

Oleg Pavlov

title

**Tales from the last Days**

Captain of the Steppe – The Matiuschin Case – Requiem for a Soldier  
Trilogy. Moscow 2001. 550 pages

**Sold to:** China, Croatia, France, Hungary, Italy, Macedonia, Netherlands,  
Poland, UK

The settings of the three “Tales from the last Days” are military posts in the Kazakhstan steppe, which Pavlov knows from his own experience. Using the fates and fortunes of his heroes – unimportant and humiliated soldiers – and with great linguistic intensity and an expertly crafted composition, he demonstrates the eternal struggle for physical and mental survival under the hardest of conditions. The view from inside the penal camps has produced many famous books: Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov, Platonov, to name but a few. However, the desolate situation of Russian soldiers in general, especially of the soldiers with simple guard duties, has never before been so grippingly and poignantly expressed. Although Pavlov’s “Tales” are set at the end of the era of the Soviet Union, they do paint a fundamental picture of the situation in the Russian army, a situation that has scarcely improved since the time of the Soviet Union.

Death is ever present, and in the places of death life prevails. Anarchy and chance are the only means by which the individual can survive inside the strictly hierarchical structure. Those caught in this system are all weak and dejected, cruel and immune to suffering. The few moments of human warmth are seen as sheer happiness.

press reviews

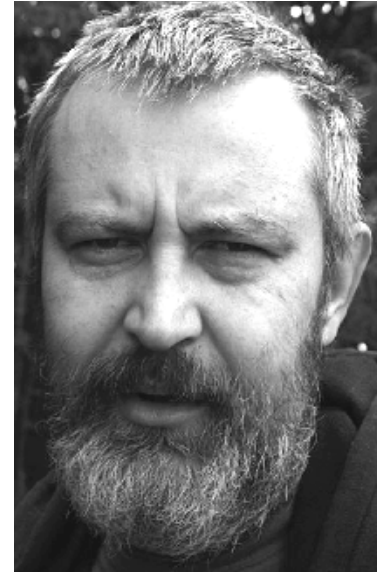
“His tales delve into the world of soldiers sent to the bleakest regions of central Asia, where their hopelessness ends up matching that of their prisoners, whose absurd routine, hunger and boredom they share. This is Berg’s Wozzek set in Buzzati’s Tartar Steppe.” – LA LIBRE

“An extraordinary portraitist, with a nose for trenchant, black humour, Oleg Pavlov delves into the shadowy outer edges of existence.”  
– FRANCE CULTURE

“Poetry, sensuality, humour, metaphoric genius.” – L’EXPRESS CULTURE

biography

Oleg Pavlov was born in Moscow in 1970. He served in Karaganda as a prison guard. After leaving the army at the age of twenty, diagnosed for with ‘mental instability’, he went on to study at the Institute of Literature in Moscow. He published his first novel at the age of twenty-four. Working as a literary critic he continued to publish novels, short stories as well as essays. O. Pavlov lives in Moscow.

**foreign rights in general**

CHINA  
CROATIA  
FRANCE  
HUNGARY  
ITALY  
MACEDONIA  
NETHERLANDS  
POLAND  
UK

**awards**

Solzhenitsyn Prize 2012  
Znamya Award 2009  
Russian Booker Prize 2002

**other works**

Notes of a Hospital Receptionist  
Documentary chronicle  
(French translation available)

# O. Pavlov

**Captain of the Steppe**

Captain Khabarov commands the soldiers who guard a Khazakstan penal camp. The provisioning is abysmal. Despite the resistance of his hungry soldiers he grows some potatoes and guards the plot himself. The day of the harvest is joyful, but after the first potato feast an officer from the special unit turns up and confiscates the harvest saying it is illegally acquired state property. The potatoes are destroyed somewhere in the steppe. Khabarov lodges a complaint and eventually goes on a hunger strike. In the winter the soldiers starve yet again and furthermore do not receive their pay. Khabarov sets off by himself in a snowstorm to get the soldiers pay from the garrison and dies on the way. His body is only found when the thaw begins, he is buried with full military honours. Times change and the regulations too: the garrisons are now ordered to grow their own provisions.

**The Matuschin Case**

Matuschin grows up as the unloved son of a senior officer, who was himself abandoned as new-born baby in a cemetery. Matuschin and his older brother have an unhappy childhood in the care of their mother. His father has only contempt for Matuschin. After his second medical examination and final rejection, Matuschin gets drunk and runs riot in the conscription office and finally manages to get himself enlisted.

The rail journey with the other recruits to an unknown destination takes several days and is one fear-induced drunken orgy. On arriving in Tashkent the recruits are robbed by the older soldiers even before they have been given their uniforms. Wearing only foot-wraps Matuschin's feet are soon chaffed and become so infected that he gets sent to the sickbay. Even in hospital he has to suffer humiliating indignities, which he endures for so long until his life instinct revolts and explodes in a mindless violent rage directed against the cook. Instead of giving him away the drug-addicted cook involves Matuschin in his own shady dealings. Matuschin escapes his clutches when he is sent to join the detachment guarding a penal camp. There he keeps guard in a watch-tower at the foot of which illegally distilled liquor is being traded in secret. One night the drunken prisoners rampage so violently that one of them dies. Stricter controls are implemented and Matuschin is caught out when he leaves his post and as a punishment is ordered to clean the latrines. Back at his post and after four nights without sleep he cracks up and wants to put an end to it all, he gets drunk on the liquor and passes out in the watch-tower. When, before daybreak, a prisoner demands some liquor, Matuschin shoots and kills him. Thanks to a benevolent intercession he is not punished but discharged from the army. The discharge occurs simultaneously with the death of his father. At the cemetery Matuschin realizes that the sole point of his existence is to end up in the family grave.

**Requiem for a Soldier**

Alyosha serves his conscription as a simple soldier at a military training area near Karaganda. As a farewell gift his commander wants to present him with a gift for life: an "eternal" tooth made of stainless steel. The dentist and head of the sickbay pulls one of Alyosha's healthy teeth, but puts off fitting the steel replacement. Although his conscription service is over Alyosha still has to carry out various jobs and comforts himself with the thought of being able to go home soon. But as he finally loses patience, the dentist begs him to do a final job for him – to put on his dress uniform and accompany him to the morgue. A naked body has to be dressed. However, the dead soldier's dress uniform has disappeared and only the singed combat dress can be found. Good-natured as he is Alyosha agrees to "lend" the corpse his own uniform, believing the promises of the head of the sickbay. The father of the deceased insists on inviting everyone to the wake. Disobeying the instructions of the dentist Alyosha follows the father into the night. They lose themselves in the maze of trains shunted on to the sidings and eventually find the "hotel" on rails with a well-laid table and the waiting mourners. The wake in the railway carriage ends tragically. The head of the sickbay together with some militia raid the carriage and, in the resulting brawl, is stabbed to death. Alyosha ends up in prison and is badly abused by the soldiers. Luckily, at the last minute his former commander comes to his aid and has him set free. There are several hours before Alyosha's train departs and he spends them by buying a water melon with his 10 rubles travelling allowance in order to give it to the little beggar-girl who won his simple heart at the wake.

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