

A Harvest of Misery

‘Survival was a moral as well as a physical struggle.’ - Timothy Snyder on the Holodomor

Mikhail ‘Misha’ Matkin awakened to the crowing of the village cocks, though by now they had become so enfeebled he was sure they would perish before the harvest even ended.

COCK-A... doodle-doo. Then came that blunt knell, clanged thrice in uniform intervals, the herald of another long and difficult day. A languishing organism once full of life had been replaced by something else entirely, a callous machine pulled by the strings of evil.

Matkin had barely got off his pallet when the village superintendent banged on the izba’s front door, prompting a scampering of feet and a spate of expletives on the part of his exasperated parents. His older sister burst into his room, dishevelled and only wearing her nightgown.

“You haven’t seen my barrette, have you Misha?”

Having donned his kosovorotka and trousers, Misha shook his head.

“Ah, to hell with it!” his sister said, pulling on a shirt she found in Misha’s wardrobe.

“Come on, you two!” came the gruff voice of his father, who pulled the door to his room wide open and yanked them both outside. Misha caught a glimpse of the barrel-chested superintendent rapping on the next izba, before he was jostled along by the throng of peasants trudging to the village kolkhoz.

A peasant in a faded red kosovorotka and a sailor’s cap trotted up to them, slapping Misha’s father on the back.

“Morning, Solomov. What gives?” Misha heard his father say.

“I just found out from the village officer that a member of the Ukrainian intelligentsia will make a stop at our village today for a speech.”

The news apparently buoyed up Misha's mother. "Aleksey!" she gasped.

"You can't be serious, mother," Misha's sister said. "Aleksey's only an errand boy within the Nationalist Party. Do you really think he would be entrusted with such a serious duty?"

Misha's mother looked downcast. "Even if you're right, it can't hurt to have him come here once in a while."

Thereupon they reached the fenced-off compound, where at the gate each villager was handed a rusty sickle and five feet of rope with which to bundle satisfactory grain. In order to boost efficiency levels and cut corners, the 'Reds', as the villagers were wont to call the Soviet revolutionaries, had allocated one mechanized reaper per village, making the work gruelling and characterless.

The peasants spread out fairly evenly over the once fecund soil and began reaping the crop, scrawny children sticking close to even scrawnier parents. At about noon, though it was hard to tell because of the leaden sky, the harvest was interrupted by the canter of a magnificent chestnut stallion from the direction of the village road. Some of the village guards got a bit flustered when they noticed the peasants cheering and clapping.

Aleksey, liveried in the resplendent manner of the old White Guardsmen, and sporting a Fu Manchu moustache just like his hetmen predecessors, hopped off his mount and pulled out a scroll from the saddlebag. His mother was weeping tears of joy; a rare smile cut across his father's weathered face as the latter clapped in exaltation; even Misha's sister, who as far back as he could remember had had a strained relationship with Aleksey, was now laughing and gamboling with her weary girlfriends.

"People of Tomsk, hearken to me! I dare not call you comrades, for I consider that a communist phrase, -" the village guards here bristled, but Aleksey assured them with such an affable look that they relented, "- instead, by calling you what you are - people - I hope to restore to you a semblance of humanity and dignity that has been taken from you."

Cheers and whistles from the crowd.

"I am the bearer of great tidings, folks. I have managed to set up, with the help of certain affluent acquaintances, a number of workers' committees across the nation. These have already begun to implement policies which I am sure you will welcome: to begin with, manual labour will be delegated only to those peasants who are physically fit

enough for it. Massive food dispensation, including approximately 10'000 tonnes of rice and 50'000 bushels of apples, as well as other essential foodstuffs, has already started in the Donbass region, and by the end of the next month it will reach most areas in our country..."

At this point in his speech Aleksey bundled up the scroll and placed it in the saddlebag. His gaze shifted from peasant to peasant, until it settled on Misha's family. Almost as if recognizing Misha for the first time, Aleksey at first seemed to be looking *through* him.

"Mark my words, -" Aleksey switched to a Ukrainian dialect that only the peasants knew, "- there will come a time when no man or woman shall have to slave away for the sake of some bloated, doddering old fool at the top of the food chain. But by acting defiantly, though it is our natural instinct, we will not get anywhere. No, we need to be cunning. We need to fight Comrade Stalin with diplomacy, not with fists. I depend on you, my brothers, just as much as you depend on me. Have courage, have patience, and the promised revolution shall ensue!"

The roar of applause and hurrahs engulfed Aleksey so completely that Misha couldn't make out his own voice, let alone the rumbling of a Soviet truck, which stealthily slithered up to where Aleksey was still waving to the peasants, and out of which poured out several armed soldiers in peaked caps. They wrenched Aleksey from his mount and forcibly thrust him into the back of the truck - they did this all so quickly that Misha's dad barely had time to vent his outrage when the truck had rumbled off. The nearer peasants were held off by a wall of bayonets - the village guards who aimed them had reacted briskly.

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The wind felt like cattails as it caressed their skin; a distinct scent of jasmine nearby covered up the miasma of mud, cow dung and putrefied barley, but the stench of corruption that emanated from the garrison leading them was beyond natural.

"Come on, shake a leg," an officer growled, squeezing Misha's and his sister's arm with cold, unpitying fingers.

“Where are you taking us?” Misha’s mother screeched, flinching at another officer’s extended hand.

“You’ll see,” came from up ahead. A field of stubble girdled the group on all sides, but at night it resembled a miniature battlefield, strewn with pointy yellow warriors.

At last the family reached, or rather was stopped, at the edge of a conifer forest. A figure emerged out of the murk, a lantern in one hand.

“Solomov!” Misha’s father gasped.

“Quiet!” the figure snapped, lifting his cowl just barely for Misha to see the cowlick that indeed belonged to Solomov.

“Tie them up,” Solomov barked at the garrison, handing them a few yards of rope.

“Solomov, why are you doing this?” from Misha’s mother.

“Why?” Solomov stopped in his tracks, as if the question had never occurred to him before.

“To save my family from being killed, like you will be in a few moments,” he finally answered.

“Traitor! Did nothing Aleksey say strike a chord with you?”

“Aleksey is a fool. His speech was fancy, I admit, but in the real world there are only big cats and small cats, and no matter how much you puff out your chest the big cat needs only to lift his paw, and various other small cats will run to do his bidding.”

There was a finality to Solomov’s last words that forbade any objection. The soldiers lined Misha and his family up together, then retraced twelve steps and directed their rifles at their heads.

“May you rot in hell, Solomov,” Misha’s father cried out, his voice drowned out by a deafening salvo of shots.

The four instantly toppled to the ground. Miraculously, the bullet missed Misha’s head and went through the bole of a pine behind him. The soldiers didn’t even bother to check that they were dead.

“Mama, Papa...” Misha sobbed, swallowing salty tears and cradling his parents’ heads in his own, as if they were his children and not the other way around.

“I’m sorry,” he moaned in a voice full of anguish, then let his head loll back down onto the field.

Were a stranger to pass by this field and see the heap of bodies that was once Misha's family, he would take for granted that they were all dead and would pay his respects. In a way, he would be right - for Misha had died at the same time as his parents, and his occasional weeping and twitching were lifeless. The blunt knell that sounded morning after morning did not disturb him anymore, for it had robbed him of what negligible, though for that reason valuable, life he had, and the absence of the village cocks only soothed him - for he knew that the latter's death was inevitable, and that they were now finally at rest.