Screenplay for the film "1925 – Sergei Yesenin. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze" written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI

Screenplay Summary:

The text paints a bleak picture of 1925 in the Soviet Union, a year marked by a veritable wave of suicides. In Leningrad alone there are said to be 10–15 suicides a day, more than even in 1917. Very different groups are affected. Hard-core "reinforced concrete" communists shoot themselves in despair over the NEP, which reintroduces money, inequality and crude everyday life where they had dreamed of permanent revolutionary heroism. Some veterans of the revolution and Civil War, by contrast, become "Soviet millionaires" in livestock or trade, while the unemployed sink into misery: industrial prices rise, wages collapse, and fewer than 10% of those registered at the labor exchange receive a meagre benefit. Demobilized Red Army soldiers, unable to find work since the Civil War, are especially desperate.

Another cluster of suicides comes from within the party. These are people who had taken Trotsky's series The New Course seriously, believing his calls for inner-party democracy, criticism and freedom of the press. When Trotsky later recants and declares that no one can be right "against his party," those who had trusted his earlier words feel betrayed. Still sleeping with Civil War revolvers under their pillows, they shoot themselves in protest against party discipline they feel they are only now really experiencing. Students influenced by Trotsky's ideas also kill themselves; young women, less politicized, use veronal. Suicide, the author notes, is almost fashionable in 1925.

Against this backdrop stands the death of Sergei Yesenin at the very end of the year, which differs from the general trend in that it is the death of a great poet. At thirty, Yesenin is the leading poet of Russia. The day before he hangs himself he writes his last poem, "Goodbye, my friend, goodbye," in his own blood, as later forensic examination shows. Three years after his death, Nikolai Erdman's comedy The Suicide will capture the mood of the time: its small hero Podsekalnikov demands nothing more than the "right to whisper" that life is hard — a right Stalin will deem "harmful."

The text then traces Yesenin's trajectory: his flirtation with Trotsky (whom he calls a man who "carries himself through history as a personality"), his presence in the crowd before Lenin's coffin, Trotsky's moving obituary that describes him as a defenseless human child, not alien to the revolution but not akin to it. Very quickly, however, the party's line on Yesenin shifts. Pamphlets appear "against decadence, against Yeseninism," and in 1927 Bukharin publishes a vicious piece in Pravda, calling "Yeseninism" a brazenly painted Russian obscenity drenched in drunken tears, expressing the worst traits of the village and the "national character." The aim is to sweep the dead poet away together with defeated political figures and to reaffirm that within the Soviet system the poet has no independent value.

Paradoxically, Yesenin's fame survives and grows in prisons and camps. Prisoners of all kinds — thieves, former officers, engineers, peasants, workers — listen to his poetry with amazement and joy; as Shalamov notes, the criminal world turns him into a classic of prison sentimentality. His private life appears chaotic: extreme alcoholism, constant brawling and provocations (including anti-Jewish slurs punished only with a public reprimand), stormy relationships with Isadora Duncan, Zinaida Raikh and finally Sofia Tolstaya. At the same time, he is obsessed with Pushkin

and with the ambition to be “the first poet”: he imitates Pushkin’s ring, cloak and poses, takes photographs at his monument, and is forever measured against him in his own mind.

Throughout 1924–1925, Yesenin oscillates between frenzied creativity and mental breakdowns: hallucinations, conversations with his reflection, the dark visionary poem “The Black Man,” stays in psychiatric clinics. The police are instructed to detain and release him quietly, as with Rasputin before the revolution. In the end, the text suggests that Yesenin was crushed not only by the hardship of life under the NEP, but above all by the unbearable weight of his own talent in an age when a totalitarian state claims a monopoly on speech and will not even concede its citizens the modest “right to whisper” that it is hard to live.

Screenplay:

1925: Sergei Yesenin

The year 1925 was exceptionally rich in suicides. In Leningrad in 1925, there were from 10 to 15 suicides a day. This is significantly higher than the suicide level of 1876, when Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky raised an alarm about the mental state of Petersburg’s youth. In 1925 there are even more suicides than in revolutionary 1917. And the deepest despair grips completely different, even opposite, groups of Soviet citizens.

Die-hard “reinforced concrete” communists shoot themselves over the NEP. Because NEP means money again, a last farewell to the idea of equality, the complete end of revolutionary romanticism. NEP is everyday life. And everyday life, after the wild spree of the revolution, is unbearable to the point of suicide. Of course, not for everyone. Some participants in the Revolution and the Civil War, in 1925, have retrained as Soviet millionaires. For example, certain former Red partisans in the south have built a stunning business career in sheep-breeding. In 1925, their daughters are vacationing in the best Crimean sanatoriums, and their sons are playing big in casinos.

The unemployed are also putting an end to their lives.

The main economic idea of the country’s leadership is to boost industry urgently. At any cost. In the literal sense. The vice-chairman of the Supreme Council of the National Economy, Pyatakov, demands:

> “All resources, wherever they come from, must be driven into the fixed capital of industry.”

In Pyatakov’s view, these resources can easily be obtained by raising wholesale prices on industrial products. Wholesale prices are raised. Accordingly, retail prices shoot up immediately. At the same time, procurement prices for agricultural products remain the same, that is, low. No one can afford to buy industrial goods anymore. They lie around in warehouses. Consequently, enterprise profits drop toward zero. And wages follow. Unemployment climbs inexorably.

Less than 10 percent of those registered at the labor exchange receive unemployment benefits. By the way, at the end of the 1920s it is precisely on the basis of the capital’s labor-exchange lists that people will be arrested and sent to work in the Gulag under a system of “forced employment.”

> “We remember you, you were looking for work, weren’t you? Here you go.”

The Moscow labor exchange was located in Rakhmanovsky Lane. It was called the Rakhmanovka.

In 1925, unemployment benefits amount to the famine ration of 1919 and are given to only one member of the unemployed family. If documents proving work record are lost, and regardless of the number of children, no benefits are paid.

In a particularly overwrought state are the demobilized Red Army soldiers who have not found work in all the years since the Civil War.

Among unemployed men there are more suicides than among unemployed women.

At a Central Committee plenum in July 1926, Pyatakov will say that crises are inherent to the Soviet economy just as they are to the capitalist economy. And in September 1926, the presidium of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions will, in a resolution, acknowledge its complete helplessness in the economic struggle against unemployment. Two and a half years remain before Stalin's first Five-Year Plan. That plan will already be completely free of economic laws.

In 1925, the capital's hotels intended for foreigners are packed. There are many prostitutes. The men fall into three categories: thieves, bribe-takers, and party officials of various ranks. At night there are knife fights. Sometimes with people shouting: "I've been a party member since 1917!"

Among party members with pre-revolutionary seniority there is a special category of people who also end their lives in 1925. In Stalin's terminology they could be called Trotskyists, although strictly speaking they are not. They are people who took the bait of Trotsky's articles under the general title *The New Course*. They sincerely responded to his words about the dominance of bureaucracy in the party, about the need for freedom of criticism and freedom of the press, about party democracy.

Six months later Trotsky backs away from his words, saying that "no one wants or can be right against his party." Trotsky says that "one can be right only with the party."

Those who had pinned their hopes on party democracy put a bullet in their heads. They had the means to do so: everyone still had weapons left over from the Civil War. Out of habit, they still slept with a revolver under their pillow.

After the Civil War, after the grain-requisition detachments, they shoot themselves as a gesture of non-submission to party discipline, as if they had only now truly seen it and tasted it for the first time.

Students, stuffed with Trotsky's *New Course*, are also committing suicide. Young girls who have never even heard of Trotsky poison themselves with veronal. Suicide is in fashion in the USSR in 1925.

The death of Sergei Yesenin, at the very end of 1925, stands out from this trend for a simple reason: it is the death of a very great talent.

Yesenin's last poem, written the day before he hanged himself, begins with the line: "Goodbye, my friend, goodbye."

In the archives of the Institute of Russian Literature (the Pushkin House) of the Academy of Sciences, a thin layer of pigment was taken from the paper on which the poem was written. A microspectral analysis confirmed that the poem had been written in blood:

> “As a result of the forensic medical examination, it was concluded that, given the size of the letters of the original, 0.2 ml of ‘living’ human blood is required to write the poem ‘Goodbye, my friend, goodbye’.”

Three years after Yesenin’s suicide, the playwright Nikolai Erdman will write the comedy *The Suicide*. By many accounts, it is the best Soviet play.

In *The Suicide*, the main character is an unemployed petty bourgeois, Semyon Semyonovich Podsekalnikov. He is prone to hysteria, and one day his wife imagines that he has decided to shoot himself in the toilet of their communal apartment. Later he really does decide to commit suicide, but then changes his mind. The little man changes before our eyes. He resolves to call the Kremlin. He calls and says:

> “I’ve read Marx, and I didn’t like Marx.”

And in his final monologue he goes even further:

> “I’m not asking for much — for God’s sake, allow us to say that it is hard for us to live. Even like this, in a whisper: ‘It is hard for us to live.’ Comrades, I ask you in the name of a million people: give us the right to whisper.”

And after these words of the ridiculous little man, Semyon Semyonych Podsekalnikov, who did not go through with his suicide, at the very end of the play, in the Chekhov tradition, someone suddenly mentions an unknown figure:
— Fedya Petunin has shot himself. He left a note.
— What note?
— “Podsekalnikov is right. Life really isn’t worth living.”

Stalin personally banned *The Suicide* from being staged, both by Stanislavsky and by Meyerhold. Stalin said: “The play is empty and even harmful.”

Yesenin himself Stalin will forbid later. And the reason for the ban is Trotsky. Trotsky loved Yesenin’s poetry. Yesenin had Trotsky “on his tongue.”

On a May night in 1920, Yesenin is walking down Tverskoy Boulevard from the Pushkin monument — Pushkin stood there at the time — with his new acquaintance, Nadezhda Volpin. She is 20, she writes poetry, and she will later bear Yesenin a son. To her, on Tverskoy Boulevard, Yesenin says:

> “Lenin is nothing. He has spread himself out in the revolution. Trotsky is different. Trotsky carries himself through history as a personality.”

In 1924, Yesenin will be deeply impressed by Lenin’s death. On January 23, Yesenin temporarily leaves the sanatorium for nervous patients on Bolshaya Polyanka Street, where he is undergoing treatment for a mental disorder. He walks through the courtyards of Zamoskvorechye and joins the crowd accompanying Lenin’s coffin on its way to the Hall of Columns. In the Hall of Columns, Yesenin stands for several hours.

When Yesenin is lying in his own coffin, it is Trotsky who writes the obituary. Gorky says: “Trotsky wrote best of all.” The obituary is read at Yesenin’s memorial evening at the Moscow Art Theatre and then published as an article in *Pravda* and *Izvestia*:

> “An undefended human child has been hurled into the abyss! With half-affected roughness, Yesenin tried to shield himself from the harsh time in which he was born; he tried, but did not manage to. ‘I can’t go on,’ said the poet defeated by life, without defiance or reproach.
>
> Yesenin had always, it seems, felt not of this world. But that is no reproach — can one reproach, even after the fact, the most lyrical of poets, whom we failed to keep for ourselves!
>
> The poet was not alien to the revolution — he was not akin to it.”

A year after Yesenin’s death, a small pamphlet appears under the title *Against Decadence, Against Yeseninism*. Then another little pamphlet, *Decadent Moods Among Youth. Yeseninism*.

And finally, in January 1927, *Pravda* publishes an article by Bukharin titled “Nasty Notes.” In 1927, Bukharin is a member of the Politburo and editor-in-chief of *Pravda*. At the end of 1926, Kamenev, Zinoviev and Trotsky had been expelled from the Politburo. Bukharin’s love for Stalin is at its peak. In *Pravda*, Bukharin writes about Yesenin. The piece is nothing other than a delayed reply to Trotsky, two years later, but without mentioning Trotsky.

> “Is Yesenin talented?” Bukharin asks rhetorically. “Of course, Yesenin’s verse often sounds like a silvery stream. And yet Yeseninism is a disgustingly powdered and brazenly painted Russian obscenity, lavishly soaked in drunken tears. Ideologically, Yesenin represents the most negative traits of the Russian village and the so-called national character: fist-fighting, profound inner indiscipline, the deification of the most backward forms of social life.”

In the two years since Yesenin’s death, the Soviet political landscape has been simplified. The main actors have been erased, even if not yet physically. The late Yesenin is brushed aside along with them. Not out of fear of the power of words, but in order to affirm that the poet has no independent value.

The further course of Soviet history will guarantee Yesenin extraordinary popularity in prisons and camps. The poet Anatoly Zhigulin writes:

> “When they found out that I remembered so many of Yesenin’s poems, I became a needed and respected man in the barracks. All sorts of people — former bandits and thieves, former officers, engineers, former kolkhoz peasants, workers — listened to Yesenin with huge amazement and joy.”

The writer Varlam Shalamov says:

> “They picked up every note of longing, everything that evoked pity, everything that resonated with prison sentimentality. The thieves made Yesenin a classic.”

The priest and philosopher Pavel Florensky noted:

> “In people from Ryazan — and Yesenin is from Ryazan — there is something exceptionally pleasant: gentleness and kindness, a sort of absorbing tenderness. The ‘Ryazan type’ is the complete opposite of hardness and dryness. The people of Ryazan are the most pleasant — but they are also without character.”

Yesenin’s publications “in freedom” will be extremely rare and poor.

After the war, an episode takes place within the walls of Moscow University. A young man is courting a girl. She is secretly reading Yesenin. He informs on her. She is expelled from the Komsomol. Then she marries him.

In his very last poem, Yesenin wrote:

> In this life, to die is nothing new,
> But to live, of course, is nothing newer.

From the standpoint of grand philosophy, these two lines contain hardly a revelation, but poetically the whole poem is insanely beautiful. And simply insane. Because in the last line of his last poem Yesenin is being sly. “But to live, of course, is nothing newer” is not weariness — it is golden boyhood. Because right up to his death — all along the home stretch — he is in a continuous creative upsurge. There are no signs of fatigue or depletion in his talent. The medical diagnosis and death are separate matters. In 1925, thirty-year-old Sergei Alexandrovich Yesenin is the leading poet of Russia.

In 1925, preparations begin for the complete edition of his works. Yesenin says:

> “In Russia, almost all poets died without seeing the complete edition of their works. But I will see my collected works.”

In summer, on June 30, he signs a contract with Gosizdat for a three-volume edition of his poems and long verse pieces. At the end of November, all three volumes are delivered for typesetting.

Yesenin says that his poems are very good, that no one writes like that anymore, and that Pushkin has long been dead. Pushkin gives him no peace all his life. Pushkin is a goal one can go mad from. The distance between them shrinks to a minimum on the day of Yesenin’s funeral, when a mourning banner is stretched across the House of the Press: “The body of the great national poet rests here.” His coffin is carried three times around the Pushkin monument. A memorial ceremony is held there as well. The poems are read by Kachalov, a good acquaintance of Yesenin and an actor of the Moscow Art Theatre. In the first row of the many-thousand-strong crowd stands Yesenin’s last wife, Sofia Andreyevna Tolstaya, Tolstoy’s granddaughter. A military band is playing, sent by Mikhail Lashevich, deputy to Mikhail Frunze (Frunze had died two months earlier under murky circumstances on the operating table of the Botkin Hospital). Lashevich will shoot himself in 1928.

Also present are the director Vsevolod Meyerhold and his wife, Zinaida Raikh, Yesenin’s former wife. Meyerhold was wildly jealous of his wife’s feelings for Yesenin. Anatoly Marienhof writes:

> “If Yesenin had crooked his finger at her, she would have run away from Meyerhold without an umbrella in rain and hail.”

Marienhof was a long-time close friend of Yesenin. In 1919 they slept in the same bed in a room they rented in apartment no. 43 of house no. 3 in Bogoslovsky Lane.

At Yesenin’s funeral, Zinaida Raikh cried: “Our sun has gone,” and hugged the children she had had with Yesenin, whom Meyerhold was raising.

Yesenin loved to show photographs of his daughter and son to friends. He always carried the photos in his pocket. He had left Raikh two months before their son was born. She had no place to live. She and the infant found refuge at the Mother and Child Home on Ostozhenka Street. By the standards

of the time, this was quite good. Yesenin's son Konstantin later became a famous sports journalist, an expert on football and a very refined man. Yesenin loved his daughter more.

Nadezhda Volpin recalls that Yesenin always said: "I have two children." Only once did he casually say: "I have three children." Yesenin's eldest son is Yuri Izryadnov. He will be shot on August 13, 1937, on a charge of plotting against Stalin.

Yuri's mother, Anna Romanovna, after her son's death, helped Yesenin's son by Zinaida Raikh. Raikh was brutally murdered after Meyerhold's arrest. Konstantin Yesenin recalls:

> "When I was left alone, Anna Romanovna used to feed me, and later she sent me parcels with tobacco and warm clothes at the front."

She lived in a semi-basement on Vspolny Lane. On his last visit to her in 1925, Yesenin left a box of cigarettes on the table. He smoked Safo cigarettes, with a picture of the ancient poetess on the lid. Yuri, Yesenin's son, smoked all the remaining cigarettes except one. Konstantin, Yesenin's other son, smoked that last cigarette, left from his father, in 1941 before leaving for the front. His youngest son, Aleksandr Yesenin-Volpin, born in 1924, Yesenin never saw.

At the funeral rally on December 31, 1925, Yesenin's seven-year-old daughter Tatyana recited Pushkin's "Frost and sun! A day of wonder…"

In the summer of 1924, in Leningrad, Yesenin visits Akhmatova. In her room in the Fountain House they talk about Pushkin and Kiprensky's portrait of Pushkin. Yesenin says:

> "The painter who would paint as flattering a portrait of me has not yet been born."

If anyone was an ill-suited conversation partner for that kind of talk, it was Akhmatova: with her severity, caustic tongue and reverence for Pushkin, she could easily have mocked him. She did not. And in a poem written after his death, she showed a rare and supreme compassion of one poet for another. She placed the death of Pushkin and the death of Yesenin side by side. And probably wise Akhmatova understood better than anyone the real reason for his death. Not everyone can withstand the power of his own talent. Talent is unbearable. Talent is a beast.

Yesenin and Akhmatova had met long before that, in December 1915, in Tsarskoe Selo. Yesenin came to see her with the newspaper *Birzhevyye Vedomosti* (*The Stock-Exchange News*). Its Christmas issue printed his poems, alongside Blok, Hippius, Sologub, Bryusov, Bunin, Merezhkovsky. Yesenin wanted desperately to read. Naturally, he called the 26-year-old "Anna Andreyevna," and she, after a brief hesitation, called him, 20 years old, "Sergei Alexandrovich."

Akhmatova said:

> "He read superbly. Although a little too loudly for my small room. One thing worried me: the last line:
>
> I came to this earth
> So that I might leave it the sooner."

Yesenin turns up in Petrograd in 1915. Overcoming his fear, he comes to see Alexander Blok, and he frequents the home of Zinaida Hippius. The venomous Zinaida Nikolaevna looks at his legs through her lorgnette and asks: "What kind of gaiters are those, Yesenin?"

Yesenin is wearing felt boots.

He later recalls about her:

> “I walked into the Merezhkovskys’ salon. Toward me comes his wife, the poetess Zinaida Hippius. I was dressed like a peasant, in felt boots. This lady takes me by the arm and leads me to Merezhkovsky: ‘Let me introduce you, my husband, Dmitri Sergeyevich.’ I bow, shake his hand. She leads me to Filosofov: ‘My husband, Dmitri Vladimirovich.’ She wanted to embarrass a boy from the village, but I didn’t bat an eyelid: if she’d led me to a third husband, I wouldn’t have flinched either.”

Around the same time, through the already well-known peasant poet Klyuev, Yesenin meets Dmitri Loman, a staff officer attached to the commander of the palace. It is Colonel Loman who gets the idea of taking this boy from Ryazan to Moscow, to the house of the Empress’s sister, Grand Duchess Elizaveta Fyodorovna, on Ordynka Street.

Yesenin is taken to Moscow along with the poet Klyuev. They dress Yesenin in a blue silk shirt, a long velvet caftan and high-heeled boots. After Moscow, Loman arranges a poetry reading in front of the Dowager Empress Maria Fyodorovna at the Alexander Palace in Tsarskoe Selo. According to Yesenin’s recollections, the Dowager Empress says:

> “I place great hopes in you. In such times, when internal enemies sow unrest among the people, patriotic and loyal poems would be very useful.”

This conversation takes place practically across the road from the hall where Pushkin had once read at his Lyceum graduation exam. Later, Ilya Repin will reproduce this episode. In 1915, Yesenin meets Repin. Chukovsky had brought Yesenin to see him. The artist Annenkov is also there — the future painter of portraits of Trotsky, Lenin, Yesenin and many others.

Yury Annenkov recalls:

> “The drive to be the first Russian poet, to catch up and overtake, to outjump and outdo the others, obsessed many Russian poets — Severyanin, Mayakovsky, even the gentle Khlebnikov. One day I asked Yesenin: ‘What the devil do you need that dubious championship for?’ ‘It’s tradition,’ Yesenin answered. ‘I read in Pushkin: *I have raised a monument to myself not made by human hands*.’”

At the same time, in the Tsarskoe Selo military hospital, Yesenin reads his poems before the reigning Empress Alexandra Fyodorovna. He serves in a medical train. In his 1923 autobiography, Yesenin writes:

> “After my poems, the Empress said they were beautiful but very sad. I answered that the whole of Russia was like that.”

In August 1923 in Moscow, in the apartment on Bogoslovsky Lane that he shared with Marienhof, a cheerful Chekist, Yakov Blumkin, bursts in. From the doorway he shouts:

> “Guys, Lev Davidovich — Trotsky, Lev Davidovich — can see you today. Get ready, we’re going.”

On the way he stops by the barbershop on Tverskaya. He meets the actress Augusta Miklashevskaya and calls out to her:

> “I’m in a hurry, I’ve been summoned to the Kremlin, I’m running to wash my head.”

There are two clear cult objects in this situation. The first is Yesenin's hair. Nadezhda Volpin recalls:

> "Yesenin was in love with the yellow of his hair. It was part of the imagery of his poetry. He wanted to see himself as a light blond: he always deliberately sat so that the light fell on his curls."

There was a reddish tinge in his beard, which is why he was always clean-shaven and powdered his shaven cheeks.

The second object of cult in this hair-washing story is Trotsky. Yesenin said:

> "…There is one man… If he wants to whip me, I'll pull down my own pants and lie down myself! By God, I will! Do you know who? Trotsky."

In August 1923, at the Kremlin, Yesenin tells Trotsky that peasant poets have nowhere to publish: they have no publishing house, no journal. Trotsky replies:

> "We'll help. You'll be given a sum for expenses, and you will publish in a journal those works which you yourself like. Naturally, the responsibility, both political and financial, will lie entirely with you, Comrade Yesenin."

Yesenin thanks Trotsky and refuses.

Yakov Blumkin, who brings Yesenin to Trotsky, is a Cheka officer, a former Left SR, the assassin of the German ambassador Mirbach, and again a Cheka-OGPU operative. In reality he is a ruthless Red James Bond, a participant in adventures in various corners of the globe. Not a stranger to poetry and poets.

Once, Blumkin, in a leather jacket with a Nagant revolver at his side, walks behind Nikolai Gumilyov, reciting to his back the famous lines from Gumilyov's poem "The Captains":

> "Or, discovering mutiny on board…
> With the pink Brabant cuffs…"

Gumilyov stops and coldly asks:

— What do you want from me?
— I'm an admirer of yours.
— That speaks well of your taste, but it doesn't concern me.
— I wanted to shake your hand. I'm Blumkin.

At that name, there is not a trace left of Gumilyov's coldness.

— Blumkin? The assassin of Mirbach? Very, very pleased.

Gumilyov smiles and shakes Blumkin's hand. Gumilyov is shot in 1921.

Blumkin boasted that he could put anyone he wanted on the execution lists — like God Himself.

Back in the spring of 1918, before the murder of Ambassador Mirbach, Yesenin had brought Blumkin to Alexei Tolstoy's name-day party. Nodding toward Blumkin, Yesenin offered one of the ladies:

> "Would you like to see how they shoot people at the Cheka? I can arrange it for you through Blumkin in one minute."

In 1923, when Yesenin and Blumkin go to the Kremlin, Trotsky is still People's Commissar for Military and Naval Affairs, i.e. Defense Commissar; he is all-powerful. In 1925, he will be completely stripped of power. The time between Yesenin's meeting with Trotsky and Yesenin's death — this short historical interval — is the most crucial for all subsequent Soviet history. It is precisely then that Stalin definitively comes to power.

In 1924 Trotsky is no longer heard. At the end of 1924, Kamenev, with Zinoviev's support, proposes excluding Trotsky from the Politburo. Stalin is, of course, pleased that the blow against Trotsky is being struck not by him but by other hands. Stalin even says that he is against Trotsky's exclusion from the Politburo.

But in January 1925, at the Central Committee plenum, Stalin delivers a report on Trotsky and accuses him of trying "to turn the party's ideology into Bolshevism without Leninism." Such a man, naturally, cannot remain Defense Commissar. Trotsky is removed, and Frunze is appointed in his place. The plenum warns Trotsky that if he continues factional work, he will be removed not only from the Politburo but from the Central Committee as well.

Central Committee member Emelian Yaroslavsky calls the plenum's decision "in a sense historic" in a private conversation. He says:

> "Until now we were under a sort of hypnosis: you couldn't touch Trotsky, he had a permanent seat in the front row of the Politburo, and that seat was for life. Now everyone, including Trotsky himself, can see that there will be no joking with him."

Trotsky writes in his memoirs that he "gave up the military post without a fight, even with relief, in order to deprive [his] opponents of a weapon for their insinuations about his military ambitions." Trotsky hints at possible accusations of a bid for power.

At the end of April 1925, a rumor spreads that somewhere a meeting between Stalin and Trotsky has taken place, that they have supposedly agreed to make peace, and that Trotsky will soon receive an important economic post. Trotsky is indeed soon appointed a member of the presidium of the Supreme Council of the National Economy, head of the Electrotechnical Administration and chairman of the Concessions Committee.

And in June 1925, Stalin says, in a fairly wide circle of comrades:

> "Trotsky has crawled to the party on his belly."

Trotsky really has given him cause. In issue no. 16 of the journal *Bolshevik* for 1925, a letter from Trotsky to the editors is published. The letter is a critique of the American Max Eastman's book *Since Lenin Died*. Eastman is distressed that the party has degenerated and that bureaucracy is triumphant. In other words, Eastman repeats Trotsky without knowing that Trotsky has already renounced himself — and that, for this reason, many in the USSR have already put a bullet in their heads.

In his letter to *Bolshevik*, Trotsky begins by criticizing Eastman's book but ends by saying the one thing that matters most to him:

> "Lenin left no testament."

By this, Trotsky declares that Lenin said nothing about Stalin's rudeness and did not set Stalin against Trotsky.

> “The very situation in the party excludes the possibility of such a testament,” Trotsky continues. “The story of this alleged testament is being spun by the émigré bourgeois and Menshevik press. There are absolutely no circumstances in the Politburo or the Central Committee that could provide any grounds whatsoever for fearing a split.”

That’s it. In other words:

> “I am entirely yours, Iosif Vissarionovich,” says Trotsky in 1925.

After this letter by Trotsky, Stalin says that Trotsky “has crawled to the party on his belly.” Most of those in the know laugh approvingly at Stalin’s joke; a few are horrified by Trotsky’s instantaneous and total capitulation.

In the first half of 1925, among the active participants in squeezing Trotsky out is Grigory Zinoviev, Politburo member and head of the Leningrad party organization. It is at his initiative that the Leningrad gubernia committee proposes excluding Trotsky not only from the Politburo, but from the party altogether.

After the victory over Trotsky, at the end of 1925, Zinoviev gets the idea of turning his offensive against Stalin. Zinoviev seriously hopes to take Stalin’s place. On December 18, the Fourteenth Party Congress opens in Moscow. Stalin delivers the political report. The next day Zinoviev delivers his own political report. On December 21, Stalin’s birthday, Politburo member and head of the Moscow Soviet, Kamenev, speaks. He says:

> “Personally, I believe that Comrade Stalin cannot fulfill the role of unifier of the Bolshevik staff.”

It is on this day, December 21, 1925, that Yesenin leaves the psychiatric clinic on Pirogovka, in Bozheninovsky Lane. He had been there since November 26, under the care of the famous psychiatrist Gannushkin. It is at Gannushkin’s that he writes “My Withered Maple Tree.” He is utterly exhausted after the previous year. For the entire year, as in the previous one, he has been constantly writing. Yet he says:

> “I have no rivals, and so I cannot work. I have lost my gift.”

And he writes again. Just before entering the clinic on Pirogovka, he finishes “The Black Man.” He has worked on it a long time. He has read it to many people, in many different places.

Mikhail Zoshchenko recalls:

> “We walk into a beer hall. Yesenin comes toward us. He says something to the waiter. The waiter brings him a glass of rowanberry liqueur. With his eyes closed, Yesenin drinks. He wants to call the waiter again. To distract him, I ask him to read some poetry.
>
> He agrees, for some reason joyfully. He reads the poem *The Black Man*.
>
> Almost the entire beer hall is gathered around him. Dozens of hands lift him up and carry him to a table; everyone wants to embrace him, kiss him.”

Yesenin’s brother-in-law Nasetkin recalls:

> “Twice I caught him wearing a top hat and holding a cane in front of a big mirror, with an indescribable, inhuman grin, talking to his double — his reflection.”

The poet Nikolai Aseev:

> “Another image of Yesenin appeared before me. Not the well-known one with the fair curls, but a living face washed in the cold of despair and illumined by pain and fear before its own reflection.”

Those who heard the poem from his lips say that the printed text is shorter and less tragic than the one he recited. Yesenin himself, speaking of *The Black Man*, often mentioned the influence of Pushkin’s *Mozart and Salieri*.

Pushkin appeared to him in dreams and haunted his insomnia. In the summer of 1924, in Tsarskoe Selo, he climbs out of the window at dawn and goes to the monument. He later says:

> “I suddenly had an unbearable desire to see Pushkin. To say ‘Good morning’ to him first.”

On the way he finds a photographer, climbs up on the monument and says:

> “Take a picture of me with Sasha. We’re friends.”

Then he goes to the station, has a drink for Sasha and says:

> “Who knows when we’ll see each other again.”

He drinks heavily that year. When friends urge him to undergo serious treatment, he always smiles and says he needs first to prepare his collected works for Gosizdat, and then he will tackle the cure.

At the same time, in the summer of 1925, a 27-volume collected works of Trotsky is on the publishing plan. Zinoviev has long since had the right to publish his own works. Honoraria for party authors are paid regardless of how well their books sell.

Yesenin knows he ought to receive money for his poems. Some recall that Yesenin considered it a personal insult if the same poem was printed in fewer than five or six collections. That publishers melted under his gaze. Others write that his visits to editorial offices usually ended badly, that his pride could not bear a refusal, that while waiting for his money he became nervous and went straight from the editorial office to a beer hall. At night he would come home drunk and penniless. He fed and treated everyone around him. He often repeated: “I want to be rich!” or “I’m going to be rich, I won’t depend on anyone — then they’ll have to bow.”

For him, “rich” was synonymous with “strong,” “independent.” Nadezhda Volpin recalls that once he unexpectedly boasted:

> “My grandfather wasn’t a peasant at all. He had two steamers running on the Volga.”

Yesenin’s father wrote to him:

> “Sergei! If you didn’t drink, you certainly wouldn’t be living the way you do. You’d have a luxurious apartment and at least two servants, you’d be living like a real gentleman.”

In 1924 and early 1925, Yesenin doesn’t have an apartment at all. He lives with friends, with women he knows. In particular with Galina Benislavskaya, at the corner of Bolshaya Nikitskaya Street and Bryusov Lane, in house 2/14.

In March he writes to Benislavskaya:

> “Dear Galya! You are close to me as a friend. But I don’t love you at all as a woman.”

On the first anniversary of Yesenin’s death, Benislavskaya will kill herself on his grave.

Galina Benislavskaya wrote:

> “In the period 1923–1925, Sergei Alexandrovich no longer knew how to cling to opportunities, he no longer knew how to push through. ‘Understand,’ he kept saying, ‘I have to knock on the door of my own house, and they won’t open it. They will not be forgiven for that. Let me be a sacrifice for everyone, for all those who are not let in. This is no small thing. Because of me, everyone will become angry. And we are all vicious, you have no idea how vicious we are when we are offended. I will shout, I will, everywhere I will. They’ll lock me up — let them lock me up — it will be even worse for them.’”

The poet, critic and acquaintance of Yesenin, Georgy Ivanov, recalls:

> “Almost every night Yesenin would shout in a whole restaurant, or even across the entire Red Square: ‘Beat the communists — save Russia.’ Any other man in Yesenin’s place, of course, would have been shot.”

Writer Andrei Sobol recalls:

> “In 1924 there was an order about Yesenin circulated through the police: to bring him to the station to sober up and release him, without letting the case proceed further. Of course the order was given not out of love for Yesenin, but for reasons of prestige — they did not want officially to acknowledge ‘divergences’ between the workers’-and-peasants’ power and the poet who had the reputation of being the peasants’ poet.”

All the policemen of the central precincts knew Yesenin. Policeman Doroshenko reports:

> “He (Yesenin) allowed himself to verbally insult the Soviet workers’-and-peasants’ militia, calling everyone present ‘scum’.”

Policeman Kaptelin:

> “Citizen Yesenin, while being in the station, called those present ‘crooks’, ‘parasites’, and also allowed himself other indecent expressions.”

The police reports about Yesenin, and the fact that the cases were ordered not to be pursued, strongly resemble, in outward outline, the situation with Grigory Rasputin in 1915–1916.

In those same years, the very young Yesenin, as Rasputin once had been, was being dragged around and shown off in all sorts of Petersburg salons — from monarchist to liberal. Rasputin used to say about this: “They cart me around like a bird of paradise.”

According to some information, in 1916 there was even a political idea floating around of molding the young poet Yesenin into a counterweight to Rasputin. Possibly for this very reason Colonel Loman first took Yesenin to Grand Duchess Elizaveta Fyodorovna, a fierce opponent of Rasputin. But Yusupov killed Rasputin. Then came the February Revolution, then October.

The poet Klyuev, who had become Yesenin's friend back in pre-revolutionary days, from the time of readings before the Grand Duchess, hardly resembled, by his moral qualities, a Vyazemsky at Pushkin's side.

In 1923, Klyuev is a failure, he is not being published, he is jealous of Yesenin's fame. But he turns out to be an excellent provocateur.

> "The yids don't let us get published. The yids rule Russia, that's why I don't like yids," Klyuev used to say.

From the interrogation record of Yesenin at the 47th Moscow police station, November 21, 1923:

> "I was sitting in a beer hall with friends, we were talking about Russian literature. I noticed a guy who was listening in on our conversation. I told my friend to pour beer into his ear. After that the guy got up, left and called the police.
>
> We only mentioned Jews in the sense that they are not the masters of Russian literature and that they understand it a thousand times worse than the black market, where a large percentage of Jews are present as specialists.
>
> I plead guilty to the insult. The insult was expressed with the words 'kike mug'. I did not say anything about pogroms against Jews."

After that there was a comrades' court at the House of the Press. They issued a public reprimand, even though, in the mid-1920s, anti-Semitism was already a serious crime.

After the trial, Yesenin said:

> "What, did they gang up on me or something? Anti-Semite, anti-Semite! But my children are Jews."

Nadezhda Volpin recalls:

> "I often heard him say that Raikh was a Jewess, and Duncan too."

He met the famous dancer Isadora Duncan in 1921 in the studio of the artist Yakulov on Bolshaya Sadovaya Street, in the house that would later become the setting of Bulgakov's "bad apartment." That evening Duncan did not sit down to dinner with everyone, but settled on a couch in the next room.

A man in a grey suit suddenly rushed through, almost knocking over the guests. He shouted:

> "Where is Duncan, where is Duncan?"

It was Yesenin.

Yesenin fell out with Duncan after their trip to the United States, in Paris.

From the States he wrote to Marienhof:

> "Apart from the Russian language, I acknowledge no other, and I conduct myself in such a way that, if anyone is curious to talk to me, let him learn Russian."

In Paris there was a tremendous scandal in the hotel with Duncan: he smashed mirrors and furniture. He was arrested, released with Duncan's help, and went to Germany.

In Paris, in a restaurant, he mocked the Russian officers who were now working as waiters. He demanded that they drink to Soviet Russia.

In Berlin, at an evening of émigré writers, he demanded that they sing “The Internationale.” And when someone asked who in Moscow was interested in poetry, he replied:

> “Maybe only girls. And then — Jewish girls.”

People recall that in his mouth this sounded plaintive and tender.

Duncan came to him in Germany. Together they returned to Moscow.

> “Yes, she loved me very much, and I know — she still loves me. She said I resembled her dead son. There is much tenderness in her.”

This is what he told Galina Benislavskaya. He said:

> “I have beaten two women, Zinaida and Isadora, and I couldn’t do otherwise; for me, love is such a torment.”

He said that it was Duncan who had sent him to the psychiatric clinic on Polyanka Street. In that clinic he began an article, a draft of which survived:

> “Russians! There has never been a more disgusting and vile time in literary life than the time in which we live. The country’s dire condition in these years has brought to the fore sergeants-majors of the revolution who have merits before the proletariat, but not the slightest ones before art.”

In April 1924, in Leningrad, Yesenin drops in on his friend Wolf Ehrlich on Basseinaya Street:

> “You know, Klyuev gave me a ring. A fine ring, very old, from Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich.”

He lays his hands on the table. A large copper ring is on the thumb of his right hand. Just like Alexander Sergeyevich. In Tropinin’s portrait, Pushkin wears a ring on the thumb of his right hand. For Pushkin the ring is not a decoration but a talisman.

Probably Yesenin went to the Caucasus following in Pushkin’s footsteps. Or perhaps he went there for a completely different reason.

In the 1950s the poet Boris Pasternak told Olga Ivinskaya that one day he, Pasternak, Mayakovsky and Yesenin had been invited to the Kremlin. Stalin had spoken separately with each of them. The subject was translating Georgian poets into Russian.

In September, Yesenin drops everything and goes first to Baku, then to Tiflis, then back to Baku.

At that time the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Azerbaijan Communist Party (Bolsheviks) is Sergei Kirov. A year and a half later he will be transferred to Leningrad to replace Zinoviev. At Kirov’s in Baku, Yesenin meets Mikhail Frunze, who will soon replace Trotsky as Defense Commissar.

Later, at Kirov’s, Yesenin will read poems from his new cycle *Persian Motifs*. He was not allowed into Persia, just like Pushkin. They could have. The Soviet residency in Persia at that time was headed by Yesenin’s friend — the same Yakov Blumkin.

From Baku, Yesenin comes to Moscow for a month. During that month he meets Tolstoy's granddaughter and namesake of his grandmother, Sofia Andreyevna Tolstaya. He steals her away from Boris Pilnyak and announces her as his fiancée.

A year later Boris Pilnyak will write *The Tale of the Unextinguished Moon*, about the story of the unexpected death of Defense Commissar Mikhail Frunze. In 1925 everyone was discussing Frunze's death, in 1926 they were discussing Pilnyak's book. Yesenin cried when he heard of Frunze's death. Pilnyak will be shot in 1938.

Yesenin often told his friends:

> "You know, I'm married! Isn't that wonderful? Sergei Yesenin is married to Leo Tolstoy's granddaughter!"

The biting Marienhof writes:

> "Sofia Andreyevna Tolstaya, Leo Nikolaevich's granddaughter, looks like her grandfather to an unimaginable degree. Only the bald head and beard are missing."

Sofia Andreyevna herself writes:

> "Sometimes I think I am the happiest woman in the world, and I wonder — why?"

A friend asks Yesenin:

— Sergei Alexandrovich, what's the matter with you?
— You know, I live with a woman I do not love.
— Then why did you marry her?
— Well… why? Out of spite. That's how it turned out.

And Sofia Andreyevna writes that autumn in a letter:

> "He seems to look a little better. But in general he is delicate, and my heart aches for him."

The critic Alexander Voronsky recalls:

> "On a frosty winter night on Tverskaya Street, I saw Yesenin climbing out of a sleigh. He was wearing a top hat and a Pushkin-style cape. He carefully wrapped himself up in it. He was sober. I asked: 'What does all this mean, why this masquerade?'
>
> He smiled: 'I want to look like Pushkin, the best poet in the world.' And, paying the cabman, he added: 'I'm terribly bored.'"

And to Nadezhda Volpin, the mother of his son, he had already said:

> "To truly fall in love! Or maybe catch typhus!"

Doctors used to say that typhus renews not only the body but also the soul — if you survive.