

**A Hero Comes Home:
Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev and the City of Cheboksary**

Jason Morton

Summer 2013

Jason Morton is a PhD Candidate in the Department of History
at the University of California, Berkeley.

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Vasily Ivanovich Chapaev was a Soviet hero. Born on January 28 (February 9) 1887 into a poor Russian peasant family in the tiny village of Budaika on the Volga river, he would go on to lead an entire Red Division (the 25th) during the Civil War before dying in battle on September 5, 1919. After his death, Chapaev was transformed into legend, becoming one of the most iconic figures in Soviet history. Dmitry Furmanov's 1923 novel, *Chapaev*, an allegedly documentary story of how the spontaneous peasant leader was transformed into a conscious proletarian, was one of the earliest expressions of what Katerina Clark calls the 'master plot' of Socialist Realism, which, she claims, is "the literary expression of the master categories that organize the entire culture."¹ The Vasiliev Brothers' 1934 film adaptation of the novel was one of the most popular films in Russian history and would help make Chapaev a ubiquitous symbol in the Soviet Union.

Over the years, his image spread dramatically. From folklore, jokes, and children's games, to agit-prop posters and operas, Chapaev was seemingly everywhere. His myth became one of the most enduring in Soviet history: taking on different shades of meaning to adapt to the changing cultural context. Yet at each stage, Chapaev was *the* Soviet folk hero. His image was connected to traditional peasant heroes like Pugachev and Stenka Razin (he had an almost anarchic love of freedom, a complete lack of pretension, an inborn talent for battle, an ability to effortlessly relate to the common soldier, etc.). There is evidence that Chapaev actively cultivated such associations during his lifetime. Two of the brigades under his command were named after Razin and Pugachev, and his trademark Circassian *burka* and *papakha* gave him the distinct look of a warrior horseman from the steppe. By combining this traditional folk image with a narrative about the attainment of revolutionary consciousness, artists like Furmanov helped made Chapaev an archetype for the 'spirit' of the Soviet 'people.'

V.V. Vladimirov was also a Soviet hero. During World War II, Vladimirov served in the 23rd Motorized Brigade of the 3rd Tank-Guard Army on the Voronezh Front where he was wounded

¹ Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 14.

, “looked death in the eye,” and was awarded the Order of the Great Patriotic War First Class “for bravery” (*za otvagu*).² After the war, Vladimirov became a teacher and, eventually, the director of a school. During the early 1970s, he began a series of summer pilgrimages to the places where Chapaev had lived and fought: trips he would continue to take for at least a decade. His notes, later published as a travelogue, reflect Vladimirov’s sense that visiting these places connected him to Chapaev in some tangible way. Standing by the banks of the Volga in the summer of 1974, he looked at the railroad bridge Chapaev would have crossed on his way to the front sixty years earlier and tried to imagine what it must have been like to leave this river (beside which he had lived his entire life) behind him. In August of 1977, he tried to swim near the place where the wounded Chapaev had drowned while trying to flee the approaching Whites. “It was late at night,” he writes, “eleven o’clock. Dark. There, at the very edge of the water, on the clean sand, I began to take off my shirt. Three or four meters away an engine started. A Kazakh, busying himself with his water-pump, turned his face to me and said in the darkness, ‘It is forbidden to swim here. This is where Vasily Ivanovich Chapaev drowned!’”³

This is a strange scene. Since Chapaev’s body was never recovered from the river, the prospect of swimming there at night evokes images of submerged corpses or bones that might be accidentally stepped on or bumped into. This is only the most extreme example of a general trend in the travelogue. Throughout Vladimirov’s narrative, the ghost of Chapaev seems to hover over every place that he inhabited. This sense of disembodiment seems intentional: deliberately emphasizing the fact that there was no gravesite for Chapaev and pointing to the need for an alternative. Without one, his death would continue to overshadow his life.

Chapaev’s death had a prominent place in his mythology. The story, retold in countless forms, always follows the format of the heroic last stand. After liberating Uralsk (a city that had already changed hands many times during the course of the war), Chapaev and his men moved on to the small town of Lbishchensk. By this point, the 25th Division was dangerously close to exhaustion. Food and water were scarce, and many soldiers were growing sick from hunger and

² V.V. Vladimirov, *Tam, gde zhil I voeval V.I. Chapaev-Putevye zametki* (Cheboksary, 1997), 81.

³ *Ibid.*, 57.

thirst. Chapaev knew that his men needed to find supplies soon if they were to continue fighting. After sending the division onward, Chapaev remained at the headquarters he had established in Lbishchensk with only a small detachment as protection. The Whites had allegedly focused their strategy on killing Chapaev at all costs. Learning that he was momentarily vulnerable, a large contingent of White Cossacks surrounded Lbishchensk late on the night of September 4, 1919. Despite being attacked from three different directions, Chapaev and his small detachment were able to hold the Cossacks at bay as they attempted to escape across the Ural River. Chapaev was seriously wounded in the head, but still managed to provide covering fire for his men. By many accounts, he was among the very last to swim across.⁴

According to T.S. Zuikov, even these final moments were spent in an act of self-sacrifice:

“Chapaev tore my clothes from me, threw me and then himself into the water, and began to swim... We swam side by side, him helping me the entire time since I was completely without strength... I happened to glance at the shore. There, several Cossacks were setting up a machine gun and chopping up the wounded, who could not even raise themselves up. One stood and, aiming at Chapaev, fired. I ran out of strength and began to sink. ‘Be strong!’ he cried, as he supported me and, summoning his strength, pushed me towards the approaching shore.”

Chapaev allegedly spent the last of his strength saving Zuikov’s life. Once he had pushed him towards the shore, Chapaev could no longer keep himself afloat. Zuikov claims that, despite his desire to save his commander, he simply hadn’t the strength. All he could do is watch Vasily Ivanovich vanish beneath the waves before losing consciousness.⁵

This account reflects a broader tendency to depict Chapaev’s death as an act of sacrifice on behalf of the Soviet people: itself an expression of typical Soviet attitudes towards death and ‘eternity’. Beginning at least as early as the 1877 funeral of the poet Nekrasov, Russian revolutionaries commemorated departed heroes as martyrs, and envisioned their afterlife as the continuing revolutionary struggle for which they had given their lives. Even an atheist state, it

⁴ A. Kononov, *Rasskaz’e o Chapaeve* (Moskva & Leningrad: Detizdat TsKVLKSM, 1939), 47-53; A.V. Chapaev, K.V. Chapaeva, Ia. A. Volodikhin, *Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev: ocherki zhizni, revoliutsionnoi i boevoi deiatel’nosti* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1987), 328-333.

⁵ E.N. Artemov, *Chapaev: nauchno-populiarnyi fotoillustrirovannyi al’bom* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1974), 93-4.

seems, could not sever its ties to the dead, or to some concept of immortality.⁶ All modern states have an element of secular religion: mystifying the bond between the state and the people by extending it into the past and into the future through the lives of great men. This dynamic seems more jarring in the case of a state self-defined as non-religious. Unlike states which have embraced the concept of religion (even if they do not officially endorse any specific faith), an atheist state cannot blend its secular religion with the dominant religious beliefs of the populace (Christian Americans have long failed to distinguish the secular religion of their state from their traditional religious beliefs). The existence of a secular religion of the state in the Soviet Union is by no means an exception; if anything, it only makes the rule more apparent. Just like George Washington, Jean-Paul Marat, or Guiseppe Garibaldi, Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev was a revolutionary hero who would “continue to live in the memory of the people, as long as the people live. And the people are eternal.”⁷

Yet representations of Chapaev’s afterlife could also take on a more literal, corporeal form than the typical abstract formulations of the martyr’s eternal memory. When asked why he continued to watch the Vasiliev Brothers’ film so often, a young boy naively answered, “maybe this time he’ll swim across!”: a hopeless desire that was allegedly shared by many fans of the film.⁸ Barely one month after the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Lenfilm released a short agitprop piece entitled “Chapaev Is with Us,” in which Chapaev (once again played by Boris Babochkin) rises from the Ural River to lead the charge against the invaders. In Mikhail Chekhanovskii’s 1957 cartoon film, *Skaz o Chapaeve*, Chapaev again rises from the river, and with the help of animals and forest spirits, reverses the traditional ending of his story by driving the Whites into the river to their deaths.⁹

V.V. Vladimirov’s attempted late night dip was symbolically charged: such an avid Chapaev

⁶ Catherine Merridale, *Night of Stone: Death and Memory in Twentieth Century Russia* (New York, NY: Viking, 2001), 74-91.

⁷ A. Kononov, *Rasskazy o Chapaeve*, 53.

⁸ “Nash Zemliak V.I. Chapaev,” *Molodoi kommunist-organ Chuvashskogo Obkoma VLKSM*, 8 fevralia 1957; “Legendarnyi nachdiv K 90-letniiu dnia rozhdeniia V.I. Chapaeva,” *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 9 fevralia 1977.

⁹ Mikhail Leikhailovich Chekhanovskii papers, fond 2627- opis 1- delo 66, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i isskustva (RGALI).

enthusiast would not have been ignorant of the location's significance. Yet, the fact that he is warned not to swim there suggests that the river is an inappropriate site at which to commune with Chapaev. Here, the image of his death would always be more tangible than any imagined resurrection. The entire organization of Vladimirov's travelogue is, in fact, structured to draw attention to the 'true' center of Chapaev commemoration: the V.I. Chapaev Museum in the capital city of the Chuvash Republic, Cheboksary. His account begins with the story of the discovery that the hero was born in the Chuvash capital. Exactly half-way through the book, there is an account of his chance meeting at the Chapaev monument in Cheboksary with a former member of Chapaev's division (a *Chapaevets*), who proceeds to tell him tales of his personal experiences with the legendary commander. Finally, the book ends with a description of the museum's founding in 1974, and the moving of the hero's childhood home to the grounds of the museum in 1986. Taken as a whole, Vladimirov's work suggests that, while there may be many places where one might commune with the memory of Chapaev, Cheboksary is his true home.¹⁰

Beginning in 1934, when it was discovered that Chapaev had been born in a small village on the outskirts of Cheboksary, the city began to cultivate an imagined relationship with the fallen hero. Chapaev became '*nash zemliak*' (from the word *zemlia* – earth), which can be translated as 'our countryman,' but has more of a connotative link to a shared connection in the physical environment. After the village of Budaika, where Chapaev was born, was incorporated into Cheboksary, the city began to integrate its status as the birthplace of Chapaev into its official Soviet identity: a process which culminated in 1974 with the construction of the largest Chapaev memorial complex in the Soviet Union. This museum imagined itself, and by extension the town in which it was located, as the center of Chapaev commemoration: as the hero's earthly home.

There is both a particular and a general story here. On a local level, rooting the hero in Cheboksary and Chuvashiia was about making these communities *matter* in the broader Soviet context: it is about a periphery connecting with its center. On a national level, the domestication of Chapaev's image reflected broader social concerns about the younger generation's increasing

¹⁰ V.V. Vladimirov, *Tam, gde zhil i voeval V.I. Chapaev-putevye zametki*, 3, 49, 77-78.

apathy towards the state. The museum in Cheboksary was part of a larger effort to reinvigorate the Soviet family as one way of keeping the revolutionary flame alive. Yet, these goals were not always compatible. Bringing Chapaev 'home' to Cheboksary required making him ethnically ambiguous, ultimately leading to the downplaying of his Russianness and the emphasizing of his imagined links to the Chuvash people. This contradicted Chapaev's image as the spirit of the Soviet people, who were not supposed to be ethnically defined.

The concept (and reality) of home is often complicated by its many meanings. As Robert Frost famously wrote, "It all depends on what you mean by home."¹¹ I see several different characteristics of 'home' in the Chapaev Museum. Home is, most obviously, a physical place. Buildings, towns, and entire landscapes (home, hometown, homeland) are all understood as somehow sharing in the larger sense of home. Home is a geographical center: "really the center of a series of radiating circles of hominess."¹² It is a place that, when you return to it, you are somehow returning to an integral part of yourself. It is the extension of the individual identity to the physical world.¹³ This, in turn, is connected to my second definition of home as a site of identity formation. A childhood home, like Cheboksary for Chapaev, is the place where a person first interacts with the world and becomes self-aware (attains consciousness). Finally, home is the space occupied by the family: the first and most durable social unit. It is a place where families are made. The Chapaev Museum attempted to be all of these things for the memory of Chapaev, and in the process revealed the difficulty inherent in trying to construct homes and families around ideas rather than blood.

Home as Place: Native Soil

The concept of home is meaningless without its counterpart in homelessness, and the return

¹¹ Robert Frost, "Death of a Hired Man", in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature, Volume D* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Co., 2003), 1181.

¹² John Hollander, "It All Depends," in Arien Mack, ed., *Home: A Place in the World* (New York, NY: New York University Press), 33-35.

¹³ Amy C. Singleton, *No Place Like Home: The Literary Artist and Russia's Search for Cultural Identity* (Albany, NY: New York State University Press), "People need to give meaningful structure and symbolic significance to the relationship between themselves and their environment (the human 'condition')" and "the house gives concrete shape and form to the individual and cultural values that are projected onto space; it is at once a reflection of how people view the world and how they see their relative position in it.", 1-2.

journey home is perhaps the most prominent representation of home itself. In this sense, “we are all the children of Adam and Eve, who were at home everywhere there was for them; it was only by losing this privileged human place forever that they entered a world in which they would have to internalize, and go on successively internalizing, the place-of-being-at-home.”¹⁴ As Vladimirov’s travelogue illustrates, Chapaev had long been homeless. The story of his homecoming, of the discovery that he had been born in the small village of Budaika on the outskirts of Cheboksary, would be repeated endlessly: beginning almost every account of Chapaev’s relationship to the town and the foundation of the museum.

Chapaev returned home to Cheboksary on the silver screen. The 1934 film *Chapaev*, directed by Georgi and Sergei Vasilev and starring Boris Babochkin, “quickly became more popular than any film before it.”¹⁵ In the first year of its release, Joseph Stalin allegedly watched it twenty-seven times.¹⁶ On November 21, 1934, the newspaper *Pravda* published its first editorial devoted to a single film, declaring that *Chapaev* would be screened “in all corners of our vast country—in towns, villages, collective farms, settlements, in barracks, in clubs and in squares.”¹⁷ The film was unique, not only as one of the first major sound films produced in the Soviet Union, but also because it reinvigorated the myth of the Civil War (which, according to many contemporary critics, had been cheapened by a series of mediocre attempts to capture it in film).

The film was shown twenty-nine times over the course of eight days at the *Rodina* theater in Cheboksary. It was seen by 12,514 people, including almost 200 *kolkhozniks* from neighboring collective farms and a large number of peasants from surrounding villages.¹⁸ According to numerous accounts, one of these peasants, “a grey-bearded old man,” upon seeing Chapaev on the screen for the first time, grabbed his neighbor’s hand and shouted: “Oh!...Vasiatka!...My cousin! (*plemianik*).”¹⁹ The next day, an argument broke out at the entrance to the theater. When the ticket-collector attempted to obtain the entrance fee from a large peasant woman, he was greeted with

¹⁴ John Hollander, “It All Depends,” in Arien Mack, ed., *Home: A Place in the World*, 34.

¹⁵ “Chapaev rodilsia v Budaike,” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*-27 ianvaria 1957.

¹⁶ Julian Graffy, *Chapaev: Kinofiles Companion #12* (New York, NY: I.B. Tauris, 2010), 68.

¹⁷ Quoted in Julian Graffy, *Chapaev*, 74.

¹⁸ “Chapaev rodilsia v Budaike,” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*-27 ianvaria 1957.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

confused outrage: “What is the meaning of this?” she screamed, “We have to pay money to see Chapaev?... What is he some kind of tsar? He’s one of us, from our village, our cousin. Give me a ticket for my whole family!”²⁰

This story is clearly reminiscent of numerous accounts from around the world about naïve first-time film spectators unable to distinguish the events on screen from reality (i.e., the audience members that supposedly cringed in fear or ran away from the oncoming train at the Lumiere Brothers’ first screening of their motion pictures in Paris). These accounts are commonly believed by film scholars to be exaggerated, and are accepted as part of the foundation myth of film reflecting the way in which this new medium expanded and complicated perceptions of reality. Upon viewing the Lumiere shorts in 1896, Maxim Gorky had to remind himself that despite the fact that it was “terrible to see,” it was “the movement of shadows, only of shadows.”²¹

This ability of film to seemingly manipulate reality, though terrible to Gorky, was embraced by many Soviet proponents as providing an unprecedented opportunity to actively shape the consciousness of the masses.²² This was clearly the hope for the Vasilev Brothers’ *Chapaev*. When the film was screened and discussed with the directors at the Russian Association of Revolutionary Cinematographers (RosARRK) on November 10, 1934, delegates enthusiastically speculated about the film’s potential to demonstrate the formation of the new man to a mass audience and transform spectators, even those without warlike tendencies, into fervent defenders of the Soviet state.²³ At Stalin’s ninth viewing of the film on November 15, he allegedly worried that too few regions of the Soviet Union would be able to view the film, because they were not equipped with the appropriate screen or sound technology. On his eleventh viewing five days later, he demanded

²⁰ “Nash zemliak V.I. Chapaeva,” *Molodoi kommunist*-8 fevralia 1957.

²¹ Quoted in Richard M. Barsam, *Non-Fiction Film: A Critical History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), 3.

²² See Dziga Vertov, “Kinoki. Perevorot,” *Lef*, 1923, no. 3 (June/July), pp. 135-43: “I am the Cine-Eye. I construct things. I have planted you, who were created by me, in a most remarkable room that never existed before that I also created.” Sergei Eisenstein, “The Montage of Attractions,” in *The Film Sense*, trans & ed. Jay Leyda (NY; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975), where he describes the film attraction as “every element that can be verified and mathematically calculated to produce certain emotional shocks in a proper order within the totality” as “the only means by which it is possible to make the final ideological conclusion possible”, 231; and of course, Lev Trotsky, “Vodka, the Church and the Cinema,” *Pravda*, 12 July 1923, which praises the potential of cinema to replace the church and discipline the masses.

²³ G.N. and S.D. Vasilevy papers, fond 2733-opis 1-delo 426, Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i isskustva (RGALI).

that *Pravda* run a leader with a summary of audience reactions to the film.²⁴

The film certainly changed the reality of Cheboksary. Accounts of what followed the peasant woman's outburst at the theater vary. According to one, the woman (later identified as Nadezhda Nikifirova, the daughter of the peasant Gavril Afanas'ev, who had so enthusiastically recognized his relative on the screen the night before) went to the local administration to demand free tickets for herself and her family. Although her request was denied, it prompted officials to conduct an investigation into her claims that Chapaev was from Budaika, which were eventually verified through a search of church documents from the Budaika parish.²⁵ Another account claims that the impetus for the search was a letter to the editor of the newspaper *Krasnaia Chuvashiia*, written by Komsomol members from Budaika, who reported that, in the aftermath of the film screening, the village was buzzing with rumors that Chapaev was a local.²⁶

Either way, the discovery of Chapaev's birth records was a moment of great significance. Prior to this, the *Bolshaia Sovetskaia Entsiklopediia* had listed his place of birth as the town of Balakovo (a city far to the south, where the Chapaevs eventually moved), and the *Malaia Entsiklopediia* listed his date of birth as 'unknown.' Locating Chapaev in a specific place and a specific time was a major step towards concretizing the image of a hero, who had until that time occupied an ambiguous space (the screen; the page) somewhere between fiction and reality. While other locations could claim that he had fought, lived, or otherwise passed through them, none could claim to be his point of origin (with all the mystical rootedness the concept implies). Chapaev was now *from* someplace; he had, in effect, been given his papers.

The discovery was even more momentous for the Chuvash Republic and its capital city of Cheboksary. Shortly after Chapaev's birth was verified, the village of Budaika voted to change its name to *Chapaevo*. Yet the village only maintained this distinction for a few short years. In the summer of 1940, it was incorporated into Cheboksary, and Chapaev became the city's most

²⁴ Julian Graffy, *Chapaev*, 68.

²⁵ "Nash zemliak V.I. Chapaeva," *Molodoi kommunist*-8 fevralia 1957.

²⁶ "Priglasenie na <Chapaeva>--K sorokaletiiu pervogo pokaza fil'ma v Cheboksarakh," *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia* 4 dekabria 1974.

famous resident.²⁷ Like most of the smaller nations within the Soviet Union, the Chuvash people occupied a position on the periphery that long predated the revolution. The Chuvash are a Turkic-speaking people, who were incorporated into the Russian state during the reign of Ivan IV, during his conquest of the khanate of Kazan in 1552. Unlike many other Turkic peoples in the Volga region, the Chuvash were animists rather than Muslims and were actively proselytized into the Russian Orthodox Church. By the early twentieth century, the Chuvash were nominally Orthodox (although animist practices still persisted and continue to). Their embrace of Orthodoxy gave them leverage against their non-Orthodox (primarily Muslim) neighbors; yet, the Chuvash were still treated as backwards by many of their Russian neighbors. The Chuvash ethnographer, G.I. Komissarov, noted at the turn of the century that it was not uncommon for Russians to mock the Chuvash as “Vasilii Ivanoviches” or “Chuvash hicks” (*Chuvashskie lapotniki*). A Chuvash walking down the street might be taunted by groups of Russian hooligans or schoolchildren, yelling “Well, Vasilii Ivanovich!...Where are you going? To Cheboksary? To your capital? Cheboksary has more bast sandals (a universal symbol of peasant backwardness) than all other cities combined!”²⁸

The situation of the Chuvash changed dramatically under Soviet rule. On June 24, 1920, the Chuvash autonomous oblast was created from territory that had historically been divided between the provinces of Kazan and Simbirsk, and on April 21, 1925, the Chuvash were given their own autonomous national republic.²⁹ For the fiftieth anniversary of Soviet rule in Chuvashiia, the local government proudly published collections of colorful diagrams and graphs, charting the astonishing development: from 30,000 students and 900 teachers in 1914, to 297,600 students and 14,000 teachers in 1967; from 3,000 tractors in 1934, to 12,000 in 1967; and so on.³⁰ The capital of Cheboksary grew from a small settlement to a city of hundreds of thousands over the course of the same period (the village of Budaika, which had been outside of the city limits in 1934, was the center of the city by the 1960s).

Yet similar statistics were given for nearly all regions of the Soviet Union. Other than being

²⁷ Chapaev rodilsia v Budaike,” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*-27 ianvaria 1957.

²⁸ G.I. Komissarov, *O Chuvashakh: issledovaniia, vospominaniia, dnevniki, pis'ma* (Cheboksary, 2003), 207.

²⁹ *Chuvashiia za 50 let Sovetskoi vlasti (v tsifrax)* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1967), 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 106-7.

the capital of the Chuvash Republic, Cheboksary had little to distinguish itself from a myriad of Soviet cities, many of which were the capitals of proud peoples, whose noble traditions were to be admired and celebrated. It was Chapaev that truly put Cheboksary on the Soviet map. Citizens could now proudly claim him as ‘*nash zemliak*.’ Chuvash soldiers during World War II drew upon their imagined connection with Chapaev as a source of strength and inspiration. As one soldier wrote, “We battle the enemy, just as our fearless countryman (*nash besstrashnyi zemliak*) Chapaev did.”³¹ In an open letter to their children at the front, Chuvash parents implored: “Hurry son of the Chuvash people!...In your heart burns the unquenchable courage and valor of our brave countryman Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev.”³² In later years, an operatic rendition of Chapaev’s story, composed by the Chuvash B.A. Mokrousov, would become Cheboksary’s most prominent cultural export. Almost every time a new staging was launched, and there were many of them, local papers would proudly herald Chapaev’s arrival in the cultural centers of Moscow and Leningrad (always with the implicit understanding that his journey originated in Cheboksary).³³ Chapaev even managed to connect Cheboksary and Chuvashiia directly to the spiritual heart of the Soviet Union: Lenin himself. In 1979, a Chuvash researcher excitedly shared his discovery of a book with pages devoted to “the son of the Chuvash soil...Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev” in Lenin’s personal library.³⁴ Just as with the Chapaev opera playing in the Kremlin, the relationship suggested here posits Chapaev as the link between the Chuvash periphery and the Soviet center: he was, in effect, the face of Soviet Chuvashiia.

Yet, while the discovery of Chapaev’s birth records was an important step towards placing him in a concrete physical place outside the realm of screen, page, or human memory, the records themselves were not substantial enough to adequately signify the legendary hero’s eternal bond to his native land. The city of Cheboksary decided to reinforce their connection to what was

³¹ *Chuvashskaia ASSR v period Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny: sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1975), 434.

³² *Ibid.*, 441.

³³ “Eto—Otradno: ‘Chapai’ budet pokazan v Kremle,” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 11 marta 1962; “S prazdnikom Cheboksary!” *Sovetskaia Rossia*, 25 sentiabria 1969; “Novaia vstrecha s ‘Chapaem,’” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 25 fevralia 1970.

³⁴ “Chapaevskaia stranitsy biblioteki Lenina,” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 22 noiabria 1979.

essentially an abstraction by erecting a monument.³⁵ Monuments have frequently played a role in the creation of modern societies, giving abstract concepts the appearance of concreteness. This dynamic was certainly not lost on Lenin, whose “monumental plan of propaganda” sought to turn Moscow (and eventually every Soviet metropolis) into a “talking city” full of statues that would serve as “constant reminders for the pupils of his gigantic new revolutionary school” of History’s material presence.³⁶

The idea of erecting a Chapaev statue in the town was initially the brainchild of Ivan Alekseevich Zakhartsev, former director of the Chapaev Industrial Union, who claimed that he was determined to “establish a monument to our celebrated countryman (*znamenitomu zemliaku*) from the first days of my directorship.”³⁷ After learning from Chapaev’s daughter, Klavdiia Vasilievna Chapaeva, that the monument to her father outside the Privolzhskii section of the All-Soviet Economic Exhibition (VDNKH) in Moscow was soon to be taken down (along with the pavilion), Zakhartsev determined to acquire it for his city. He arrived in Moscow only to learn that he was too late. The monument had been given to the city of Pugachev, where Chapaev had lived and fought during the Civil War. Undeterred, Zakhartsev informed the local Komsomol in Cheboksary of his predicament on the day of his return. The Komsomol determined to send a delegation to the Komsomol Central Committee in Moscow (TsKVLKSM) under the strict orders “Do not return without Chapaev!” The expedition was ultimately successful, and on June 24, 1960, the monument was unveiled at the center of the city’s new Chapaev square. Cheboksary was now an undeniable link in the Soviet network of sacred spaces. The myth of Chapaev as ‘*nash zemliak*’ now had undeniable substance, and could be physically extended to connect Chuvashiia to the broader heroic pantheon of the Workers’ state. “I’ll never forget how I felt,” said Ivan Alekseevich, “standing at the Lenin Memorial in Ulianovsk with a copy of our monument dedicated ‘To Lenin from the Workers of Chuvashiia.’”³⁸

³⁵ Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public feeling in America* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 38.

³⁶ Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 88-89.

³⁷ “U pamiatnika svoia sud’ba,” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 27 oktiabria 1984.

³⁸ Ibid.



The monument quickly became an important site of social interaction: a nexus for *Chapaevtsy*. The term, which initially referred specifically to those who had served under Chapaev during the Civil War, eventually came to embrace all veterans of the 25th Division (even those who had enlisted long after Chapaev's death). After it was placed under the patronage of the Chuvash Komsomol in 1965, a "tradition" began, wherein those "upon whom had fallen the honor of serving in the famous Chapaev Division" swore "an oath to prove themselves worthy of the hero's name."³⁹ Eventually, anyone with a passion for Chapaev, who had somehow internalized his 'spirit', could count themselves among the ranks of the *Chapaevtsy*. In this case, as V.V. Vladimirov discovered, there was perhaps no better place to connect with the memory of Chapaev than at his monument in Cheboksary. Here anyone could suddenly find themselves listening to one of Chapaev's living contemporaries describe their personal impressions of him.⁴⁰ The monument was also intended as a site where the Soviet identity of Cheboksary could be realized collectively. On Chapaev's birthday, large gatherings of local residents, workers' delegations, and officials met at the statue,

³⁹ "Vsadnik na letiashchem kone," *Molodoi kommunist*, 11 fevralia 1982.

⁴⁰ V.V. Vladimirov, *Tam, gde zhil I voeval V.I. Chapaev-Putevye zametki*, 49.

sometimes joined by Chapaev's son Alexander or his daughter Klavdiia. Here the community was intended to reflect on its mutual connection to their legendary *zemliak*, visibly constructed around his image and his memory.⁴¹

Yet the monument was only the beginning. Several years later, in 1967, the Chuvash Komsomol held a republic-wide competition for the best architectural design for a Chapaev Museum in Cheboksary. After three rounds, the project was awarded to I. Gavrilov and A. Kuz'min, from the institute "*Chuvashgrazhdanproekt*."⁴² Local *komsomoltsy* actively raised funds for the project. In one day, *komsomoltsy* from a railway repair factory gathered scrap metal, which they then sold for 600 rubles and donated to the museum fund. *Komsomoltsy* from a teacher's vocational school donated 950 rubles (such 'volunteerism' was usually encouraged [mandated] by the authorities to give civic projects the necessary appearance of popular support). Within a short time, they had raised more than 2,000 rubles, and construction was under way.⁴³ Gavrilov and Kuz'min's design envisioned the museum as an extension of the monument. Together, they would be a "unified architectural ensemble," reinforcing the reciprocal symbolic relationship between Chapaev and Cheboksary. By providing a home for the hero, Cheboksary simultaneously domesticated his image and established itself as the hero's home.⁴⁴

When it opened in 1974, local newspapers proudly heralded the V.I. Chapaev museum as "the pride of Cheboksary and Chuvashiia." In the first decade of its existence, the museum attracted more than 1.7 million visitors. Among these were numerous veterans of the Civil War, veterans of Chapaev's division, generals, artists and officials. Chapaev's son and daughter were frequent visitors, participating in museum programs and donating materials about their father to the museum's collection. The museum's guestbook was filled with expressions of gratitude from both locals and those who had traveled great distances to visit the childhood home of the great Soviet hero. The poet Vladimir Razumnevich wrote "Those who live in the land of Chapaev (*na zemle Chapaia*), learn from their legendary hero how to live and serve their country like brave and

⁴¹ "Volozhenie venkov k pamiatiku V.I. Chapaevu," *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 10 fevralia 1972.

⁴² "Posviashchaetsia Chapaevu," *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 26 dekabria 1968.

⁴³ "V fond muzeia V.I. Chapaeva," *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 5 dekabria 1967.

⁴⁴ "Takim budet muzei legendarnogo Chapaia," *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 2 dekabria 1967.

honorable people... To love Vasily Ivanovich means to love the Soviet nation. Thank you museum, for imparting that love to your visitors.”⁴⁵ This recognition by the Soviet center was a tremendously valuable source of political capital for local leaders: such prominent visits were hardly accidental.

Attracting visitors (i.e., tourists) was clearly important and was certainly part of the motivation behind building the museum. In his proposed plan, chief-architect Gavrilov argued that the monument had already brought “large numbers of tourists” to Cheboksary, and that “the construction of a Chapaev museum [would] only heighten their interest in the homeland (*rodina*) of the legendary Civil War hero.”⁴⁶ There was an entire tourist industry, complete with ‘Chapaev cruises’ along the Volga, stopping off at Cheboksary, Balakovo, Kazan, Saratov, and other cities where the hero had lived or fought.⁴⁷ Revenue was certainly an important consideration here, but the impact on civic pride and identity should not be underestimated. Being a Soviet tourist destination made Cheboksary *matter* in the Soviet context. It was no longer just a provincial backwater, or a city whose primary significance was restricted to a small ethnic minority within the Soviet Union. It was the homeland of one of the most important heroes in the Soviet pantheon.

In the museum, Chapaev’s childhood was (and is) exhibited as Cheboksary’s history. Pictures of Chapaev as a boy and a copy of his birth records hang beside a map of Budaika from 1874. Even though the Chapaevs never lived in Cheboksary, old pictures of the city are displayed alongside pictures of the young Chapaev and his family. From here, the exhibit transitions to a copy of the newspaper article announcing the discovery that Chapaev was born in Budaika and telling the story of the 1934 film screening. This episode, which occurred long after Chapaev had died, is inserted into a narrative that is otherwise chronologically linear: bookmarked on one side by artifacts from the period of Chapaev’s early childhood, and on the other by his young adulthood and early military service.⁴⁸ By nesting the story of the screening into a chronological narrative of Chapaev’s life, Cheboksary’s historical relationship to Chapaev is made more *real* than it was in

⁴⁵ “Spasibo tebe, muzei!” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 25 maia 1984.

⁴⁶ “Takim budet muzei legendarnogo Chapaia,” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 2 dekabria 1967.

⁴⁷ “Krus—k Chapaevskim mestam,” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 25 apreliia 1977.

⁴⁸ V.I. Brovchenkova, *Muzei V.I. Chapaeva: putevoditel’* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1980), 6-9.

fact.⁴⁹ While it is probable that he was familiar with the town, he lived in Budaika, and Budaika was not made a part of Cheboksary until twenty-one years after his death.

The museum was thus a significant step towards building a concrete home for Chapaev in Cheboksary. It made the city a major destination for Chapaev enthusiasts and Volga package tours, and its various pedagogical programs (discussed in detail below) worked to reinforce the connection between Chapaev and the town in the minds of locals (especially children). Yet the material link was still tenuous. To really be Chapaev's home, Cheboksary needed his house. Even though the former site of the home was known by at least 1955, when a memorial plaque was erected there, the whereabouts of the house itself remained a mystery. In 1965, a journalist named Nikolai Sturikov began an investigation and, based upon the recollections of former Budaika residents, learned that the home had been sold to one I.N. Nikiforov, who had moved it to his village of Knutikha, which was later incorporated into Cheboksary (the sources say nothing about how or why someone would move an entire house and treat the whole thing as a matter of course). When Nikiforov was tracked down, he explained that he sold the house to a man named G.P. Petrov, who had moved it to his village of Tokhmeevo. On May 15, 1975, a reporter for *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia* traveled with Nikiforov to Tokhmeevo and found G.I. Petrov, and with him, the Chapaev family house. The next day, *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia* published an article about the discovery of the house, accompanied by a photograph of an old log cabin with the caption "Here it is, the Chapaevs' house."⁵⁰

It now remained to bring Chapaevs' home back 'home,' that is, to the premises of the Chapaev Museum in Cheboksary. But, before this could be done, the house needed to be restored. What this meant in practical terms was far from straightforward. According to Chapaev's relatives in Budaika, the Chapaevs had been extremely poor: their house didn't even have a functional roof. It was, in fact, very small, without the entrance hall that the existing house in Tokhmeevo now had, and the interior had been almost completely empty. Was this truly the hero's home that

⁴⁹ Contemporary museum scholarship emphasizes the historical role of museums as "institution[s] for the construction, legitimization, and maintenance of cultural realities" which "use theatrical effects to enhance a belief in the historicity of the objects they collect," Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, eds., *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Limited), 2, 13. Museums represent/construct a seemingly natural relationship between their objects and a given historical narrative.

⁵⁰ "Kak nashli dom Chapayevkh," *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 16 maia 1975.

Cheboksary wanted to exhibit? Shortly after the house was discovered, V.A. Nesterov, an official with the Chuvash Central State Archive, expressed concern about how it could be integrated into the Chapaev Museum while remaining an accurate historical representation of Chapaev's early life in Budaika.⁵¹

Nesterov's concerns spoke to the heart of what it meant for Cheboksary to be Chapaev's home. Was the emphasis to be on historicity or symbolism? Was Cheboksary to reconstruct the house of a dead man as it existed when he lived there (a space that was historically separate from the present) or was it to provide a home for a hero whose 'spirit' was still very much alive, whose relationship to his homeland was dynamic? Museum scholar Stephen Bann argues that the "poetics" of the modern museum lie somewhere between the depictions of history as separate and history as present. This is represented in the two kinds of museum exhibits: one, in which historical objects are displayed in a linear narrative progression, and the other, in which a room (or house) is recreated *as it was* at some point in history: asserting "the experiential reality of history."⁵²

While both elements had been present in Soviet museums from the beginning (as they are in all modern museums), the question of how to "increase the exposure of the dialectical historical process" through museum exhibits was a central concern in the 1930s.⁵³ Yet, by the 1970s, this focus had shifted. In 1970, the Soviet Ministry of Culture marked the one hundredth anniversary of Lenin's birth with a 'Lenin inspection' (*Leninskii smotr*) of Soviet museums. The inspection concluded that the most important task facing Soviet museums was the need to make the connection between museum visitors and history "more emotional."⁵⁴ The best way to achieve this was through the immersive historical exhibit, typified by the memorial house museum, or the memorial room. Here the visitor was to connect with the past in an experiential way by interacting with the material reality of history.

⁵¹ V.A. Nesterov, "K voprosu o dome Chapaevykh," Papka No. 49, fond 448, CHKM 11097/44.

⁵² Stephen Bann, "Poetics of the Museum: Lenoir and Su Somnard," in Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, eds., *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, 77, 81.

⁵³ V. Glagolev, "Kontsentratsiia i kontrat v istoriko-revoliutsionnoi ekspozitsii," in *Sovetskii muzei* No. 2, (Moskva: sektor nauka Narkomprosa, Mart-Aprel' 1932), 18.

⁵⁴ I.A. Anoshchenko, "Leninsketeranov revoliutsionii smotr muzeev," in *Muzeinoe delo v SSSR* (Moskva: Tsentral'nyi Ordena Lenina Muzei Revoliutsii SSSR—TRUDY, 1971), 12.

To be fair, these discussions (just as Nesterov's report) stressed the importance of historical accuracy in renovation and reconstruction. Nevertheless, the creation of an emotional response to history was clearly a priority, and this left the door open for creative interpretation. When the Chapaev house was finally opened to the public on May 8, 1986, it was quite different from the dirty, empty, roofless little hut described by the Chapaevs' relatives. It maintained the entrance hall that had been added to the back of the house after the Chapaevs sold it. It had a roof. The inside was clean and filled with numerous reproductions of peasant artifacts and improbable decorations. Yet, while it may not have been an accurate representation of Chapaev's actual living conditions, the house clearly reproduced a common ideal of the house as sanctuary. Actual peasant homes were often dirty and oppressive: filled with smoke, animals, and family members rather than knickknacks and colorful fabrics. This, on the other hand, was a cozy little nest.





The addition of the Chapaev house completed the symbolic process. By this time, the museum had received more than 2.5 million visitors “from every corner of [the] country.”⁵⁵ The city could truly claim itself as the center of a vast symbolic network of Chapaev memorial sites throughout the Soviet Union, which collectively constituted a vast Soviet space.⁵⁶ In 1988, the museum’s director, Valentina Ivanovna Brovchenkova, published an article, in which she describes the relationship between the Chapaev Museum and the broader memorial network in precisely these terms. Her narrative chronicles “the second life of the legendary Civil War hero,” which began, she says, with the decision to name the 25th Division the ‘Chapaev Division’ shortly after his death in 1919.⁵⁷ After this, Chapaev’s name was given to “rivers, villages, collective farms, sanatoriums, streets, squares, parks, pioneer battalions, etc.” in “all of the places where he had lived

⁵⁵ V.I. Brovchenkova, “Chapaevskie pamiatnye mesta v SSSR i Muzei V.I. Chapaeva v Cheboksarakh,” in *Legendarnyi geroi grazhdanskoi voyny V.I. Chapaev* (Cheboksary: Ordena ‘Znak Pobedy’ Nauchno-issledovatel’skii institute iazyka, literatury, istorii i ekonomiki pri Sovete Ministerov Chuvashskoi ASSR, 1988), 55.

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault claims that just as history was the “great obsession of the nineteenth century...the present epoch will perhaps be above all the epoch of space.” This epoch, he says, “is one in which space takes for us the form of relations among sites.” Michel Foucault, “Texts/Contexts: Of Other Spaces,” in Donald Preziosi and Claire Farago, eds., *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, 371-2.

⁵⁷ V.I. Brovchenkova, “Chapaevskie pamiatnye mesta v SSSR i Muzei V.I. Chapaeva v Cheboksarakh,” in *Legendarnyi geroi grazhdanskoi voyny V.I. Chapaev*, 51.

or fought.”⁵⁸ During World War II, Chapaev’s “warrior tradition” inspired acts of heroism amongst members of the division which bore his name, and, after the war, the monuments dedicated to their exploits further expanded the symbolic space of the Chapaev network. By ending her narrative with the adoption of the 25th Division by the Chuvash Komsomol in 1965, and the construction of the Chapaev Museum in 1974, Brovchenkova closes the symbolic circle: Chapaev’s ‘second life’ now had a physical home.

Home as Process: Site of Development

A home is much more than a place. To some extent, it is the activity that takes place within it that makes a home what it is. Frequently, home is represented as a place where consciousness is formed. This is especially true of the childhood home: the place where an individual became self-aware, cognizant of the wider world around them and their particular place within it.⁵⁹ Home is, in this sense, part of a process of becoming. The theme of personality formation, of coming to consciousness, was an important component of Chapaev’s representation in the city of his birth. Visitors to Cheboksary could tour the house where Chapaev formed his first impressions of the world. Through the museum’s exhibits, they could “trace, on a documentary basis, the formation process of a heroic personality from a simple working boy to a tempered Bolshevik, a distinguished Civil War commander.”⁶⁰ While Furmanov’s novel had depicted Chapaev’s attainment of working-class consciousness after he had already become a Bolshevik commander, later stories directed at children detailed his youthful intolerance of bourgeois oppression and his early realization that, as a worker, he was different than them.

For the Chapaev Museum, this theme was especially important and helped to facilitate the revolutionary pedagogy that all Soviet museums were expected to provide. The role of the Komsomol in obtaining the monument, sponsoring the 25th Division, and providing the incentive

⁵⁸ Brovchenkova, 54.

⁵⁹ According to historian John Randolph, scholars of the home have described it as “the bearer and producer of certain practices and ideals” and a “stage for modern self-creation and performance.” John Randolph, *The House in the Garden: The Bakunin Family and the Romance of Russian Idealism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2007), 5.

⁶⁰ Brovchenkova, 56.

for the construction of the museum is worth noting in this respect. If true, these stories reflect the deep connection between Chapaev and Soviet youth, among whom he was incredibly popular. Yet, even if these stories were exaggerated, this only highlights the importance placed upon associating the image of Chapaev with the youth of Chuvashiia in official representations.

Soviet museums had always seen the education of Soviet youth as an important part of their mission. On September 4, 1931, the Central Committee of the Communist Party declared that regional museums were to act “as fulcrums for schools in the process of polytechnicalization” (*politekh nizatsii*).⁶¹ During the 1930s, museums struggled with the problem of capturing and maintaining the interest of children while simultaneously communicating complex concepts like the historical development of nature and dialectical materialism. Exhibits for children were told to “avoid monotone classifications, and strive to capture the eye with clear, fresh contrasts in material, form, color, scale, construction, etc.”⁶² While tapping the emotions of children was important, this was primarily to prevent them from becoming bored with Marxism-Leninism.

By the end of World War II, museums had begun to shift the emphasis away from using emotion as a way to make theoretical education more palatable for children towards harnessing children’s emotions as a way of establishing a connection between Soviet children and their state. This tendency had, of course, long been present in many spheres of Soviet education, including museums. However, by the beginning of the postwar period, there was a new emphasis in Soviet museum literature on the need for museum exhibits to instill the values of bravery, courage, and love of one’s country, over the teaching of Marxism-Leninism. After repelling the largest military invasion in the history of the world, the Soviet Union was understandably concerned with the need to maintain a strong and committed defensive army. The increasing apathy of the younger generations must have been particularly alarming in this context.

During the 1970s, there was a notable increase in the construction of memorial museums. In the first five years of the decade, almost one-hundred museums were founded in the Russian

⁶¹ E.S. Radchenko, “Muzei i shkola,” in *Sovetskii muzei No. 5 sentiabr’-oktiabr* (Moskva: sektor Narkomprosa, 1932), 3.

⁶² Ia. Meksin, “Iz opyta muzeino-vystavoshnoi raboty s det’mi,” in *Sovetskii muzei No.2 mart-aprel’* (Moskva: sektor Narkomprosa, 1932), 40.

Federation alone, and many of these museums were self-classified as ‘memorial.’ The term became so widespread that one museum official felt compelled to write an article strictly defining the term and providing a list of six degrees of ‘memorial-ness.’⁶³ This phenomenon (which one scholar has dubbed ‘memorial mania’) is often attributed to “anxieties about national unity...unleashed by the rapid advance of modernism, immigration, and mass culture.”⁶⁴ In the Soviet Union during the 1970s, concern about the apathy of the younger generation and their growing preference for western mass culture seems to fit this pattern. Many museum officials expressed the belief that a primary problem facing their institutions was the need to inspire museums dedicated to war and war heroes.⁶⁵

The Chapaev Museum in Cheboksary was well-suited to the task. The museum was opened to the public on May 9, 1974: the twenty-ninth anniversary of the Soviet victory over the Nazis. A newspaper article chronicling the ceremony described the museum as a “memorial complex” dedicated to the “first defenders of Soviet power” and the “glorious warrior tradition of the Soviet Union---a tradition which was developed repeatedly during the years of the Great Patriotic War.”⁶⁶ Illustrating how this warrior tradition linked ‘the first defenders of Soviet power’ to the defenders of Soviet power during World War II was central to the museum’s overall structure. By moving through the space of the museum, young visitors were to internalize this process and, thereby, continue it.

Through the museum’s exhibition of photographs, documents, and personal objects, visitors were to trace the formation of Chapaev’s personality “from a simple working boy to a tempered Bolshevik, a distinguished Civil War commander.”⁶⁷ This process was (and is) represented

⁶³ S. Kasparinskaia, “Sozdanie memorial’nykh muzeev,” in *Muzei i Sovremennost’*, vypusk II (Moskva: ministerstvo kul’tury RSFSR nauchno-issledovatel’skii institut kul’tury, 1976), 85-88.

⁶⁴ Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 27-8. So many statues and memorials were erected in France that 1911, the Paris City Council passed an ordinance banning busts, bas-reliefs and statues from public places for the next ten years.

⁶⁵ S. Kasparinskaia, “Sozdanie memorial’nykh muzeev,” in *Muzei i Sovremennost’*, vypusk II (Moskva: ministerstvo kul’tury RSFSR nauchno-issledovatel’skii institut kul’tury, 1976), 85; F.L. Kurlat, V.G. Lur’e, “Vospitanie molodezhi na revoliutsionnykh boevykh i trudovykh traditsiiakh Sovetskogo naroda,” in *Muzeinoe delo v SSSR* (Moskva: Tsentral’nyi ordena Lenina muzei revoliutsii SSSR—TRUDY, 1971), 93-97.

⁶⁶ “Podvig zhizni narodnogo geroia—V Cheboksarakh otkryt muzei V.I. Chapaeva,” *Unknown article from the collection of the V.I. Chapaev Museum in Cheboksary*.

⁶⁷ V.I. Brovchenkova, “Chapaevskie pamiatnye mesta v SSSR i Muzei V.I. Chapaeva v Cheboksarakh,” in *Legendarnyi geroi grazhdanskoi voyny V.I. Chapaev*, 56.

architecturally in the contrast between the Chapaev's peasant hut and the ultra-modern building of the Chapaev Museum. In Chapaev's childhood home, visitors could marvel at his humble origins while remembering stories they had read about his experiences there. Accounts of Chapaev's youth often described how his poverty influenced the development of his personality. Some even described this process as an awakening of working-class consciousness. In Z. Likhacheva and E. Matveeva's *Detstvo Chapaia*, a tale of Chapaev's childhood set in Budaika, the young Chapaev (here Vasia), tells his grandfather how his classmate Fed'ka Efremov (who figures prominently in the role of the evil kulak child) told him that he had no family name:

"What do you mean no name? —asked Grandpa in astonishment.---Our family name is Chapaev! Vasia blushed: Grandpa, Fed'ka Efremov said that it's not a name at all, only a nickname [klichka]... Chap'-Chap'.
*Fed'ka spoke the truth. It was my nickname...I worked towing lumber down the Volga. We Budaikovites all know that 'chap, chapai' means 'hold on, don't let go!' There is nothing shameful about it; it's a worker's word [trudovoe slovo]. I consider, Vasiatka, having a worker's nickname to be a mark of great honor! It means a man understands what he is."*⁶⁸

The conversation marks a turning point for the young Vasia. He begins to connect his various struggles against Fedka and his father (who repeatedly oppress and humiliate the poor villagers) to the larger patterns of injustice in society (i.e., he attains working-class consciousness).

While this story is obviously fictional, it is quite representative of the popular image of Chapaev's childhood by this time. The portrayal of Chapaev as quasi-working-class is in fact closer to reality than Furmanov's depiction of him as a peasant bumpkin. The history of the 'working' origins of the family name can be traced to an account given by Chapaev's brother.⁶⁹ Chapaev's grandfather, Stepan Gavrilov, actually had worked as a barge hauler on the Volga, and his father, Ivan Stepanovich, was a travelling carpenter who journeyed up and down the Volga looking for work.⁷⁰ Before joining the army, Vasilii Ivanovich worked alongside his father and,

⁶⁸ Z. Likhacheva and E. Matveeva, *Detstvo Chapaia-povest* (Volgograd: Volgogradskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1962), 13.

⁶⁹ A.V. Chapaev, K.V. Chapaeva, Ia. A. Volodikhin, *Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev: Ocherk zhizni, revoliutsionnoi i boevoi deiatel'nosti* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1987), 17.

⁷⁰ The image of the Volga barge-hauler was romanticized by Russian socialists in the 19th century. They were seen as embodying the toughness and fortitude of the Russian spirit. Ilya Repin, who painted the iconic painting of the 'Volga Boatmen' described his first meeting with them in ecstatic terms: "What beautiful, burly people!...Where did they acquire such independent and cheerful speech? And such a full and dignified bearing?" From Ilya Repin, *Burliaki na Volge: vospominaniia* (Moskva: gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo iskusstvo, 1941), 38.

according to various accounts, was a gifted craftsman. This fact no doubt influenced the ultimate decision to reconstruct the house as a pristine example of turn-of-the-century peasant architecture, rather than to return it to the dilapidated, roofless state described by contemporaries. The desire to represent the Chapaevs as workers (clean, industrious, resourceful) ultimately trumped the need for historical accuracy.

As visitors left the house and made their way to the museum standing opposite, the movement between these two spaces represented symbolic movement through time: from backward pre-revolutionary Budaika to modern Soviet Cheboksary. This trip, visitors were to understand, was only possible because of revolutionary heroes like Chapaev. After entering the museum and following the exhibition of Chapaev's development from poor child to glorious hero, visitors then passed into another hall into the exhibition "Chapaev Is with Us." Here they encountered a series of photographs, displaying many of the places (streets, towns, cities, squares, *kolkhozy*) bearing Chapaev's name, followed by various exhibits dedicated to the veterans of World War II (especially those who had fought in the 25th Division or contributed in some way to the founding/maintenance of the museum). It was a place where all Soviet youth, especially "the youth of the city", could learn about the "revolutionary and worker traditions of their fathers and older brothers," especially those who had carried on Chapaev's legacy by fighting to defend the Soviet Union during World War II.⁷¹

Visitors to Chapaev's childhood home could therefore participate in a process of awakening similar to that experienced by Chapaev in *Detstvo Chapaia*. The museum was frequently described in local newspapers as a "warrior school" or a "school of patriotism...for the education of young people," who came to the museum with a desire to "connect with the heroic experiences and times of the Civil War." According to A. Zerniaeva, a museum employee, "every year our museum is named the best school in the city."⁷² The museum frequently organized outreach events for local youth, inviting veterans of the Chapaev Division (from both the Civil War and World War II) to meet with them and inspire them to acts of heroism and patriotism. Chapaev's children frequently

⁷¹ Vladimir Dolgov, "Podviga, muzhestva shkola," *Molodoi kommunist*, 17 iulia 1976.

⁷² "Oveiano slavoi k legendarnomu nachdivu," in *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 9 fevralia 1982.

came to the museum to meet with visitors and tell about their father. Such meetings were described as “lessons in courage.”⁷³

For a graduate education in courage and patriotism, the youth of Chuvashiia could enroll in the region’s other Chapaev school: the 25th Division. During World War II, the division had proved itself worthy of the “Chapaevtsy warrior tradition,” by playing an important role in the early defense of Odessa and Sevastopol, as well as the later liberation of Kharkov and Budapest.⁷⁴ In 1965, the Chuvash Komsomol became the division’s sponsor, and “every year” from this point on, “the best representatives of Chuvashiia were chosen to serve in the division and bring glory to the immortal name of their countryman.”⁷⁵ The 25th Division was described in similar terms as the Chapaev Museum: it was “a school of moral-political training and courage for numerous young people of the Chuvash ASSR.”⁷⁶ The museum and the division worked in tandem: educating and inspiring Soviet youth (particularly those from Chuvashiia) to defend their homeland by carrying on the Chapaev tradition.

This link between home and school was not superficial but was, in fact, an integral part of an emerging discourse about Chapaev and his relationship to Soviet youth. As officials sought to harness his popularity with children in order to address their concerns about the stability of the Soviet family and its ability to transmit the official value system to the next generation, Chapaev’s image became increasingly domestic. Chapaev was now a good father: one who taught his children the value of education and always helped them with their homework. According to his daughter, Klavdiia Vasil’evna, Chapaev was angered by what he perceived as sexual discrimination at their local school. While the boys were encouraged to work hard, “the girls spent more time playing with dolls than studying.” Chapaev examined his daughter, and when he found that she couldn’t even read the letter ‘o’, he decided to pull her out of school and have her educated at home. Her brother Alexander would now be responsible for teaching her the things that he learned at school.⁷⁷

⁷³ “Geroi v iunikh sertsakh,” in *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 28 sentiabria 1976.

⁷⁴ V.I. Brovchenkova, “Chapaevskie pamiatnye mesta v SSSR i Muzei V.I. Chapaeva v Cheboksarakh,” in *Legendarnyi geroi grazhdanskoi voyny V.I. Chapaev*, 53.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “Shkola muzhestva/sluzhat rodine zemliaki,” in *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 8 fevralia 1978.

⁷⁷ “Chapaev i ego deti,” in *Sem’ia i shkola no.2*, 1967.

As an adult, Klavdiia was particularly active in propagating the image of her father as domestic, educated, and interested in education. She traveled to various archives, collecting documents about her father, which she spread in an effort to combat Furmanov's portrayal of him as an irrational peasant partisan.⁷⁸ Even before the museum was founded in Cheboksary, Klavdiia donated to the city copies of over four-hundred documents related to her father. These documents supposedly confirmed that Chapaev was never a partisan leader, but rather an official emissary of the Party with a "great knowledge of the art of war," who always "conducted battle according to a plan."⁷⁹ During her visits to local school children in Cheboksary, she told them that as "young Chapaevtsy" they "should be first not only in their labor, but also in their studies" and that this "would be the best memorial of Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev." Those who would be a part of Chapaev's family, she claimed, had to follow the rules of the house. Children of Chapaev, both actual and spiritual, were to be hard-working, studious, honest, brave and patriotic if they were to make their father proud.⁸⁰

Home as People: the Chapaev Family

As the space where the family lives, home is perhaps the most significant space humans construct. Since the family is the primary unit of society, the home ultimately "organizes not only relations of family, gender, and generation, but also relations of class [and] is the principle product of human endeavor."⁸¹ Beginning in the late 1930s, newspapers began to use Chapaev's children to reinforce the official image of the Soviet family and to connect that image to the state. As the situation in Europe deteriorated, the children began to appear in the role of model Soviet youth in agit-prop pieces aimed at preparing the country for war. Just as Chapaev had come to represent the soul of the Soviet people, his children gradually came to symbolize the people's children

⁷⁸ According to the museum's current director, Valentina Ivanovna Brovchenkova, Klavdiia used to covertly copy restricted documents and sneak them out by hiding them in her clothing.

⁷⁹ "Klavdiia Chapaeva rasskazyvaet ob otse," in *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 15 sentiabria 1957.

⁸⁰ "Vstrechi s iunymi Chapaevtsami," in *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 8 fevralia 1967.

⁸¹ Tim Putnam, "'Postmodern' Home Life," in Irene Cieraad, ed., *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1999), 144. For a fascinating study of the influence of the home upon the creation and propagation of the American middle class, see Mary P. Ryan's *Cradle of the Middle Class: The Family in Oneida County, New York, 1790-1865* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Tamara K. Haveven, "The Home and the Family in Historical Perspective," in Arien Mack, ed., *Home: A Place in the World*.

(this dynamic was reinforced by the strange fact that Chapaev's wife, Pelageia Nikanorovnaia, is virtually absent from these discussions of his family). In 1939, Chapaev's sons Arkadii and Alexander appeared alongside the children of Mikhail Frunze (Chapaev's superior) and several other Civil War heroes in an article entitled "Fathers and Children" (*Otsy i dety*). The primary focus of the article was to demonstrate how the descendants of fallen Soviet heroes continued the work of their fathers by enlisting in the military, serving in the Komsomol, etc. At the time of the article, Arkadii was a senior lieutenant studying at the Zhukhov Combat Flight Academy, and Alexander was studying to be an artillerist. "We, sons of Chapaev," proclaimed Arkadii, "like millions of patriots from the country of socialism, are ready to give the last drop of our blood for the country, for the Party, for Stalin, and for communism!"⁸²

This proved to be a compelling paradigm. In the early days of the Leningrad Blockade, the slogan "We fight magnificently, we slash frightfully (*otchaianno*), we are the grandchildren of Suvorov, the children of Chapaev!" could be seen on posters plastered to the sides of buildings throughout the city.⁸³ The image of Soviet warriors as descendents of historical heroes like Alexander Nevskii, Kutuzov, Suvorov, and Chapaev were prominent in wartime propaganda. This imagery is largely typical of nationalist propaganda, in which the nation (often defined ethnically) assumes the role of 'meta-family.' According to David Brandenberger, it was such wartime propaganda that truly "catalyzed the formation of a sense of Russian national identity on the popular level" for the first time in history.⁸⁴

Yet, Chapaev was different from many of the other popular historical heroes in that he was one of the only ones who had been a Bolshevik. Although his image was often distinctly Russian, this never completely replaced his revolutionary aspect. From the time of his appearance in Furmanov's 1923 novel, Chapaev had been associated with the attainment of revolutionary knowledge. His story was the story of the creation of a new Soviet man: the blending of spontaneity and consciousness. Although he subsequently took on many shades and forms, he never completely

⁸² "Otsy i deti," *Krasnaia armiia*, 22 fevralia 1939.

⁸³ "Vdokhnovlial zashchitnikov Leningrada," in *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 14 ianvaria 1982.

⁸⁴ David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956*, 226.

lost his connection to ideology or became a primarily Russian hero. Rather, he seemed to represent the “new imagined community composed of the ‘soviet people,’” which, although never as powerful as traditional nationalism, was able to offer many in the postwar Soviet Union, “an alternative sense of identity”.⁸⁵

During the postwar years, the image of Chapaev’s children as the people’s children and of Chapaev’s family as the model Soviet family, was reinforced through numerous newspaper articles across the Soviet Union. In these accounts, each child symbolically continued a particular legacy of their father. Several years before the war, Arkadii Chapaev’s airplane went into a tailspin and crashed into a peat marsh, killing him at the age of 25. Shortly thereafter, the town near the crash site erected a memorial obelisk to him.⁸⁶ Through his tragic death, Arkadii had carried on his father’s legacy of self-sacrifice: he was Chapaev the martyr. Alexander Chapaev quickly rose from the rank of captain to general during the early stages of the war, participating in numerous battles “from the walls of Moscow to the shores of the Baltic.”⁸⁷ Three times he was awarded the ‘Red Banner’ (*Krasnaia Znamia*), as well as the orders of Suvorov, Alexander Nevskii, and the Great Patriotic War.⁸⁸ The soldiers in his brigade, eight of whom had served under his father during the Civil War, proudly fought under the slogan “Where Chapaev is, there is victory.” Upon meeting Alexander for the first time, an enthusiastic reporter claimed, “When the door opened and we met with a slender, medium-height, affably smiling man, there was no doubt whatsoever that this was the son of Chapaev, so much did he look like his father.”⁸⁹ His noble figure, clothed in the full regalia of a decorated general, was captured in a life-sized portrait that hung at the entrance of the “*Chapaev s nami*” exhibit in the Chapaev Museum. Alexander had carried on his father’s legacy of martial glory: he was Chapaev the war hero.

The role played by Klavdiia Chapaeva was different. The pre-war *Krasnaia Armiia* article, “*Otsy i deti*,” had included daughters as well as sons. Tatiana Frunze declared that both she and

⁸⁵ Brandenberger, 243.

⁸⁶ “Iz roda Chapaevykh,” in *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 14 april 1982.

⁸⁷ “Chapaev i ego deti,” *Sem’ia i shkola*, no.2-1967.

⁸⁸ “Deti Chapaeva,” *Neva*, no.7 1962.

⁸⁹ “Narodnyj geroi—K 75-letiiu so dnia rozhdeniia V.I. Chapaeva/rasskazyvaet syn legendarnogo komandira,” *Moskovskaia Pravda*, 9 fevralia 1962; “Gde Chapaev-tam pobeda,” *Pionerskaia Pravda*, 8 fevralia 1978.

her brother Timur, both *Komsomoltsy*, were willing to die defending their homeland.⁹⁰ Klavdiia, however, was not a warrior, and she was not included in this article. She cut a much more domestic, more traditionally feminine, figure: by devoting herself to the preservation of her father's memory through collecting and disseminating documents about him, and engaging in educational outreach to Soviet children, she 'kept the home fires burning.' While there is no portrait of Klavdiia hanging in the Chapaev Museum, she, more than either of her siblings, was actively concerned with making a home for their father's memory and perpetuating the Chapaev family.

By the 1960s, the image of Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev promoted by his children was becoming increasingly domestic. Chapaev's role as a good father, who took an active interest in the lives of his children, gradually began to complement his traditional image as a fearless leader. "We children," claimed Klavdiia, "played with our father."⁹¹ She tells how he often came home to visit them on leave, and that, even though he was often completely exhausted, "he never drove his children away from him, but gave them all of his free time."⁹² He was not only interested in his children's education, but from a very early age sought to instill in them a love of work.⁹³ Alexander describes how his father actively encouraged him to be a brave warrior so that he could one day defend his homeland. On one occasion he returned home from the front with an old rifle and, after pinning one of the three crosses of St. George he had earned in World War I on Alexander's chest, gave it to him. It seemed to his son that he was "very satisfied with my warlike appearance."⁹⁴

The roles played by Chapaev's children could be played by any Soviet citizen. The image of Chapaev as a spiritual father for all loyal Soviets, prominent during the war years, was reinforced through subsequent representations that portrayed the 'true' Chapaev family as always having been a relationship based on comradeship and shared values rather than blood. According to numerous accounts, during World War I Chapaev promised a dying comrade that he would look after his orphans. Klavdiia Chapaeva claims that her father loved these two children as if they were his own, and never

⁹⁰ "Otsy i deti," *Krasnaia Armiia*, 22 fevralia 1939.

⁹¹ "V sem'e Vasiliia Ivanovicha Chapaeva," *Semia i shkola*, no.2 1962.

⁹² "Chapaev i ego deti," *Sem'ia i shkola*, no.2 1967; "Deti Chapaeva," *Neva*, no.7 1962.

⁹³ "Deti Chapaeva," *Neva*, no.7 1962.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

treated them any differently from the rest. In another account, she tells how her father chided her and her classmates for cheering at the news that their teacher had fallen ill and class would be cancelled:

“Chapaev stood silently, looking around at everyone, and then asked:

--Raise your hand if you have a holiday in your family when your grandfathers, grandmothers, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, or even acquaintances get sick!

Everyone was silent. Nobody raised their hands. After waiting a few moments, Chapaev continued:

--Does that mean there are no such families? I thought not! Then tell me, from whom did you learn this example? Who taught you to be happy about the unhappiness or misfortune of others? Are you still silent? Maybe you are just afraid of work? For studying is also work---difficult work! Do you all want to be little lords? To run through the streets all day? Happy in your idleness, you celebrate the unhappiness of your teacher—the eldest and dearest person in your family! I say ‘your family’ because all of you sitting here are one family! We, your fathers, grandfathers and older brothers are also one family. We fight together so that you will be able to study and become genuinely good people, literate and knowledgeable.”⁹⁵

Chapaev goes on at length about the new future they were fighting for in which everyone would live as brothers and sisters. He asks them how they think he would feel if he should die the next day, knowing that he had made the sacrifice for a bunch of ungrateful children. “From that day on,” says Klavdiia, “we all found a new, big, wonderful family.”⁹⁶

The most common image of Chapaev’s ‘spiritual’ family was the *Chapaevtsy*. This was a fluid concept that initially referred to those who had fought under Chapaev during the Civil War. Klavdiia and Alexander describe her father’s soldiers as relatives. There were apparently always Red Army men at the home. When Chapaev played with his children, several *Chapaevtsy* would often join in the games.⁹⁷ Alexander remembers that, when their father died, it was the *Chapaevtsy* who looked after them.⁹⁸ And just as the soldiers he commanded now cared for his children, the division Chapaev safeguarded his spirit. Eventually, even those who served in the division long after Chapaev’s death would be known as *Chapaevtsy*: they fought under his name and were responsible for living up to it.

In 1965, the Chuvash Komsomol became the headquarters of the 25th Chapaev Division and, soon after, the monument in Cheboksary became a traditional meeting place for its veterans.

⁹⁵ “V sem’ia Vasiliia Ivanovicha Chapaeva,” *Sem’ia i shkola*, no. 2 1962.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ “Chapaev i ego deti,” *Sem’ia i shkola*, no. 2 1967.

The Chapaev Museum in Cheboksary regularly received visits from *Chapaevtsy*: both those who had served under Vasilii Ivanovich, and those who had fought in his name during the Second World War. They would meet with local children and tell them stories of Chapaev or their experiences in combat.⁹⁹ Yet, as Chuvash children were repeatedly encouraged to be like Chapaev, the precise boundaries of the *Chapaevtsy* became less clear. Children learned that the young Komsomol member Anatoly Merzlov, from the ‘Chapaev *kolkhoz*,’ who died in a farming accident, was “a real *Chapaevets*!”¹⁰⁰ Iakov Alekseevich, a member of the Chapaev Pioneer squad in Cheboksary, exhorted his comrades to “Be real Chapaevtsy” and emulate their “legendary countryman (*zemliak*),” who could “never in any way endure falsehood.”¹⁰¹

Despite the broader non-ethnic emphasis of the Chapaev ‘family,’ those who lived in Chuvashiia, especially Cheboksary, often saw themselves as having a special claim to Chapaev’s family by virtue of their birth. Every year, Chuvashiia’s best and brightest were enlisted into the 25th Division.¹⁰² Those from Chuvashiia and Cheboksary, where there was no shortage of organizations and entities named after their native son, were far more likely than the average Soviet to belong to an organization bearing his name. While tourists from all over the Soviet Union visited the Chapaev Museum, residents from Chuvashiia were far more likely to do so. The children of Cheboksary particularly, for whom the museum frequently organized programs or otherwise made its space available, were encouraged to self-identify with Chapaev’s extended family.

Chapaev could never be made explicitly Chuvash for such an open declaration would quickly have been met with irrefutable evidence to the contrary. Instead, the explicit question of his ethnicity was largely avoided. This ambiguity allowed for a subtle, largely unspoken, understanding of Chapaev’s connection to the Chuvash people. An open letter sent on June 7, 1943, by the people of Chuvashiia to their sons serving at the front, exhorting them to be steadfast and brave in their defense of the Soviet Union, reveals that this tendency was already prevalent long before the construction of the Chapaev Museum. The letter makes explicit reference to the

⁹⁹ “Zdravstvuite, Chapaevtsy!” *Molodoi kommunist*, 26 oktiabria 1967.

¹⁰⁰ “Podviga, muzhestva shkola,” *Molodoi kommunist*, 17 iulia 1976.

¹⁰¹ “Vstrechi s iunymi Chapaevtsami,” *Sovetskaia Chuvashiia*, 8 fevralia 1967.

¹⁰² Brovchenkova, 53

Russian people and the Chuvash people, claiming that these two nations had a long history of fighting side by side. In a paragraph that opens with the sentence “Together with the Russian people (*s russkim narodom*) our people (*nash narod*) joined the battle against the exploitation of man by man in the memorable year of 1917,” the letter goes on to describe how Chapaev was born “on the Chuvash soil” and how “Chuvash warriors” (*boitsy-chuvashi*) now fight the enemy as did their “fearless countryman Chapaev.”¹⁰³ The letter ends with the exhortation “hurry son of the Chuvash people! (*chuvashskii narod*)...In your heart burns the unquenchable courage and valor of our brave countryman Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev.”¹⁰⁴ Chapaev is never explicitly made Chuvash here, but the implied link is quite obvious.

This understanding would be reinforced year after year, through hundreds of newspaper articles in local papers. Every time the mantra of Chapaev as ‘*nash zemliak*’ was repeated, it carried with it a possible ethnic interpretation without overtly describing it. Strangely, even Chapaev’s own children (who actively promoted their father as the leader of a non-ethnic Soviet family based upon shared ideals) participated in this process. In an interview with *Pionerskaia Pravda*, Alexander Chapaev launches into a discussion of Chapaev’s relationship to Chuvashii and the Chuvash people. “My father”, he claims, “was born, and lived for ten years in the Chuvash village (*chuvashskoe село*) of Budaika.” Alexander was well aware of the fact that Budaika had been an exclusively *Russian* village. In a book he later wrote with his sister, he describes how Budaika was one of the many Russian settlements established in Chuvashii by Ivan IV in the sixteenth century as ethnic Russian outposts.¹⁰⁵ While Alexander may be referring to the fact that Budaika was located in Chuvashii, his statement gives the false impression that Chapaev’s neighbors were all Chuvash. Later, he explicitly says that his father “grew up among the Chuvash, was educated with them and spoke their language.”¹⁰⁶ A possible clue to these statements lies in their timing:

¹⁰³ “Pis’mo Chuvashskogo naroda svoim synam-frontovikam s pryzvom muzhestvenno srazhat’sia s fashistskimi zakhvatchikami,” in N.M. Semenov, sostavitel’, *Chuvashskaia ASSR v Period Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voyny* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1975), 434.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 441.

¹⁰⁵ A.V. Chapaev, K.V. Chapaeva, Ia. A. Volodikhin, *Vasilii Ivanovich Chapaev: ocherki zhizni, revoliutsionnoi i boevoi deiatel’nosti* (Cheboksary: Chuvashskoe knizhnoe izdatel’stvo, 1987), 16.

¹⁰⁶ “Gde Chapaev—tam pobeda,” *Pionerskaia pravda*, 8 fevralia 1978.

the interview was conducted in 1978, several years after the opening of the Chapaev Museum. Alexander and Klavdiia were closely involved with the operations of the museum, and may have supported efforts to connect their father to the Chuvash Republic in the popular imagination. By the time their book was published in 1987, this concern may no longer have been necessary.

Many Chuvash clearly internalized the relationship between their people and Chapaev that was implied through such statements. While conducting research for his project about Chapaev, the Chuvash historian Valentin Grigorievich Burnaevskii wrote a series of letters to Klavdiia Chapaeva describing the significance of his project, which was to be the first history of Chapaev in the Chuvash language.¹⁰⁷ In one letter, Burnaevskii ecstatically announces “the goal of [his] life is to say a new word about the legendary hero” and claims that anyone attempting such a project needs a “special upbringing” (*Ia schitaiu, chtoby napisat' kapital'nyi trud o nem—nado spetsial'no rodit'sia*).¹⁰⁸ The word I have translated here as ‘upbringing,’ *rodit'sia*, is more commonly rendered as ‘to be born,’ and contains the root ‘*rod*’ (‘generation, birth, origin, stock, family’) which is also the root of many other words pertaining to the family. Burnaevskii seems to be indicating that, by virtue of his birth in Chuvashiia (or because of his Chuvash ancestry), he was specially equipped to say a ‘new word’ about Chapaev. Who better than family?

Conclusion: the Home Front

Chapaev’s homecoming to Cheboksary changed him. This symbol of forward movement, standing up in the saddle with saber outstretched, had become a symbol of domestic stability sitting at the kitchen table with his daughter helping her to read the letter ‘o’. The fiery, irrational peasant had become a disciplined working-class officer concerned with the state of his children’s education. Furmanov’s unruly partisan leader, who became enraged at any effort to undermine his exclusive authority, now lectured local schoolchildren about the importance of respecting one’s elders and submitting to the rule of the Party in all aspects of life. The rootless warrior, whose many battles had taken him from the Carpathian Mountains in present-day Romania, to the banks

¹⁰⁷ Lichnyi arkhiv Burnaevskogo, Valentina Grigor'ievicha, fond 1817, opis 1, delo 9, Gosudarnyi arkhiv Chuvashskoi Respubliki (GACHR).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

of the Ural River in contemporary Kazakhstan, was now forever rooted in the flourishing little Chuvash capital on the Volga.

Chapaev's homecoming changed Cheboksary as well. This city, whose primary significance had been to the tiny Chuvash nation, was now associated with one of the most recognizable heroic figures in the Soviet Union. He represented them at cultural festivals in Moscow and St. Petersburg, where famous opera stars wearing his trademark moustache, *burka*, and *papakha*, sang arias about machine guns and cavalry charges. He connected his hometown to a network of sites bearing his name, making it the center of a vast imagined Soviet space. Cheboksary had become a tourist destination, attracting many thousands of visitors every year. His attributes had become theirs. If he was brave, they were brave too. If he was talented and cunning, this was no wonder, for he had grown up amongst the Chuvash and could speak their language.

While many of the new elements of Chapaev's image were in fact true (he really did adopt the children of his fallen comrade, and really had been a tradesman who worked mostly in small cities, rather than a peasant farmer who largely spent his days in the fields), it would be naïve to ignore the extent to which this new Chapaev was also shaped by larger concerns. The Chapaev Museum was built during a period characterized by a marked increase in the construction of museums and memorials. As a self-described 'memorial complex,' it was clearly part of this larger pattern. Such fervent memorialization is often typical of societies in flux, or even in crisis. The need to reinforce a common identity with stone and brick often reflects a fundamental uncertainty about what that identity actually is, or what it is becoming. The Chapaev Museum in Cheboksary expressed a desire for the stability of home, but home is not a stable concept, and Chapaev's was no exception.

The attempt to carve out a fixed place for this ubiquitous icon of official Soviet culture made his identity paradoxical. Rooting him in a particular place contradicted his traditional function as an image of dynamism. The most common images of Chapaev show him with saber outstretched at the front of a huge cavalry charge. As such he embodies forward momentum and leads the way to the future. Bringing Chapaev home marked a shift in emphasis from offense to defense. The front

was now home: heroes fought to preserve the status quo, not to build the world of the future. But bringing Chapaev home attached him to a local ethnic identity, which undermined his status as the spirit of the Soviet people (defined multi-ethnically). While many representations of Chapaev's symbolic family depicted it as universal, based on ideas rather than blood, in Cheboksary it was somehow simultaneously represented as exclusively Chuvash. Even more troubling, as the hero settled down into a cozy paradigm of domesticity in Cheboksary – his image sanctified by structures and ceremonies – he was simultaneously becoming a prominent character in the jokes and anecdotes so typical of the ironic desacralization of regime symbols in the last decades of the Soviet Union. The battle for the home front would not be an easy one.

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