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Translation Of "The 'Metropol' Affair" By V. Erofeev

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THE *METROPOL'* AFFAIR

Metropol' was an attempt to fight stagnation in the conditions of stagnation. That's what I think, looking back on it today. In this lie its idea and significance. But no less importantly, thanks to *Metropol'* you can understand the subtle meaning of the pronoun *we*, freed from its Orwellian¹ connotations, all too well known to us, and understand the strength and weakness of artistic solidarity. I lived through and survived this story as a rare idealist; maybe that's why I survived.

On my writer's identification card there is a temporal absurdity: accepted into the Writer's Union in 1978, date of issue 1988.² The question of how for ten years I could be seditiously without a card is answered by the story of the almanac *Metropol'* and its panicked shutdown, for which the meanest of years bears the responsibility ("there were worse times, but not meaner times"³), as well as those who, literally yesterday, controlled the fate of our culture.

¹ "Zamyatinian" in the original. Evgeny Zamyatin (1884–1937) is the author of *We* (1921), a dystopian novel critical of the Soviet state which in turn influenced George Orwell's *1984*.

² Henceforth abbreviated as "WU," to reflect the abbreviation used in the original Russian.

³ From Nikolai Nekrasov's 1875 poem "Contemporaries."

From their perspective I was, of course, completely justifiably expelled from the WU, for the rules of literary life at that time stank so strongly (everything was stiff, fettered, crumpled, crushed, distorted), that one didn't have the strength to make peace with them, and I truly did try to bring a devilish plan into existence.

In December of 1977, when I rented an apartment across from Vagankovo Cemetery and funereal music discordantly flowed through my windows every day, the jolly idea came to mind to create a "bulldozer" of a literary exhibition, united around a home-made almanac of recognized and respectable young people of letters, along the model of the Moscow artists who were at that time fighting for at least the shadow of independence for themselves. The bomb consisted namely in the mix of dissidents and non-dissidents, of Vysotsky and Voznesensky. Without any trouble I infected my older celebrated friend Vassily Aksyonov with my idea (without whom nothing would have happened); Andrei Bitov and my contemporary Evgeny Popov⁴ were drawn into the deal (Fazil Iskander⁵ joined in significantly later), and so it was set in motion.

The words in the foreword to the almanac, that it all started with a toothache, are not a metaphor, but reality. Aksyonov and I were having our teeth treated on Vuchetich Street. They had seated us in neighboring chairs. The interior was strange: a hall with no partitions, filled with the grinding of teeth. Aksyonov immediately established the format of the publication: it would be an almanac of "cast-off literature" which we would publish here at home.

Over the course of 1978 we assembled a thick almanac. More than 20 people participated in it, no one by chance. Everyone, from Semyon Lipkin to the young Leningrader Petr Kozhevnikov,⁶ was talented in his own way. We consciously developed the

⁴ Evgeny Popov (b. 1946): one of co-editors of the almanac.

⁵ Fazil Iskander (b. 1929): a famous satirical writer, one of the co-editors of almanac.

⁶ Semyon Lipkin (1911–2003): a prominent Soviet poet and translator, close friend of Vasily Grossman. Husband of Inna Lisnyanskaya. Petr Kozhevnikov (1953–2012): a non-conformist writer; after 1991 worked as a screenwriter and film director.

idea of aesthetic pluralism. *Metropol'* would not be a manifesto for any particular school. Discussions arose. There were steady opponents: the philosophers Leonid Batkin and Viktor Trostnikov.⁷ Bella Akhmadulina and Inna Lisnyanskaya argued poisonously with each other.⁸ Some people took their manuscripts back. Yury Trifonov⁹ explained that it was better for him to fight the censors with his own books. Bulat Okudzhava¹⁰ noted that he was the only member of the Communist party among us.

We put *Metropol'* together in a one-room apartment on Krasnoarmeyskaya Street that formerly belonged to the by-then deceased Evgenia Semyonova Ginzburg, the author of *Journey Into the Whirlwind*.¹¹ There is symbolism in the choice of location.

Vladimir Vysotsky rang at the door, and in answer to the question “Who’s there?” he responded: “Is this where they’re counterfeiting money?” We roared with laughter, knowing that we’d take it in the teeth for our work, but we didn’t suppose that the higher-ups would fly into a rage, or that in their eyes genuine counterfeiters would be social compatriots, almost relatives, in comparison with us, literary traitors.

⁷ Leonid Batkin (b. 1932): cultural historian, an expert on the Italian Renaissance. In 1979, a researcher at the Institute of the World History, Academy of Science of the USSR. Viktor Trostnikov (b. 1928): a religious philosopher, author of underground works about Russian Orthodoxy. In the 1990–2000s became affiliated with Russian nationalists.

⁸ Bella Akhmadulina (1937–2010): one of the most prominent and popular poets of the generation of the 1960s. Inna Lisnyanskaya (1928–2014): poet and translator, wife of Semyon Lipkin.

⁹ Yury Trifonov (1925–1981): one of the most prominent liberal writers of the 1970s; author of the cycle of *Moscow Tales* and the novels *House on the Embankment* (1976), *An Old Man* (1978).

¹⁰ Bulat Okudzhava (1924–1997) one of the most famous poets of the generation of the Thaw, he was a song-writer and performer of his own songs.

¹¹ Evgenia Ginzburg (1896–1977) is the author of the memoir *Journey into the Whirlwind*, which details her arrest on false accusations and the eighteen years she served in a labor camp. The memoir, which could not be published in the Soviet Union, was smuggled into the west and published in Italy and Germany in 1967. She is the mother of Vassily Aksyonov.

Everyone brought something of their own. Vysotsky dedicated a song to *Metropol'* and sang a few couplets from it. Then it all disappeared somewhere, like a lot of other things. Like Friedrich Gorenshtein, who now lives in Berlin.¹² He showed up in winter, for some reason wearing long underwear. Aksyonov was a little surprised and said:

“Friedrich, it seems you forgot to put on your pants . . .”

“Vasya!” cried Friedrich, “I didn’t forget. I was just warming up.”

Metropol' had a lot of assistants. They helped us paste pages and check the proofs. The size of the almanac was about 40 folio sheets. So, taking into account 12 copies, we had to glue about 12,000 typed pages on Whatman paper. What did the “first” issue of the almanac look like? Four typed pages were pasted on Whatman paper. The layout was done by David Borovsky of the Taganka Theater.¹³ It looked like 12 greenish gravestones. Again, the funeral theme . . . Boris Messerer thought up the almanac’s frontispiece and trademark, the gramophone. At first we wanted to paste in photos of the authors. Gorenshtein had already brought two: full-face and in profile. We soon discovered that they quickly came unglued and we decided against it. Credit for the name of the almanac goes to Aksyonov. *Metropol'* is the literary process here, in the metropolis. In the foreword, also written mainly by Aksyonov (his style is felt there), it is said that the almanac is a lean-to atop the best metro in the world.

We didn’t want to pile up a mountain of manuscripts so we made the almanac in the form of a ready-made book. We were going to offer one copy to The State Committee for Publishing and one to The All-Union Agency of Writers’ Rights. For publication here and abroad. That is, we offered to reprint what we had already published. That’s why in the foreword it is written: “May be published in typographical form only in its given condition. No

¹² Friedrich Gorenshtein (1932–2002) is the author of several philosophical novels. He had only a few texts published in the USSR. Emigrated to Germany, where he died in 2002.

¹³ A theater famous for its politically charged productions in the 1960s–70s, its director was Yurii Liubimov. David Borovsky was its chief art director.

additions or deletions allowed." This demand especially enraged our opponents.

The campaign against *Metropol'* began in the offices of the secretariat of the Moscow Organization of the Writers' Union on January 20, 1979. In the first place, we didn't think there would be so many people. There were about 50 of them. In the second place, we received some sort of very agitated summons from them via courier: you are requested to appear . . . in the event you don't appear . . . Then there were the threats. Thirdly, this session of the "party committee" was on the eve of our proposed debut; this especially frightened them and became the dominant theme of their incantations. They were convinced that after the debut of *Metropol'* people would begin to speak "in tongues," and then the book would be published in the West. "I warn you," announced the chairman of the meeting, Felix Kuznetsov,¹⁴ "if the almanac is published in the West, we will accept no repentance from you."

All of this had been choreographed beforehand. One figure after another stood up, yelled, became indignant, made threats. Someone even shed tears of hatred. Gribachev¹⁵ told me in the corridor, with thief-like confidentiality, "No matter what you say it's all the same for you guys, you're dead meat." There were five of us, the compilers. Everything was so vile, so despicable, that there was nothing left for us to do other than conduct ourselves "heroically." Iskander said we live in our own country as if we were under occupation. They became angry with Popov because he had copied down their speeches. Aksyonov called the Writers' Union the kindergarten of a fortified regime.

Later they accused us of thinking up *Metropol'* with the aim of publishing it in the West. This is factually incorrect. We sent two copies to France and America through acquaintances who appeared out of nowhere and took the almanac abroad at great risk to themselves, not to publish, but to preserve it, and in this we turned out to have had foresight. When the big scandal occurred and our

¹⁴ Literary critic, head of the Moscow Writers Union.

¹⁵ Official Soviet poet Nikolai Gribachev, known for his political conservatism.

plans to publish *Metropol'* in-country collapsed, the authors agreed to publish the almanac in Russian through the American publishing house Ardis, at that time run by Carl Proffer, who had published many excellent Russian books and was a friend to many of us. He hastened to announce on Voice of America that he had the almanac in his hands. After that there was no backing down. The almanac was published a little while later in English and French.

Originally we had planned a launch for *Metropol'* to introduce it to the public. We rented a location. The celebration was to be held at the cafe "Rhythm" near Miuskaya Square. We invited around three hundred people. Then the detective story began.

The KGB reacted in military fashion: they cordoned off the block, closed the cafe, sealed it due to the discovery of cockroaches, and hung a sign on the door: "Closed for sanitation." They began to bring us in to the Writers' Union for questioning.

They tried to split us up in every possible way. They told us that Aksyonov was not one of us—that he had millions in the West. They vilely made fun of Lipkin's surname: Lipkin-Vlipkin.¹⁶ Iskander "fought them" but he couldn't "fight them off" . . . Repressions began, hitting almost every one of the "Metropolitans": they banned our books (those already published were made unavailable for loan in libraries), our plays, and fired us from our jobs.

The then-heads of the WU and its organizations play the fool even more conspicuously now and even justify their behavior, now that they've lost their way in the abrupt changes in the climate; but in 1979 they were genuine executioners. One example: my father, who at that time occupied a prominent diplomatic post in Vienna, was immediately called back to Moscow. In the name of the Politburo, where they had decided that *Metropol'* was the start of a new Czechoslovakia, the secretary of the Central Committee Zimyanin gave him a truly Nazi-like ultimatum: either your son signs a renunciation of *Metropol'* or you will not return to Vienna . . . Zimyanin didn't want to speak with my father one-on-one, because he already took him for an enemy. Also present were Albert Belyaev,

¹⁶ A play on the verb *vlipat'*, to get into trouble, into a mess.

at that time the “central” persecutor of culture, and Shauro, the head of the Department of Culture, who had known my father since his student years. When Zimyanin pointed at my father and asked, “Do you know one another?” Shauro extended his hand and introduced himself: “Shauro.” Such was the fear . . . Zimyanin read the most “pointed” pieces from the almanac, called Akhmadulina a prostitute and drug addict, and on my account noted:

“Tell your son that if he doesn’t write the letter it’ll be the end of him.” I didn’t write it, and they threw my father out of work . . . I never regretted my participation in *Metropol'*; it was a good life lesson, but I don’t thank the executioners of the almanac for such a lesson.

On the eve of his death they declared Vysotsky’s songs to be vulgar. They dealt with Aksyonov by depriving him of his Soviet citizenship in the end. Popov, who had been expelled from the Writers’ Union, was not published for many years. They persecuted Lipkin and Lisnyanskaya, who left the Union in a sign of protest against the expulsions.

Felix Kuznetsov headed the campaign to persecute *Metropol'* with full determination, reflected in his unceasingly perspiring face. When he would get tired, the doors of the office were flung open, and pale-faced Lazar Karelin and ruddy-faced Oleg Poptsov,¹⁷ in a leather Red Army jacket, flew in to continue the fight against us. In the article “Confusion with *Metropol'*,” Kuznetsov wrote: “The aestheticization of criminal acts, vulgar ‘criminal’ language, this inside-out snobbism, and in essence all the contents of the almanac *Metropol'* contradict the roots of the humanitarian tradition of Russian Soviet literature . . . There’s no need to create a propagandistic stone soup and present ordinary political provocation as concern for the expansion of the creative possibilities of Soviet literature.”

By order from above a whole gang of the almanac’s critics was unleashed, and their opinion of *Metropol'* was unanimous: “pornography of the spirit.” Rimma Kazakova considered *Metropol'* to be “trash, not literature, something close to graphomania.”

¹⁷ Karelin and Poptsov were liberal-minded writers, members of the secretariat of the Moscow Writers Union.

Vladimir Gusev was torturously alarmed by the “fate of young writers, including those participating in this collection. It isn’t all the same to us, whether a young writer writes about men’s or women’s restrooms, like Erofeev, or solely about drunkenness and sexual perversion, like Popov.” Those famous champions of the ideological front, literary counterintelligence agents Tatyana Kudryavtseva and Tamara Motyleva, were also alarmed in print about the “clarity of ideas,” and Nikolai Shundik¹⁸ threatened: “You, as a participant in this endeavor, will become the object of the cheapest political football.”

All this looks like nonsense now, and even in 1979 we laughed at such ravings; at the same time the ravings were not a joke but a verdict. Sergei Zalygin¹⁹ found the stories of Popov to be “beyond the bounds of literature.” Grigory Baklanov,²⁰ repeating Kuznetsov, having gently called my story “Humping Hannah” “an immoral scrawl,” declared: “I will no longer speak, for example, of the stories of Erofeev, which have no relationship to literature whatsoever.” Did these venerable writers really not understand that their pronouncements would lead to diabolical conclusions? If the changes had not occurred, we would still be sitting with gags in our mouths. Along with Popov we would have died as former writers, having existed in the WU for 7 months and 13 days. To hell with it, with the WU of the USSR; but no one has ever repented, not on our side or theirs.

How many did we lose? Boris Vakhtin died. Yury Kublanovsky, Yuz Aleshkovsky, and Vassily Rakitin found themselves in emigration along with Friedrich Gorenshtein, who published his unforgettable story “House with a Turret” in *Youth* at some point in time. Yury Karabchievsky recently passed from this world.

The shutdown of *Metropol’* on the one hand was the peak, the culmination of stagnation; on the other hand, everything was

¹⁸ Nikolai Shundik (1920–1995), literary functionary, editor-in-chief of the journal *Volga*, director of the nationalistic press *Sovremennik*.

¹⁹ Sergei Zalygin (1913–2000), a popular liberal writer.

²⁰ Grigory Baklanov (1923–2009), a popular liberal writer.

already on a downward trajectory, drawing its last breath. Hence the particular spite and rage of our "blue-arsed flies." Rumors flew, of course, that we would be expelled, but we cheekily did not believe them. Having fired back, three of us went to the Crimea: Aksyonov, Popov, and I. At an exhibition of holographs in some little southern town we wrote in the visitors' book: "We, the editors of the almanac *Metropol'*, greet the birth of the new art of the holograph . . ." I was told later that the note has been preserved somewhere. In Koktebel we met Iskander and set off to drink some apple brandy. When we had already downed a couple of shots, Fazil suddenly remembered: "I received an anonymous letter! 'Rejoice, you bastard! They've finally expelled two of your sons of bitches from the Writers' Union.'"

The anonymous letter turned out to be correct. They expelled us in our absence. It was, in essence, literary death. Those who were expelled were no longer published. In an instant Popov and I became dissidents. The impressive logic of banditry: strike at the youth to frighten and divide everyone. Our comrades, Aksyonov, Bitov, Iskander, Lisnyanskaya, and Lipkin, wrote a letter of protest: if they didn't reinstate us, they would all leave the Union. Akhmadulina sent a similar letter. The Voice of America did not delay to report this. Passions flared.

On August 12, 1979 the *New York Times* published a telegram from American writers to the Writers' Union of the USSR. Kurt Vonnegut, William Styron, John Updike (who had contributed to the almanac at the invitation of Aksyonov), Arthur Miller, and Edward Albee came out on our behalf. They demanded that we be reinstated into the Writers' Union; if not, they would refuse to be published in the USSR. The WU, it seemed, chickened out. In any event, Yury Verchenko, who "worked" with more than one dissident, took up with us after this telegram. Good-natured and odious, Verchenko looked like a big Chicago gangster. Once Georgy Markov²¹ stopped by his office to take a look at us. Verchenko pulled himself up

²¹ Georgy Markov (1911–91): Chairman of the Board of the Union of Soviet Writers of the USSR from 1977 to 1986.

and began to yell "And I say that your *Metropol'* is a pile of shit!" Markov paced a bit, sniffed the air, and left, saying neither hello or good-bye.

Generally the atmosphere of the WU surprised me. It was an atmosphere of universal servility and cringing. With us they behaved themselves quite politely; we were enemies. But with subordinates, with Kuznetsov and others, they conversed with extreme disdain. And not only were they not offended, but took it as a sign of kindness. Once when we were with Verchenko, Lazar Karelin came in. As the conversation progressed, we bonded with him. Verchenko delighted in this scene, and then said: "Enough, Karelin, don't play the beggar here . . ." and then begin to promise to reinstate us into the Union ("Wait a bit, we'll take you back, you'll become the top people, you'll know all the authorities"), but he demanded various concessions and compromises from us. He was very afraid of Popov's bag, supposing there was a tape-recorder hidden in it.

The *Literary Gazette* answered the Americans' telegram with Kuznetsov's article, with the criminal title "Why All the Fuss?" He assured his "dear colleagues" that the Writers' Union "no less than anyone else" is concerned about the creative destiny of its writers and believes that "the deep and organic ties that connect authentic writers with their native literature and native land are indissoluble." "These hopes," continued Kuznetsov, "circulate among our young authors Viktor Erofeev and Evgeny Popov . . . Acceptance into the Writers' Union is such an internal matter of our creative union that we ask that it be given the opportunity to determine on its own the degree of maturity and the creative potential of every writer."

Metropol' turned out to be the mother lode for Felix Kuznetsov. He began to fly into offices that formerly he had no hope of getting into. A big theorist of morality in literature, he loved to practice slander for a bit of variety. My father told me that in their meeting Zimyanin declared to him that I was preparing to emigrate. My father was much surprised. "Kuznetsov told me about it," explained Zimyanin, "your son himself confessed to him."

Our exclusion was communicated in a very strange, illiterate formulation (O, these scribblers!). The resolution of the secretariat

of the Writers' Union of the RSFSR was printed in *Moscow Litterateur*: "Taking into account that the works of the writers E. Popov and V. Erofeev received unanimous negative marks at the meeting of the Moscow Literary Organization, the secretariat of the administration of the WU of the RSFSR withdraws its decision on the acceptance of E. Popov and V. Erofeev as members of the Writers' Union of the USSR . . ."

From this moment on the authorities, trying to confuse everything, began to work out a version in which it was as if we had never been accepted into the Union. Popov and I appeared before Kuznetsov to find out why we had been expelled. "No one expelled you, we just withdrew our decision." "But there is no such provision in the regulations!" Then he got the regulations and read to us how a Soviet writer must participate in the building of communism. We made some sort of objection. Kuznetsov exclaimed: "Next you'll be talking about human rights!"

The episode when we were almost accepted back into the Union was mysterious and vague. All the same they must have been frightened. The letters from six of our authors, the Americans' telegram and articles in many countries—all this was rather serious. Of course without this support Popov and I would have had a good chance of following in the footsteps of Sinyavsky and Daniel; not without reason did we talk about some sort of investigator on particularly important government business who allegedly occupied himself with us. We never saw him in person. But I sensed the chill of the Gulag for a long while. They insolently listened in on phone conversations, secretly dispatched people, summoned friends to the "authorities" and dissuaded them from being friends, stole into my car at night, and spread fantastic rumors: Aksyonov and Erofeev are homosexuals who decided to create *Metropol'* to test the strength of their male friendship. Finally the KGB "abducted" me: they took me away to the top floor of the Hotel Belgrade to some special room, spoke "gently," proposing I give them the manuscripts without a search. They wanted to "get to know my work better," they threatened me with "writing pornography." Later I found out that the KGB had nicknamed me Woland while working out a scheme to deport me

which, for some reason, never came into being.²² Well, for that, thanks.

Of course our misfortunes of that time were nothing in comparison with the torments that fell to the lot of Anatoly Marchenko or Sakharov.²³ We were not beaten in prison, we were not force fed during hunger strikes. But in that “*Metropol’itan*” year I understood the essence of the society we lived in, the meanness and cowardice of some and the nobility of others, in a way that I would not have understood over half of a lifetime.

And so on 6 September Kuznetsov once again invited Popov and myself to see him. He said that the secretariat of the Organization of Moscow Writers held a meeting where it was decided to reinstate us. Popov immediately said “Give us a certificate!” “No, we won’t give you a certificate.” “Are we members of the WU?” “No.” “Then who are we?” “You are members of the Organization of Moscow Writers . . .” We turned out to be in the unique position of accepted-not-accepted. Kuznetsov said, write a declaration and they will fully reinstate you into the secretariat of the RSFSR. They meant that they wanted us to write about the “ballyhoo in the West.” We refused. Sergei Mikhalkov, secretary of the Russian WU, stepped into the fray. In the silence of an enormous office on Komsomolsky Prospect he said that at minimum they demand political loyalty from us. A political declaration is needed for our comrades from the provinces who are not up to speed. We did not give in. We simply wrote a declaration about the reinstatement.

In December a summons to the Secretariat of the RSFSR followed. We decided not to go: let them reinstate us in absentia. But on the day beforehand Verchenko assured us that everything had been agreed to and we had to appear for formality’s sake. We met Aksyonov that same day. This was important, as there was a version of the events that suggested he had made *Metropol’* in

²² Woland is the devil in Mikhail Bulgakov’s classic novel *The Master and Margarita*. His arrival in Moscow sets in motion a series of chaotic events.

²³ Both famous dissidents. Anatoly Marchenko (1938–1986) was imprisoned in 1979. Andrei Sakharov (1921–1989), was exiled in the same year.

order to leave for the West. Vassily said "If they reinstate you, we can live normally." He even prepared to attend some meeting of the Inspection Commission he belonged to the following day.

The next morning a complete debacle took place. We understood that a fight lay ahead. We thought that they would humiliate us, force us to repent, so that our "confession" could be printed in the *Literary Gazette*, that they would smear us with shit, but in the end they would accept us, and this meant that the Union was betraying its Soviet essence. We considered reinstatement to be a victory.

They made us wait for a long time and then let us in one by one. Popov went in first: it was thought that, being a Siberian, from the people, he could smooth out the situation in a certain sense. It's hard to say if the result was planned beforehand. It's possible that they received from above first one set of directions, then another. The episode happened literally on the eve of the occupation of Afghanistan, and the leadership did not need liberal games of "detente." In any event, someone had visited the "upper echelons." Perhaps it was Kuznetsov, because he began the meeting with an inflammatory speech against *Metropol'*.

The entire secretariat, from the lowliest to the highest, were in attendance. They sat behind a long table and irritably wriggled their hands: it looked like a bundle of writhing snakes. Sergei Mikhalkov and Yury Bondarev sat at the chairman's table.²⁴ Bondarev didn't say a word, but his indignation was expressed in his gestures: he would grab his forehead then throw up his hands. The chief speaker was Shundik. Valentin Rasputin left halfway through for another meeting. Mikhalkov expressed impartiality. When they began to yell "Enough of listening to them!" he objected: "No, comrades, we should look into everything . . ." That they had called us in separately meant nothing. We laughed afterwards: we had all given absolutely identical answers.

²⁴ Sergei Mikhalkov (1913–2009) was a popular children's poet, the author of the Soviet anthem, father of film directors Nikita Mikhalkov and Andrei Konchalovsky. In 1979, Chair of the Board of the WU of Russian Federation. Yury Bondarev (b.1924) was prominent writer and author of many novels about WWII. In 1979, served as the first secretary of the Board of the WU of Russian Federation.

The questions were ordinary and vile: how did you come up with such a detestable plan? Do you understand the damage this has done to the nation? How do you feel about the fact that reactionary circles in the West use your names? Who put you up to this? They wanted to bring everything down on Aksyonov. Popov said that Aksyonov is thirty-three years old and that he can answer for his actions himself, and that no one “put him up,” he isn’t shelving to be put up.

We had agreed that as soon as Popov came out he would give me a sign: good, OK, or bad. Popov came out and just waved his hand: completely bad . . . They asked me right off: do you believe you have participated in anti-Soviet activity? I understood. They were setting me up: this wasn’t acceptance into the Writers’ Union; participation in anti-Soviet activity is the 70th statute of the criminal code. Kuznetsov said: “How is that, having written about Sartre and the like, you did not understand that you would be used like a pawn in a grand political game?” Rasul Gamzatov, Mustai Karim, and David Kugultinov behaved entirely differently.²⁵ At some moment Gamzatov stood up and told Popov: “You answer well! Accept them all, and get it over with!” When Popov came out, Karim followed him out and said: “You’ve said everything correctly, but look who you’ve said it to!”

After the session of the secretariat some of the participants in the debacle came up to us and shook our hands. We found out later that they had voted unanimously. There was a long break, they deliberated, and we hung about the hallways. Then they called us back in, and Shundik read out the decision (edited by Daniil Granin)²⁶: we are expelled from the Writers’ Union for an indefinite time. When everyone was already breaking up, Mikhalkov whispered to us: “Guys, I did everything I could, but 40 people were against me . . .” Maybe that time he truly wasn’t the chief thug?

²⁵ Poets representing republics within the USSR, respectively, Dagestan (Gamzatov), Bashkiria (Karim), and Kalmykia (Kugultinov).

²⁶ Daniil Granin (b. 1919): a prominent Soviet writer with a questionable liberal reputation.

This was all two days before the 100th birthday of Stalin. When Craig Whitney, correspondent for the *New York Times*, approached us we told him that this is how they celebrate the birthday of The Leader. Lipkin and Lisnyanskaya left the Writers' Union. They got it worse than anyone else: they were deprived of almost all means of existence. We always treated them like heroic figures. Aksyonov also left the Union, but his "betting on departure" weakened our solidarity. Soon he received an invitation from an American university, left and gave up his citizenship. I must add that Popov and I wrote a letter to our friends with an appeal not to leave the Union, not leave the left flank of literature exposed. Bitov, Iskander and Akhmadulina cautiously heeded our advice.

Metropol' turned out to be an X-ray that exposed our whole society. We saw authority clearly: it was no longer pushing forward on its ideological bulldozer as before, it barely crawled—asinine, degraded, and collapsing—but nevertheless was ready to destroy anything that lives just so as not to disturb its decay.

At the same time the saga of *Metropol'* showed that it was possible to resist that power, and that it should be resisted. Moreover, it became clear how to resist it.

For us the year of *Metropol'* was a frightful and jolly year: amicably, trying not to lose our sense of humor, we (how ambiguously I valued the meaning of that pronoun that year!) went against the grain, against the stream of slop pouring down upon us. They shouted that we had sold out to the Special Service, that we should be lined up either against the wall or with our faces to the people. They didn't break us, they just spoiled our biographies. And now I think and talk not about revenge, but about memory: social amnesia leads to catastrophic repetitions.

Those "epic" times have passed. A new trial has arisen: what to do, when one can do anything?

From the muzzle to freedom of choice to the choice of freedom.

Translated by Brian R. Johnson