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Major Pronin Stories by L. Ovalov – The Beginning of a Mythological Hero

Abstract

The image of Major Pronin, a fictional counterintelligence operative of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Fighting Counterrevolution and Sabotage has been well known throughout Russia for years. Yet, few could name his author, Lev Ovalov, and even fewer philologists have shown interest in analyzing the stories he originated from. By offering a detailed analysis of Ovalov's first Pronin story "The Blue Swords" ("Sinie mechi") this article aims to reveal some of the principal reasons this literary character became a cultural phenomenon. Relying on the comparative mythology theories of scholars such as Joseph Campbell and David Adams Leeming, it proposes that Pronin falls into the category of (Soviet) mythological heroes. More precisely, his traits and actions provide inspiration and guidance for the Soviet people and thus work to reinforce Soviet identity during a difficult time in history. The monomyth structure revealed in the storyline supports this theory, as do the mythological archetypes and relationships enriching the plot.

Keywords: Major Pronin, Lev Ovalov, detective fiction, Soviet mythology, monomyth

1. Introduction

Major Pronin, a fictional character created by Lev Ovalov in his 1939/1940 stories, achieved nationwide fame immediately upon his emergence on the Russian literary scene in 1941. The stories, after they have initially been rejected for publication in the literary magazine Krasnaja nov', were rushed into print in Znamja by the leading figure in the Soviet government – Vjacheslav M. Molotov himself. Even Viktor Shklovskij, an acclaimed writer and literary critic best known for his

association with the Russian formalist school, applauded Ovalov on his ability to present such a compelling protagonist and by doing so lay down the foundations of a new genre in the Soviet Union, combining detective and didactic elements (15). Arsenij Zamost'janov in his afterword to the 2004 edition of Ovalov's stories, claims that Pronin was the Sherlock Holmes of Soviet mythology and was integrated into daily life to such an extent that he became the protagonist of many anecdotes and metamorphosed into a folklore hero (235, 239). As the amount of "folklore" material grew with time, the bond between Ovalov and his creation deteriorated and the public forgot this character was born of a writer's fantasy (Zamost'janov 235). In the interview on the topic of Major Pronin, Georgij Vajner, a popular detective novelist, similarly maintains that although everyone in Russia is familiar with his image, the vast majority does not know the name of his author (Vajl'). Nevertheless, a similar process is known to have happened before in the history of literature, notes culturologist Denis Dragunskij in the same interview, recalling Greek gods and heroes such as Achilles, whom people are familiar with despite not having read the Iliad (Vajl'). What is more, he places Pronin in the category of mythological heroes, claiming that fictional detectives have in fact inherited their attributes as they carry certain cultural functions and undergo a series of adventures.

Regardless of such nationwide fame, little has been written in the way of philological research on Major Pronin. Perhaps the reason for this is that these stories fall into the category of mass literature,[1] often ignored and depreciated in the study of the Russian history of literature during most of the 20th century (Chernjak, Massovaja 7). Only in the mid-1990s did the need for a serious scientific study of mass literature appear in Russia. It was the result of a drastic change of the book market (Chernjak, Massovaja 9), which catered for the "emancipated" reader – the reader liberated "from the dictatorship of the former literary-centric ideology and the pressure of standards of 'high literature'" (Zorkaja 35). If the scientific research of mass literature appeared only with the intensive development of the book market in the 1990s, it is logical to assume that these new works would become the primary focus of researchers, while the Soviet mass literature would fade into the background. However, as Marija Chernjak claims, Russian history of the 20th century literature "will only be truly complete when it reflects upon the literary stream often simply ignored, called paraliterature, mass literature, third-rate literature thought to be unworthy of attention and analysis"

(Massovaja 7). This article will therefore focus on revealing some of the fundamental reasons for the initial success of the original literary series and the enormous popularity of its protagonist by providing a detailed analysis of Ovalov's first story featuring Pronin – "The Blue Swords" ("Sinie mechi") and touching on the other five published in the 1941 collection. It suggests, similar to Dragunskij, that Pronin serves as a mythological hero. Moreover, it proposes that Ovalov utilized the structure of monomyth and mythological archetypes in the first story, but had adapted them to benefit the modern reader seeking guidance in the period of paralyzing uncertainty and numerous discrepancies.

Namely, the 1930s which preceded Ovalov's stories were the years "of extraordinarily rapid and profound social and economic transformation" (Kenez 114). Stalin's policy of collectivization[2] was launched in 1928 (Lee 9) and the country was well on the road to industrialization. However, the government was using "increasingly harsh methods to impose discipline" (Kenez 113). The collectivization was forced and led to a drop in production, rural economy disorganization, and induced famine, which resulted in the death of 6-8 million people in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in the 1932-3 (Kenez 105; Morrow and Wester 53). In 1934 Stalin unleashed against the Communist Party members, military leaders, and citizens mass terror known as the Great Purge, which claimed millions of lives. More than half of the party delegates were arrested and sent to correctional labor camps or sentenced to death (Kenez 105). In other words, with the role of the party significantly diminished and Stalin's power substantially enhanced, the Soviet political system transformed into a dictatorship (Kenez 110). The storm that was descending upon Europe was yet more ominous as Hitler had, on April 3, 1939, ordered the preparation of military operations for the invasion of Poland after its government refused to transfer territory voluntarily (Overy 90). The threat of war prompted the Soviet Union to sign two agreements with Germany. Trade and Credit Agreement was signed on August 19, securing the exchange of German military and civilian equipment for Soviet raw materials (Moorhouse 34). The Treaty of Non-Aggression[3] was signed on August 23 and included the Secret Protocol that enabled them to split the Polish territory (Morrow and Wester 54; Overy 91). Thus, the way was paved for the invasion of Poland and the outbreak of World War II (Moorhouse 2). With local repression and persecution on the one hand, and peasant resistance and defiance on the other (Lee 24), as well as WWII looming in the

background, it was a time riddled with uncertainty and likely to invite anticipatory anxiety. Such a difficult period could indeed be welcoming of myths and mythological heroes that would aid in restoring order and provide much desired form to people's lives. And so, it appears that amidst such hardship, the stories of Major Pronin appeared much as a healing salve.

Myths are essentially the stories of a culture which are told to "explain the world around us, and to make sense of our place within it" (Randall 7). Prominent American scholar Joseph Campbell distinguishes two orders of mythology: one that relates people to their nature and the natural world and another, strictly sociological, which links people to a particular society (The Power 40). The latter instates the rules of society and teaches people about roles within that society. The myths are, as Campbell claims, "mental supports of rites" and the function of rites, or rituals, is to provide an in-depth form to human life (Myths to Live by 45). When a child, for example, absorbs the myths of his or her social group and so participates in its rites, he or she will be structured to accord with the social environment and transformed into a "defined and competent member of some specific, efficiently functioning social order" (Campbell, Myths to Live by 45).

"The Blue Swords" is set in 1919, another difficult period in Russia's history, marked by "the bloodiest civil war of the 20th century" (Bullock 20). The war began in 1917, following the overthrow of the monarchy (the three-century reign of the Romanov dynasty) by the February Revolution, and the overthrow of the Provisional Government by the October Revolution (McCauley 14-15). Since many factions strived to determine Russia's future, this period was also characterized by uncertainty and political flux. The largest combatant groups were the Red Army – a collection of revolutionary factions[4] among which the most influential were the Bolsheviks – and the White Army – a coalition of heterogeneous anti-Bolshevik groups, led by former Tsarist officers (Bullock 24). In their fight against Red partisans, the White Army was also supported by the Allies of World War I.[5] However, regardless of many opponents, the Bolsheviks soon became the ruling party in the state with an organ of absolute power in their possession – the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Fighting Counterrevolution and Sabotage (Vserossijskaja chrezvychajnaja komissija po bor'be s kontrrevoljuciej i sabotazhem), commonly known as Cheka, "the offspring of the military-revolutionary committee of the Petrograd Soviet which had organized the October revolution" (Hallett Carr 158, 169).

The adventures of Ivan Nikolaevich Pronin, initially a soldier of Red Army who gets recruited into Cheka, serve as a window into this formative stage of communist society. The reader is not only shown communist values in Pronin's character and his deeds throughout the plot, but descends into the world of counterintelligence, one of the crucial organs which aided in establishing the new social order (Hallett Carr 158). In the same manner that the earliest myths taught people how to live communally and how to survive, transforming them into competent members of a specific social order and binding them into a community, Ovalov's stories reinforce Soviet identity during difficult times under Stalin's dictatorship and rebind people into communist society by retelling not only how it was created, but how it managed to survive adversity. What is more, this process is reinvented in the stories of a communist hero ascending together with the dawn of the Soviet Union.

Campbell claims that if a myth is to be successful, the moral order depicted in it has to catch up with the present necessities and the model appropriated to the time in which the reader is living (The Power 28). Otherwise, the hero as we know him from Greek mythology is in danger of losing the sympathy of a modern reader (Brophy 13). Ovalov not only illustrates the contemporary moral order, as will be shown in further analysis, but he does so explicitly by utilizing elements of espionage and detective fiction. Although there is no murder to be investigated in the first story, the crime is nevertheless committed in the form of anticommunist activity and the culprits need to be uncovered and apprehended. This will require the covert action of the agent implicated in the process of investigation, which David Seed defines as the main distinction between spy and detective story (115). Similar to the Western spy thriller emerging in the early twentieth century that "responded to a need to represent covert activity by state organisations" (Bloom 1), the covert action depicted in Ovalov's stories is tied to Cheka and the political tensions both during the revolutionary and 1930s period. Because the spy genre's central question is the ownership of the secret, it "involves a struggle for power played out at the level of thrills" (Bloom 3), which makes Ovalov's stories appealing to the thrill-seeking reader.

On the other hand, the principles of detective fiction utilized in the story work toward enhancing the effect of moral lessons served in the myth. Namely, the process of solving the enigma, which lies at the core of detective fiction, involves the reader deeply with the narrative whether he only

witnesses it or attempts to undertake it together with the hero. By attempting to recall and connect clues such fiction stimulates the reader to think, to hypothesize and reason as well as to adopt knowledge through discoveries. Stories of Pronin, who is tasked with searching for clues that would expose the elusive antirevolutionaries, employ the above-mentioned mechanism and end in the reinstatement of the social order. Furthermore, some research has already been written on the topic of detective fiction representing a modern myth. Brigid Brophy, for instance, says that "it is the detective hero who sticks most closely to the center of the track beaten by the Greek hero, though he has abbreviated it at both ends" as the circumstances of his birth are unknown and he does not become the king by the end of the narrative (18). His cause, however, undoubtedly is identical, considering he too is to deliver the population of a threat (Brophy 18).

It is also worth mentioning that although in the modern society the novel has taken the place of a mythological story and fairy tale, and that some of those modern novels use the structure, characters, and themes of mythology (Eliade 188), Ovalov chose to write in the short literary form, inherent to the mythological stories of the gods' adventures which were "popular in the pre-Attic age" (Hansen). The form of the short story commonly implies a concise narrative, omission of a complex plot, economy of setting as well as that the character is "disclosed in action and dramatic encounter" (Hansen). Bearing in mind the above-mentioned circumstances under which the Soviet readers lived, Ovalov's decision to keep to brief literary form might as well have aided the stories' reach and consumption.

2. The Hero's Journey

The first story featuring Pronin, "The Blue Swords," seems to be utilizing the structure of what Joseph Campbell calls the monomyth[6] – "the standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero" (The Hero 28). It entails the hero leaving the everyday world and venturing into the region of the unknown, where he encounters enemy forces but ultimately achieves victory, after which he returns home to bestow blessings upon his community. In his 1949 book, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Campbell lists seventeen events of the hero's journey, which anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss calls "gross constituent units" (431) and later "mythemes."[7] However, not all myths contain all the mythemes, nor is their order completely unalterable. The mythemes can be

assembled into the structure of the monomyth in a somewhat different order. Other scholars have been proposing similar theories. For instance, David Adams Leeming in his book Mythology, the Voyage of the Hero published in 1973, allows for a more simplified version of the monomyth. Instead of Campbell's seventeen stages, he divides it into eight supreme mythic events (Leeming 7). Campbell's work furthermore inspired screenwriter Christopher Vogler to write his well known The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters (published in 1992).[8] Drawing from Campbell's mythic studies and Carl G. Jung's theory of archetypes he provided a manual on how to use these mythic elements in writing successful adventure stories, albeit primarily for television (Vogler xiii). Vogler described eight major character archetypes and listed twelve stages of the hero's journey. The number of mythemes evidently differs in Campbell's, Leeming's and Vogler's works, but they can nonetheless be grouped into three larger stages: departure (separation), initiation and return.

The monomyth, claims Campbell, is "the magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: separation—initiation—return" (The Hero 28). He explains that the rituals depicted in myths are related to the process of discarding our old roles and accepting new ones with a sense of responsibility (The Power 26). "The Blue Swords" shows Pronin struggling to abandon his previous role of a soldier for the new role of a Chekist, not only in the beginning but throughout most of the narrative. It is not until he finally accepts his new responsibilities that the Chekists manage to catch the elusive anticommunists and succeed in forwarding their goals of establishing a new social order. In other words, at the base of the story's structure lies the initiation ceremony which underpins the communist social order. Moreover, Pronin, who abandons not only his previous life, but his private one as well for the service in Russian communist counterintelligence – and thus for a socially determined manner of life – serves as a model for all citizens and has, as Campbell would put it, "move[d] into the sphere of being mythologized" (The Power 31). Ovalov himself writes in the preface to his stories featuring Pronin that: "perhaps some finicky critic will claim that the stories provide a lot of amusement and little edification... However, I think that Pronin has a lot to teach and provides good examples" (2).

3. Set-up

The dualism of good and evil, light and dark, as well as the struggle between those polarities, is inherent to all three: the traditional detective genre, espionage fiction, and mythology. In all three, the victory of the first provides the restoration of the social order. Ovalov begins his story with describing the summer of 1919 as difficult and the reader is plunged into the events of the Russian Civil War: "Kolchak was ravaging Siberia, Denikin was approaching Kharkov and Judenich was threatening Petrograd. The enemies did not sleep on the home front either: near Petrograd a counter-revolutionary uprising began" (7). These historical names carry pejorative connotations considering they belong to the generals of White factions. Admiral Kolchak was the establisher of an anticommunist government in Siberia; General Denikin an anti-Bolshevik Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of South Russia and General Judenich the leader of the anticommunist White movement in Northwestern Russia (Bullock 21). In 1919 the White troops under Kolchak moved westward from Siberia, others commanded by Denikin moved up from Ukraine and Judenich was poised outside Petrograd, all of which threatened the dominance of the Red Army (McCauley 18). By invoking these historical figures and depicting them as rising from different sides of the country and closing in to strike, the author depicts the fast-advancing force of evil. In such manner, the shadowy presence of generals moving the pieces on the chessboard in the background represents "a preliminary manifestation of the powers that are breaking into play" (Campbell, The Hero 46). These powers will be embodied in several characters of antirevolutionaries planning to assist Judenich from the inside of Petrograd when he attacks the city. It is against them that the protagonist, as the force of good, must stand and secure a victory before time expires. Namely, the threat progresses together with the plot as we read in chapter eight that:

> *The fate of Petrograd was about to be decided upon. The city was preparing for defense. In the event of White Guard's invasion, the groups of workers were digging trenches and putting up wooden barricades, placing artillery weapons at the crossroads and making rifle stands out of sandbags in the house windows. The White Army was threatening to plunder the city and cut down working men and women, Red Army soldiers and sailors. (Ovalov 40)*

Because the destiny of Petrograd and its citizens depends on whether the antirevolutionaries inside the city are caught beforehand, the importance of Pronin's mission is elevated to the highest level. The world Pronin and the reader find themselves in is evidently on the brink of falling into ruin

and, as Campbell would put it, is suffering "from a symbolical deficiency," hence it requires a hero of exceptional gifts, even if his actions may go unrecognized by his society (The Hero 35).

4. Departure

Having briefly introduced the reader to the situation, Pronin as the narrator informs us that he was seriously wounded on the battlefield at the end of June, but already in August he requested to be sent back to the front. Contrary to his request, he is recruited into Cheka without fully realizing what that means. This marks the beginning of the mythological hero's journey, which Campbell designates as the "call to adventure," a covert call to a "high historical undertaking" (The Hero 47). It is also what Evelyn Underhill would identify as a call to an intense conversion, the awakening of the self (164). At this stage, the hero "is drawn into a relationship with forces that are not rightly understood" (Campbell, The Hero 46). Indeed, Pronin considers the task to be of little importance and wishes instead to rejoin his comrades on the frontlines, who are shedding blood for the future of communist society. On the one hand, such display of commitment to his fellow soldiers, the eagerness and determination to return to the battlefield so shortly after being wounded define him as both the embodiment of communist values and a cultural hero. However, Pronin requires further growth because he is unable to fully abandon the previous role and thus cannot accept the new one, even if he has done so verbally. This represents yet another element of the hero's journey, termed "the refusal of the call," which is essentially "a refusal to give up what one takes to be one's own interest" (Campbell, The Hero 54, 55). In psychoanalytic terms, it represents an individual's fear of abandoning the safety of childhood and making passage into adulthood (Campbell, The Hero 57). For Pronin the front is, regardless of danger, still an ordinary world he must abandon to move forward, as he says: "I turned twenty-seven, spent the tsarist war in the trenches, joined the Bolshevik party at the front, volunteered for the Red Army, I have no real knowledge … All I knew how to do was to hold a rifle in my hands and shoot straight" (Ovalov 8).

Upon his arrival at Petrograd, Pronin is met by comrade Kovrov, who tells him that "[s]ometimes sitting and being quiet is more useful than shooting and fighting" (Ovalov 9). He also tasks Pronin with going undercover as a disabled sailor and moving into a nationalized mansion they suspect serves as a secret meeting place for antirevolutionaries. When Pronin once again asks about the

possibility of being sent to the front instead, Kovrov verbally imposes discipline and instructs him "not to be upset but obedient" (Ovalov 10). In such manner Kovrov serves as a guardian, who represents the benign, protecting power of destiny in mythology (Campbell, The Hero 63). Vogler calls this figure, whose role is to guide, teach, test, train, and provide magical gifts, the "mentor" (117). He even lists the hero's encounter with him as a separate event following the "refusal of the call." Comrade Kovrov not only warns the protagonist to remain alert and observant, but also later in chapter five demonstrates how to uncover antirevolutionaries. By extracting the hidden grenade parts out of a bread roll being delivered to a kindergarten teacher he teaches Pronin to think "outside the box." Kovrov's lessons de facto have at least two more purposes. They function as a cogwheel in the detective story mechanism inviting the reader to join the detection game by providing him with a set of "tools" and principles he would need to employ if he is to surpass the protagonist and draw correct conclusions before the author reveals them. Secondly, they imply that class enemies could be hiding behind the faces of ordinary people such as the deceptive kindergarten teacher, and as such instruct the reader to become a more vigilant member of communist society. This lesson was especially important during the years of Stalin's purges, when it was thought, and many were genuinely convinced, that the economy "was riddled with 'wreckers' and saboteurs who had to be brought to book" (Lee 24). This extraliterary purpose of Kovrov's lessons is then similar to those found in myths, which educate the readers about society and their roles within it.

When Pronin rings the doorbell of the mansion in question, the door is opened by an old lady, Aleksandra Evgen'evna Boreckaja. She is the mansion's previous owner appointed by the Red Army to guard the porcelain collection kept there until the war ends and the building is transformed into a museum. The hero's adventure in myths presupposes "a passage beyond the veil of the known into the unknown" (Campbell, The Hero 76). At the entrance to this uncharted region the hero often encounters the "threshold guardian," a menacing presence who attempts to block his way and beyond whom lies the "darkness, the unknown, and danger; just as beyond the parental watch is danger to the infant and beyond the protection of his society danger to the member of the tribe" (Campbell, The Hero 71). Boreckaja, who represents the personification of the previous political system on numerous levels, serves as this threatening presence. To begin with, Pronin

describes the mansion she previously owned as the richest place he has ever seen: “there were silk curtains on the windows, the walls too were covered with silk, decorated with wood, the furniture was polished, decorated with bronze, gilding and crystal and … elegant dishes: vases, bowls, glasses and various figurines were everywhere” (Ovalov 12). Boreckaja is guarding a specific type of porcelain as will be revealed by the two blue crossed swords painted on them. This is the trademark of the royal porcelain factory in Meissen (near Dresden), whose traditional customers in Russia (as elsewhere in Europe) were the richest families. In other words, both the luxury of the villa and the royal porcelain indicate the financial and social status Boreckaja lost in the process of nationalization, which provides her with a strong motive to aid the antirevolutionaries. Secondly, when Pronin tells her he was sent to move into the mansion, she tries to prevent his entrance by saying: “And are you aware, sailor, that I have a security certificate for the entire living area?” (Ovalov 11). Such a statement underlines her reluctance to share the mansion with other citizens, as the new political system requires, and implies that there might be activities inside she does not want to make known. Boreckaja’s appearance is also quite indicative, as she is: “quite plump despite the time of hunger” (Ovalov 10). Lastly, her name, derived from the Russian word borec, which translates into English as “fighter,” suggests her concealed purpose. Due to all of these elements which associate her with the previous political system as well as due to her attempt to prevent the hero from entering, she can be defined as the threshold guardian.

5. Initiation

Once the hero traverses the threshold he is swallowed by the unknown and “moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms, where he must survive a succession of trials” to prepare for the greater ordeals ahead (Campbell, The Hero 89). This initiation phase of the hero’s journey represents the process of dissolving the past self, transcending it and transmuting into a new self (Campbell, The Hero 93). As Leeming notes, the hero must first lose himself to find himself in the overall pattern of the cosmos (7). Oftentimes it happens that the hero fails several trials because of his lack of experience, knowledge, or because of his naivety. During his stay at the mansion, Pronin begins hearing muffled voices and footsteps in his sleep and the following morning wakes up feeble and uncertain. Although this keeps occurring each time Boreckaja serves

him tea, he fails to detect the pattern but instead attributes the restless sleep to his idleness and melancholy. Similarly, because he is agitated by having to lead an idle life while his comrades are on the battlefield, he fails to recognize there is a meaning encoded in the pattern of Boreckaja's verbal replies to her occasional visitors. These failures, if viewed through the mechanism of detective fiction, provide an opportunity for the reader to surpass the investigator and independently arrive at the conclusion that Boreckaja is a member of the guilty party, which strengthens the story's lessons. On the other hand, the hero's failures clearly indicate he is struggling with abandoning his previous role and requires further growth if he is to become more useful to his society. Essential aid in his transformation will be provided by allies, whom the hero usually meets on his perilous journey.

When Pronin, wanting to be of use to Boreckaja in her absence recites the words he often heard her say to the visitors, he is handed a suspicious note written in English with crossed blue swords drawn in the corner. Soon afterwards it is Kovrov who gives him the necessary information for deciphering it:

> *You see, the White Guards are preparing for an armed uprising when Judenich strikes … There are many different counterrevolutionary groups in the city, small and large, but they can all be traced to the same headquarters. Among them is also the organization which calls itself the 'Blue swords.' Prior to this, we had no knowledge of their meeting place. (Ovalov 19)*

Kovrov is also the first to assume Pronin is being drugged on the nights counterrevolutionary meetings take place and suggests collecting a sample of the tea. Due to his advice, Pronin manages to evade consuming the drug and remains awake to hear the previously muffled voices clearly for the first time: "All of the voices are male. They're talking quietly about an attack, about the seizure of some building. They mentioned Judenich twice …" (Ovalov 30). He then attempts to trap the antirevolutionaries by locking them inside a room, but miserably fails because he was acting on his own. When the alerted patrol arrives, they find the room empty. Kovrov then teaches him the last and most valuable lesson: "You cannot count on yourself alone. You are supposed to do reconnaissance without raising a fuss, and immediately inform us of everything" (Ovalov 34). At

the same time the instruction – that only joint efforts will advance society's development and lead to success – is directed at the communist readers.

This message is conveyed via yet another element in the story – the friendship between Pronin and a thirteen-year-old boy named Viktor, which will prove essential in capturing the enemy. Pronin first encounters Viktor when collecting firewood. Noticing that the boy is struggling with lifting planks, he offers his help. In such manner the beginning of their relationship is marked by a readiness to aid a fellow citizen in performing menial tasks. It evolves into friendship when Pronin invites him to visit and begins telling him about the enemy – the Red Army, and teaches him the Morse code. Viktor, on the other hand, returns the favor by giving him lessons in arithmetic. That is to say, their efforts to contribute to each other's development lie at the core of their friendship. Another important fact is that Viktor's company helps Pronin to think less of his previous life. "I do have one comfort – Viktor," he admits (Ovalov 26). Their camaraderie advances to an even higher level when the major asks the boy to assist him in his mission. Viktor successfully distracts Boreckaja by knocking over a bookcase, allowing Pronin to collect the tea sample; he checks on the major every day to make sure the counterrevolutionaries have not harmed him; and when Boreckaja forbids him to visit, he uses the Morse code by tapping on the window. In this way, Viktor serves both as a friend and an ally to the mythological hero.

Having received Kovrov's final lesson and fully developed the friendship/camaraderie with Viktor, the hero is ready to proceed to the most perilous moment of the journey – the ordeal, which Campbell, in the light of Oedipal theory, calls the "atonement with the father" (The Hero 116). The father as the epitome of authority in fact represents that which holds absolute power over the hero and is preventing his advancement. It is the self-generated fear preventing him from abandoning the previous role and transmuting into the new self, the fear which needs to be confronted and defeated. Vogler somewhat simplifies this by stating that the secret of the ordeal is that "heroes must die so they can be reborn" (155). Death may come in many forms, whether as the end of a relationship or the break with an old personality, but it always presupposes the death of an "old, limited vision of things" (Vogler 171). In Ovalov's story, this crucial moment occurs when Boreckaja sends Pronin to retrieve firewood and traps him, significantly enough, in the deepest part of the house – the basement. In Leeming's terminology, this event is equal to "the descent to the

underworld," where the hero confronts the forces of death (8). The loss of control and the darkness Pronin finds himself in symbolize both the complete loss of sight of the counterrevolutionaries he was sent to spy on and his metaphorical death. Because they will now be able to assist Judenich in conquering Petrograd, the evil appears to have won. The hero's death, however, allows for the separation from the previous self and for a true Chekist to emerge.

Pronin suddenly recalls Boreckaja mentioning that the basement has a ventilation system because of the wine kept there. He then carefully searches the walls for vent pipes and identifies the one leading to the part of the house where his room is. Relying on Victor to perform his checks, he starts tapping on the vent and calling his name. When the boy, having heard him, says he will release him, the major shouts: "Don't you dare! … Run to Cheka, get Kovrov, tell him everything" and warns him to "Obey the order!" (Ovalov 44-45). In this short event, Pronin demonstrates the skills and knowledge accumulated thus far: recalling the information gained by perceptive listening, conducting careful search, spatial awareness, and above all, relying on the collective to help and trustworthily allowing it to take control over his destiny as well as of the destiny of others. Pronin exercises the latter in two ways; by relying on Viktor and by choosing for Viktor to first call the troops instead of releasing him, thereby demonstrating that he has fully embraced his new role of a Chekist and become the very epitome of communist society. His ego, as Campbell would claim, is not annihilated, rather, "it is enlarged, instead of thinking only of himself, the individual becomes dedicated to the whole of his society" (The Hero 144). In other words, he undergoes "apotheosis," advances beyond the terrors of ignorance, and becomes godlike, entering a state of divine knowledge, compassion and bliss (Campbell, The Hero 139, 153). For his efforts, the hero also gains the miraculous reward which Campbell calls "The Ultimate Boon." In many ways Pronin's reward – the successful capture of revolutionaries – is similar to the "Elixir of Imperishable Being" and the "Fountain of Youth" granting immortality in myths (Campbell, The Hero 168, 174). Namely, it prolongs and assures the existence of entire Petrograd's communist society. Judenich will not be able to capture the city without the aid of counterrevolutionaries from within.

6. Return

Following the successful initiation, the reformed hero enters the final stage of his journey: he returns to his ordinary life to present his boon to society. Sometimes, however, he requires the assistance from without to bring him back (Campbell, The Hero 192). This assistance in the story is once again provided by Kovrov, who unlocks the basement door and informs Pronin that the operation has been successful. They jointly praise Viktor for his smartness and commitment, and while crossing the return threshold that leads out of the mansion into the rainy night, comment on the boy having a bright future in Cheka. Pronin then takes Viktor home and completes the journey with such an act. Namely, Viktor can be viewed both as Pronin's young double and another form of the ultimate boon which would keep communist society safe in the future. Even his name, Viktor, derived from the Latin word victor, meaning "winner" (Superanskaja 64), and his surname, Zheleznov, derived from the Russian word zheleznoj which translates into English as "iron" (adjective), together indicate not only the nature of his character, but the desired future development of communist society – perseverance to be victorious. Indeed, in the following stories, Viktor evolves from being Pronin's unofficial assistant to his official apprentice and, finally, a C hekist defending the communist social order.

Campbell writes that after the journey has been completed and the lesson taught, "the boon brought from the transcendent deep becomes quickly rationalized into nonentity, and the need becomes great for another hero to refresh the word," but the question arises, how to teach a lesson that has been taught a thousand times (The Hero 202)? Instead of creating another hero to retrace the journey, Ovalov chooses to keep his characters and send them on various missions of preserving communist society all the while cultivating its values. With the help of Viktor and Cheka, Pronin manages to protect the Soviet community from the perpetually scheming capitalist enemies, devious saboteurs and traitors. For example, in "The Tale of a Cowardly Devil" ("Skazka o truslivom chjorte"), set in the postwar year of 1922, he travels to Ural as a member of a state committee inspecting iron mines that are to be restored, but finds them sunk or collapsed, which raises his suspicion. Combining investigation with espionage he uncovers saboteurs who aim to ruin the mines so that the Soviets would lease them to foreign capitalists for a cheap price. This would have, of course, slowed down the progress of the Soviet Union and benefited the capitalist countries. In "Dusja Carjova's Hens" ("Kury Dusi Carjovoj"), entire flocks perish in one of the

largest poultry sovkhozy (state farms) due to the fowl cholera epidemic. When an udarnik ("shock worker"), Dusja Carjova, dies as well, the investigation begins on two fronts; one in the sovkhoz conducted by Pronin and the other in Moscow by Viktor (now a young Chekist). The latter learns that a certain doctor Burcev did research on fowl cholera a few years before, but allegedly killed himself after a failed experiment caused the death of several laboratory technicians. Pronin, on the other hand, finds that sovkhoz medical worker Grohov is actually Burcev and that he was financed by foreign capitalists to develop a more deadly form of human cholera to be used in biological warfare against the Soviet people. In "A Glass of Water" ("Stakan vody"), a foreign intelligence agent, Major Rogers, who has been orchestrating the crimes against Soviet society in all of the preceding stories, but has masterfully been eluding Pronin, pours a vial of cholerae bacteria into the well at a military summer school. Upon capturing him, Pronin reveals he had outwitted him by switching the contents of the vial with pure water a long time ago. The fact that the main villain, who was aiding counterrevolutionaries since the first story, is British – as his surname suggests – does not surprise. During the Civil War, the British were supplying and training forces led by Kolchak and were their main supporters (Bullock 93). What is more, in "Appeal of the Russian Workers' and Peasants' Soviet Government," signed by Lenin, Chicherin, and Trotsky, the intervention of the Allies was harshly condemned and the Anglo-French called "bandits" (Bullock 1). In other words, the depiction of the evil "master of puppets" as British, carries an extraliterary and certainly political weight. In "Winter Break" ("Zimnie kanikuly") and "Agave Mexicana," Pronin and Viktor uncover individuals who have been aiding Major Rogers in obtaining "documents of colossal value for the state" (Ovalov 163). Pronin clearly functions as the mythological hero saving his nation and prevailing over oppressors in the stories that follow, each time refreshing and broadening the lessons taught in the initial one.

7. Conclusion

The focus of this article was Lev Ovalov's fictional character, Major Pronin, who achieved nationwide fame when he first appeared on the pages of the literary magazine Znamja. The article attempted to reveal some of the fundamental reasons for such popularity by offering a detailed analysis of Ovalov's first story featuring Pronin – "The Blue Swords." The analysis showed that

Pronin's initial qualities (commitment to his fellow soldiers and their cause, eagerness to return to the battlefield shortly after being wounded) and those he nurtures into growth on his adventurous journey (vigilance, perceptive listening and observing, reliance on the collective and readiness to surrender control into its hands) made him the epitome of communist culture and value system. Serving as an example for the readers, the character of Major Pronin worked to reinstate and fortify Soviet identity in the difficult period following forced collectivization, political repression and persecution, as well as during World War II. In other words, he performed the functions of a mythological hero. Indeed, mythology, apart from aiming to explain creation and religion, the meaning of life and death, and various natural phenomena, "attempts to chronicle the adventures of cultural heroes" (Harmon 326).

Moreover, the standard path of the hero's adventure Joseph Campbell calls the monomyth, can be discerned in "The Blue Swords." In the very beginning of the plot, Pronin is given an order to join the Cheka, which serves as the "call to adventure," but since he keeps wishing for the return to the front, this call is psychically refused. In other words, because he is unable to abandon the previous role, he cannot fully accept the new one. At the entrance to the mansion Pronin was sent to inspect, he encounters Evgenija Boreckaja, the personification of the previous political system and a "threshold guardian," the menacing presence attempting to block the hero's entrance. After traversing the threshold, Pronin enters the initiation phase, but fails several times to notice suspicious activities and capture the enemy. That is to say, he fails several trials, which serve as the preparation for the greater ordeal ahead. Crucial assistance, however, is provided by allies: comrade Kovrov teaches him the most valuable lesson – to rely on others, and the boy Viktor aids him by distracting Boreckaja. With Kovrov's lessons mastered and Viktor's friendship obtained, the hero "descends into the underworld" represented by Boreckaja's basement, where he experiences metaphorical death and transmutes into the new self, demonstrating all the skills he obtained on the journey. Having fully embraced the role of a Chekist, whose main purpose is the protection of communist society, Pronin undergoes "apotheosis" and becomes godlike, entering the state of divine knowledge and compassion. For his efforts he is awarded "The Ultimate Boon," which refers not only to the current safety of Petrograd's communist society, but its assured existence and

development. No traitors, saboteurs, or foreign intelligence agents undermining the communist social order in the following stories manage to escape the watchful eye of Pronin and Viktor.

The departure, initiation, and return stages of Pronin's journey, which depict the hero embracing the social role dedicated to the protection and growth of communist society, lead to the conclusion that Ovalov "adorned" the structure of monomyth with "red colors" to serve as the source of instruction, motivation, and inspiration for the Soviet readership. If we take into consideration that myths are often perceived as stories about gods, and that the definition of a god can be simmered down to "a personification of a motivating power or a value system that functions in human life and in the universe" (Campbell, The Power 40), then Pronin can indeed be described as the Soviet mythological hero.

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[1] Chernjak characterizes mass literature as literary works that are easily absorbed by readers of different ages and society strata; these works do not require special literary and artistic sensitivity, nor aesthetic perception (Sovremennaja 14). She points out that the term 'mass literature' "designates not so much the breadth of distribution of some or other publication, but a certain genre paradigm, which includes detective fiction, science fiction, fantasy, melodrama, etc." (Massovaja 5).

[2] Collectivization marked the end of private farming and the establishment of kolhozes and sovhozes. It began in 1917 but had made little impact by 1929 when it got under way due to Stalin's policy; it was completed by 1937 (McCauley 34).

[3] Also known as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Nazi-Soviet Pact and the Hitler-Stalin Pact.

[4] These include "The Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Left Socialist Revolutionaries, Right Socialist Revolutionaries, the Jewish Bund, Anarchists, various smaller agrarian peasant and 'social democratic' parties" (Bullock 24).

[5] A coalition of countries consisting of France, the United Kingdom, Italy, Japan, the United States (and Russia).

[6] Campbell borrows the word "monomyth" from James Joyce's Finnegans Wake (581).

[7] The term mytheme first appears in Lévi-Strauss' 1958 French version of his work "The Structural Study of Myth."

[8] For the second edition published in 1998 Vogler revised the book and changed the title to The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers.

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