

A Companion to  
Andrei Platonov's  
*The Foundation Pit*

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# A Companion to Andrei Platonov's *The Foundation Pit*

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE  
Platonov’s Life . . . . . 1

CHAPTER TWO  
Intellectual Influences on Platonov . . . . . 33

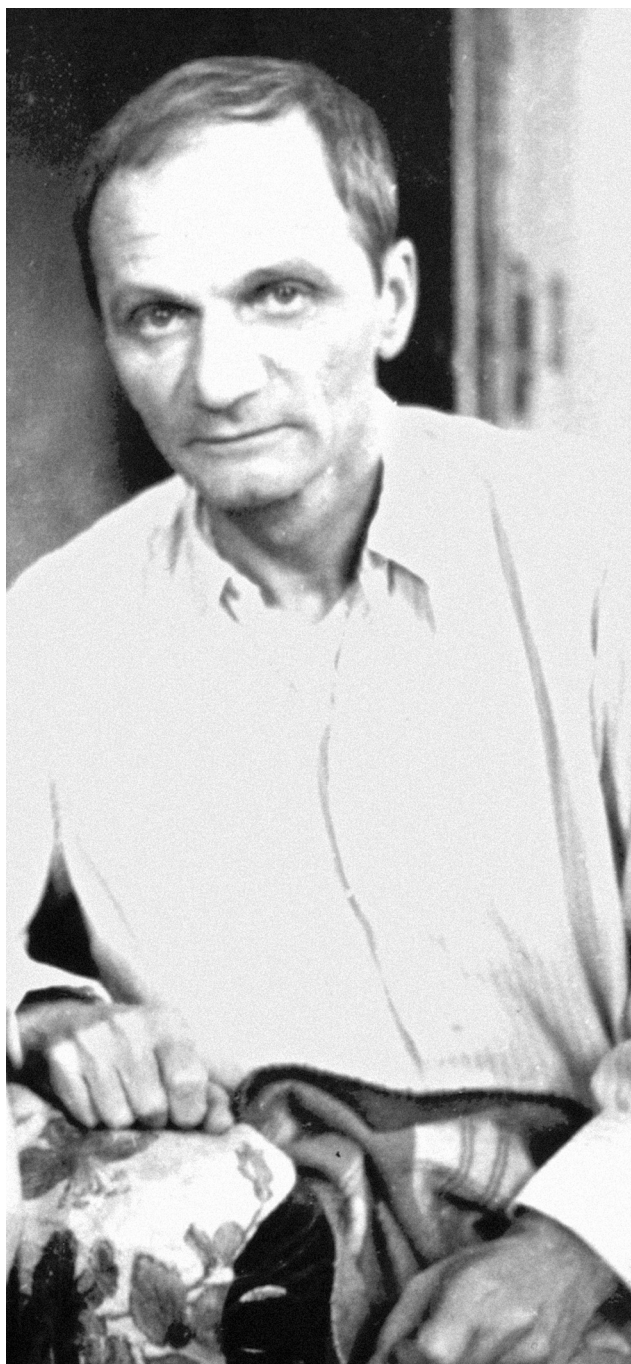
CHAPTER THREE  
The Literary Context of *The Foundation Pit* . . . . . 59

CHAPTER FOUR  
The Political Context of *The Foundation Pit* . . . . . 81

CHAPTER FIVE  
*The Foundation Pit* Itself . . . . . 103  
    The generic context of Platonov’s tale: the production novel . . 105  
    Platonov’s refraction of the production novel in  
        *The Foundation Pit* . . . . . 110  
    Principal characters . . . . . 130  
    Important symbols  
        The proletarian home/tower . . . . . 142  
        Excavation . . . . . 149  
    The language of Platonov’s text . . . . . 154  
    Selected annotations of events and situations in  
        *The Foundation Pit* . . . . . 173

Index . . . . . 187





*Andrei Platonov, 1950*





# Chapter 1 ---

## Platonov's Life



For someone justly considered one of the major figures of twentieth-century literature, Platonov left behind a surprisingly meager collection of written or other materials from which his biography can be reconstructed. The paucity of biographical materials in his case is mostly a legacy of the Stalin period of Soviet history in which he lived most of his life, when private documents could be turned into incriminating evidence in the event of a search by the agents of the NKVD (the Stalinist secret police). But even against this background the material is sparse. Platonov kept a series of notebooks in which he wrote down ideas for literary works and technical inventions, and these have been published in recent years; but they reveal almost nothing of his private life and even relatively little about the composition of his literary works. He is not known to have kept a diary, though many of his contemporaries did, sometimes prolifically (see, for example, those collected in Garros, *et al.*, *Intimacy and Terror. Soviet Diaries of the 1930s* and those discussed in Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind. Writing a Diary under Stalin*). Some letters by and to him have survived and been published, but not very many. Reminiscences by some of his acquaintances have also been published, but few of their authors seems to have known Platonov particularly closely—or, since some of these reminiscences were published in the Soviet era, to have been willing to say much about Platonov's views. At various times from the 1920s–1940s Platonov filled out questionnaires for one or another journal or literary organization, but the information in them is sometimes contradictory and we lack even a full account of his non-literary employment for various land-reclamation agencies in the 1920s and 1930s. In general Platonov seems to have been more

inclined to discard than to preserve things he had written; his wife Mariia Aleksandrovna occasionally even had to rescue his literary manuscripts from the garbage.\* The account of Andrei Platonov's life is thus mostly an account of his literary career, behind which one gains only glimpses of his private self and experiences.

The writer we know as Andrei Platonov was born Andrei Platonovich Klimentov, on 16 August (28 August, new style) 1899 in Iamskaia Sloboda, a suburb of the provincial Russian city of Voronezh (the suburb's name means "coachman's settlement," and would originally have designated an area in which coachmen were allowed to live without paying certain taxes).\*\* On a questionnaire he filled out in the 1920s he once gave his class origin as *meshchanin* (roughly, petit bourgeois). His paternal grandfather was a watchmaker, and in a letter to Platonov's brother written late in his life his father also referred to himself as *meshchanin*; but Platonov's father, Platon Firsovich Klimentov, worked on the railway throughout his adult life, and in his late teens Platonov worked on the railway, too, so that his claim to come from a proletarian background was entirely legitimate (Inozemtseva 98; *Sochineniia* I-2, 351). Indeed, in this sense he was one of the few genuinely proletarian writers to emerge in the years immediately following the October Revolution of 1917, and the press continued to refer to him as a proletarian writer even after critics had attacked him for his "counterrevolutionary" views (Langerak 208).

\* Andrei Platonov, *Zapisnye knizhki. Materialy k biografii*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., foreword N.V. Kornienko (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2006), 13. Hereafter this and other works by Platonov will be referred to by title alone (e.g., *Zapisnye knizhki*, *Sochineniia*, etc.).

\*\* There is some confusion over the exact date of Platonov's birth. Soviet-era sources give it as 20 August (1 September, new style) 1899 (see for example Vasil'ev 4). More recent Russian scholarship, however, pushes the date back by four days to 16/28 August. See, for example, V. P. Zarskaia and N.V. Kornienko, *Andrei Platonov. Zhizn' i tvorchestvo* (Moscow: Pashkov dom, 2001) accessed online at: <http://orel.rsl.ru/nettext/bibliograf/platonov/platonov.htm> on 13 January 2009. I have assumed that the recent scholarship is accurate.

Platonov's father was hardly a simple worker, however. He had several inventions to his credit (a device for attaching bands to the wheels of locomotives, another for rolling pipes) and for one of them, a device which simplified the mounting of drive cylinders on locomotives, he received a patent (Inozemtseva 103, n.16; *Sochineniia* I-2, 351). Although images of suffering mothers arguably play a more important role in Platonov's works than do those of fathers, Platon Klimentov's influence on his son is explicit. Platonov's decision sometime in 1920 to adopt "Platonov" rather than Klimentov as his surname, was almost certainly meant to honor his father, perhaps under the influence of the Russian philosopher Nikolai Fedorov, whose vision of a utopian resurrection of ancestors emphasized the importance of paternal filiation in particular (another, albeit less likely, possibility is that he wanted to suggest an affinity for the Greek philosopher Plato, whose name in Russian is "Platon"; in any event, Platonov left no explanation for his change of surname). Platonov's attempts when still a teen-ager to construct a *perpetuum mobile* were likely influenced by his inventor-father (see M.Iu., Preface to *Golubaia glubina*, ix), as was his own invention later in life of an electrical scale (a report filed by the OGPU agent assigned to him stated that he was able to live off the award he received for it; Shentalinskii 19). In 1920 in the *Voronezhskaia kommuna* newspaper Platonov published an homage to his father and two other Voronezh workers that was clearly meant to serve as a nomination for the recently instituted "Hero of Labor" award ("Geroi truda. Kuznets, slesar' i liteishchik," in *Sochineniia* I-2, 101-5). Alexander Maltsev, the protagonist of the story "In the Fierce and Beautiful World" ("V prekrasnom i iarostnom mire," 1941) who is tragically blinded by lightning yet continues to drive his locomotive, is also partly modelled on Platonov's father.

Platonov attended parochial school until he was thirteen, then completed four years of public school. In October 1918 he enrolled at Voronezh University with the intention of studying physics and mathematics, but soon switched to the department of history, where he studied until the following May. He soon transferred from

there as well, however, to the electrotechnical department of the Voronezh Railway's polytechnical institute, from which he graduated in 1921.\* The vacillation between technologically-oriented science and the empathetic interpretation of human life (through history, for example) was to characterize virtually the whole of Platonov's career, and seems to represent some fundamental divide in his intellectual temperament. Because his father could not support a family of eleven children on his own, Platonov, the oldest child, had to begin working when he was only fourteen (*Tvorchestvo Andreia Platonova* 229). His first job was as an errand-boy in the offices of the "Rossiia" insurance company, then he worked as an engineer's assistant for the South-Eastern railway. He also he worked in a foundry, then again, in 1917–1918 (i.e., during the Revolution) in the repair facility of the Voronezh railway (Inozemtseva 99; *Kommentarii* 449). His work on the railway—in that era a symbol of industrial modernity—made an especially strong impression on him, and scenes involving trains and train wrecks appear in some of his most significant literary works. "Without having finished technical school," Platonov wrote to his wife in 1922, "I was hurriedly assigned to a locomotive as an engineer's assistant. The phrase about the revolution being the locomotive of history for me turned into a strange and pleasant feeling: recalling it I worked especially hard on the locomotive" (Platonova 161).

It was common in Soviet culture from the 1930s onward to claim early allegiance to the Bolshevik cause where none had in fact existed, but Platonov seems to have welcomed the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 with genuine enthusiasm—perhaps, as his later articles suggest, in the utopian hope that it would remake not just social but physical existence as well. The front line of the civil war which followed the Revolution passed directly through Voronezh: the forces of the White general Denikin briefly occupied the city in the fall of 1919 until it was retaken by the Red Army on October 24. In later years Platonov gave conflicting information about his involvement

\* I. Iu. Aleinikova, *et al.*, commentary to Andrei Platonov, *Sochineniia* (Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2004), I–1: 449–50. Hereafter referred to as "*Kommentarii*."

in military affairs in this period, stating on a questionnaire he filled out in 1923 that he did not serve in the Red Army, but claiming in an autobiographical sketch he wrote in 1942 (during another war) that he had been mobilized in 1919. Most likely as an employee of the railroad he was automatically absorbed within the war effort. In the 1942 autobiography he indicates that he volunteered as an infantryman for a "special division" (*chast' osobogo naznacheniiia*; Inozemtseva 97), a fact which, if true, may have meant that he had some experience of requisitioning grain from peasants, a common assignment for such units; but the length and nature of this service remain unverified (Kommentarii 450–1; Shubina 141).

Somewhere around the age of twelve or thirteen, even earlier than he began working, Platonov began writing poetry. Although he is now known as one of the most significant Russian prose writers of the twentieth century, his first serious literary publication was a collection of poems called *The Blue Depth. A Book of Verse (Golubaia glubina. Kniga stikhov)*, which was brought out in Krasnodar in 1922 by the Burevestnik publishing house (the name means "Stormy Petrel," and was taken from a 1901 poem by Maxim Gorky). *Golubaia glubina* had little impact on the development of post-revolutionary Russian poetry (though it did attract a brief review by the Symbolist poet Valery Briusov, who praised Platonov's peculiar talent while noting the derivative and awkward manner of many of the poems) but it already exhibits what were to become key traits of Platonov as a writer. The most striking feature of the collection as a whole is its dualism, the way its poems sort themselves out into two groups of distinctly different tone and subject matter. To one belong poems which develop rural or folk-oriented motifs in a lugubrious mood reminiscent of such "peasant" poets in the Russian tradition as Alexei Kol'tsov and Nikolai Nekrasov, together with poems expressing vaguely Symbolist "longings" for an unattainable otherworld or sentimental empathy for nature (in the preface to the volume Platonov thanks his schoolteacher Appolinaria Nikolaevna, who taught him "that there is a fairy-tale sung by the heart about Mankind, whose native ties are with 'all that breathes,' with the



grass and the beasts, and not about some all-powerful God who is alien to the tempestuous green earth and separated from the sky by infinity"; *Golubaia glubina* vi; also Kommentarii 467). The poem "The Wanderer" ("Strannik")—a recurring figure in many of Platonov's works—for example, imagines the poet opening the door late at night to a wanderer, then leaving together "with the last star/to search for our grandfather's truth" even though "we can't even understand the grass" (*Sochineniia* I-1, 288). In a review of Platonov's 1930 collection of stories *Proiskhozhdenie mastera* published in the Leningrad journal *Zvezda* the critic M. Maizel' was later to note, sardonically, how attracted Platonov seemed to be to "humble peasant pilgrims (*podvizhniki*) lit by the halo of christian humility" (195). The poems in this group were almost certainly written when Platonov was in his teens.

The other group of poems in *Golubaia glubina* express a discordantly different militant enthusiasm for the October Revolution, which clearly provided significant stimulus for Platonov's development as a writer. Indeed, with the exception of the early poems and a few early, autobiographically-oriented stories his entire *oeuvre* can be viewed as a complex *response* to the Revolution, and it is in this sense that he is a profoundly Soviet writer. His works, including *The Foundation Pit*, are simply unthinkable apart from the Bolshevik Revolution and the political and social changes to which it led. The poems in this second group are dominated by industrial motifs which betray the influence of the so-called Proletarian Culture movement (in its Russian abbreviation, "Proletkul't") and the kind of impassioned odes on factory themes cultivated by such worker-poets as Alexei Gastev, Mikhail Gerasimov, Vladimir Kirillov, and Nikolai Liashko. Gerasimov's "Song About Iron" ("Pesn' o zheleze," 1917), for example, enthuses that "In iron there is strength/It has raised up giants/On the rusty juice of its ore;/Forward we march, my brothers/ In an iron platoon/Under the flaming banner of labor!" Kirillov's "Iron Messiah" ("Zheleznaia messiia," 1918) depicts a mighty proletarian who is "the savior and ruler of the world" and who "strides across the deeps of the seas" in order to "bring it a new sun, destroying

thrones and prisons, erasing boundaries and borders." In similar spirit Platonov's "To the Universe" ("Vselennoi") vows that "We will extinguish the tired sun/And ignite a different light in the universe/We will give people iron souls/and sweep the planets from their paths with fire" (*Golubaia glubina* 6). "The Dynamo-Machine" ("Dinamo-mashina") similarly insists that "Until night, until death we are at the machine, and with it alone/We do not pray, we do not love, we will die as we were born: at this iron face/Our hands are regulators of electric current...An electric flame has poured a different life into us" (*Golubaia glubina* 28).

The contrast between these poems with their stentoracious proclamation of the new world of factories, collective labor, and machines—which are placed first in the volume—and the sentimental, meditative intonations of the other poems in the collection was not lost on the audience at Voronezh's "Iron Pen" café where Platonov gave readings in the months after the Revolution, and in the preface to *Golubaia glubina* the editor and publisher G.Z. Litvin-Molotov, Platonov's sponsor in those years, even felt compelled to offer a sociological explanation of his protégé's duality as a reflection of the Russian proletariat's relatively recent emergence from the peasant class (Kommentarii 476–8). For his part, however, Platonov seems to have been concerned not with the opposition but with finding some kind of link, some "native bond between weeds, the beggar woman, the field song and electricity, locomotives, and the whistle which shakes the earth" (*Golubaia glubina* vi). In a sense the two scenic parts of *The Foundation Pit*, the digging of the pit in order to erect the Proletarian Home and the collectivization of agriculture in a nearby village, preserve both this duality and the attempt to find unifying themes within it.

With Litvin-Molotov's sponsorship Platonov quickly gained notice on the Voronezh literary scene (Litvin-Molotov was to play an important role a few years later when, as the director of the publishing house *Molodaia gvardiia*, he helped Platonov find entry to the Moscow literary world). Platonov registered as a journalist for the local press in 1920, and several "literary evenings" were organized

to discuss his works—especially, at this stage, the “poetry of the worker Platonov,” who, his listeners agreed, was a “rare self-taught writer of considerable promise” (Inozemtseva 92). He also began publishing newspaper articles and delivering intellectually ambitious talks on a wide range of philosophical, literary, and political topics, from reports on the effects of the drought in the Volga region and earnestly intended proposals for inventions (such as a system which would allow planes to fly along telegraph lines like inverted trolleybuses) to bold pronouncements on the future organization of human labor, the nature of consciousness, sex, and the death of God. Fueled by a young man’s utopian response to the Revolution, these outpourings were typically written in haste and rather than forming a coherent system present us, as the editors of his collected works put it, with “a bundle, a clump (*klubok, sgustok*) filled with all the contradictions of his intellectual searching” (Kommentarii 490). They nonetheless provide a catalog of early influences on Platonov, and for all their inconsistencies the articles are united by Platonov’s fervent hope in those years that the Bolshevik Revolution would transform not just Russian society but human physical existence in general. As Platonov wrote to his wife in 1922, in essence imposing a cosmic dimension on Marx’s famous dictum that philosophy should not just analyze the world but change it, “We should love the universe that could be, not the one that is” (Platonova 162).

In the years immediately following the Revolution, however, writing was not Platonov’s only profession, and not even his principal one. After graduating from the Voronezh Polytechnical Institute in 1924 he began work as a land reclamation engineer for the Voronezh region, with additional responsibilities for introducing electricity into local agriculture and planning a hydroelectric installation on the Don River (“...Ia derzhalsia i rabotal’,” 115, n.7). This “second” career was far more important to his sense of himself as a writer than even, say, Chekhov’s training as a physician was to his, or Nabokov’s entomological pursuits were to his (Kornienko even suggests that Platonov’s various early writings are realized in different “languages,” 15). As late as 1931, in a questionnaire

he filled out for the journal *Na literaturnom postu*, Platonov stated that he considered "electrotechnology" to be his main profession ("...Ia derzhalsia i rabotal'," 117). A particularly important stimulus for his work in land reclamation and electrification was the severe drought which struck the Volga region in 1921. As Platonov explained in a 1924 autobiographical statement, having seen the effects of the resulting famine he felt could no longer occupy himself "with a contemplative activity, literature" (Kommentarii 466; though several of his stories of the 1920s feature desperately starving peasant characters). In the early 1920s Platonov left journalism altogether in order to devote himself to his work as an engineer, a decision possibly influenced by such theoreticians associated with the avant-garde journal *LEF* as Nikolai Chuzhak and Boris Arvatov, who believed that labor represented a more authentic form of human creativity which would eventually replace art (Langerak 40). In his Voronezh journalism Platonov himself often expressed the belief that the real "construction" of socialism must take place within the physical, not the cultural, realm. "In the era of socialist construction it is impossible to be a 'pure' writer" ("Otvét na anketu 'Kakoi nam nuzhen pistatel'," 287).

Unlike the majority of Soviet writers in the 1920s and 1930s, who traveled in "brigades" to observe such labor projects as the digging of the White Sea canal or the construction of the industrial city of Magnitogorsk so that their descriptions would inspire other Soviet laborers, Platonov thus had direct, physical experience of the construction of socialism in the Russian countryside. From May 1923 to May 1926 he worked for the Voronezh branch of *Gubzemupravlenie* (the Russian acronym for Regional Agency for Land Management, most often shortened to *Gubzemuprav*), overseeing the agency's efforts to prevent future droughts. As the certificate issued to him when he left Voronezh indicates, during his work in the region he excavated 763 ponds, dug 331 wells, drained 7600 *desiatins* of land and irrigated 30, built bridges and dams and installed three electrical stations (Kommentarii 456–7; Platonova 163). At one point he was even paid a visit by the Formalist literary theoretician Viktor

Shklovsky, who descended by plane to one of Platonov's work sites. "Comrade Platonov is a land reclamation engineer," Shklovsky wrote in *The Third Factory* (*Tret'ia fabrika*). "He's a worker, about twenty-six years old... Platonov is very busy... The desert is encroaching. Water seeps away beneath the earth and flows there in huge subterranean rivers... Platonov spoke also about literature, about Rozanov, and about the fact that it's impossible to describe sunsets and how one ought not to write stories" (Shklovskii 126, 129).

Platonov did write at least one "technological" work in this period, the popularizing brochure *Electrification* (*Elektrifikatsiia*) which was published in Voronezh by the state publisher Gosizdat in 1921—but, his words to Shklovsky notwithstanding, he also began to write stories, many of which directly reflect his experiences as a land reclamation engineer. "Il'ich's Extinguished Lamp" ("O potukhshei lampe Il'icha," 1926), for example, recounts the efforts of a young man who has taken a course on electrical technology while in the Red Army to build an electrical generator and a mill in his native village of Rogachevka. After considerable effort, with only meager resources at his disposal, he manages to install both and plans to start them up ceremoniously on the anniversary of the Revolution. The owners of the local windmill, however, sabotage his efforts. The tale was closely based on Platonov's own experiences—even down to the name of the village—but the editor of the journal in which it first appeared changed the title to the more optimistic "How Il'ich's Lamp Was Lit" ("Kak zazhglas' lampa Il'icha") and omitted the ending in which the generator is wrecked (Langerak 99, 225, n.154; "Il'ich" was Lenin's patronym, and the lamp is his because of the campaign he led to extend electricity to the Russian countryside). A closely related story is "Electricity's Native Land" ("Rodina elektrichestva"), in which an engineer is sent at the height of the 1921 drought to install an electrical generator in a remote village.\* Once there the

\* In the two-volume collection of Platonov's works published by Khudozhestvennaia literatura in 1978 the date for this story is given as 1926. Kornienko, however, suggests that it may have been written in the late 1930s ("Ot 'Rodiny elektrichestva' k 'Tekhnicheskomu romanu', i obratno" 1). In