to the same level of mediocrity and stupidity, so that a select few can rule over us without resistance or difficulty. And to know that we accept the yoke so willingly, that we accept preying upon our neighbours, upon our loved ones like carrion birds over a rotting carcasse for the falconer that is our state. How abhorrent.

Our next days passed awkwardly similar to the metaphor I presented above. We received news from high command that we would be rewarded if we round up dead bodies and send them towards mass graveyards. I rarely felt as stripped of my humanity as I felt participating in this manifestation of barbarism and inconsideration:

Myself, Ivan, and two other colleagues of ours went through a village from house to house, witnessing emaciated toddlers all curled up in their bed like ragdolls, crying, while their older siblings wept over their deceased grandparents, the bodies we had to drag out. We dragged them out while the children grabbed us by our legs, crying, yelling. I looked down only to see the shimmering blue eyes of innocence as a little girl stared straight into my soul, as if her spirit persuaded me to allow her grandmother to rest in peace. I cannot express how much of a pity it is that her innocence would be silenced in a few days by starvation. But now, she was silenced by the sight of seeing her grandparents’ bodies thrown like worthless objects at the back of the truck. Impressive how one human came to value exactly one hundred rubles.

The next house, something most unearthly occurred: we entered just like in any other house, laying our eyes upon emaciated bodies of children and parents alike. As we investigated the home for bodies or food we stumbled upon a grandmother lying on her death bed, striving for her possibly last breaths.

“Let’s grab her, Mikhail!” Ivan shouted, pointing at her. “She is going to die soon anyway and I do not want to come back tomorrow just for her.” he continued.

His words petrified me. I could not imagine how someone could be capable of such inhumanity, but that is the creation of the socialist system, soulless machines that disguise themselves under the skin of man.

“Don’t take me! Please! I am alive! I want to live!” the old woman cried desperately, trying to fight her assailant but to no avail. Soon, she would find herself buried under the ground outside the village.

And she was not the only one who suffered this way, for the ground moved, haunted as if, as it vibrated with the murmurs of dying men and women from within it; Many were buried alive, just so that the NKVD officers would get their rewards faster.

The whole countryside turned sickening, blistering with a grim atmosphere of death and gloom, as walking corpses, people so starved that their bones would daunt their skins, embroidered the villages and their houses. In the face of death, fear gave way to desperation and children ran into wheat fields trying to take at least a few grains for their families, only to be shot dead by commissars. And these are only a small fragment of the atrocities that swept the country.

My nights grew more and more unpleasant, as I find myself either waking up drenched in sweat from a horrifying nightmare, or staring at my rich, filling dinner, feeling guilty to eat from it when just outside people starve... because of me.

I could not resist living like this anymore, and thus, I did whatever man with an ounce of humanity left would do in my place. Every evening, and every morning, when I could find the solace of privacy and solitude gaze upon me, I would take a part of my meals and smuggle it covertly into the villages, sharing it with the locals. At the very least, I postponed their ends, but the endearing sights of children eyes looking up to me with gratitude, and the happiness of families knowing that they can spend one more day together thanks to me gave me the peace to sleep at nights.

At least that was until one day when Ivan discovered my benevolent initiatives. And soon I found myself before high rank officers, “tried for treason”. My body would soon fatten the fields, but at least, I will die knowing that I die at peace, resisting against this taint that depraves our humanity.