

# THE GREAT ARMORED TRAIN



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**S**O, THIS IS WHAT COMMUNISM MEANS? Gribov thought. The train was magnificent. It seemed too heavy to move, but it fairly glided along the tracks. It was the smoothest ride Gribov had ever been on, and it bustled with activity—warehouse, restaurant, barracks, even a Politburo office and telegraph station, a two-car garage, and even a small biplane among its twelve wagons. Never mind the armored engines with gun turrets. All this, and it doesn't even have a name! It was just the train of the Predrevoyensoviet, Leon Trotsky. Didn't the War Commissar have a wife or a girlfriend to name his personal armored war-train after?

But really, it was the workers' train, and there was much work to be done. Gribov was a soldier, but no longer just a standard peasant with a rifle and a children's book on the Russian alphabet to help him learn to read. He was one of the Red Sotnia, the hundred soldiers who made up Trotsky's bodyguard and rushed out to join pitched battles. Not long before, he'd been in the cavalry train that followed behind Trotsky's, shoveling horse shit. But the train, and the Bolshevik efforts, had taken some hits lately, and now Gribov was decked out in black leather, presumably ready to give his life for the world proletariat, and for comrade Trotsky. Gribov dutifully collected the train's newspaper, *V puti*, but mostly used it to insulate his boots. It was cold tonight on the Polish border, and he was glad that Trotsky wrote so much. Almost toasty, he thought, as he leapt from the roof of one car to another, watching the forest for Mensheviks, for Cossacks, for Poles.

"Comrade!" one of the sharpshooters stationed on the roof whispered harshly. "Step lightly! You'll bring them down upon us."

“Comrade,” Gribov said, “we are on a giant train. Steam is billowing from the engines. Even idle, even under the new moon, we’re obvious.”

“And an opposing army flooding from the wood should be more obvious still,” another sharpshooter said.

“When I was a soldier under the tsar, we would never have dared to banter so,” said the first shooter.

“Thus I am thankful now more than ever for the Revolution, and the 2nd Latvian Riflemen’s Soviet Regiment,” said the second. The others, five in all, giggled. “But be quiet anyway,” the second shooter said to Gribov. “I’m working on my poem.” More chortling emerged from the dark.

“Poem? What?” Gribov asked.

“Don’t you read the paper?” the first shooter asked. “How do you know where we are on our way to?” More laughter, this time for the pun on *V puti—en route* or “on our way.”

“Comrade Fancy Dude has called on the poets of Poland to write poems denouncing the landlords and the bourgeoisie,” a new voice explained.

“Perhaps I will write a poem, then,” Gribov said. He laughed, once.

“What rhymes with pshek?” the second shooter asked, and he got a round of chuckles from the shooters arranged on either side of the train car’s roof. The new Communist mentality had not quite taken hold in the men of the Red Sotnia. After all, the Polish workers spoke as funnily as the Polish bourgeoisie. But Gribov couldn’t blame them for their elitism. They were an elite! It was a very nice train after all, complete with cloth napkins for Trotsky’s personal staff, so perhaps being part of the “One Hundred,” living aboard a futuristic conveyance, had confused them. Gribov could too write a poem, and a poem that would be understood by the Polish proletariat! Working man to working man, something these careerists from good families would never understand. The poem could be about the train, and its many magnificent attributes—the

Rolls-Royce liberated from the tsar's garage and outfitted with a pair of machine guns! It was always a thrill to hear it roaring forth from its special train car, metal flashing under the sun, lighting and thunder at once. . . .

"Carry on," he announced to the sharpshooters, and moved on to the next train car, jumping lightly and expertly over the gap. It was a risk, but Gribov knew there would be no insults shouted at his back, for fear of alerting the enemy. There was no way the train was secret, but a sudden yelp could give away a comrade's position to a Polish sniper.

A poem, a poem. . . . What would inspire the Polish working class to rise up, to greet the Red Army as liberators? No poem had been needed to persuade Gribov. His family were dirt-poor peasants and when he crawled into Petrograd to look for work on the piers, he was treated worse than his father had treated the animals on the farm. Nobody else offered anything but misery, and the phony

promise of a heavenly reward. The heavens were dark tonight. No moon, no stars; the clouds were low and the color of slate.

A rush of wind almost sent Gribov's spine tearing out of his back. Bursting from the trees had come a great grey owl, flying low and nearly silent just under the dome of the sky, wings stretched a meter and a half from tip to tip.

Incredible! This would go into the poem, Gribov decided, but then the owl banked and turned, its claws wide and gleaming. Gribov couldn't decide between drawing his pistol and just raising his arms. The owl took his face. Screaming, Gribov flailed and fell from the train. An alarm was raised, but from the woods Polish irregulars rained small arms fire down on the train.

Who would wake Trotsky? "The man would sleep through the Proletarian Revolution were he not in charge of scheduling it" was the common joke, but it wasn't quite fair. Trotsky was awake twenty hours a day, so the four he slept were extremely necessary. He was difficult to awaken, and ornery when he finally arose. Even under



Communism, whoever knocked on the door had better have his boots polished. Nechayev drew the short straw and was poised to knock when the door opened. Trotsky was already dressed, complete in leather coat and hat.

“We’re not under way, I presume,” Trotsky said, “because the tracks ahead have been destroyed. And we are concerned that if we head back along the line, we’ll encounter a Menshevik train. The cavalry train is also pinned down.”

A near-perfect set of wrong conclusions. Under any other circumstances, Trotsky would have been correct, but. . . .

“We have an infiltrator. She has sabotaged the engines. We were able to repulse the Poles, but we expect reinforcements by morning,” Nechayev said.

“She—” Trotsky began.

“So . . . we’ve heard,” Nechayev said.

“She’s not been captured yet? A woman? An individual woman?”

“It’s hard to explain,” Nechayev began. A few words later and Trotsky pushed past him, his own sidearm drawn, orders spilling forth.

The woman looked like a Pole; fair, with a round face, though there was something else about her coloration too, the bone structure around her cheeks. She wore the black leather uniform of a Red Sotnia fighter, though it was far too big for her. She’d made it as far as one of the supply cars. The men she had already dispatched slumped amidst piles of shoes, loose piles of tobacco, and potatoes spilling forth from the sacks they’d been stored in. Four guards had rifles trained on her. For a moment, Trotsky thought she was weeping silently, but then realized that the squint was just her eyes—she was a Tatar, or had some Tatar ancestry, anyway.

“Anyone have any Polish?” Trotsky asked. Then he tried, in Russian, then German, and even bad French, and English.

“Comrade Commissar,” one of the guards asked. “What shall we do? Shoot her? If we approach, she just . . .” he trailed off.

“. . . turns into an owl,” Trotsky finished. “Keep her pinned. Rotate comrades in and out of here. Let her stand there, looking foolish. Kick a bucket over to her so she can urinate without making a mess. If she does anything else . . . interesting, seal her in the car and detach it from the train on both ends. We’ll rendezvous the hard way.”

After hasty scrambles around tracks and over coaches to the restaurant car, everyone was full of questions, but only Trotsky was actually able to complete his sentences without interruption.

“You’d sacrifice the train, but—”

“Seal her in and set it on fire! That way—”

“How many more . . .”

“Why are you even taking this seriously?” Pozansky finally demanded of Trotsky. He was the senior of the commissar’s

secretaries, and broad-chested, so his voice both metaphorical and literal carried like no other. "It defies all we know of science!"

"That is why," Trotsky said. The room quieted. "Why am I on the verge of sacrificing our train? Because if a woman can metamorphose into an owl, our cause is lost. The proletarian dictatorship depends on proletarian revolution. The proletarian revolution depends on a dialectical understanding of history. The dialectical understanding of history"—the soldiers began shifting in their seats, as it sounded like Comrade Fancy Pants was gearing up for one of his extensive speeches—"and the dialectical understanding of history is built upon a bedrock of materialism."

Trotsky tugged on his Vandyke. "We're at war, so I'll say it quickly. If she is some sort of mystical or supernatural being, our cause is lost. If magic is real, then Marxism is not. We may as well go home and light candles by the family icon."

"What are the chances that this woman can turn into an owl in a way not possible to explain by some science, even if only the

science of the future?" Pozansky asked. "And what are the chances that vodka and philosophical backsliding led to a certain level of embarrassment among our troop over the fact that a single, female saboteur eluded detection, damaged both engines, and killed several men with what was obviously a garden fork of some sort?"

"Low," Trotsky said.

"Lower than the possibility that magic and superstition is real? That a fairy out of children's tales attacked our train for the glory of Polish imperialists?"

"That depends on the nature of reality," Trotsky said. "Which we will now investigate. Men, take the motorcars out. Find me a Pole who speaks Russian. Find me a Tatar familiar with the superstitions of his race. Find a book, a journal, anything, even if for children, on the subject of local folklore or avifauna. And try to make sure the Pole who can speak Russian is literate. Shoes and food and cigarettes and liquor to trade, and if the marketplace doesn't meet our demands, well then, men, remember that you are Communists."

When the troop dispersed, Trotsky raised an eyebrow at Pozansky. The senior secretary smirked back, and young Nechayev just looked confused.

“We cleared the train of anyone who might have been bamboozled by this stage magic,” Pozsansky explained.

“Obviously, she is wearing one of our uniforms. If she turned into an owl and then back, she would be nude,” Trotsky said. “What I am interested in, primarily, is finding out how our captive performs these tricks. It might make for a useful wedge between Polish workers and reactionary, credulous peasants.”

Nechayev said, “I thought we were never to lie to the working class.”

Trotsky shrugged. “We wouldn’t be. We’d be lying to the backwards elements of the peasantry. The Poles are lying to our people, of course, which is why this social-reactionary split has occurred.” Nechayev had the strong feeling that the only split that had occurred was that Trotsky was getting ready to have him

demoted, arrested, or thrown off the train for passing on the owl story with such credulity.

“And we need to find out from whom she got one of our uniforms. We’ve not been through this part of the front before; we’ve had no recent casualties outside of the train from which the leathers could have been salvaged. If the Poles had decided to infiltrate, surely they would have sent a male, and a Russian speaker. I suspect some sort of love affair concocted by local peasant militias,” Trotsky said. “You two, move my desk over to the train in which our owl has been penned.”

A handful of comrades discovered Gribov on their way back from their mission. He was cold, bloodied, probably blinded, and one eye was missing entirely, but he lived. Much of his uniform was missing as well. They created a makeshift gurney from rifles and coats and brought him aboard, to the infirmary car.

Gribov was not a weak man, and he had fallen into a snow bank, so soon enough he was able to testify, haltingly. Pozansky took notes, argued closely over the advice of the medics.

"The owl? Not a small kite, or even an aeroplane of some sort?"

"It was warm, alive, smelled like the woods and dead prey . . ."

"Feathers would do that!"

"She took off my clothes. Just one little girl . . ."

"One? How do you know there was only one if you are missing one eye?"

"Just a pair of little hands . . ."

"Did they say anything?"

Gribov laughed. "Pshek pshek . . . you know how Poles sound. All consonants. Haha."

"Comrade, there are many revolutionary Poles in our movement who might tell you that to a Pole, a Russian sounds like a child," Pozansky lectured. "Shaa shaa vaa vaaa."



"Comrade secretary, please," one of the medics said. "He needs rest, not political education."

"We need to get to the bottom of the case of this infiltrator, comrade doctor!"

"Why not just shoot her and throw her into a ditch?" the medic demanded.

"Please don't . . ." Gribov said. "She's . . ."

"Yes?"

". . . my poem . . ."

"He's delirious," said the medic.

"Thank you for that insight, comrade doctor," Pozansky said. "As we thought."

Nechayev told Trotsky about finding Gribov, but that made the commissar only more interested in this interrogative theater. Soldiers had slowly moved into the train car, but kept their rifles, and further the length of two strides, between themselves and the girl. She looked like a wax doll of some sort. If not for the

puffs of steam coming from her mouth with every exhalation, she could have passed for a bit of whimsical propaganda art amongst the supplies.

The soldiers had found several books on folklore, and a local bilingual speaker, an older woman who had experienced the border shifting between empires under her feet several times in her long life. She was not pleased to have been awakened at gunpoint and brought here for the interrogation, but she drank her tea and ate a potato and a bit of meat from the tin plate held on her lap with some pleasure. She could even read, but her glasses had been smashed during the trip back to the train, so her literacy was of no help.

“Do you two women know one another?” was the first question.

“I don’t associate with Tatars,” the old woman said. “Or Communists.”

“And yet here we all are,” said Trotsky. Nechayev put his hand to his forehead and sighed. Under the tsar he probably would have been whipped for the gesture, but Trotsky didn’t even notice.

“Ask her why she is against the proletarian revolution,” he said to the older woman. With a practiced sneer, she turned toward the girl and repeated the question in Polish. The answer was short.

“She says you know why.”

The interrogation went on for some time. Was she a Tatar? That depends on what you mean. Did she attack the soldier Gribov, sabotage the engine, then storm through the cars of this magnificent train, killing and injuring Soviet soldiers? Certainly she did, and she would be pleased to continue. How did she manage such a feat? The soldier had his head in the clouds; her husband, murdered by Reds, had been a machinist, so she knew something of engines; Russian men are weak and easy to kill, even for a simple girl like her. Could she turn into an owl? Yes, of course. That was the fault of the Bolsheviks as well.

“How is that?” Trotsky said, clearly amused.

“Girls who are married when they die turn into owls,” it was explained by the translator before the young girl even spoke. The

older woman added, "It is an old story." Trotsky took a moment to flip through one of the children's books his soldiers had liberated, and grunted once when he alighted upon a certain illustrated page.

"Are there mice in your home?" The old woman turned again to ask the girl, but Trotsky raised the hand. "In your home, ma'am."

"There were mice in my home," she snapped, "when there was food in my home. Another achievement for the Bolsheviks!"

"Then how likely is it that Polish girls transform into owls upon their death?" Trotsky asked, ignoring the last bit of editorializing. "The moon would be eclipsed every night by masses of owl wings, and there wouldn't be a mouse left in Poland."

The girl said something testy-sounding, and the old woman translated at length, even pantomiming a mouse nibbling at some food. Trotsky turned to Nechayev. "Summon more witnesses," he said. "If they are not wounded or tending the wounded, if they are not on watch, if they are not repairing the engine, have them gather on either side of the car and peer inside." Nechayev ran to comply.

Finally the girl said something and the old woman translated it. "Her explanation is that she is only a Pole on her mother's side of the family. Her father's side are Tatars." There was a bit more discussion, then the old woman turned to Trotsky with a smile on her face. "She says her grandfather's grandfather was a . . . primitive."

"A shaman," Trotsky said. Behind him, a crowd was forming, four or five rows deep. With military discipline the shortest gathered immediately behind Trotsky's desk and took to their knees to not block the vision of their comrades behind them. "I presume it was the hybridity of superstitions that allows you your special ability to transform into an owl." The old woman didn't bother to translate that.

Lanterns shifted and danced on either side of the train car as comrades who couldn't fit on either end of the train car tried to squeeze in. Trotsky was clearly pontificating at length in order to allow everyone to get into position.

“So, why attack us? Why not be free as the proverbial bird, always, without the burdens of consciousness or the need to labor? Why not join us, allow us to better understand your ability, so that we might integrate it into the corpus of materialist science? What diseases could be cured via this form of cellular transformation? And yet, you keep it yourself.” The old woman’s translations were obviously abbreviated and simplified, Nechayev could tell, but the young girl seemed to be getting the gist of Trotsky’s comments anyway.

“Or, perhaps, you cannot turn into an owl,” Trotsky finally concluded. “Just acknowledge this, and we’ll keep you a prisoner here until our engine is repaired. We’ll leave you at the next station on our side of the front for typical justice. If you continue to insist on your nonsense story, we shall gun you down here—summary revolutionary justice on the part of the international working class, against a deranged member of the criminal element.

“Or you may turn into an owl and flee,” Trotsky said. He glanced at Nechayev, then nodded toward the closest window. It occurred to Nechayev that the window, even were he to smash it out of its frame with the butt of a borrowed rifle, would not be sufficient for the wingspan of an owl the size of the one Gribov supposedly encountered, but he obeyed anyway as the older woman translated. Then, harshly, the older woman added something else—a message directly aimed at the girl.

The girl shifted in her outfit. A shoulder, nude, almost pink despite the cold, was visible now, and her thin little collarbone, itself like a bird’s wings. Then two things happened.

The girl made a move. It wasn’t a run, or a leap, but as though she had thrown her body forward, every muscle working together.

One of the soldiers fired. The train car filled with sound and smoke. Men screamed. “No!” “Don’t!”

For a moment Nechayev thought something would happen. She wouldn’t fall. Feathers would erupt out her back, trailing the bullet.

There was still shouting. The comrades were worried, hysterical, for themselves. Why fire into a crowded train car?! Madness!

The girl fell hard to the floor. A gardening tool slipped from one sleeve of her oversized leather coat and clattered to the floor.

The other soldiers who had had their rifles trained on the woman held their fire. The old lady wasn't crying as Nechayev thought she might be. She was terrified that she would be next, her face chiseled by horror into an unnerving rictus.

Trotsky looked contemplative. Maybe it was a flash of disappointment that crossed over his eyes as he spoke. "Retrieve the coat and have it stitched up if possible," he said to nobody in particular, and there were no volunteers to strip the girl. He turned to the shooter. "Comrade Fedin, you are relieved of duty due to reckless fire. Put your rifle down now if you do not wish it removed from you by force."

He sighed deeply. "Have the body brought to the infirmary car. We're not equipped for an autopsy here, but it might be interesting



to see if there are visible lesions on her brain. So much for magical owls, eh?" Trotsky readied himself against his desk and rose. With a gesture, he told Nechayev to clear it all away. "And if I see one comrade making the sign of the cross, or hear tell of it, he will be disciplined most severely. And someone pay this woman and return her to her home," he said, indicating the old lady, who still hadn't moved, hadn't blinked.

Clearly, the corpse should have been stored in the refrigerated car, but Pozansky wouldn't have it, and he threatened the medics who said they'd go to Trotsky about it with hard discipline and a negative write-up in the train's newspaper.

"It's cold enough on this train," Pozansky said. "Her lesions will keep for the night, I am sure." There were a few choice items in cold storage that Pozansky liked to keep for himself, and whenever an unauthorized comrade entered the refrigerated car they would, in a burst of revolutionary fervor, take a sample of the caviar or

beefsteak or decent vodka to share with the masses—that is, their friends.

And so she ended up in sickbay, next to Gribov. He suffered, awake, from his wounds, so was conscious to hear her cough out the bullet that had entered her chest. Mostly blind, he couldn't see that the bullet was coated in plant matter, feathers, and tiny bones. She slid off the examination table she had been left on, wrapped the blanket she had been given out of a sense of retrograde modesty around herself, and nudged Gribov.

"I have your eye," she said to him. "Would you like it back?" She was not speaking in the pshek-pshek of Polish. It was a strange tongue, all elongated Y sounds.

"I . . . that would be hard to explain to the comrade officers . . ." Gribov said.

"You may come with me," the girl said. "Indeed, I insist upon it."

"I cannot fly, like you."

She smiled. "Can you drive?"

He smiled too. Not quite like a mother giving a child a kiss, she leaned down, swept her hair away from her face, and with a significant gulp, regurgitated Gribov's eye onto his face, then roughly pushed it back into the socket with her free hand. Ten bloody minutes later, they had made it to the tsar's Rolls-Royce in the garage car and were on their way, roaring, serpentine, into the night, machine guns blazing as Gribov twisted the wheel to dodge fire from train-top sharpshooters.

Fire that soon tilted up into the slate-dark sky as a thousand great gray owls descended in swarms onto the train.











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