

Breaking Stalin's Nose Study Guide

Breaking Stalin's Nose by Eugene Velchin

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Plot Summary

"Breaking Stalin's Nose" by Eugene Velchin is the story of Sasha Zaichik, a ten-year-old Russian boy who lives in a commune with his father and forty other Russian citizens. Sasha is enthralled with Communism and he idolizes Comrade Stalin who is the Leader and Teacher. He loves and admires his father who is a hero and works for State Security which is also known as the Secret Police. Sasha writes to Stalin to tell him how much he appreciates his leadership and how grateful he is to live in a Communist society.

One night, his father is very late in coming home. A neighbor gives him a carrot to eat. He is sure that the kids who live in capitalistic societies are not as fortunate as the children in the USSR are. They do not have fine carrots to eat like he does and there is no chance for them to fulfill their dreams like the children in the Soviet Union have. They are also blessed to live in communes in Russia because it reminds them of the "we" in communism as opposed to the "I" in capitalism.

Sasha thinks some people seem afraid of his father but he is certain that they really respect him for being a state hero. His father warns him not to talk to a particular neighbor named Stukachov. He also tells Sasha that if something should ever happen to him he should go to his Aunt Larisa. Sasha is initially confused about his father's warnings. However, his father is arrested in the middle of the night and it is apparent that Stukachov turned him in on some false charge. Stukachov is all too happy to move his family into the larger apartment that Sasha and his father shared. Sasha goes to his Aunt Larisa's apartment just as his father told him to do. However, she has a husband and young baby. She is afraid that taking him in will put her family at risk. Sasha has nowhere to go and is homeless.

Sasha sleeps in the basement of his aunt's apartment building that night and takes a streetcar to school the next day. His classmate Borka is the only Jewish student. His parents had been arrested some time before and he lives with other relatives. Another peer, Vovka, is a formerly good student who has become a bad boy who is always in trouble. Sasha is anxious to join the Young Soviet Pioneers which is the Communist youth group and he is to become a member that day. His father was supposed to participate in the ceremony but Sasha is not certain about his status. Although he was arrested Sasha is certain that it was a mistake and as soon as Stalin finds out about the mistake he is sure he'll be released.

But life in the USSR is harsh. When reality sets in, Sasha begins to see that Communism is not all that it was purported to be. He learns that Borka's parents were executed and that Vovka's anger stemmed from his own father's arrest and execution. Sasha knows deep down that his father may be facing the same fate. Although he doesn't believe it, people tell Sasha that his father was responsible for the death of his mother. When Sasha accidentally knocks the nose off of Stalin's plaster statue that is kept in the school's main hall, he is at risk of being arrested and perhaps even executed.



Sasha realizes that he doesn't want to become a Young Pioneer and thereby rejects Communism. He runs away from school to Lubyanka where his father is imprisoned. Waiting in the long visitor line at the prison, Sasha meets a woman who offers him a place to stay. She is a kind woman who has hope for a brighter future, which is exactly what Sasha needs in his young tragic life.



Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

In Chapter 1, Sasha wants to be like his father who is a hero and a Communist. He admires Comrade Stalin but could never aspire to be like him - he's the Leader and Teacher. He writes a letter to Comrade Stalin thanking him for a happy childhood and bright future. He pities children in capitalist societies who will never live to see their dreams come true. Sasha plans to join the Soviet youth group known as the Young Soviet Pioneers the very next day at school. He swears in his letter to be ever vigilant and strong for the Communist cause.

In Chapter 2, Sasha and his father live in a commune with forty other Russian citizens. They all know each others habits and there are no secrets. Stalin has taught the people that living together stresses the "We" in Communism instead of the "I" in capitalism.

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

In Chapter 1, Sasha has been taught to be loyal to Communism. He feels that Stalin is a great leader and teacher and looks out for the people. He has been taught to pity children in capitalist societies. Obviously, he and the other school children are being lied to. He will probably discover the lies as the story unfolds.

In Chapter 2, Sasha and his father live in a crowded commune. They are convinced that it is a good thing to live in crowded conditions and without privacy. The children are duped into thinking that this arrangement is noble but the question of whether the adults really believe it still remains.



Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

In Chapter 3, Sasha's father works for the State Security or Secret Police. Their job is to uncover enemies infiltrating across the borders. Sasha's father is one of the top officers. He was awarded the Red Banner by Stalin for "purging the vermin from our midst." (10) A neighbor, Marfa Ivanovna, gives Sasha a carrot to eat because his father doesn't come home all evening. He tries to make the carrot last. He figures that kids in capitalist societies aren't fortunate enough to have good food like carrots to eat.

In Chapter 4, everyone at the commune seems to be afraid of Sasha's father but they are just respectful. One neighbor, Stukachov, asks him how many spies he caught that day. But he can't say because it's a state secret. But Sasha's father catches enemies every day.

Sasha's father tells him to follow anyone who looks suspicious. There are spies and enemies everywhere. Sasha and his father share a large room - larger than many of the other people have. Stukachov has a cramped room that he must share with his wife, three children and his mother. Sasha feels fortunate. His father warns him not to talk to Stukachov. He might use what he says against them.

His father hands him a package from his school principal. It is a red scarf - the scarf of a Young Pioneer. Sasha is thrilled. The three corners of the scarf folded into a triangle symbolize three generations: mature Communists, the Communist Youth and the Young Pioneers. The color red represents the blood spilled in the cause of Communism. His father ties the scarf on him. Sasha says he is ready to fight for the cause. His mother would be proud of him, his father tells him. His father was asked by the school principal to participate in the ceremony in which Sasha will become an official member of the Young Soviets. His father whispers in his ear that if anything ever happens to him that he should go to his Aunt Larisa who will take care of him.

Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

In Chapter 3, Sasha feels lucky to have a carrot to eat. He has been led to believe that children in capitalistic societies don't eat as well as children in the USSR. How surprised he would be if he saw how well American kids eat compared to children in the USSR.

In Chapter 4, Sasha doesn't want the other people in the commune to be afraid of his father. He wants them to like and respect him. But the reality is that they are afraid of the Secret Police and with good reason. They abuse people and arrest them in the middle of the night. Sasha doesn't want to think of his own father like that. When his father warns him not to talk to Stukachov, it is an indication that his father doesn't trust him. Sasha is frightened when his father tells him to go to his Aunt Larisa if something

happens to him. Sasha's father obviously knows something very bad might be on the horizon and is concerned about his son being left alone.



Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

In Chapter 5, Sasha wakes up during the night wondering why his father told him to go to his aunt in case something happens to him. He tells himself there is nothing to worry about. Nothing will happen to his father because Stalin needs him. He looks out the window at the huge statue of Stalin which is made from the steel of fighter planes and is taller than the buildings.

Sasha's father caught a gang of wreckers - people who want to destroy the Soviet Union. The wreckers were planning on blowing up Stalin's statue. Sasha feels that the statue of Stalin watches over and protects all the people. His father has a state issued black car that has bulletproof glass. Sometimes in the middle of the night members of the Secret Police ring the door bell at the commune. The number of times the bell is rung indicates which family is to answer the door. One night, the bell rings five times which indicates the police want them. His father tells Sasha to stay in bed. He will see what they want.

Three police officers follow his father into their apartment. They strike his father in the head and dump out all the drawers of their chest. They throw their possessions all around. They cut up his father's mattress. As the police officers pull his father up and push out of the room, Stukachov is standing in the hall, bragging about turning his father in. They prepare to take Sasha's father away. They tell Stukachov that the state will raise the boy. They will pick him up in the morning. Stukachov wants to move into their room. Sasha calls after his father as he is taken away. He tries to follow but can't open the front door. From a window, he watches the guards shove him in a car and drive him away.

In Chapter 6, Stukachov and his wife, Vasya, are cleaning up Sasha's room when he returns. Soon they begin moving their furniture in. At first, Sasha thinks he is sharing the room with them. But Stukachov tells him that his father has been arrested and that he'll be going to an orphanage.

Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

In Chapter 5, even though his father is arrested, Sasha holds on to the belief that it was a mistake. His plans to talk directly to Stalin indicates how immature and innocent he is. Sadly, he will probably never see his father again. As a member of the Secret Police, if his father is suspected of being a spy or enemy, he will probably be executed. Will his aunt be afraid to take him in because she and her family could be at risk? The community exists within an environment of fear and mistrust which impacts every member of the citizenry. Sasha's instincts about Stukachov were right. He turned Sasha's father into the police for an unknown, at least at this point, crime. But



Stukachov had his own agenda - he wanted the larger room that Sasha shared with his father.

In Chapter 6, even though Stukachov tells Sasha rather bluntly that he's an orphan, Sasha is in denial and is holding onto the belief that his father will return.



Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

In Chapter 7, Sasha is afraid to go outside. It's dark and cold. He thinks about sleeping on the kitchen floor. There is a stove there to make the room warm. After his mother died, they got a small stove for their room. Sasha decides to stay in the kitchen until his father returns. He is sure that Stalin will be upset and that his father was arrested by mistake. Sasha worries that it could be days before Stalin finds out. He decides he must tell Stalin himself.

In Chapter 8, while it's still dark, Sasha walks through the snow across Red Square toward the Kremlin. He imagines his meeting with Stalin. As soon as he hears that his father was arrested, Stalin will pick up the phone and order his release. But the guards spot Sasha and chase him away.

Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

In Chapters 7 and 8, Sasha decides to talk directly to Stalin about his father's arrest. He has bought into the lie that Stalin is a benevolent leader and that Communism makes for a happy and successful life. It is so ingrained in him that even though his personal circumstances have changed tragically and forever, he is not facing the reality of what Communism really is.



Chapters 9 and 10

Chapters 9 and 10 Summary

In Chapter 9, Sasha runs to his Aunt Larisa's apartment. He doesn't want to alarm her in the middle of the night so he decides to sit outside her door until morning. But Aunt Larisa and her husband find him on the stairs. The husband scolds him. He could get them in trouble. Larisa is upset guessing that Sasha's father had been arrested. Sasha asks to stay just the night. He plans to speak to Stalin the next day. His uncle scoffs at the idea. His uncle tells Sasha to get lost. Larisa runs after him. She tells him that he can't stay there because they'd be arrested. They just had a baby and have to protect him. She pushes some money into his hand.

In Chapter 10, Sasha takes the stairs down to the basement of Aunt Larisa's apartment building. He finds a stack of old newspapers and makes a bed from them. The last time that he saw his aunt was when his father dropped him off when he had to take his mother who was very ill to the hospital. His father returned two days later and told him that his mother had died in the hospital. Aunt Larisa embraced him when he began to cry. She angrily told his father that he looked guilty but not sad. He had wondered at the time why he wasn't allowed to attend her funeral. In the morning, Stalin would end up releasing his father.

Chapters 9 and 10 Analysis

In Chapter 9, sadly, Sasha is rejected by his aunt. They live in fear of being arrested just as everyone else does. He holds onto the hope that this misguided arrest will be personally rectified by Stalin himself. His aunt shows that she cares for him by giving him some money.

In Chapter 10, when thinking of his mother's death, Sasha recalls that his aunt had accused his father of looking guilty but not sad. Aunt Larisa may have suspected that his father either caused her death or failed to prevent it. In either case, she seemed to hold him responsible for it.



Chapters 11 and 12

Chapters 11 and 12 Summary

In Chapter 11, Sasha wakes up to the sound of someone scraping ice outside. He's late for school! He runs outside and manages to jump on the streetcar. The bumpy, rollicking ride makes Sasha laugh.

In Chapter 12, when Sasha gets to school, the kids are having a snowball fight in the schoolyard. Everyone wants Sasha on their team because he's a great marksman. Vovka Sobakin throws a snowball at Sasha and calls him "Amerikanetz" because of his mother. The kids all attack "Four Eyes," who is Borka Finkelstein. He wears glasses and reads a lot. He is the only Jewish kid in class. His parents were arrested and he lives with other relatives. Sasha refuses to throw snowballs at Borka. Vovka calls him a traitor and enemy of the people because he refuses to join in.

Borka picks up a snowball and hurls it. He wasn't aiming at Sasha but it grazes him on the ear. Sasha takes a snowball from Borka and throws it at Borka. It hits him in his face. His glasses break and fall to the ground. A shard of glass cuts Borka's cheek.

Chapters 11 and 12 Analysis

Chapter 11 shows that Sasha is still a child - laughing as he has a bumpy ride in a streetcar on the way to school. It serves to distract him for a short time from his huge adult-sized problems.

In Chapter 12, Sasha feels sorry for Borka but overreacts when he is hit by a snowball thrown by Borka. It is understandable that Sasha is dealing with some burgeoning anger. Sasha is ridiculed for having a mother who was American. Sasha knows deep down that it was wrong to bully Borka but he caved in to peer pressure when he joined the other kids in their assault on him.



Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

In Chapter 13, in class, Sasha's desk is near the front where the teacher, Nina Petrovna, sits. The good students are seated in the front. Vovka is in the back in what the kids call Kolyma - named after a region in the country where people are sent for punishment. Vovka used to be an A student but began fall behind and behaving badly. No one knew why. Miss Petrovna announces that Sasha's father will attend the Young Pioneers ceremony and tie the red scarves on everyone. Sasha figures that someone must have told Stalin and that his father had been released.

Miss Petrovna asks Sasha to stand and recite the Laws of the Young Soviet Pioneers. Sasha says, "A young Pioneer is a reliable comrade and always acts according to his conscious." (page 56) The teacher punishes Vovka for mocking Sasha as he recites the laws. She makes him stand in the corner and face the wall. Sasha feels bad when Borka comes in with his broken glasses and bloody face. The kids all laugh and Miss Petrovna chides him for being late.

Miss Petrovna accuses Vovka of breaking Borka's glasses. She asks Borka to confirm her suspicion but he refuses. Vovka, from his corner, says that Sasha was the assailant. But Miss Petrovna tells him to be silent. Sasha can't be guilty. His father is a hero. The kids all raise their hand and vote to send Borka to the principal's office. But Sasha doesn't raise his hand. She tells Sasha that she has chosen him to carry the red banner during the ceremony. However, if he doesn't take part in the voting, he will not be able to carry the banner. Sasha raises his hand.

In Chapter 14, Miss Petrovna sends Sasha to the basement to get the banner. He knocks on the door but the janitor, Matveich, is half deaf and doesn't hear him at first. Matveich finally answers the door but refuses to give Sasha the banner until he has Miss Petrovna's note stamped by the chief. He runs back upstairs with the note. He passes by Borka who is sitting outside the principal's office. Sasha apologizes for breaking his glasses. He asks Sasha why they call him Amerikanetz. His mother was an American, he tells Borka. But she was a good Communist. His parents are, too, but they are in prison in Lubyanka. Borka tried to visit his parents but was told they couldn't have visitors. His aunt told him that they tell people that when the prisoners have already been shot and killed. But Borka doesn't believe it. He asks Sasha to help him get inside the prison. His father has a lot of influence. Sasha pushes him away, refusing to help him.

Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

In Chapter 13, it is obvious that the teacher has not been notified that Sasha's father was arrested. Her announcement that his father will be at the Red Scarf ceremony that

day gives Sasha false hope that his father is still alive and has been released by Stalin. At first Sasha will not vote to send Borka to the principal's office. But his teacher, who is obviously a devout Communist, threatens that she won't allow him to carry the banner at the ceremony unless he "votes." Once again, Sasha caves to the pressure. He feels he has no choice.

In Chapter 14, Sasha shows his human side when he apologizes to Borka. However, when Borka pleads with him to help him visit his parents in prison, Sasha is not willing to help. He has enough problems of his own. Besides, the imprisonment of Borka's parents is a reminder of his father's status - something that Sasha is not willing to deal yet.



Chapters 15 and 16

Chapters 15 and 16 Summary

In Chapter 15, Sasha is able to get the banner and takes it to the main hall which is still deserted at the time. He unfurls the beautiful banner which contains the image of Stalin on a red background with golden fringe. At the end of the hall, is a plaster bust of Stalin. Sasha marches around the hall swirling the banner around. He hears the rumble of Soviet tanks rolling onto Red Square and the sounds of fighter planes up above. Sasha imagines himself joining in the big formation in the Square and talking to Stalin about his heroic father. Stalin is in a rage that his best officer had been arrested. He pictures the chaos in the streets from Stalin's anger. He loses his grasp on the banner pole. It goes crashing down and knocks the nose off Stalin's statue.

In Chapter 16, breaking the nose off Stalin's statue changes everything for Sasha. He will not become a Pioneer, the incident will be reported to State Security and everyone will know Sasha was the guilty one. He will surely be arrested for an act of terrorism. It was an accident but who would believe him? Soon the students will be running into the hall. Sasha quickly grabs the banner and runs to the boys' restroom.

Chapters 15 and 16 Analysis

In Chapter 15, although he imagines Stalin helping his father, he is swept away by the chaos and anger that he attributes to Stalin. Perhaps even at a subliminal level, he is onto the leader more than he realizes. What will be the ramifications of Sasha knocking the nose off the statue of Stalin? What is a passive-aggressive act?

In Chapter 16, Sasha has accidentally caused his whole future to be in question. Although he claims to love Stalin and is happy in a Communist society, he seems to be inordinately afraid just because he accidentally damaged a statue - something that can be repaired. Perhaps the reality of life in the USSR is beginning to dawn on him.



Chapters 17 and 18

Chapters 17 and 18 Summary

In Chapter 17, in the boys' restroom, Sasha dashes into the last stall. He can hear the kids in the hall. His mind is on the broken nose and he silently apologizes to Stalin for the incident. He hears Miss Petrovna ordering all the kids to return to their classrooms. Sasha is frantically trying to wrap the banner up when in walks Vovka. He grabs the banner out of Sasha's hands. He plays around with it like it's a bayonet. Sasha warns Vovka not to damage the flag - it's state property. But Vovka has no respect for the banner and drops it on the wet floor. He cites the Soviet Criminal Code which lays out the laws that cover damaging or destroying state property and the punishment for violating them - death by firing squad. To Sasha's dismay, Vovka pulls Stalin's nose out of his pocket. He tells Sasha he saw the whole thing.

In Chapter 18, Miss Petrovna tells the class that it is their duty to expose the guilty for defacing Stalin's statue. The Pioneer rally will be postponed until the guilty party is discovered. She instructs the children to write down the name of the student who they think is guilty. One of the girls, Zina, is having trouble writing down any names. Miss Petrovna tells her to write down the names of those who she is sure did not commit the crime. She tells Sasha to write and tells Vovka if he knows how to spell his own name, he should write it down. Vovka rises with clenched fists. Sasha is afraid he's going to attack the teacher. But they are interrupted by Matveich who tells Miss Petrovna that the chief has ordered everyone to the cafeteria at once.

Chapters 17 and 18 Analysis

In Chapter 17, Vovka who has become his bitter enemy saw Sasha damage the statue. He is an angry young boy and wants to make Sasha feel as bad as possible because he is so torn up inside himself. He reminds him that Soviet law calls for the execution of those found guilty of damaging state property. At this point, Sasha feels completely doomed.

In Chapter 18, the cruel teacher forces the children to write the names of the students who they think might be guilty of damaging the statue. She is forcing one child to be against another. Although Miss Petrovna has commented that they live in a democracy she has decided that Vovka is guilty of the crime without a confession or proof. The rage is building within Vovka. It is unknown at this point why he is so upset but it will no doubt be revealed as the story proceeds.



Chapters 19 and 20

Chapters 19 and 20 Summary

In Chapter 19, the principal, Sergi Ivanych, is outraged by the heinous crime that had been perpetrated by murderers and spies. He is certain that the school has been infiltrated with these criminals. Sasha usually agrees with the principal but in this case, he knows better. He looks around for Vovka but he's nowhere to be found. The principal vows that State Security will find the guilty ones and will have no mercy on them. Anton, another student, whispers to Sasha that his father is arriving. Sasha looks out the window and sees a big black security car arriving. Sasha's spirits are lifted only a short time when he sees the lieutenant who had arrested his father the night before emerge from the car.

In Chapter 20, the principal leads everyone in applause as the lieutenant and his guards enter the cafeteria. The principal orders Dubasov, the physical education teacher, to bring out the papers the students used to write down their suspects. The lieutenant doesn't seem to be interested. He draws his pistol and points it to the ceiling. He demands that the guilty party immediately raise his hand. Sasha is struggling with what to do. Suddenly, another hand pops up. Four-Eyes Finkelstein has raised his hand. The guards arrest him and carry him from the cafeteria. As he passes Sasha, he winks.

Chapters 19 and 20 Analysis

In Chapter 19, the principal shows his outrage to the children over the damaged statue. He overreacts by proclaiming that the perpetrators were murderers and spies. But he probably has good reason to be worried because he will probably, in the end, be held responsible for it. Sasha is worried for two reasons when he sees the Lieutenant exit the security car. First, it is not his father as he had hoped it was; and, secondly, the lieutenant may find out that he broke Stalin's nose and arrest him.

In Chapter 20, just when Sasha's guilt is compelling him to confess to the crime, Borka claims responsibility. Why on earth would Borka want to be arrested? Perhaps he thinks it's the only way he can ever see his parents again.



Chapters 21 and 22

Chapters 21 and 22 Summary

In Chapter 21, Borka is on Sasha's mind as he walks back to class. The students had all seen him being shoved into the big black car. Why did he take the blame for it? Borka must be scared. He imagines Borka arriving at Lubyanka, being searched and given a prison uniform to wear. He'll be put in a cell. Could he possibly be put in the same cell as his father? Then it dawned on Sasha. Borka took the blame so he could get inside the prison to see his parents. Perhaps he'll be reunited with his father and mother. Stalin may free them. As Sasha entered the classroom, Vovka jumps up from behind the door. He taunts him for letting someone else take the blame and calls him an American.

In Chapter 22, Miss Petrovna tells the class that they should have been suspicious of Finkelstein because his parents had been arrested. They would be more vigilant from then on and not let anything like that happen again. She walks over to the class photo hanging on the wall. She takes her ink pen and blackens Borka's image out. Sasha thinks to himself that Borka is not an enemy; he just wanted to see his parents.

Miss Petrovna tells the class to line up for the Pioneer celebration. Miss Petrovna tells the students that she has a confession to make to them. There is another student who is the child of an enemy. Sasha feels like he's going to faint. He imagines that the teacher points at him as the guilty one. He becomes so weak that he drops the banner. The teacher tells him to pick up the banner and then asks Vovka why his father had been arrested. Vovka's face is enveloped in rage. Miss Petrovna tells the class that Vovka's father was executed as an enemy of the people. She suspects that Vovka conspired with Borka in defacing the statue. Vovka rushes Miss Petrovna and begins strangling her. Her face is turning colors and her eyes are bulging. Some kids are scared; others are laughing. Sasha steps in to separate them. Matveich comes in and takes Sasha and Vovka to the principal's office. Miss Petrovna is staggering and sobbing as they leave.

Chapters 21 and 22 Analysis

In Chapter 21, it dawns on Sasha that Borka probably confessed to something he didn't do so he could see his parents again. Sasha is maintaining a lofty view of Communism. He pictures Borka reuniting with his parents. They make such a happy image in his mind that he thinks Stalin might free them. Vovka still taunts Sasha with exposing him although he has already had the opportunity and failed to do so.

In Chapter 22, Miss Petrovna is teaching the children to think in a biased way. Since Finkelstein's parents were arrested, they should have been suspicious of Borka - guilt by association. Once again, Miss Petrovna doesn't understand what democracy is. She shows her lack of humaneness by blackening out a young boy's face on the class photo



- like he will never return, almost like he's dead. Sasha is beginning to see the light. He knows that Borka is not an enemy of the state. He only wanted to see his parents - something that Sasha can relate to.

Petrovna tells the class that Vovka's father had been executed, which sends shock waves through Sasha. It is now apparent what the source of Vovka's anger and misery is.



Chapters 23 and 24

Chapters 23 and 24 Summary

In Chapter 23, Sasha and Vovka are told to wait while the principal speaks with Miss Petrovna. Sasha tells Vovka that he's sorry about his father but Vovka doesn't respond. Sasha had once been best friends with Vovka. He had been at his apartment hundreds of times. His father was a good man and a devoted Communist. Sasha recalls that his father often said that if there is smoke there is fire. If someone is arrested and executed, there must be a good reason. Sasha is totally confused.

Just before the principal calls them in, Vovka tells Sasha that he's going to turn him in. Inside the principal's office, Vovka was asked why he attacked the teacher. He replies that the teacher is scum. The principal tells Sasha that his father was arrested and taken to Lubyanka. Sasha leans against the wall to keep from falling. The principal chides Sasha for not coming to him and telling him that he no longer wanted anything to do with his father. Had he done that he would have been allowed to denounce him at the rally and become a Pioneer. State Security has been calling all day from the orphanage for the children of the enemies. Ivanych tells the boys that both will be sent to the orphanage.

Vovka tells Ivanych that Borka was not the guilty party. He will tell the principal who the criminal is if he is not sent to the orphanage. The principal sends Sasha back to his class.

In Chapter 24, Sasha sees that the damaged statue of Stalin has been hauled away. He hears the voices of the students in the other classes. They are all marching toward Communism - except him. He is no longer part of it. He peeks in the Russian Literature class. The teacher is asking the question about a Russian story called "The Nose." It's about a guy dressing his nose up in a uniform. The nose begins to have an attitude.

Sasha continues to listen. The teacher tells the class that the importance of "The Nose" is that if people take on the ideas of others, whether they are right or wrong, it can lead to the collapse of a political system, the nation or even the world. Sasha continues on to his class certain that everyone knows that he is the guilty one and that he'll soon be in the orphanage. He will be shamed and never trusted again - he who loves Stalin more than anyone. He sees the lieutenant and the guards returning.

Chapters 23 and 24 Analysis

In Chapter 23, Sasha is very sorry about Vovka's father. But he is confused. His father had always told him that if someone is arrested and executed there is a reason for it. But now his own father has been arrested and he is a state hero. The two things don't mesh. Although Sasha has been trying to deny it, his father's arrest is confirmed to him by the cold and cruel principal. The adults in this story have very little empathy for



children. They have probably been hardened through so many years of their own indoctrination that they've forgotten how it feels to be a child who is longing to be with his parent.

In Chapter 24, Sasha learns from listening to the Russian literature teacher that a classic Russian story called, "The Nose" was a metaphor for adapting the ideas of others whether they are right or wrong. Perhaps the story will help Sasha draw the parallel between the story and what Communism does to the individual.



Chapters 25 and 26

Chapters 25 and 26 Summary

In Chapter 25, Sasha hides in the biology lab. He is sure the guards are looking for him. He plans to run to the gym and exit there. Suddenly, there is a nasally voice. He turns to see Stalin's nose sitting on a chair, dressed as a comrade and smoking a pipe! The nose tells him that he's been naïve and careless. The nose tells him to renounce his father. Sasha asks the nose what his father is accused of. The nose responds that he's being interrogating and is getting ready to confess. Sasha claims that his father is innocent. The nose tells him that the guards in Lubyanka know how to make people confess. The nose warns Sasha to renounce his father. Forget about him - he'll never see him again.

In Chapter 26, when Sasha returns to class, Miss Petrovna makes him sit in the back. He is cold, shivering and all wet. The cleaning woman had doused him with ice water when she found him passed out on the biology room floor. Miss Petrovna has the children line up again and begin marching and playing music. She announces that she will choose another student to carry the banner. On an impulse, Sasha grabs the banner and climbs up on Miss Petrovna's desk. He begins waving the banner over his head. Miss Petrovna orders him to get down.

The lieutenant and the guards enter the room with Vovka. He points to Miss Petrovna's desk. They search it and find the plaster nose. They accuse her of defacing the statue. She protests that she is a good Communist. The guards arrest Miss Petrovna and take her away.

Chapters 25 and 26 Analysis

In Chapter 25, Sasha, influenced by the Russian story, "The Nose," imagines that Stalin's nose is talking to him. The nose warns Sasha to renounce his father and forget him. Perhaps because the nose is small, Sasha is not afraid to stand up to it. He is able to vent his real feelings, that he will never renounce his father. Sasha uses the nose as a proxy for the real Stalin.

In Chapter 26, Petrovna gets the chance to see what it's like to be falsely accused of something she did not do. She gets what's coming to her for being so cruel and uncaring to the children. She has repeatedly claimed to be a good and loyal Communist. Will she feel differently after her false arrest? Vovka has showed his cleverness in framing her. It is obvious that he didn't want Sasha to get in trouble for knocking the nose off. He knew it was an accident.



Chapters 27 and 28

Chapters 27 and 28 Summary

In Chapter 27, Sasha spots the principal coming down the hall. He tells him that Miss Petrovna is not guilty and neither is Borka. He only wanted to get arrested so he could see his parents. The principal tells Sasha that Borka's parents had been executed. Ivanych pulls Sasha downstairs to the basement.

In Chapter 28, Ivanych locks Sasha in the basement. He is alone in the darkness. He holds onto the wall and walks slowly along. He bumps into something. He feels around on the object and realizes that it's the statue of Stalin with the missing nose. There is a light yellowish light which allows him to see other discarded items including student artwork and class photographs. A voice speaks out from the shadows: "Out of sight, out of mind. That's why they put all this stuff down here." (132) The voice explains that it helps people forget. Sasha is shocked to see that it is the Lieutenant.

The Lieutenant offers him some hard candy and asks if he might read something to him. He reads to him the letter that Sasha wrote to Stalin just the day before. It was in his father's briefcase. Sasha tells the Lieutenant that he will not renounce his father. He won't have to, the Lieutenant tells him. Due to the loyalty demonstrated in the letter he wrote, they want to recruit him to watch for spies in the school and report any suspicious people to State Security. If he does well, he'll be able to meet Stalin.

The Lieutenant had nothing but respect for his father. Two years before he turned in his own wife as an enemy. Sasha doesn't believe it. His mother was sick and died in the hospital. But his father's loyalty came into question when he became easy prey to his wife's contacts. His mother wasn't a spy, he tells him. If Sasha doesn't take the Lieutenant up on the offer, he will be taken to the basement of Lubyanka and imprisoned. Sasha shakes his hand.

Chapters 27 and 28 Analysis

In Chapter 27, Sasha is very disheartened to hear that Borka's parents were executed. Would his father be next or has he already been executed? These worries had to be running through Sasha's mind.

In Chapter 28, Sasha's letter to Stalin convinced the Lieutenant that Sasha was a good little Communist. He wants to recruit him to work for the Secret Police. The Lieutenant reveals that his father had turned in his mother as an enemy which explains his aunt's comment about his father looking guilty but not sad. Sasha doesn't want to believe it but as he matures he will probably accept it as the truth. But it was a jarring revelation for a child and too much for a ten-year-old to deal with. He has so many other problems already. Sasha is in a spot. He doesn't want to go to prison but he doesn't want to help the Lieutenant. He buys time and ostensibly agrees to work for the Lieutenant.



Chapters 29 and 30

Chapters 29 and 30 Summary

In Chapter 29, Sasha is at the rally. He doesn't sing along with the others. He carries the banner and waits in the hall for his cue to enter. He hears the drum roll but has set the banner down to dry his eyes which were filled with tears. He knows that everyone is waiting for him. He sets the banner against the wall and runs out of the school. He doesn't want to be a Pioneer.

In Chapter 30, Sasha took a streetcar and is freezing as he braces himself against the cold wind that blows through the cracks. He gets off the streetcar at Lubyanka prison. A guard orders him to stop but he keeps walking. His father is in prison and he needs to see him. The guard tells him which line to wait in. The line of people waiting to see prisoners is endless. He is not dressed very warmly so a lady gives him a scarf to put around his face. He tells the woman that his father is in prison and his mother died in the hospital. He has no other relatives. She tells him that it will be three days before he will be able to see his father. She gives him a potato to eat. The woman tells him that her son's cot is empty. Sasha can stay with her if he would like to. He immediately accepts the offer. The woman says they are in a mess but they will sort it all out someday.

Chapters 29 and 30 Analysis

In Chapter 29, Sasha makes the most important decision of his young life. He has decided he doesn't want to be a Pioneer and therefore is rejecting Communism.

In Chapter 30, Sasha has not lost the hope of reuniting with his father but deep down he knows that it may never happen. For once he has the good fortune of meeting an adult who seems to be a caring person. The woman tells Sasha that her son's cot is empty. Since she is standing in line to meet with a prisoner, it could very well be that her son is in prison. Sasha agrees to stay with her, a woman who seems to have hope for a better future. Perhaps all his misery has led him to a better life.



Characters

Sasha Zaichik

Sasha Zaichik is a ten-year-old boy who lives with his father in a commune in Communist Russia, also known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Sasha is enthralled with Communism and hopes to become a member of the Young Soviet Pioneers, a Communist youth group. He is proud of his father who works for State Security, also known as the Secret Police. His father was honored as a hero by Stalin himself. He is so excited about becoming a Young Pioneer that he writes a letter to Stalin thanking him for his wisdom and leadership.

But Sasha's world begins to fall apart when in the middle of the night his father is arrested by members of his own police force. A neighbor who had his eye on Sasha's large apartment, turned his father in on a false charge. Sasha is sure that it's a big mistake and that as soon as Stalin hears of it, he will be outraged and order his father's release.

At school, Sasha learns that he is not the only one with adult-sized problems. Borka's parents were both arrested months before and he hasn't been allowed to see them since. Another student, Vovka, who had been a good student has become a disciplinary problem and a bad student. Later Sasha learns that Vovka's father had been executed and that both of Borka's had been executed as enemies of the state. This all does not bode well for Sasha and his concerns about his father.

When Sasha accidentally knocks the nose off of a plaster statue of Stalin that is kept in the main hall at school, he is faced with the possibility of his own imprisonment and execution. In the end, he decides that he doesn't want to be a Young Pioneer and thereby rejects Communism. Standing in the visitor's line hoping to see his father, he meets a woman who offers him a place to stay and the hope that things will someday get better.

Vovka Sobakin

Vovka Sobakin is a student at Sasha's school. He had been an excellent student but of late has become the "bad boy" in class. No one knows why he has undergone such a drastic transformation. Sasha used to be friends with him but now Vovka is not interested in having friends. He is bitter and angry and it is apparent that something is drastically wrong.

As the story progresses, it is revealed that Vovka's father had been arrested and executed as an enemy of the state. Sasha is shocked. He knew Vovka's father well. He was a kind man and a good Communist. One afternoon, Sasha is alone in the main hall at school and accidentally knocks off the nose on a plaster statue of Stalin that is kept



there. Sasha runs and hides but is soon confronted by Vovka who was spying on Sasha and saw the whole incident.

Vovka taunts Sasha about damaging "state" property and that, according to law, he could be executed for it. But Vovka passes up many opportunities to turn Sasha in and in the end, he takes the plaster nose and sticks it in his teacher's drawer. His teacher, Nina Petrovna, is not a nice person and seems to enjoy seeing her students in misery. Vovka tells the principal that it was his teacher who knocked the nose off. When the secret police storm in and find the nose in the teacher's drawer, she is taken away. Even though Vovka grieves the loss of his father, he obviously still considers Sasha a friend and did not want to turn him in for something that was unintentional.

Mr. Zaichik

Mr. Zaichik, Sasha's father, is a member of the State Security also known as the Secret Police. He was honored by Stalin for his outstanding work in routing out the enemy but he was ultimately arrested for being an enemy of the state.

Joseph Stalin

Joseph Stalin was the Premier of the Soviet Union. He was known as Comrade Stalin. The children were taught to idolize him. Sasha accidentally knocks the nose off of a plaster statue of Stalin.

Stukachov

Stukachov lives in the commune with his wife, three kids and mother in one cramped room. Sasha's father warns him not to talk to Stukachov. Later, Stukachov turns Sasha's father in for some violation which leads to his arrest.

Aunt Larisa

Sasha's father whispers to him to go to Aunt Larisa if something should happen to him. Sasha is frightened by the warning and doesn't know why his father would say such a thing.

Nina Petrovna

Nina Petrovna is Sasha's cruel teacher. She claims to be a good Communist but may have changed her mind when she was falsely arrested and dragged off to prison.



Borka Finkelstein

Borka Finkelstein is a classmate of Sasha's. He is the only Jewish child in class. His parents were arrested and he lives with other relatives. He finds a way to get in prison to try to visit them.

The Lieutenant

The Lieutenant and his guards arrested Sasha's father. He offers Sasha the opportunity to work with the Secret Police as a sort of mole at school.

The Woman in Line

The story ends with Sasha finally meeting a nice and caring adult. The woman offers Sasha food and a place to stay when she realizes that he is homeless. She is the bright light at the end of a long tunnel for Sasha.



Objects/Places

Communism

Sasha lives in Russia, known as the USSR. Communism is the form of government in Russia.

Stalin's Nose

Sasha accidentally knocks the nose of a plaster statue of Stalin that is kept in the main hall at Sasha's school.

Young Soviet Pioneers

The Young Soviet Pioneers is the Communist youth group that Sasha wants to join.

Soviet Union (USSR)

During the reign of Joseph Stalin, Russia was known as the Soviet Union or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Moscow

Sasha and his father live in a commune of forty people in Moscow, the Soviet capital city.

Moscow Elementary School #37

Moscow Elementary School #37 is the school that Sasha Zaichik attends.

Komunalka

The "komunalka" is the commune that Sasha and his family shares with over forty other citizens.

State Security

Mr. Zaichik works in the State Security on Lubyanka Square. The State Security is also known as the Secret Police.

Stalin's Statute

The huge statue of Stalin is made from the steel of fighter planes. It is taller than the buildings and can be seen from every window in Moscow.

Red Square

Red Square is the main square in Moscow, the capital of Russia. Red Square is used as a gathering place the people. The Kremlin is located in Red Square.



Themes

Indoctrination

The only way that a political system like Communism which is harsh and oppressive can work even for a short duration is through indoctrination or through brainwashing. Ten-year-old Sasha is sure that the kids who live in a capitalistic society do not have fine carrots to eat like the kids in the Communistic society of the USSR have. He is also certain that they have no chance of fulfilling their dreams like those kids lucky enough to be born in a society such as his.

The Soviet leaders convince the people that it is beneficial for them to live in communes. They persuade the masses that it is advantageous to live in crowded quarters with no privacy. Living this way is a constant reminder that it is the "we" that is important as opposed to the "I" that the focus in capitalistic societies.

Sasha is a very bright young boy as are his friends at school. The only way that these boys could believe that their way of life is superior to one that allows freedom of expression and the pursuit of happiness is to keep them from learning about them and to tell them lies about this alternative way of living. Everything in such a society is seen through the filter of propoganda. By having mind-control over the citizenry, Stalin and the Soviet leaders had little or no conflict to their way of ruling. It is a sad way to exist and one that ultimately kills the human spirit.

Oppression

The human spirit dies at least in some measure when a person is forced to live under oppression. Part of living under oppression, particularly in this story about living in Communist Russia, is the struggle to exist in an environment of fear. Using fear as a control tactic is effective although it does not spawn the greatness of man since it does not foster artistic expression or cultural or political advancement. Simply put, oppression in general and Communism in particular, stops progress and represses the people. It is neither conducive to high ideas nor to great thought. However, it does what it is designed to do, which is to control the masses.

It is an insult to true democratic societies for an oppressive political system to make the claim that it is the bedrock of true democracy. Raids in the middle of the night followed by arrests and imprisonments and even executions without explanation or trial are not the fiber of democracy. Oppression fosters envy and distrust among the people. They begin to fear that their friend or neighbor is watching them and may turn them in on some false charge in order to gain favor for themselves.

Even in the school system, fear and oppression are dominant elements of the environment. In this story Sasha's teacher and principal are more concerned with their own survival than for the welfare of the children. They have been indoctrinated into the



ways of Communism and have seen enough to know that at any moment it could be their turn to face the executioner.

Abandonment

Sasha Zaichik, the young protagonist in "Breaking Stalin's Nose," is confronted with many forms of abandonment. It not pleasant for anyone to experience the feeling of abandonment, the cruelest form of rejection. But for a child it is a particularly difficult issue to deal with. A child cannot express himself adequately and cannot understand the hurt he feels and often internalizes that pain and blames himself for being abandoned.

Sasha lived with his father in a commune which was the home to near forty other Russian people. His mother died in the hospital some time before but he had always had some private doubts about her death - doubts that he couldn't vocalize. His father is a member of the Secret Police but one dark night some of his fellow cops come and raid his apartment - tearing everything apart and destroying his possessions - and arrest him. Sasha now has neither mother or father. He asks his aunt to take him in but she fears that her family will be at risk if she does. Once again, he is abandoned by an adult that he turns to for support.

There are different forms of abandonment. At school, his teacher and principal who should have the welfare of their students in the forefront were more concerned with their own survival in the oppressive society and abandoned Sasha and the other students in favor of their own agendas.

Finally as the story comes to a close, Sasha meets a woman who offers him a place to stay and the hope that things will get better. This woman, a total stranger, is far more caring towards Sasha than any of the adults he has known his entire life. She comes into his life and gives him the care and understanding that is crucial for a child to have.



Style

Point of View

"Breaking Stalin's Nose" by Eugene Velchin is recounted in the first-person perspective of ten-year-old Sasha Zaichik. This perspective provides insight into the impact that fear and adult-sized problems can have on innocent children.

Writing the story from Sasha's point of view, allows the reader to understand the thoughts and reactions that a youngster has about living under an oppressive sociopolitical system - in this case Communism. Sasha's character arc begins with a youngster who is enthralled with Communism to a disappointed and disillusioned young man who begins to see the cracks in the system. The story is successful in showing the dangers and failures of a repressive political system and the misery that it inflicts on the masses and on the individual alike.

The author, Eugene Velchin, is quite familiar with the setting of the story. He was born and educated in Russia. But he decided to leave the USSR when he was a young man and now lives in America with his family. This is his first novel but he has been the illustrator for other children's books. Mr. Velchin wrote and illustrated this book which is filled with interesting and compelling black and white drawings.

Setting

"Breaking Stalin's Nose" by Eugene Velchin takes place in Communist Russia or as it was also known as, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The time frame is Stalin's rule during the 1940s and 1950s. The protagonist, Sasha, lives in a commune, known as a *komunalka*, with his father. But they don't live alone. The commune is also home to some forty other Russians. Sasha describes the crowded conditions and the lack of privacy that is part of communal living. There is also envy between the residents over the size of "private" living space allotted to the individual families.

There is mention of Red Square, the Kremlin and the huge statue of Stalin that is made from the steel of fighter planes and is taller than any of the buildings. Sasha writes that the statue can be seen from anywhere in Moscow and is a symbol to the people that he is watching over them.

The story takes place over two winter days. There is ice and snow on the ground and the temperature is freezing. There is an ominous tone when Sasha describes the black bulletproof state cars that the Secret Police drive. A lot of the story takes place in Sasha's school. He takes part in a big snowball fight in the schoolyard before class begins one morning. His desk is at the front of the class near the teacher because he is a good student. Alone in the main hall in the afternoon, Sasha accidentally knocks the nose off the plaster statue of Stalin that is kept in the hall.



The story ends when Sasha runs away from school and gets in the long visitor's line in hopes of visiting his father who is being held at the Lubyanka prison.

Language and Meaning

"Breaking Stalin's Nose" by Eugene Velchin takes place in Communist Russia or as it was also known as, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). There are naturally many references to Russia itself. Sasha, the young protagonist, lives in Moscow and at one point walks across Red Square to the Kremlin. The dreaded "State Security" is also known as the Secret Police. The masses are forced to live in communes known as *komunalkas*. Sasha is taunted by some of his classmates who call him "Amerikanetz" because his mother was an American. Some even accuse him of being an enemy of the state because of his American heritage.

Through the trials and tribulations of young Sasha, the reader learns about life in a Communistic society. The communes are overly crowded and there is not even the semblance of privacy to be had. But the masses are told that they are fortunate to live in the *komunalkas* because they serve as constant reminders that it is the "we" that is important as opposed to the self-centered capitalistic societies where the focus is on the "I" or the individual. Sasha's cruel teacher claims to be a good Communist and declares that their political system is the one that spawns democracy. However, against the backdrop of midnight raids and arrests, imprisonment without trials, and secret executions, it is difficult to make the case that Communism is far better than democracy.

Structure

"Breaking Stalin's Nose" by Eugene Velchin is separated into thirty short to medium-sized chapters. The story of a ten-year-old Russian boy surviving in Soviet Russia is told in mainly a chronological order with no flashbacks other than a few brief references to past events. The story covers a span of only two days in the life of the boy, Sasha Zaichik.

As the story unfolds, Sasha is a young Russian boy who is enthralled with Communism. He is proud of his father who is a member of the Secret Police. He adores and admires Comrade Stalin who is the wise and benevolent teacher and leader of all the citizens of the USSR. The arc of the story encompasses Sasha's journey from his total embrace of Communism as a way to a happy life to the realization that it's not all that it's purported to be.

Sasha becomes increasingly dubious about the Soviet way of life when his father is arrested - which he thinks is a mistake - to the discovery that several of his friends at school have lost their parents to arrest and imprisonment and even execution. These tragedies are told through the naïve eyes of a child. Although all signs point to his father's demise, Sasha quite appropriately, considering his youth, remains hopeful. The challenges he faces are not typical for a ten-year-old. The ending leaves the reader with

the thought that there is light at the end of the tunnel although the light is dim and quite a distance away.



Quotes

"I want to thank you personally for my happy childhood. I am fortunate to live in the Soviet Union, the most democratic and progressive country in the world. I have read how hard the lives of children are in the capitalist countries and I feel pity for all those who do not live in the USSR. They will never see their dreams come true" (Chapter 1, p. 2).

"The State Security is our secret police, and their job is to unmask the disguised enemies infiltrating our borders. My dad is one of their best. Comrade Stalin personally pinned the order of the Red Banner on his chest and called him, 'an iron broom purging the vermin from our midst'" (Chapter 3, p. 10).

"I stare at the statue and pretend it is Comrade Stalin himself, watching over Moscow from his great height" (Chapter 5, p. 23).

"Down below the guards shove my dad into the car and slam the door. The engine revs up, tires spin in the snow, and, when the car leaps forward, the headlights blast across the windows. The icy glass before me flares up, turning white. When it's clear again, the courtyard is empty" (Chapter 5, p. 28).

"When Dad came back, he said Mom had died at the hospital. I started crying, and Aunt Larisa hugged me and said to my dad, 'You look guilty, not sad'" (Chapter 10, p. 44).

"Believing is the most important part. If you really believe in something, it will come true" (Chapter 15, p. 72).

"The plaster dust sparkles in the muted window light before landing on the floor around the nose. I look at the broken nose. I look at the banner, spread nearby. Then I look up at Stalin, now without a nose" (Chapter 16, p. 74).

"Destruction or damage of state property shall be punishable by the supreme measure of social defense - proclaiming the guilty an enemy of the people and shooting by the firing squad - Criminal Code of the Soviet Union, Article 58" (Chapter 17, p. 78).

"A wave of anger and profound outrage engulfed the entire body of our school when we uncovered the unspeakably monstrous crime that took place in the main hall. Undeniably, a group of filthy and cowardly conspirators, spies, murderers, and provocateurs has infiltrated our school" (Chapter 19, p. 86).



"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree...We should have known better than to permit Finkelstein to remain in our ranks after his parents were arrested. We have failed, class, slackened in our vigilance" (Chapter 22, p. 96).

"'There's no smoke without fire.' If someone is arrested and executed, there must be a good reason for it. The State Security wouldn't be shooting people for nothing" (Chapter 23, p. 103).

"What 'The Nose' so vividly demonstrates to us today. . . is that when we blindly believe in someone else's idea of what is right or wrong for us as individuals, sooner or later our refusal to make our own choices could lead to the collapse of the entire political system. An entire country. The world even" (Chapter 24, p. 112).



Topics for Discussion

Why did Sasha think that children in capitalist societies, like America, had such miserable and unhappy lives and would never be able to live out their dreams?

What logic did the Soviets use to make the people think it was beneficial to live in a commune with dozens of other families? What was the real motivation for the Soviet government placing people in communes?

Why were the adults so heartless with the young children? Who was the only adult that Sasha encountered who was kind to and protective of him?

Sasha began the story loving Stalin and wanting to be a Communist. What events occurred during the course of the story to make him change his mind?

What significance did Stalin's nose have in the story?

What parallels were there between Borka and Sasha and Vovka and Sasha? How were all three of their stories similar and how were they different?

In what ways were the teacher and principal cruel to the students? What personal concerns of their own motivated their mistreatment of the children?