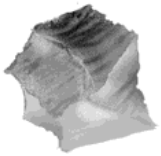
Stalin's Knee

I arrived at RAF Blackbushe in the evening of 6 December 1956 on a Britannia turbo-prop, which had yet to enter regular service. There were perhaps a hundred of us on the aircraft listening to the welcome of a Red Cross officer who could speak a few words in broken Hungarian.

Below, London was lit in an eerie orange glow, the first of countless ways that England was strange. The aeroplane parked in a dark corner of the airfield. A couple of coaches appeared to take us we knew not where. En route the drivers lost their way in the thickening fog, a parallel disorientation between drivers and refugees. Some hours later the party arrived at Tidworth Army Camp in Wiltshire. We piled into the barracks, all named after battles in India. The soldiers vacating them were busily making a mess of things in Suez, both for the Revolution and for the British Government. At that moment we did not appreciate the irony of it all. Next morning porridge was served for breakfast. Was this a test of our resolve?

I travelled light with just a brown leather briefcase. Tucked in it were a change of underwear, two shirts, a framed photograph of my father (who died in 1943 at the Don) and a small metal fragment wrapped in a handkerchief. The metal was an ugly piece of bronze less than an inch across. It had no parallel sides, the edges were serrated, cut marks started on a side, then stopped abruptly and started at another angle, and a corner was broken off. Only one surface seemed finished: this was smooth and covered in dark bronze patina. The piece of bronze was my trophy – it was part of Stalin's knee. Well, not really his knee but a representation of his knee or maybe his imagined real knee.



During the evening of 23 October 1956 Stalin's statue in Budapest was pulled down, he crashed onto his nose. First, the crowd tried to drag him off with

steel cables attached to trucks but the seven-metre figure would not give way. People clambered up a ladder leaning against his chest, and strung cables all over him – Lilliputians tying down Gulliver.

Eventually someone had the bright idea of using an acetylene torch to cut him off just below the knees. That did the trick. Stalin slowly tipped over with a bang, leaving only his boots behind, like a lover getting away in a hurry. One minute he was up there wearing his simple tunic, standing in his army boots, left leg forward, the epitome of confidence. One arm by his side, the other pointing forward in the manner of a ham actor. There was a faint indication of a smile. And then, the next moment, he was lying legless on the granite cobbles. The sculptor of the statue was Sándor Mikus, who probably never saw his subject in the flesh. Anyway, by the time it was cast in 1951 Stalin was an old man, though the statue was of a vigorous, tall father figure. The victor at home and abroad, looking to Canaan…. for some, to Siberia. The base of the pedestal formed a

rampart where the beloved party leaders stood on the most important occasions, waving to the adoring faithful and to the soldiers marching stiffly with their rifles: 4 April celebrations (the final liberation of the country from the Nazis in 1945), 1 May (Labour Day) and 7 November (anniversary of the October Revolution). The rampart was so designed that only the upper body of the dear leaders showed so, in an emergency, a quick dive could be taken. Once Stalin was pulled down, a secret tunnel was discovered leading away from the base. Not for the nomenclatura the carelessness of Anwar Sadat, who sat British Raj fashion under a canopy, to be gunned down by a Muslim fanatic. Come to think of it, were the rifles of the marching soldiers ever loaded?

On 24 October Jozef Vassiliovich Stalin was dragged to the main boulevard behind the old National Theatre. His severed head was stranded on the roadway. People were milling around with schoolboy glee waiting to hack off a souvenir. By the time I arrived the head had disappeared. The hands were gone, the torso was mutilated. I found a broken hacksaw blade and began the struggle to cut into his patella. I wrapped my gloves around the blade and sawed in any way I could. Just to cut into him – it did not matter how. An imaginary

voice called, “Stop, you little shit. Guards, take this man down.” But Stalin’s power was exhausted: I carried on unpunished. Hours passed before I finally managed to twist the small chunk of bronze back and forth around the last cut; the fatigued metal gave way. I had a bit of Stalin in my hand.

His had been a presence impossible to ignore.

Our classroom had its own altar to communism. It was a table covered in red cloth. A gypsum relief of the holy quintet hung on the wall behind: Engels, Marx, Lenin, Stalin and Rákosi (the Hungarian party leader). There was also a book of promises, which was written by a pupil with the best handwriting. Such shrines were in every school, factory, office and collective farm.

A large Soviet art exhibition was held. The first room had nothing but pictures of Stalin. The one that comes to mind most clearly was of him strutting by the rampart of the Kremlin in a white field marshal’s uniform, looking all of six feet tall (when we know from Milovan Dilas that he was short, had black teeth and shoved food under his moustache). In another famous picture Lenin is speaking from a platform surrounded by sailors of the Battleship Aurora. There was Stalin, looking important, waiting his turn to change history. In another, he was talking to a party gathering, with the workers at the front all eagerly leaning forward, their eyes popping with intensity. Just behind were the faithful peasant women and men (you understand that the proletariat were the true revolutionaries so were kept ahead). Stalin directing military operations, Stalin

hugging little girls wearing oversize hair ribbons. Here he was to be loved but for heaven's sake don't annoy him! When I hacked away at Stalin's bronze body it was revenge for the humiliation of the false applause, and more.

May Day celebrations were big; we all had to take part. One spring my role was to cheer the marchers along. Every town and village in every Soviet satellite had a this-or-that named after Stalin. So, of course, the principal road in Budapest was renamed Stalin Boulevard. It was along this thoroughfare that I was positioned with other pioneers wearing our white shirts and red ties (scout fashion). District communist parties and factory workers came with their banners, all a bit dishevelled having waited around in the sun for hours. Party cadres conducted the cheering and watched the level of enthusiasm for later reference. One after another the representatives of friendly nations arrived carrying the pictures of their own beloved leaders. 'Long live the socialist comradeship between the Soviet and Hungarian peoples', Long live Stalin, Long live Stalin … dum dum dum.' The Soviet delegation came first, of course. The Romanians marched by: 'Long live Gheorgiu-Dej.'. In a gesture of solidarity we had a shipyard named after Gheorgiu-Dej and no doubt the Romanians were lumbered with a Rákosi something.* Anyway, I was getting into the swing of the cheering business. The Bulgarians came in sight, and I thought it was time for initiative: 'Long live Comrade Dimitrov.' A pause, then the pioneer leader leaned over the ropes, shouting, 'Shut up, you turd, he is dead.' Fortunately the Bulgarians could not understand Hungarian and passed by to be cheered by other, better-informed turds. How was I to know that dear Comrade Stalin had sent his medical experts to help dear Comrade Dimitrov recuperate, from which of course he never recovered. Dimitrov, of the disbanded Comintern, was too much of the genuine article to be entrusted with running Bulgaria for long.

Then Stalin passed away, through natural causes to most people's secret disappointment. There was the public grief of the party members crying in the street during the five-minute silence. The big stick had gone but the regime was as strict as ever. Three hundred people were jailed for repeating an untranslatable joke. At the end of the year the Danube froze over; thick, grey snow covered the streets but inside people celebrated more cheerfully than before. A real, authentic life could be lived only behind closed doors and shared

only with people you could completely trust. My mother, aunts, uncles and friends of the family got together in Aunt Kató and Uncle Jenö's flat. They had a cosy fireplace and even a gramophone to play pre-war Caruso records. Everyone brought food and drink. More and more outlandish jokes were told. Midnight sounded and the radio played the national anthem, whereupon a brilliant idea came to Jenö. For being an outstanding worker who exceeded her production quota, Kató had been given a certificate. This was a red silk affair with Stalin's picture in the centre printed in gold. Jenö took the certificate, put it in the loo and used it as a target for his excess alcohol. Eventually, even little fourteen-year-old Sándor had his turn. By that time Stalin's likeness was fading. The uric acid had eaten away his noble portrait; the red silk faded to pink. The vortex of yellow piss and red dye flowed down in the old-fashioned Hungarian lavatory bowl. The women joined in and eventually only the almost plain paper remained. Then, alarm. The paper could not be flushed away just in case it blocked the drain. If a plumber found a Stalin certificate disfigured in this way my uncle could go to jail. So it was retrieved with a stick, put in a bag and I was sent out to drop it in a street bin. It was all totally futile but hugely satisfying. It was a piss to cherish.

These are the memories attached to Stalin's knee. I kept it with me at all times, in my purse. We continentals carried our money, the super-heavy copper pennies and occasional notes, in leather purses. Mine was made of yellow pigskin stitched together, the tongue folding over. Where the paper notes should have been I kept his knee; it stretched the seam but seemed all right. I struggled to learn English: six months to read the evening papers and one year to hold a conversation (but murdering the language). AC's generosity lifted me and I began a social life with English friends. For several years the same conversations ensued at parties. How did you escape? Well, I just sort of walked out once the Russian tank crews went to sleep. Where did you get out? Have you heard of Andau (*'The Bridge at Andau'*)? Why did you come to England? Always wanted to come and also have an uncle here. If I really wanted to impress girls I would produce Stalin's knee. This might be followed by a dance in the darkened rooms that all London flats seemed to have. We would move around in a tight embrace to Ella Fitzgerald.

Eventually the interest faded and a tragedy occurred through my carelessness. The seam of the pigskin purse broke and Stalin's knee disappeared. Somewhere in the pleasant land of England there is a piece of Stalin – and it is still lurking within me.

15 October 2002 (revised October 2005)

* On my recent visit to Voronezh I became aware that the Russian Gheorgiu-Dej town (since renamed) was by the River Don.