CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Viktor Erofeyev

Good Stalin

Хороший Сталин

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Viktor Erofeyev's The Good Stalin (*Khoroshii Stalin*) was first published in Moscow by Zebra-E in 2004. Appearing more than a decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the novel belongs to a broader body of post-Soviet writing preoccupied with memory, family history, personal identity, and the afterlife of Soviet experience. Rather than revisiting Soviet history from a documentary perspective, Erofeyev approaches it through the intimate sphere of family relations, examining how political myths survive within private memory long after the ideological system that produced them has disappeared. At the centre of the narrative stands the relationship between the narrator and his father, Vladimir Yerofeyev, a Soviet diplomat and former interpreter for Joseph Stalin and Vyacheslav Molotov. Yet what initially appears to be a family story gradually unfolds into a meditation on authority, generational conflict, memory, and the conditions under which a writer comes into being.

The question of genre is crucial to any reading of *The Good Stalin*. Although the novel draws extensively on Erofeyev's own life, it insistently resists being read as autobiography. Significantly, the first Russian edition designates the text as a *roman*, while the opening pages immediately unsettle any expectation of autobiographical transparency. Before the narrative itself begins, the reader encounters the provocative disclaimer: “All the characters in this book are fictional, including actual historical figures and the author himself” (Erofeyev 5). Rather than establishing a referential contract with the reader, Erofeyev dismantles it from the outset. Historical figures, family members, and even the authorial self are declared fictional constructs, suggesting that what follows should be approached not as testimony but as a literary reworking of memory. In this respect, *The Good Stalin* can be read as a form of autofiction, situated in the unstable space between lived experience and narrative invention.

This instability is already present in the novel's famous opening sentence: “In the final analysis, I killed my father” (Erofeyev 5). The confession initially appears shocking, only to be immediately undermined by the narrator's clarification that the murder was “not physical but political” and that, in the Soviet context, such a death could be as definitive as a literal one (Erofeyev 6). The statement therefore functions simultaneously as provocation, metaphor, and programme. On the one hand, it refers to a political and generational rupture separating the son from the world embodied by his father. On the other, it figures the birth of the writer as an act of symbolic patricide. Literature emerges precisely at the point where inherited authority becomes an object of reinterpretation, resistance, and narrative reconstruction.

The first-person narrator closely resembles Erofeyev himself, sharing his biography, profession, family history, and cultural milieu. Yet he is never presented as a transparent autobiographical subject. Instead, he appears as both participant and commentator, continuously reflecting on the

impossibility of fully knowing the people closest to us. “Our parents are undeveloped negatives,” he declares (Erofeyev 6), before describing them as “unstable puppet-mirages” whose meaning can only be reconstructed retrospectively (Erofeyev 6). Parents, in other words, exist less as recoverable historical persons than as figures produced through memory, projection, and narrative desire. It is therefore not accidental that the decision to write the book emerges directly from this recognition: “It is only now that I have at last made up my mind to write a book about all this” (Erofeyev 6). Writing appears not as the recovery of truth but as an attempt to give narrative shape to what remains fragmentary, inaccessible, and unresolved. The novel's politics reside less in its treatment of Stalin than in its treatment of memory. Rather than narrating Soviet history as a succession of political events, Erofeyev reconfigures it as an intimate drama of fathers and sons, suggesting that the deepest effects of ideology are often inscribed not in public institutions but in private forms of attachment and remembrance. This political dimension is inseparable from the narrator's emergence as a writer. The symbolic "murder" of the father marks not only a generational break but also the birth of an autonomous literary voice. Significantly, this process culminates in the *Metropol* affair (an unofficial literary almanac compiled by Viktor Erofeyev, Vasily Aksyonov, Andrei Bitov, Bella Akhmadulina and other writers, circulated outside the structures of Soviet censorship in 1979 and followed by severe official reprisals against its contributors). Within the logic of the novel, *Metropol* appears not merely as a literary scandal but as the moment when private disagreement with paternal and ideological authority becomes a public literary act. The narrator's becoming a writer is therefore inseparable from his confrontation with the symbolic structures of Soviet power, embodied alike in the father, Stalin, and the institutions that sought to regulate literary expression.

The relationship between history and fiction is one of the novel's central concerns. *The Good Stalin* incorporates verifiable historical events, prominent political figures, diplomatic history, and autobiographical material, yet continually questions the possibility of direct historical access. History appears not as an objective sequence of facts but as a sedimentation of stories, myths, emotional attachments, and retrospective interpretations. Particularly significant in this respect is the figure of Stalin himself. The “good Stalin” of the title is not the historical dictator but a symbolic construct preserved in the memory of the narrator's father's generation. Erofeyev is less interested in Stalin as a political leader than in the persistence of Stalinist mythology within family life and private consciousness. Political history is thus transformed into a study of memory and cultural inheritance.

In many respects, this narrative strategy reflects the broader tendencies described by Mark Lipovetsky in his analyses of Russian postmodernism. According to Lipovetsky, Russian postmodernist writing emerged from the collapse of Soviet ideological certainties and the delegitimation of the grand narratives that had structured Soviet culture. It is characterised by self-reflexivity, narrative instability, the multiplication of perspectives, and a profound distrust of authoritative historical truths (Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction* 233–35). One of its recurring devices is precisely the appearance of an authorial double within the text, a figure who simultaneously resembles and differs from the empirical author (Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction* 385–86). The narrator of *The Good Stalin* fits this model remarkably well. He bears the author's biography and public identity, yet from the outset he is declared fictional and continually foregrounds the constructed nature of his own narrative.

Lipovetsky further argues that Russian postmodernism developed in response to the crisis of Soviet utopian discourse and the collapse of ideological metanarratives. As those explanatory systems lost credibility, literature increasingly turned towards irony, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and memory as privileged modes of cultural inquiry (Lipovetsky, *Russian Postmodernist Fiction* 258–65).

Although *The Good Stalin* is formally more restrained than many canonical postmodernist texts, it clearly participates in this tradition. Rather than presenting Soviet history as a coherent narrative, Erofeyev explores the contradictions, emotional investments, and competing interpretations through which historical memory is produced.

At the same time, the novel belongs specifically to the cultural landscape of the post-Soviet period. As Eliot Borenstein has shown, post-Soviet culture is marked by an ongoing negotiation with the Soviet past, which remains both inescapable and unstable, functioning as an object of memory, reinterpretation, nostalgia, irony, and self-definition (Borenstein 1–15). After 1991, Russian literature increasingly shifted its attention from public ideology to private memory and from collective historical narratives to individual experience. *The Good Stalin* exemplifies this development. It neither simply condemns nor nostalgically celebrates the Soviet experience. Instead, it investigates the extent to which Soviet identities continue to inhabit personal relationships, family structures, and acts of remembrance long after the system itself has disappeared.

Seen in this context, *The Good Stalin* is best understood as an autofictional novel about memory, fatherhood, and the afterlife of ideology. By insisting on its status as a novel while simultaneously drawing on recognisable autobiographical material, the text deliberately blurs the distinction between fact and fiction. Its opening declaration that all characters are fictional, including the author himself, and its provocative claim that the narrator has “killed” his father establish a narrative world in which personal identity, family history, and historical memory can only be approached through acts of storytelling. The novel ultimately suggests that neither the self nor the past exists outside narrative construction. What survives history are not facts alone, but the stories through which those facts are remembered, interpreted, and rewritten.

References:

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CENSORSHIP STATUS: