

# Stephen Miller

In a city destroyed by war, a fallen dynasty holds one man's final chance for redemption.



THE  
LAST TRAIN  
TO KAZAN

# 1

Pyotr Mikhailovich Ryzhkov walked across the bright Neglinnaya Prospekt to the Hermitage restaurant. He was dressed in a brown suit, his least shabby, and carried his fedora in his hands since it was too hot to wear it. Moscow was stifling, a spider's web of streets that radiated from the river and ran uphill, spreading above the Kremlin and the old wall of the city until they intersected the ring of gardenized boulevard just next to the restaurant.

He was pretending to be a poetic soul, musing on beauty and lofty thoughts during the tram ride up from Tatarskaya. Yes, a poetic soul – a translator and valued member of the French embassy staff. A Russian veteran of the Foreign Legion, caught up in the Western Front war, and newly posted from Paris to Moscow on account of his background. Well . . . if anyone checked, that much was true. Translating? Yes, he actually did some translating, but mostly it was to explain to this bosses what a particular scrawled message might mean, or to interpret a phrase taken from a stenographer's transcript of an intercepted telephone call.

What he really did for his salary, and purely because he had very little choice in the matter, was organize a short

string of informants, both in and out of the Bolshevik government, who sporadically provided information to France. And, since everything was in chaos, the Bolsheviks suffering from factional disputes, there was no shortage of recruits. Ryzhkov did not have the privilege of selecting most of his sources, and therefore he was expendable. He knew all that. He was more than painfully aware that he was one of the only experienced agents working for the French, but precariously out on the point, with no uniform, no credentials.

But now perhaps he had somehow actually grown into the skin of a poseur. His life had been a lie for so long, and his deceit tested by enough challenges, that pretence and play-acting had been annealed into his being. If he were to be honest, he would have to admit that he fought almost every day to remember who he really was. The only way out of it all was to either win or surrender – not really much of a choice, he was thinking.

And then he saw the man, the same one he had seen in Theatre Square, waiting by the tram stops.

Paranoid, he thought. Occupational disease. After a while you saw the same people all the time. True, Ryzhkov had a great memory for faces; the man could be someone he'd seen before, outside on the street, in a café. Just an ordinary citizen en route to – where, exactly?

Don't think about it. Go on as usual.

And so he did. Musing about the city. Poetic soul.

He waited until the tram stopped, swung out of the seat and down onto the wide sidewalk and walked past the fence to the entrance to the park.

Test them, he was thinking. It could be an exercise, so test them. Do nothing out of the ordinary, but test them all the same.

He stopped, checked his watch. Ah . . . early. Stroll around, have a smoke. Admire the church in the far corner by the

little pool that they'd built into the park. Yes, yes, a beautiful day. Pose as a happy man; tip your hat to the ladies, smile at the children. A nobody, a clerk-translator on his day off, going to meet his friend at the popular restaurant. Half way around the pool he checked his watch again, made a new decision and turned around.

Ahead of him two men casually stopped and fussed for cigarettes in their clothing.

He walked faster now, heading back to the restaurant, up the steps. Under the new administration the Hermitage was a 'people's canteen' and, reservations being an affectation of the upper classes, service was strictly by queue. But one still had to pay, and there were only two couples waiting ahead of him.

He was directed to his table. Made a show of waiting for his friend. Ordered a glass of *konyak* and then went to the bathroom. In the farthest toilet he reached behind the tank and found the little magnetized box, pulled it away, opened the cap, took out the rolled cigarette papers, capped the box, hid it behind the tank in the horizontal position, flushed the toilet and, still holding the paper in his fingers, went out to the sinks. No one. A flush in the corner stall; at nearly the same moment the door to the washroom swung open and an older man entered fumbling with his pants buttons. They wouldn't try to take him in the restaurant itself, he was thinking.

He washed his hands and went back to his seat. The papers were in his pocket now. He sat and waited for his friend, nursed his *konyak* and tried to work out what to do.

They could have him any time, this government. Why now?

Outside men and women walked in the empty park, admiring the straggling gardens, looking at their own reflections in the windows. The old restaurant was not even half full. There was nothing on the menu but soup and eggs. The eggs cost 150 roubles.

Ryzhkov caught the waiter's eye and asked to use the telephone kiosk. Inside the kiosk he took out the papers and looked for a place to hide them. The seat was made of leather gone ragged and built into the wooden cabinetry. A strip of moulding on the inside rim of the seat was loose and he flattened the papers out on the marble shelf in the kiosk, slipped them beneath the wood and banged it tight with his fist.

There was no answer to his telephone call. He thought about telephoning the embassy, calling Merk to rescue him, but the new government kept records of all calls at the district switchboards, and if they were going to take him it would be soon now . . . when he left the restaurant.

So he went back to the table. Sat, fuming, for a few more minutes. Angry, letting his nerves out a little. Everything was plausible, so far. But there was nothing, nothing, nothing to grab onto.

Suddenly his anger overwhelmed him. He sat for a moment and broke out into a sweat, his face gone red. Outside, lingering at a lamppost, the man on the tram was given a light for his cigarette by a total stranger. They stopped to exchange a few words and then parted.

He'd waited long enough for his imaginary friend that was never going to come. Abruptly he was standing, shrugging at the waiter, who shrugged back – not an unhappy man. Happy to have work that put him close to a little food now and again, a life indoors under wide ferns and palms that softened the glare through the huge windows. Not a bad job in the middle of a revolution with winter coming, Ryzhkov thought.

A breeze riffled through the leaves from under the awning. He went down the steps. Now he was being a man who suddenly had time on his hands. He walked to the tram stop and waited. There was no point in even looking around now. He knew.

He took the tram as far as the Theatre, then got off and wound his way through the old market, shopping for a few items. It would give them a few more places to check, if they thought he'd dumped the package. Test them. Fight back, he told himself, still angry, frustrated. Blaming himself for never saying no, for thinking that coming back to Russia would mean that he could do something, change something. Find whatever it was he'd lost.

He'd been on the little street a thousand times. It was across and behind the Kremlin from where he'd grown up – his father's second house on Gazetni Street. They'd moved there to be close to the university where the old man had sometimes worked. Ryzhkov had gone to the Alexander School right in the centre of the city. It was one of the only good times he could remember.

He picked up the tram again, following one long strand of the spider's web past the Ilynskaya gate and the Church of Transfiguration. Four years of war and revolution had leached the life out of Moscow; the trees had slowly vanished for fuel in the winters, there were no more dogs in the city, they had all been eaten. Money was of dubious value, the prices fluctuating daily; the best way to 'buy' something was to barter for it, preferably with food. There was a brisk market in bootleg vodka and schnapps. Men sold it in home-made tins on corners. The Bolsheviks had posted strict proscriptions on alcoholism, but the people had ignored them.

They would take him soon, if they were going to take him at all, and since there was no escape he gave them time to organize. He might as well make it easy. He had no stomach for a fight. At the next stop Ryzhkov got out and walked up the hill behind the Kremlin onto the wide plaza.

Above him loomed St Basil's, famously named for the saint who was supposedly watching over Moscow and protecting her citizens. Appropriate, he thought. He went inside, admired

the frescos and the ikons of the saints. The cathedral was cool in the hot summer day, and Ryzhkov walked into one of the chapels, stood in front of the array of ikons, and, more as a test for himself than anything else, tried to pray.

It didn't matter that no prayer came. It didn't matter if he was killed. He'd long since given up worrying about death. Like all the men who'd lived through the trenches he'd only prayed that death might come quickly. A little mercy, that was all.

There was no more time, he thought. He saw a man who had come in behind him and was waiting there, hat in hand. Another was standing just at the outer doors. Both of them were young but looked like they might know what to do. He turned to leave and they followed him out onto the steps.

Below him two carriages had drawn up and four other men were waiting.

'Bonjour,' one of the men said. They were laughing and it was too late to run.

From sleep. Dark and vast; adapted for survival so that one part of him was lost in the void, while the other heard the step of the guard in the corridor; the change of the shift, the scratch of a match, the exhale of tobacco. The scattered snap of the gunshots in the courtyard.

He would never have a whole sleep again, Ryzhkov knew. Along with millions of other men, he had adjusted to it. Lying there in a daze, you could at least gain some rest. Besides, if you really slept you might have dreams.

Ryzhkov knew his jail; he had walked past it a hundred times as a young man in Moscow, been into the offices with his father back when it had been the headquarters of the Anchor Assurance and Lloyds of London. Now, it was known by its street address, Bolshaya Lubyanka 11 – newly

transformed into the headquarters of the the Extraordinary Commission – the Cheka, the Bolshevik secret police.

It was summer, but the cell was dank. Lit by a window that itself was bisected by a new wall that the revolution had thrown up, red bricks with sharp crusts of mortar that had oozed out of the gaps. Maybe six feet wide and twice as long to the cold outside wall; a thin flea-infested pallet and a bucket.

At first all cells were the same, he thought. And then, once you'd spent enough time fantasizing about escape, or trying to find tiny hiding places to store your pathetic contraband items – a pencil stub, a nail, a fragment of tobacco that had been filched from under the door and saved in hope of a wayward match – you realized that each cell was an individual, like people with their own personalities. There were the impassive ones who'd been wrenched from the soft life and burned down to an austere essence; cruel cells, like people who could watch you die rather than sacrifice a single tear; the cells that kept their dark stories to themselves; cells that couldn't stop screaming.

It had been three days and he was still in the clothes he had been arrested in; there were no uniforms for the prisoners. You were interrogated, then executed in whatever you were wearing when they picked you up; the last set of clothing you wore became your shroud.

He'd had one long session on the first afternoon. Just questions, no side talk. First one Chekisti, then another and another until there were four. They didn't bother identifying themselves.

They knew all about him and his attachment to the French intelligence networks once he'd come back to Russia when Kerensky's Provisional Government granted amnesty to all the politicals. He was openly working at the French embassy and it wasn't a great leap of detection for them to bring him in.

He sat there handcuffed to his chair and gave them all the obvious answers. One of the men wrote it all down. Testimony. He took his time and was careful. He was a translator, an embassy employee. He wanted to be put in touch with the Ambassador's office, and he wanted the services of a legal representative. All the time he was answering he was trying to work it out.

Something had cracked, something under the pressures of civil war and counter-revolution had pushed events into an emergency. Events had obviously overrun whatever immunity he might have possessed as an employee of the French. It could be a change of plans on high; there was a faint possibility he could be some sort of bargaining chip, or maybe the French had given him up to the Cheka for some favour.

He would never know, and, whatever it was, the world had moved on. He was not a prize catch, there was nothing he could divulge that would make the slightest difference to either side. He thought it might possibly be that he was only being kept alive because of a clerical error.

In semi-sleep he heard the laughing guard coming along the corridor, his stick banging against the doors. Ryzhkov stood, his knees paining him, bladder full, every muscle gone stiff, reluctant. The stick approached, crossed his doorway and continued along the hall. He counted the doors. Three until the end, and then the guard turned back down the line, peering inside to check that everyone was alive this morning. The grill slid open. Ryzhkov looked into the watery blue eyes, the shock of blond hair.

'Ah, good morning, Monsieur Ryzhkov,' he called out. 'You're looking thinner, but why waste food on the likes of you when the people's army needs nourishment, eh?' Of course the guard didn't know any of the details of his case, it was the only advantage Ryzhkov had over the boy.

‘I’m wondering if you have heard the latest news, that everyone on this corridor is to be executed. Did you know that? Only a matter of days, I’m afraid,’ and then the little laugh as the grill slid shut. The story continued to the next chamber. ‘. . . morning, Monsieur Swetovsky. Yes, you heard me correctly. We’re cleaning out all the dead wood . . .’

Ryzhkov walked the length of the cell, urinated into the bucket, and then returned to the door. The guard’s hearty greetings were still echoing down the hall. From somewhere there was the scuffling of boots on the tiles, a protesting voice, the sudden sound of metal against metal. It meant they were taking someone out. Now he could no longer hear the laughing guard; his cheeriness had evaporated. The men who came to take you were solemn when they did it. For them it was just a grim task, getting a physically reluctant creature from point A to B. More clatter along the corridor, the closing of the door, and then, finally, the laughter of the guard returned.

Ryzhkov walked the length of the cell a hundred times, folded over the mattress and sat on it and waited while the guard came at last to his door, slid the morning meal through the hinged gate. ‘There you are. A waste, if you ask me, since you’re going to die soon.’

‘Thank you very much,’ Ryzhkov said, rolling off the mat, dragging the plate across the floor and, hungry now, sipping the soup out of the tin before attacking the archipelago of cabbage marooned in the centre of the dish. There was a tiny sliver of something that looked like meat, or perhaps it was a stick of wood, a fragment of a cooking spoon or a ladle. It didn’t matter; he ate it.

The guard had developed an attachment to him. Perhaps because he was a mystery and Ryzhkov hadn’t offered the young man anything. A polite mystery, because that was the only way to deal with jailers. You couldn’t intimidate them,

or abuse them. The only thing you could do was wait. There had been one revolution that had put him here, maybe another would free him.

The boy sat outside on a stool that he'd hauled down he corridor, taunted him with questions. Perhaps he saw it as a way of educating himself by studying the enemy, just as an apprentice angel might study a lesser demon. 'I don't understand you,' he said to Ryzhkov. 'You claim to be a revolutionary? That's absurd. How can you say something like that?'

'Absolutely.' Ryzhkov was trying not to bolt the cabbage. It was all he would get until the evening, and as for activity, it was just about all he would do, unless using the bucket or strolling from wall to wall counted.

'You claim that you are a clandestine operative. For the revolution also?'

'I claim nothing. I already told them everything, and besides, it's none of your business, is it, comrade?'

He laughs. 'No, it's not my business. But since you say you're a revolutionary, then why are you here?'

'There are many varieties of revolution, comrade. Why are you here?'

'I'm here to detain and execute vermin like you. I'm killing capitalist rats, that's what I'm doing.'

'Ahh . . . Well, I'm not a capitalist, if that's what's worrying you. I have nothing, own nothing. Nothing at all. Never have. Not for a long, long time.' Idly he wondered whatever had become of the apartment he had once owned in Petersburg. Probably a flophouse for deserving peasants.

'I love to kill people like you. I am good at it,' the boy said, unable to take the laugh out of his voice. 'I have been recognized for my efforts. I'm to be given an award for diligence and valour.'

'I thought there were to be no more medals in Russia?'

A pause while the guard thought it through. ‘That’s correct. Correct. No classes. Only levels of achievement, literacy, health for all, an end to drunkenness and debauchery. All the things that we have been lacking. Now they are within our grasp. Only a little more cleaning up to do. Only a few more vermin to kill . . .’ The laughter again. Forced. Ryzhkov slid the plate across the concrete floor and through the little hinged opening. ‘Now we are on the verge of attaining all the things we’ve been lacking, comrade Ryzhkov. I call you “comrade” because deep down I do believe you can be saved.’

‘With the grace of God.’

‘Don’t tell me you believe in that garbage.’ The laugh spluttered out in the corridor. The plate was abruptly swept away, the doorway flaps closed.

‘Perhaps I am simply hedging my bets.’

‘The church! Those are the ones responsible for all our undoing, moaning and groaning about an afterlife. People like Rasputin. If you’re one of them, you really do deserve to die.’ He spat and walked away.

Ryzhkov dozes. Although it is not dozing really, more like staring at the plastered wall until he falls into a trance, reliving the choices that led him first to the Okhrana, then to the fugitive life, then to the trenches, on and on, through all his life’s mistakes. While he is so occupied, there are new boots clacking down the corridor. A door is unlocked, thrown open. A man, screaming, jerked free of his own particular trance, is hauled out and away. A Bolshevik voice recites an ‘official’ proclamation of death. Another door is closed, and a few precious moments later . . . a splattering of gunfire.

And then they come again.

Ryzhkov is bolt upright now as the boots crash through the door, down the corridor. And he stands, stands as he has been taught at the precise centre of his cell, which now . . . he

no longer wants to leave. Now it has become a place of safety. Home.

The door is wrenched open. Three toughs, and behind them is the laughing guard, the smile spreading across his wide blond face. ‘One less *burzhui* to deal with. One less parasite. I am going to be crying big tears of happiness! Oh, catch him!’ This last because Ryzhkov has fallen, either because he is weak from the rations or because he is terrified, or because after all of it – after all the times he has cheated death – this . . . this . . .

This is all happening too quickly. In front of him the tiled corridor, filthy since the guards of the Red Army are no longer compelled to perform menial jobs that soldiers normally perform. They bull along it. No one gets in their way; there are, after all, no officers to carry out inspections, to criticize the polishing of boots, the crease in one’s trousers . . .

They go now from A to B, but he is not walking. The strong young sons of revolutionary Russia are dragging him along. Ahead of him the guard, eager to help out, throws open another steel door.

‘. . . revolutionary council decision to extract the penalty of death in payment for a lifetime of parasitic activity, of conspiring with the forces of the capitalist enemy, it has been determined that one Pyotr Mikhailovich Ryzhkov shall be immediately . . .’

A short series of steps, one two three, yet another steel door, remarkably heavy doors for an insurance company, but necessary now that the enemies of the people have begun to be filed away in the basement offices.

A sudden breath of cool air – a diagonal of shade crosses the courtyard. There is, he realizes with horror, a guillotine set up at the very end of the courtyard, and if that was not enough, a gallows, newly built of stripped logs still sticky with resin. But Ryzhkov is being dragged past both of the

machines to a wall speckled from gunshots gone awry. A slime of blood is slowly making its labyrinthine way between the cobbles towards a drain. There is a hose there and a quartet of terrorized cadets still in their old Corps des Pages uniforms, tattered and filthy, shackled, with bruises on their dirty faces, sooty and tear-stained. Mere boys kept there to watch and remember, to wipe things down and at the end of the day to take it up the arse.

His bowels loosen. His eyes are stinging. Everything seems beautiful, beautiful. The sun slicing across the courtyard, the guillotine standing erect and waiting for a more distinguished neck than his.

The official voice has finished its litany of his crimes. He is thrown to his knees. The soldiers work the bolts of their rifles, two bullets are chambered. Only two! Soon they will even economize on that, he thinks.

He goes inside himself. A man in a suit has walked up directly in front of the soldiers. After a moment Ryzhkov becomes aware of the man's shoes in front of him. The guard's disbelieving voice protesting; even in disappointment he can still laugh.

The infantrymen retreat a few steps and someone grabs his hair and lifts his face up to the sun. It is the guard, cheated out of the punch line to his joke. 'After they ask you a few more questions, then we're coming back outside and finish you.'

They light up cigarettes as he is led across the courtyard under the shade of the pine-scented gallows, through a yellow doorway and down another short corridor. Then they spin him, and push him face-first into the wall of an office, unmanacle his hands, and order him to sit.

In front of him is a plain table, and behind it a second chair. He realizes his pants are soiled, from blood, faeces, urine . . . his own or someone who has gone before him, how

could he tell? The room is gorgeous, he thinks. Paradisiacal. A lovely large room, luxurious and clean. With a single window high in the wall, made of glass that has been manufactured with wires inside it.

Shatterproof.

A knot forms in his throat, and he sobs one more time, involuntarily, like a hiccup. Saved, he thinks. Saved at the last moment. Like Dostoyevsky. Saved by some quirk, some whim. Given a few moments more of life, all because of some niggling little detail, some minor bump in the roadway of revolutionary progress. Once it's all cleared up the guard will get his laugh back.

Maybe it's a dream. Maybe he has already been executed . . . and this 'little room' is just a way station? A limbo, an office of final accounting where he will be called to explain the many mistakes of his life. If he gets the answers right, perhaps there will be angels and virgins, an old man with a white beard and a gilt-covered book turning to a page inscribed with his name.

Still, he was ready, he thinks. It has taken so long, after all. A lot of pain. Too much pain, and eventually you just . . . give up. And he was ready (still, it was too quick!), truly ready to meet his maker, to slide into that great dark pit of the unknown, or just to cease, whichever it would be . . .

Kneeling in the blood and vomit, he was ready, and he is ready even now. The salted crust in the corners of his eyes, that's something he can wipe away. The clothes can be cleaned. He will catch his breath soon. The blood will clot. That sob will stay contained somewhere between his guts and his lungs. All of that can heal, even his memories will be papered over with whatever pattern his brain can come up with in order to keep him sane.

Meanwhile there is the beautiful room in which he now lives.

Voices in the hall. It is an ordinary door, with an ordinary lock. The smells in this part of the prison are different. Paper, vinegar. Everything is cleaner, less fearful. The hallways have been mopped. They obviously don't use buckets to do their business in this wing. Is that music playing in the distance?

The efficient sound of shoes in the corridor. A quiet few words, and then the sound of a key turning the lock.

And . . . in walks the dead man.