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From The Times Literary Supplement

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Mysteries at the heart of Stalin's empire

Last year's most talked-about work of fiction in Russia raises postmodern (or post-Soviet) questions

Gregory Freidin

RECOMMEND? (4)

"Never in my life have I taken first place", muses the narrator of Kamennyi most (The Stone Bridge), as he lines up his toy soldiers on a flea market stall in Moscow on a quiet autumn Sunday in 1998. Such is the opening of Alexander Terekhov's 832-page novel, last year's most talked-about work of fiction in Russia which took second prize in the Big Book awards. A graduate of the Journalism Faculty of the Moscow University (like many of the leading literary figures of his generation), Terekhov, who was born in 1966, began his career as an essayist and journalist. He published his first novel, Krysoboi, in 1995 (it came out in English as The Rat Killer in 2008). Kamennyi most is his second, and so far it exists only in Russian.

Greeted with mixed and sometimes muddled reviews but always acknowledged as compelling, Kamennyi most takes its title from Moscow's Bolshoy Kamennyi most, or Great Stone Bridge, the site of the murder mystery at the centre of the novel. The bridge's single span connects the two banks of the Moscow River in the heart of the capital. On one bank stands the residential apartment complex for high Soviet officials – a brooding Constructivist giant of the 1930s, echoing the Lenin Mausoleum which was the setting for Yuri Trifonov's novel The House on the Embankment (1976). The other bank is dominated by the Kremlin, a medieval fortress in Gothic style, the seat of the "Emperor", as Terekhov's narrator calls Joseph Stalin.

Sometime in the 1990s, while working as a reporter on Russia's investigative tabloid Sovershenno sekretno (Top Secret), Terekhov came across the "Case of the Wolf Cubs", as the murder-suicide of two teenagers on the Great Stone Bridge on June 3, 1943, came to be known. At the centre of the case was the fifteen-year-old only son of Stalin's Minister of Aviation, Volodya Shakhurin, who shot and killed Nina Umansky, the fifteen-year-old only daughter of a Soviet diplomat who had just been appointed ambassador to Mexico. Nina had been due to accompany her father to his new post the following day. Volodya, who was in love with her, asked her to stay. When she refused, he shot her and then turned the gun on himself. The weapon belonged to a friend who was with them on the bridge – Vano Mikoyan, the son of Anastas Mikoyan, one of Stalin's closest comrades-in-arms and a member of the wartime Supreme Military Council.

The investigation quickly took another turn on the discovery of Volodya's diary, which contained details of a Nazi-inspired secret society at the elite school the three teenagers attended. "The Fourth Empire", named by analogy with the Third Reich and the ancient Muscovite political doctrine of Moscow as the Third Rome, had a membership of half-a-dozen boys in their early teens. All, including two of Mikoyan's sons, were from prominent families; they gave themselves Nazi titles and fantasized about seizing power from their fathers once the war came to an end.

"Wolf cubs", Stalin is said to have remarked on hearing the report, "they must be punished." They were: after six months of

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interrogation in the Lubyanka Prison and a signed confession, all were sentenced to a year in exile. Their parents, however, remained untouched by the scandal. Grief-stricken, Konstantin Umansky left with his distraught wife the day after their daughter's death to take up his new post in Mexico, where he was killed in a plane crash in 1945. Mikoyan continued as a leading government figure until 1965. Alexander Shakhurin remained in his post for the rest of the war, but was arrested in 1946 and convicted on an unrelated charge – ruining the Soviet aviation industry. Beria released him soon after Stalin's death, and he resumed government service until his retirement in 1959. Both Umansky and Shakhurin died childless.

Such are the essentials of the story, based on the recollections of contemporaries and participants and on the case dossier of the NKVD. But was this really what happened? What if Vano Mikoyan was a "third man" – the one who pulled the trigger and killed both Volodya and Nina? Was Umansky's plane crash an accident? Or was it, rather, a carefully planned assassination carried out by the Americans who suspected him of being a conduit for a network of Soviet nuclear spies? Or was it perhaps a "special operation" carried out by the agents of the Emperor as a prelude to the post-war purge of prominent Soviet Jews? These are some of the questions that propel the narrative of Kamennyi most, where they are underpinned by the texts of official documents and a parade of historical figures, mostly dead but some still alive, strutting about under their real names. And yet, the novel itself is decidedly about something else. Instead of the standard Russian problems, What is to be done? Who is to blame?, Terekhov's novel raises postmodern (or post-Soviet) questions: Who am I? What is history?

A mixture of cold-case detective novel, fictionalized documentary and historical investigation without footnotes, Kamennyi most consists largely of a first-person monologue, a stream of consciousness inside the head of a hard-boiled sleuth, a man of an age with Terekhov, who is bent on pinning down his historical actors, with regular breaks for cold brutal sex with a succession of women. Although there are transcripts of interviews with elderly witnesses and historical documents cited in part or in full, the real world of the novel unfolds inside the narrator's head. He is a trained historian, once spotted at the Higher School of the KGB, a deprogrammer of victims of religious sects, capable of restoring their obliterated memories, a secret consultant to the Moscow Patriarchy, and, as the novel opens, an obsessive collector and seller of Soviet toy soldiers. He is so mesmerized by the past that it takes just a conversation and a couple of old photographs to set him off on a seven-year-long investigation to find out what really happened on the Great Stone Bridge that afternoon in June 1943.

His quest introduces the reader to some colourful survivors and ghosts of the past: wives, lovers, major and minor Stalin officials. Among them are the Litvinovs – Stalin's diplomat-in-chief Maxim Litvinov, his English wife Ivy, and their children, especially Tatyana Litvinov, who followed her mother back to England in 1976 and who now lives in Brighton. They reappear throughout the novel and are portrayed with uncharacteristic warmth and delicacy.

Konstantin Umansky, the murdered girl's father, was a protégé of Maxim Litvinov, who was Soviet ambassador to the US from 1941 to 1943. Known for his pro-Western leanings, Litvinov was perhaps the only old Bolshevik of his stature to have survived the purges. He was also, we find out, the lover of Umansky's old flame, Anastasia Petrova, who accompanied Litvinov to the US as the ambassador's secretary. In John Carswell's biography of Ivy (The Exile: A Life of Ivy Litvinov), Petrova is mentioned only as "P", but thanks to Terekhov's investigations we now know a good deal about her, her provincial origins, her lovers, children and her deep cover as an informer for the NKVD. Litvinov clearly appeals to Terekhov because of his patriotism and his integrity, and the author is also fascinated by the family which, unlike the other families of high Soviet officials examined here, kept clear of the corruption and rot. He cites Tatyana Litvinov's letter to Stalin of 1951 in which she pleads with "Iosif Vissarionovich" to disregard her father's modest deathbed request to leave the Moscow apartment to his surviving family. Terekhov's transcripts of interviews with her – obtained by a fictional agent that the novel's narrator sends to Brighton – form some of the sturdiest threads woven into the fabric of the novel. Whatever the provenance of these transcripts, they sound authentic and the stories they contain, known hitherto only within a small circle, ring true. Tatyana Litvinov's openness, her erudition and her feel for the times account for much of the freshness and humanity of

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TLS THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Terekhov's historical reconstruction.

The informants furnish the novel with a human bridge to the past, but it is the Great Stone Bridge itself which emerges as the master allegory. A material correlative of a mental construct, it connects post-Communist Russia and its citizens, both uncertain of their identity, with the Soviet Empire at the height of its glory, "after the Battle of Stalingrad and before the Battle of Kursk", as we are reminded early on. Terekhov sees the bridge as a hyphen linking power to meaning, a visual guide for Stalin's strong men in the House of the Embankment, to train their moral line of sight on the Emperor in his fortress across the river. Whatever was wrong with the Stalinist state – and Terekhov does not pine for the good old days – it was saturated with a sense of mission, especially during the Second World War when Soviet society was filled with what Émile Durkheim called effervescence and Max Weber theorized as charisma. This is what both the novel's protagonist and its author, drowning in anomie, find lacking in post-Communist Russia.

Terekhov's narrator seeks the secret of this effervescence in the fantastic confessions of the former revolutionaries at the show trials of the 1930s. Aware of Nikolai Bukharin's letters written to Stalin from jail, he imagines these "men of iron"

"awaiting the warden's steps in order to obey whatever is asked of them so that they could preserve their connection to the Absolute Power, which gave them the sense of . . . what? I think – immortality. Only a misunderstanding would make one say that they had lived as captive slaves. They lived a life of meaning – the meaning defined by him [the Emperor]. To abandon this meaning was worse than dying – it was to become cosmic dust, an Absolute Non-Being, and the empire had given them a clear understanding of what the Absolute means."

Some might view Kamennyi most as a piece of Stalinist déjà vu by an author who in the 1990s wrote an essay "Stalin: In Memoriam". This is not the case. The narrator's musings read like a retelling of Nietzsche's "On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense", as he discovers for himself that "the star cooled and congealed, and the clever beasts had to die". The investigation, a seven-year-long orgy of nostalgia for the empire, ends with all the leads, even the supernatural ones, revealed as either false or a dead end. But the narrator himself has been enriched and transformed by his quest, realizing its essential solipsism. In a homage to Trifonov's novel, *The House on the Embankment*, which closes with the scene of the old man visiting the grave of his only daughter, Terekhov's narrator finds himself in a cemetery, near the wall which holds the ashes of the Umansky family, who left no issue. But the novel itself ends not at a cemetery, nor on the bridge in the heart of Moscow, but with an open vista of the Moscow River on the periphery of the city, where a white boat glides past on the water before mooring at a pier. A conventional allegory – life floating on the river of time – has replaced the stone bridge, a rigid metaphor for constructing identities and meaning. Welcome to post-imperial Russia in the post-nostalgia age.

Alexander Terekhov
KAMENNYI MOST
Roman
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Gregory Freidin is Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Stanford University. He is the author of a biography of Osip Mandelstam, *A Coat of Many Colors*, 1987, and the editor of *The Enigma of Isaac Babel*, 2009, and the Norton Critical Edition of Isaac Babel's *Selected Writings*, 2009.

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