

Author's introduction

Portrait of a Great Leader follows an artist working on a painting of Stalin, who then becomes disillusioned with the regime by which he has been commissioned. I am fascinated by the history of the USSR, particularly under Stalin, and have been wanting to explore the era in writing for a while. I wished to delve into the role of artists, an unconventional perspective not often explored in fiction about the period, despite them being key producers of propaganda. I find it interesting to consider how much responsibility an artist, acting as a vehicle for the state, has in upholding a regime, and how that may conflict with their personal principles. The story aims to explore the personal struggle of an artist and how easily one can be consumed by an artwork with so many wider implications for society.

Portrait Of A Great Leader

by Iyla Latif

His mother had always said that he was destined to be an artist, although he didn't believe in ideas like that. Isaak was undeniably passionate, though, and had drawn voraciously ever since he was a child. When he should have been taking notes in class, images clouded his mind, his doodles invading the margins of his schoolbooks. The construction lines on his canvas reminded him of those early sketches - the ones stacked at the back of his studio, memories tucked safely away in the back of his mind. They sat in the corner of his room as his brush scratched against the canvas' surface, like a pen against a page.

"Isaak, do you want a tea?" Andrey yelled, disturbing the silence. Although he said yes to the offer, tea had never been his favourite drink. He would have taken a glass of his mother's Sbiten over it any day.

Andrey sauntered in a few moments later, mug of steaming liquid in hand. He set it down on the table next to the painter.

"Thanks," Isaak mumbled, hand glued to his brush and eyes only diverting from the canvas to take brief glances at his palette. This was a big job - it could be his legacy. He could feel Andrey giving him a look – a mixture of pity and confusion. Not wanting to break the spell of

creativity that was possessing the hunched figure, Andrey just sighed and made his way back to his room in their Petrograd apartment.

After a few minutes (or was it half an hour?) Isaak dropped his brush into its cup and, without looking away from the beginnings of his painting, he picked up the mug and held it to his lips. Still hot, but not steaming. He pretended that the watery drink he sipped was really a thick, purple-ish beverage filled with spices and a sweetness that coated his tongue.

He continued with the construction of the image until the scaffolding of the man he was going to paint had taken shape. Isaak barely spared it a second look once done and seamlessly, he moved to the background.

He squeezed a bright red out from a weathered tube of paint and dunked his brush in it. His strokes against the background were generous, as fierce and strong as the colour itself; it was the red of the Soviet flag, embodying the revolutionary spirit, a tenet of his upbringing that he couldn't help thinking was fading away. His instincts urged him to express this in his art, but it was out of the question, especially for an artist of the state. Creation was yet another exercise in suppression, propaganda to be used by a government, contained and controlled. Still, at least Isaak could enjoy the process. He loved how it felt to paint, to coat the canvas with each movement of his forearm and add colour where there had been none. The blazing glow and dynamism broke through the cycle of boredom and mundanity imposed on him, morning till evening.

Andrey referred to this as the start of a 'consumptive phase': a point where the artist (or, at least, this artist) starts to become engrossed in their piece as if it is absorbing them. He had long since accepted that he couldn't drag Isaak out of this trance-like state no matter how hard he tried; the unstoppable power of creative energy had to be left to its own devices. He was, unfortunately, responsible for making sure that Isaak ate and drank, though, even if

Isaak wouldn't move from his chair. Andrey walked back into the room and stood by the door, just as the painter was finishing with the scarlet: by now, the sun had set.

"Hey, I'm making some dinner, what would you like?" he asked gently.

He received no response. The artist sat deathly still, paintbrush in hand poised like a cigarette, and continued to stare at the easel.

"Isaak?"

Still no response. Time for a different approach.

"Isaak, I'm trying to help, ok?" Andrey swore under his breath, then snapped, "I'm not your mother."

That caught Isaak's attention. He turned his head so fast that he almost gave himself whiplash and stared at the man in the doorway for a few seconds.

"I'll have anything."

Andrey cocked an eyebrow.

"Seriously. Make anything. I just need to finish-"

Andrey cut him off before he could stop himself. "You always get like this. Obsessive."

Neither man spoke for a moment, an awkward tension filling the air.

"Right. Well I'm going to make some Bozbashi. Might take a while-"

"Yeah. Thanks." Isaak had already turned back to the piece, once again, oblivious to his surroundings. Andrey walked out of the room and into his kitchen, hand pressed to his forehead.

So, after a hearty Bozbashi soup and a short night's sleep, Isaak started forming the figure.

The light beige broke out of the scarlet and quickly took over the image, transforming the

canvas. It started to feel like another person had occupied the studio, with what had started off as a flat, bright silhouette darkening and deepening with every stroke, becoming more human. To the artist, though, he was as much a man as he was a collection of shapes being added to and added to until he looked right. The painting was now an ever-evolving entity in the apartment, much to Andrey's dismay. He hoped that it wouldn't stay for long; they already had one small portrait, they didn't need another. Besides, neither of them were on great terms with the actual man who was being painted.

Isaak remembered going on a gallery trip with his mother as a child, before Stalin came to power. He gazed up through long eyelashes to see countless artworks, but the piece, 'Dance', by Alexander Rodchenko had captured him. He could still recall the canvas, almost two decades later, as well as the electric feeling he experienced when seeing it: so many figures, separate yet overlapping, individuals part of one unified whole working towards a better future. That's what he painted for – the collective movement. He couldn't help but notice that his current painting was the complete antithesis of that. It was to be a single, towering man, a lone God. Unfortunately, the message of collective movement was irrelevant to the state now, and he needed to stay in their good books. (Or, more bluntly put, he needed their money.)

He still felt it eating away at him. His insatiable idealism at odds with the repressive world around him, and another, more unexpected feeling: guilt, a parasite that replaced his pride as he painted a figure who would become the face of Stalin for decades on end.

Layers upon layers of brown now completely clouded the base coat that had previously glowed whenever the sun was up. Isaak was a sculptor, chipping away at marble as he toyed with shadows and highlights; a tool of the state, precisely crafting the image of a leader. Although it had begun as an exercise in two-dimensional sculpting, with every new stroke, it became more and more of an exercise in repetition. The further into the process he got, the more he tired of what he was creating. He was forced to stare at it for hours on end,

engrossed but not willingly. Fatigue, the inevitable result of continuous boredom, was setting in, consuming him. He fought the urge to fall unconscious, blinking for seconds at a time as he obsessed over every small detail that could drastically alter the figure he portrayed.

By now, Andrey had grown increasingly concerned: Isaak seemed to be having a full-on crisis, or perhaps it was more similar to an infection. This painting was having more of an effect on him than any of his others. It was quite unsettling to have it sitting in the middle of this room in Petrograd, but that was life. Or he'd thought so, at least.

The man was sitting, finally resting, staring blankly at what looked like a finished piece. Andrey looked at him for a while, then breached the boundary between the studio and the rest of the apartment, stepping into the world of canvases, brushes, paint and rags, as he had done every day since the start of this saga. "I'm making you food," Andrey said, not waiting for a response. "By the way, it looks finished. Just let it dry and send it off." He lingered for a minute, then turned and left the room.

Oh, Lord. Was it finished? Isaak supposed it was. He could barely think now. He looked outside: once again, dark as coal. He slid off his chair and stumbled backwards to see his work. Finally, his masterpiece, his bitter masterpiece was complete. This could be his legacy. It probably would be. He sighed, staring up at the canvas, imagining what Stalin would say. His leader loomed over him, the poor man behind the stool, disapproving. Aren't you loyal? A good citizen? A good artist? So get a grip, man, and live with what you have created.

His head throbbed. Isaak stared at the brass lighter lying next to the cigarette packet on his table. He imagined himself picking it up and flicking the lid open, igniting the wick and holding it to the painting. The painting would catch fire and disintegrate, its blackened remains falling to the floor. He continued to stare, but did not move a finger.

How could he send it? He wasn't proud. He was just another person serving the state he didn't like, serving Stalin and the Gulag and the purges and the disappearances and the famines. Wasn't he?

He took a deep breath. He couldn't destroy the painting, as much as he wanted to. The time, effort and obsessive dedication had been too great for him to throw it all away. Urgh. He should not have decided to be an artist, not here. An office job would have been better: safer, more secure. He'd been made responsible for what would become the face of Stalin, perhaps for decades. But he couldn't go back now. Besides, he would only get paid after he sent the painting, and he needed the money.