

## “I have woven for them a great shroud / Out of poor words”: Moral Witnessing and the Literature of Testimony During Stalin’s Great Purges

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In *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, Jay Winter coined the term “moral witness.” Moral witnesses, Winter writes, are “storytellers of a special kind,” those who have experienced “radical evil” and traumatic events that have defined their lives.<sup>1</sup> Having endured these experiences, moral witnesses feel compelled to speak on behalf of those who perished and correct inaccurate or sanitized images in public memory. Winter notes that moral witnesses thus bear a double burden: both that of their “knowledge of acquaintance by suffering” and that of the personal risks they take in speaking out about their profound suffering.<sup>2</sup> And yet, he suggests, something of the moral witnesses’ survival depends on their ability to tell their story; storytelling, after all, is predicated on an act of hopefulness that someone else will listen and remember.<sup>3</sup>

In *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub further explore the intersection between moral witnessing and literature in Holocaust writing. The authors assert that the Holocaust is an event whose history is “not simply omnipresent...in all our cultural activities, but whose traumatic consequences are still *actively evolving* in today’s political, historical, cultural, and artistic scene.”<sup>4</sup> While Felman and Laub focus on the Holocaust, in this paper, I will illustrate how the spectre of Stalin’s Great Terror of 1937-1938 haunts Soviet literature, as both writers and citizens were transformed into moral witnesses through their documentation of it. This essay will analyze the act of testimony in response to the Great Terror through three primary literary forms: the poet Anna Akhmatova’s *Requiem*, Lidiia Chukovskaya’s novella *Sofia Petrovna*; and the diaries of Alexei Arzhilovsky, Lyubov Shaporina, Vladimir Stavsky, and Stepan Podlubny. In doing so, I will argue, in the vein of Felman and Laub, that the literature of testimony is a critical lens through

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 238-239.

<sup>2</sup> Winter, *Remembering War*, 240-241.

<sup>3</sup> Winter, *Remembering War*, 240-241.

<sup>4</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), XIV.

which subsequent generations can relate to—and come to terms with—this historical trauma on both personal and national fronts.

Among the most notable works composed on the Great Terror is Anna Akhmatova's poetic cycle *Requiem*. Written over three decades, between 1935 and 1961, it is the fruit of the author's long struggles against the forces of totalitarianism.<sup>5</sup> A previously renowned poet, Akhmatova fell out of favour with contemporary Soviet tastes after the 1917 revolutions, causing her career to suffer. More painfully still, her ex-husband Nikolay Gumilov was arrested and executed by the Cheka in 1921 after being accused of counter-revolutionary activity.<sup>6</sup> His death placed a stigma on both Akhmatova (whose poetry was later unofficially banned) and their son, Lev.<sup>7</sup> Despite these challenges, Akhmatova termed the 1920s her "Vegetarian Years," in contrast to the bloodier decade of the 1930s, which saw Lev imprisoned while Akhmatova herself barely escaped arrest on several occasions as her literary circles were increasingly persecuted.<sup>8</sup> As her friend and fellow author Lidiia Chukovskaya writes, during this time Akhmatova was destitute, with little food and money.<sup>9</sup> Her literary career had stalled: she neither published nor gave public readings, though Nadezhda Rykova notes that many still remembered her work.<sup>10</sup>

Not only did Akhmatova face day-to-day challenges alongside the repression of her literary career, but she was also spending hours each day lining up outside of Leningrad's Kresty Prison in order to hear news of her son, who was arrested in 1937 and held there for seventeen months.<sup>11</sup> These experiences would form the backdrop of *Requiem*, a poem that broke Akhmatova's literary silence of thirteen years.<sup>12</sup> *Requiem* is a cycle of fifteen poems and a prose paragraph that not only articulates Akhmatova's personal trials but, crucially, reaches beyond the author's lived experiences to memorialize the Great Terror and its victims against cultural amnesia. As such, the poem serves as testimony and embodies the poet's profound act of moral witnessing.

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<sup>5</sup> David N. Wells, *Anna Akhmatova: Her Poetry* (Oxford: Berg, 1996), 69.

<sup>6</sup> Roberta Reeder, *Anna Akhmatova: Poet and Prophet*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 155-156.

<sup>7</sup> Reeder, *Anna Akhmatova*, 202.

<sup>8</sup> Reeder, *Anna Akhmatova*, 191.

<sup>9</sup> Lidia Chukovskaya, *The Akhmatova Journals Volume I: 1938-1941*, translated by Milena Michalski and Sylvia Rubasheva, (London: HarperCollins, 1994), 8-10.

<sup>10</sup> Reeder, *Anna Akhmatova*, 192.

<sup>11</sup> Sharon M. Bailey, "An Elegy For Russia: Anna Akhmatova's *Requiem*," *The Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (1999), 324.

<sup>12</sup> Galina Rylkova, *The Archeology of Anxiety: The Russian Silver Age and its Legacy* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2007), 72.

Poetry is a key lens through which historical trauma can be framed. In *Testimony*, Felman touches specifically on the significance of poetic testimony concerning the verse of Stéphane Mallarmé, who, in an 1895 lecture at the University of Oxford, presciently addressed concerns that would gain added relevance in a post-Holocaust world: namely, the importance of “testimony of an accident” that “pursues” its witness.<sup>13</sup> Felman suggests that his ideas can be extended to the relationship between witnessing and the act of composing verse.<sup>14</sup> Key to “the accident” are two intertwined notions: first, that its impacts are not yet fully understood but continue to evolve “even in the process of the testimony.”<sup>15</sup> Also important is the witness’ pursuit of it: if accidents pursue witnesses, Mallarmé suggests, they are “compelled and bound” by testimony, while if witnesses pursue accidents, “a liberation can proceed.”<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, Felman argues that, for Mallarmé, the witness is transformed into a “medium of testimony.”<sup>17</sup>

Using this framework, I suggest that through the writing of *Requiem*, Akhmatova was both pursued by and in pursuit of an “accident” — the Great Terror — and becomes a medium of testimony. Lev’s internment implicated Akhmatova in the fabric of the story she tells, as one of the hundreds of women lined up outside of Kresty Prison. As such, the poem articulates Akhmatova’s own lived experiences: “My friends of those two years I stood / In hell—oh all my chance friends lost / Beyond the circle of the moon, I cry / Into the blizzards of the permafrost: / Goodbye. Goodbye.”<sup>18</sup> Although *Requiem* stems from personal experience, it is not merely an individual’s account of suffering. Lev is only featured in a few oblique lines, along with the similarly spectral presences of the murdered Gumilev and Mandelshtam. Instead, Akhmatova uses her vulnerability—which for Felman is a key connection between poetry and witnessing—to access reality through the wounds inflicted by it.<sup>19</sup>

Akhmatova is not merely “pursued” by the “accident” of the Terror; by establishing herself as the “Madonna, or village wailer,” she becomes the “pursuer” who fights to memorialize a shared experience of trauma.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in the prose paragraph that opens the

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<sup>13</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 19-21.

<sup>15</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 21-22.

<sup>16</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> Anna Akhmatova, *Requiem and Poem Without a Hero*, translated by D.M. Thomas, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018), 24.

<sup>19</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 28-29.

<sup>20</sup> Reeder, *Anna Akhmatova*, 212.

poem, Akhmatova portrays herself as one who is called upon to compose the work: a woman “with blue lips” asks her: “‘Can you describe this?’ And I said: ‘Yes, I can.’ And then something like the shadow of a smile crossed what had once been her face.”<sup>21</sup> Here, the recognition of Akhmatova as a well-known poet humanizes both her and the unknown woman, who breaks out of her stupor to offer the “shadow of a smile.” Through the writing of *Requiem*, then, Akhmatova becomes a witness to her own private suffering and that of the broader national tragedy.

*Requiem* lacks a defining plot, instead articulating organic cycles of grief. In *Requiem*, however, the broken stanzas are made whole again—united through accounts of the shared experiences of women in the prison lines and especially through Akhmatova’s commitment to remembrance: “And I pray not only for myself, / But also for all those who stood there / In bitter cold, or in the July heat, / Under that red blind prison-wall.”<sup>22</sup> These lines are at once an act of memory for the hardships of her fellow women but also an act of faith in the power of writing itself; the poem becomes a monument that allows the freeing power of verse to transcend the suffering it details. Looking back at herself as a witness who has undergone a personal transformation, Akhmatova considers the possibility of a memorial dedicated to her and suggests that such a statue should, as a rebuke against forgetting, be placed at the site of Kretsy Prison, “where I stood for three hundred hours / And where they never, never opened the doors for me.”<sup>23</sup> Ultimately, Akhmatova’s poetic vocation acted as a moral witness to the sufferings wrought by the Great Terror.

Akhmatova was not alone in the preservation of this poetic monument, as her output during the Great Purges “had only a tenuous claim on existence,” and her poems could never be written down due to their “dangerous” content.<sup>24</sup> As Kathleen Parthé asserts, the Soviet government viewed as dangerous those texts that failed to cultivate national values articulated in the state-sanctioned Socialist Realist style.<sup>25</sup> Certainly, *Requiem*’s direct critique of the Great Purges would have had profound consequences for its composer, of which she was well aware:

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<sup>21</sup> Akhmatova, *Requiem*, 23.

<sup>22</sup> Akhmatova, *Requiem*, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Akhmatova, *Requiem*, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Nancy K. Anderson, *The Word That Causes Death’s Defeat: Poems of Memory* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 82.

<sup>25</sup> Kathleen Parthé, *Russia’s Dangerous Texts: Politics Between the Lines* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 44-45.

the paranoid Akhmatova refused to “recite her poems aloud, even in her apartment.”<sup>26</sup> However, her call to witness was so strong that she worked around these repressive forces and found another conduit for saving her work: oral transmission. In drawing upon the oral and memory gifts of members of the intelligentsia, especially those of Lidiia Chukovskaya, *Requiem* was preserved for decades.<sup>27</sup>

As Dori Laub notes, listeners play an essential role in the act of moral witnessing. Witnessing relies upon a listener, whose role is not passive: rather, listeners “come to be...co-owner[s] of the traumatic event: through [their] very listening, [they] come to partially experience trauma in and of [themselves].”<sup>28</sup> The testimony, he writes, is no “monologue” but instead a bonding with an “other.”<sup>29</sup> In several entries in the *Akhmatova Journals*, Lidiia Chukovskaya touches upon this very interplay in her descriptions of how Akhmatova’s poems were preserved through oral memorization.<sup>30</sup> In this way, Chukovskaya (and others) saved *Requiem* through their own faculties of personal memory, bolstering a work that speaks to national moral remembrance through the act of listening.<sup>31</sup>

However, unlike Laub’s case studies, those who memorized *Requiem* did not stand outside of the events they helped witness. Ultimately, the great personal risks they undertook to save Akhmatova’s work are acts of moral witnessing that parallel the writer’s and embody the profound responsibility that Leon Weliczer Wells outlined in his 1961 Eichmann trial testimony, in which he spoke of “will of responsibility” and the need for “somebody...to remain to tell the world” the truth of what had happened.<sup>32</sup> As such, they too become part of the fabric of the poem-monument itself.

Lidiia Chukovskaya was a younger contemporary of Akhmatova’s, and she was both the author’s mentee and her first biographer. Interestingly, Beth Holmgren notes that, before the Great Terror, Chukovskaya did not “establish [herself] as a writer prior to the Stalinist period [...] [she] willingly served and conceived of [herself] as a caretaker for repressed artists.”<sup>33</sup> The trauma engendered by Chukovskaya’s personal experience of loss under Stalin

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<sup>26</sup> Anderson, *Death’s Defeat*, 82.

<sup>27</sup> Anderson, *Death’s Defeat*, 82-83.

<sup>28</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 57.

<sup>29</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 70-71.

<sup>30</sup> Lidiia Chukovskaya, *The Akhmatova Journals Volume I: 1938-1941*, translated by Milena Michalski and Sylvia Rubasheva, (London: HarperCollins, 1994), 6.

<sup>31</sup> Anderson, *Death’s Defeat*, 83.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Winter, *Remembering War*, 260.

<sup>33</sup> Beth Holmgren, *Women’s Works in Stalin’s Time*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 25.

ultimately pushed her to write her most exceptional works. Indeed, the Purges decimated both Chukovskaya's personal and professional circles: the editorial section that she worked for was shut down, and most of her coworkers were fired.<sup>34</sup> Meanwhile, her husband Matvei Petrovich Bronshtein was arrested in 1937 and executed the following year.<sup>35</sup> Like Akhmatova, she barely escaped arrest twice.<sup>36</sup> It was while she was waiting for news from her husband that she composed her magnum opus — the novella *Sofia Petrovna*.<sup>37</sup>

At the outset, *Sofia Petrovna* touches upon similar themes to *Requiem*. Both centre on the experiences of women whose lives have been indelibly marked by the Great Purges. The titular character, Sofia Petrovna, has her world shattered when her beloved only son Koyla is accused of treachery and arrested. In attempting to reconcile her faith in her son's innocence with her confidence in the Soviet Regime, Sofia suffers a psychotic break as her personal and career crumble around her, and the novella's closing scene is one of surrender and despair.

Unlike Akhmatova, however, Chukovskaya's artistic process is accidental — she is not “called upon” to testify like her mentor, but she cannot help but record some aspect of the events that unfold around her. Chukovskaya's humility and attentiveness are also underscored in the preface: she predicts that Russian literature “will turn often” to the Great Terror and works will be composed by those with “greater analytic skill and greater artistic talent.”<sup>38</sup> Yet she identifies a key dimension of *Sofia Petrovna* that will make it even more important than these later, more sophisticated works: it was actually composed during the period it seeks to capture.<sup>39</sup> In the final paragraph of the preface, Chukovskaya harnesses the language of moral witnessing to assert the validity of her experiences: “Let my *Sofia Petrovna* speak today as a voice from the past, the tale of a witness striving...to discern and record the events which occurred before his eyes.”<sup>40</sup> This passage directly echoes several of the key elements of moral witnessing, in which individuals “claim the status of truth-tellers, with a story to tell and retell” and are “determined to stop others from lying about the past or from sanitizing it.”<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Holmgren, *Women's Works*, 41.

<sup>35</sup> Holmgren, *Women's Works*, 41.

<sup>36</sup> Holmgren, *Women's Works*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Holmgren, *Women's Works*, 42.

<sup>38</sup> Holmgren, *Women's Works*, 1-2.

<sup>39</sup> Holmgren, *Women's Works*, 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> Holmgren, *Women's Works*, 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> Winter, *Remembering War*, 240.

That Lidiia Chukovskaya was driven to speak out about the grim truth of the Great Purges is clear. Why, however, would she choose fiction as the medium for her story—a genre that is notoriously slippery when it comes to ideals of “truth?” Why not, as others did, write an autobiography or work on a diary? On a literary level, the fictional elements of *Sofia Petrovna* serve an important allegorical function; Beth Holmgren notes that the story begins seemingly as a Socialist Realist work, featuring a relatable “Soviet everywoman.”<sup>42</sup> Sofia Petrovna is not a particularly remarkable heroine, but a typist who initially exemplifies many of the feminine qualities valued by the Soviet regime — especially “loyalty” and “obedient service.”<sup>43</sup> However, Chukovskaya uses Sofia’s ordinariness to cleverly undercut the Soviet regime. First, by demonstrating how prioritizing these qualities has left the protagonist with “no grounds for resistance,” setting up the devastating scene that closes the novella.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, Sofia’s suffering effectively demonstrates the devastation wrought by the Great Terror — including on the “ordinary people” it proclaimed to uplift. In this way, Holmgren writes, Chukovskaya draws on the Russian trope of the “little man,” where it is precisely the simple, limited perspective of a character that provides the most trenchant social critique.<sup>45</sup> Where Akhmatova self-consciously sought to create a literary monument, Chukovskaya attends to the particularity of one woman’s experiences. As such, fiction serves as a convenient medium for relaying the story Chukovskaya sought to tell.

Chukovskaya was not, of course, the only writer to use fiction as a conduit for moral witnessing. In *Testimony*, Shoshana Felman uses Albert Camus’ novel *The Plague* to interrogate the relationship between narrative and history, especially as it relates to the Holocaust.<sup>46</sup> She observes that *The Plague* presents itself as a “pure chronicle” where “acting” and “seeing” are conflated to become “testimony”: “The Plague (The Holocaust) is disbelieved because it does not enter, and cannot be framed by, any existing frame of reference.”<sup>47</sup> Stalin’s Great Terror had arguably a similarly totalizing effect on its victims, many of whom, like the fictional Sofia Petrovna, could not conceive of the actuality of what was happening to them. By Chukovskaya’s own admission, Sofia Petrovna serves as an allegory for the Soviet people who

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<sup>42</sup> Holmgren, *Women’s Works*, 51.

<sup>43</sup> Holmgren, *Women’s Works*, 55.

<sup>44</sup> Holmgren, *Women’s Works*, 55.

<sup>45</sup> Holmgren, *Women’s Works*, 55.

<sup>46</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 93-95.

<sup>47</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 103.

cannot “make sense of deliberately planned chaos.”<sup>48</sup> As such, the Great Terror has several key parallels with the Holocaust: that it was a bureaucratically organized set of events, one in which individuals were “cut off” from everyone else through a “wall of terror”<sup>49</sup> that fundamentally obliterated prior notions of “truth,” “narrative,” and “history.”

Chukovskaya’s act of witnessing employs an “imaginative” medium like fiction to testify on the “unimaginable.”<sup>50</sup> As Felman writes, by “bearing witness to the body,” literary writing “transforms history” from being an abstraction whose ideological or administrative processes render death “invisible.”<sup>51</sup> In *Sofia Petrovna*, the protagonist’s body is deeply implicated; she privately repeats Soviet propaganda to herself, and in doing so suffers from a nervous breakdown. Given the depth of Chukovskaya’s critique of the Great Terror, both as an event that marked a historical rupture and the institutions that orchestrated it, it is unsurprising that the novella was not released in the Soviet Union until 1988.<sup>52</sup>

Verse and fiction were not the only literary forms to serve as avenues of moral testimony, however. Diary-writing was also an important medium. Diaries are intriguing genres, ones that, in the words of Véronique Garros et al., articulate a “space of tension between different—often heterogeneous—times, between the personal, the intimate, sometimes the bodily, and the social.”<sup>53</sup> Given their form’s intense privacy and intimacy, everything that comprises a diary has meaning—the content, style, delivery, and understanding of time, revealing what Garros et al. call the “quivers of the soul.”<sup>54</sup>

While diary-writing, as a private, individual expression of consciousness, might initially seem at odds with the Soviet project, the Bolsheviks initially encouraged diary-keeping in their revolutionary soldiers as a form of political education.<sup>55</sup> In the following decade, there is evidence to suggest that diaries were used in the school system as a teaching tool.<sup>56</sup> The medium was also of great interest to left-wing artists and was widely encouraged among

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<sup>48</sup> Lidia Chukovskaya, *Sofia Petrovna*, translated by Aline Werth (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 112.

<sup>49</sup> Chukovskaya, *Sofia Petrovna*, 112.

<sup>50</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 105.

<sup>51</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 108.

<sup>52</sup> Holmgren, *Women’s Works*, 58.

<sup>53</sup> Véronique Garros, Natalia Korenevskaya, and Thomas Lahusen, *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s*, translated by Carol A. Flath (New York: The New Press, 1995), XIV.

<sup>54</sup> Garros, Korenevskaya, and Lahusen, *Intimacy and Terror*, XIV.

<sup>55</sup> Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 38.

<sup>56</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 41.



workers.<sup>57</sup> However, Jochen Hellbeck notes that, in the 1930s, it “remained a matter of doubt whether the diary was a suitable tool for self-training and individualization in a Soviet setting,” with some activists suggesting that diary-writing was a useless, solipsistic exercise and that individuals should define themselves instead through work and actions.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, while pedagogues had been the primary interpreters of diaries in the preceding decades, during the 1930s, this task was assumed by the NKVD.<sup>59</sup> Much like the pedagogues before them, the NKVD believed that the diaries revealed something true about their writers: as such, they were closely examined for “counter-revolutionary” content.<sup>60</sup>

Indeed, Andrei Arzhilovsky was arrested and executed, in part, for the content of his diary; his life story is a testament to the decades of upheaval that followed the revolutions of 1917 and subsequent Soviet regimes.<sup>61</sup> Arzhilovsky got into trouble with the authorities several times over the course of his life; he was first arrested by the Cheka in 1919, liberated from prison in 1923, accused of counter-revolutionary activity in 1929, and interned in a labour camp for seven years before being released due to poor health.<sup>62</sup> He was arrested for the third time in 1937 and subsequently executed.<sup>63</sup>

Despite the inherently private nature of diaries, and the trauma he endured, Arzhilovsky wanted to preserve some sense of the past (and his own story) for future generations. In the diary’s first entry in 1936, he writes: “I feel the need to salvage something in my memory...and get as much as I can down on paper.”<sup>64</sup> It is, in large part, traumatic memories that Arzhilovsky commits to paper; he addresses his “recollections of the camps” first.<sup>65</sup> He critiques the harsh rejection of Imperial Russian culture, juxtaposing Soviet slogans about life having become “better” and “happier” under Stalin with images of his own family’s day-to-day suffering.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 42-43.

<sup>58</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 47-48.

<sup>59</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 48.

<sup>60</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution On My Mind*, 50.

<sup>61</sup> Garros, Korenevskaya, and Lahusen, *Intimacy and Terror*, 111.

<sup>62</sup> Garros, Korenevskaya, and Lahusen, 111-112.

<sup>63</sup> Garros, Korenevskaya, and Lahusen, 111-112.

<sup>64</sup> Andrei Stepanovich Arzhilovsky, “The Diary of Andrei Stepanovich Arzhilovsky,” in *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s*, edited by Véronique Garros, Natalia Korenevskaya, and Thomas Lahusen, (New York: The New Press, 1995), 112.

<sup>65</sup> Arzhilovsky, “The Diary of Andrei Stepanovich Arzhilovsky,” 112.

<sup>66</sup> Arzhilovsky, “The Diary of Andrei Stepanovich Arzhilovsky,” 131.

Lyubov Shaporina also addresses some of these traumatic themes in her diary. Shaporina was an immediate witness to the devastation wrought by the Great Purges on intellectual and artistic circles.<sup>67</sup> Yet her diary does not merely chronicle people's suffering; Shaporina also deals with her own personal grief at having lost her only daughter, and implicitly dedicates the diary to her.<sup>68</sup> Shaporina acknowledges that in shared suffering that she can connect with others: "I've lost my interest in other people. Only when someone suffers some misfortune that I feel the need to help, I feel closer to that person."<sup>69</sup> In some ways, Shaporina's willingness to stare into the "gloom of the abyss" makes her the moving narrator of the trauma of the times.<sup>70</sup> Shaporina's view of the political and social realities of her time is rooted both in nihilism and history. While she writes that it is "better to die than to live in continual terror, in abject poverty, starving,"<sup>71</sup> she also places herself within history, writing that she "keeps getting the feeling" that she is within Bryullov's painting *Pompeii's Last Day*.<sup>72</sup> Even as this allusion suggests continuity with the past, with its dramatization of scenes of terror and destruction, Shaporina highlights the extraordinary nature of these years, for which there is no historical precedent: "NEVER in the world have people and parties struggling among themselves worked to destroy their own homeland."<sup>73</sup> She critiques at various moments the sham elections and baseless arrests—even naming Yagoda and Yezhov for their roles in the Great Purge.<sup>74</sup>

Furthermore, Shaporina's diary is an emotional portrait of "life in the slaughterhouse"<sup>75</sup> where the routine of violence had assumed a disturbingly quotidian form: "The nausea rises to my throat when I hear how calmly people can say it: he was shot, someone else was shot, shot, shot...I think that the real meaning of the word doesn't reach our consciousness—all we hear is the sound."<sup>76</sup> Given that both the Shaporina and Arzhilovsky diaries were private and unpublished, both were clearly composed in part to process and move

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<sup>67</sup> Garros, Korenevskaya, and Lahusen, *Intimacy and Terror*, 333.

<sup>68</sup> Garros, Korenevskaya, and Lahusen, 333.

<sup>69</sup> Lyubov Vasilievna Shaporina, "Diary of Lyubov Vasilievna Shaporina, Notebook 1: 1935-1937" in *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s*, edited by Véronique Garros, Natalia Korenevskaya, and Thomas Lahusen (New York: The New Press, 1995), 363.

<sup>70</sup> Shaporina, "Diary of Lyubov Vasilievna Shaporina," 352.

<sup>71</sup> Shaporina, "Diary of Lyubov Vasilievna Shaporina," 366.

<sup>72</sup> Shaporina, "Diary of Lyubov Vasilievna Shaporina," 352.

<sup>73</sup> Shaporina, "Diary of Lyubov Vasilievna Shaporina," 358.

<sup>74</sup> Shaporina, "Diary of Lyubov Vasilievna Shaporina," 358.

<sup>75</sup> Shaporina, "Diary of Lyubov Vasilievna Shaporina," 359.

<sup>76</sup> Shaporina, "Diary of Lyubov Vasilievna Shaporina," 352.

through individual traumas and grief. Yet both works also make explicit reference for the need to preserve memory in writing, an ideology they attribute to earlier generations. Shaporina writes that she does not fear death but that the things that she “cherishes” will be “discarded, burned, and given away to strangers.”<sup>77</sup> Arzhilovksy and Shaporina also share a concern for the younger generation, and the ways in which their environment has warped their lives and minds.

Both diaries can thus be read as indicative of their authors’ desire to leave something of themselves that will survive them through writing that may ultimately have pedagogical value. As such, they too are acts of moral witnessing, albeit ones that lack the monumentality of literary works like *Requiem* and *Sofya Petrovna*. The diaries also represent their writers’ struggles against “entrapment,” which occurs, according to Dori Laub, when individuals are subject to “ceaseless repetitions and reenactments” of their trauma.<sup>78</sup> In writing their diaries, Arzhilovsky and Shaporina “construct a narrative, reconstruct a history [...] and, essentially, re-externalize [...] the event” and in so doing are able to “transmit” their stories before taking them back within themselves.<sup>79</sup>

Diaristic writing, then, is a therapeutic act that may assert the individual’s identity and experiences within a totalizing regime. However, diaries are also fascinating for what their writers choose to omit. The final section of this paper will consider two diaries that alternately demonstrate both the failure to witness (and, by extension, to acknowledge guilt) and how the preservation of a diary may serve as an act of sorrow and contrition.

Vladmir Stavsky occupied an important place in Soviet society, one that existed at the junction between state politics and literature; in 1937, he was General Secretary of the Union of Soviet Writers and Chief Editor of the journal *Noyvi mir*.<sup>80</sup> The Writer’s Union had a troubled and complex place in society. John and Carol Garrard note that it “simultaneously acted as an agency of Stalin’s Terror against its own members, and as a cornucopia of privileges and luxuries.”<sup>81</sup> This tension is well personified in Stavsky, whose diary at once demonstrates his social privileges and political anxieties, yet who remains silent on the actions that gave him

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<sup>77</sup> Shaporina, “Diary of Lyubov Vasilievna Shaporina,” 339.

<sup>78</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 68-69.

<sup>79</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 68-69.

<sup>80</sup> Garros, Korenevskaya, and Lahusen, *Intimacy and Terror*, 219.

<sup>81</sup> John Garrard and Carol Garrard, *Inside the Soviet Writer’s Union* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 45.

the moniker of “executioner of Soviet literature.”<sup>82</sup> Stavsky countersigned arrest warrants of members of the Writer’s Union.<sup>83</sup> By December 1938, he had authorized the arrest of hundreds of Union members.<sup>84</sup>

None of this is mentioned in Stavsky’s diary, as he neither defends his actions nor expresses remorse for them. Instead, he turns his attention to recurrent themes: scenes of natural beauty at his dacha, his struggles with alcoholism, and his growing fear and paranoia. In *Testimony*, Felman examines the question of omission through the case study of Paul de Man, a professor who was posthumously revealed to have written for a pro-Nazi journal in his youth.<sup>85</sup> She argues that de Man — even though he never addressed his past directly — spent the latter half of his career “bearing witness” to the “lesson” of totalitarianism by incorporating ideas of the “failed” mute witness into his writing and translation work.<sup>86</sup>

There is little evidence to suggest that Stavsky went to such lengths in his own writing, but his diary nevertheless leaves faint traces of a troubled conscience. For instance, Stavsky’s paranoia speaks to the disquiet that permeated every facet of Soviet life, one that follows him to the natural beauty of his dacha: “Sometimes an oppressive mood takes over me, a feeling that something is going away and leaving, leaving me behind.”<sup>87</sup> Additionally, the command to write — externally from his superiors and internally from himself — is repeated to almost claustrophobic levels: “Everybody is wondering why Stavsky isn’t doing any writing. Why is he silent?”<sup>88</sup> Armed with the context of Stavsky’s actions, the modern reader is compelled to read this acknowledgement of his “silence” on both a literal and a moral level.

Stavsky’s diary is not the only one that engages in acts of omission. The diary of Stepan Podlubny, written between 1931 and 1939, is patchy and riddled with gaps.<sup>89</sup> One such gap is the year 1937 — widely considered to be the apex of the Great Terror. In his first entry of that year, dated December 6, Podlubny addresses this conspicuous omission: “[N]ot a single day of my life this year has been illuminated in this so-called diary... [I’ll] banish it from my

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<sup>82</sup> Garrard and Garrard, *Inside the Soviet Writer’s Union*, 51.

<sup>83</sup> Garrard and Garrard, *Inside the Soviet Writer’s Union*, 51.

<sup>84</sup> Garrard and Garrard, *Inside the Soviet Writer’s Union*, 57.

<sup>85</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 120.

<sup>86</sup> Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 137-139.

<sup>87</sup> Vladimir Petrovich Stavsky. “Diary of Vladimir Petrovich Stavsky” in *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s*, edited by Véronique Garros, Natalia Korenevskaya, and Thomas Lahusen, (New York: The New Press, 1995), 245.

<sup>88</sup> Stavsky, “Diary of Vladimir Petrovich Stavsky,” 230.

<sup>89</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution*, 166.

mind...like a thick blood stain on my clothes.”<sup>90</sup> Given the time of its composition, this passage necessarily references the increasing political violence around Podlubny — at least in part. However, it is also deeply connected to his political and personal past.

Podlubny’s family were Ukrainians who were dekulakized (victims of a repressive Soviet political campaign against prosperous peasants) in 1929, an act that saw his father deported for three years.<sup>91</sup> He and his mother relocated to Moscow, where he began working for the *Pravda* printing plant, became involved with the local Komsomol, and distinguished himself as a model worker and activist while concealing his origins.<sup>92</sup> He was approached in 1932 to work with the Joint State Political Directorate (GPU), the secret police division that sought out opponents of the regime.<sup>93</sup> In his diary entries throughout the early 1930s, Podlubny reveals himself to be a sincere follower of Soviet ideology, one who strives to fulfill his duties as an informer while trying to reinvent himself as a Soviet “New Man.”<sup>94</sup> There is a troubling undercurrent in the diary’s entries, however; even as he seeks to reinvent himself, Podlubny is deeply aware of both his past and the violence that accompanies his denunciations.<sup>95</sup>

The diary entries of 1936 onwards mark an important shift in Podlubny’s writing. Having been exposed as a “class alien” that year, he was expelled from the Komsomol, though he was allowed to remain a student in the medical school.<sup>96</sup> Here, Podlubny begins using his diary to record the regime’s terror. The 1937 entry, then, can be interpreted as a manifestation of lingering guilt over his role in previous repressions. For instance, one recurring image in the entry is that of a noose slowly choking the writer himself.<sup>97</sup> Given his prior experience working with the GPU, Podlubny knew of the violence that was coming.<sup>98</sup> The Purges would reach the Podlubny household in December 1937, when his mother was arrested.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Stepan Filippovich Podlubny, “Diary of Stepan Filippovich Podlubny,” in *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s*, edited by Véronique Garros, Natalia Korenevskaya, and Thomas Lahusen, (New York: The New Press, 1995), 302.

<sup>91</sup> Garros, Korenevskaya, and Lahusen, *Intimacy and Terror*, 291.

<sup>92</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution*, 166.

<sup>93</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution*, 173-175.

<sup>94</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution*, 171.

<sup>95</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution*, 183.

<sup>96</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution*, 211.

<sup>97</sup> Podlubny, “Diary,” 302.

<sup>98</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution*, 214.

<sup>99</sup> Podlubny, “Diary,” 304-305.

In a series of scenes that echo both *Requiem* and *Sofia Petrovna*, Podlubny describes (in an interesting reversal of gender roles) waiting in prison lines, amid many mothers, to hear news of his mother's fate.<sup>100</sup> He learns that she has been sentenced to eight years in prison.<sup>101</sup> Podlubny's final entry for 1938, written after having been allowed to see his mother briefly, is indicative of many of the inner conflicts he experienced during the decade: "Many people have perished in the name of justice, and as long as society exists, people will be struggling for justice. Justice will come. The truth will come."<sup>102</sup> Hellbeck writes that this passage "echoes" the rhetorical devices and language used by revolutionary freedom fighters, ubiquitous in Soviet literature, but is here used against the state.<sup>103</sup> In many ways, these lines articulate the contradictory problems that Podlubny expresses throughout his diary: his sincere desire to reinvent himself on Soviet terms; his collusion with and later victimization by state forces; his "bloodstain" of guilt; and his quest for "justice" that cannot be expressed in a language outside of state rhetoric. These complexities are highlighted again in the tale of the diary's preservation: Podlubny placed it in Moscow's Central Popular Archives as an "act of repentance," but in a later interview, he refused to see himself as anything but a victim of Soviet repressions.<sup>104</sup>

Despite the heavy repressions and control exerted by Soviet authorities on the literary output of the late 1930s, many citizens felt compelled to write. Given the significant personal risks undertaken by the authors—and their representation of Stalin's Great Terror—these pieces are acts of moral witnessing and important examples of what Elie Wiesel termed the literature of testimony. A range of literary forms—verse, fiction, and diaristic writing—reveal different intersections between memory and writing. Collectively, they speak to how this tragic moment in Russian history—one during which "The mountains bow[ed] before this anguish, [and] / The great river d[id] not flow,"<sup>105</sup> in the memorable opening lines of Akhmatova's *Requiem*—was traumatic on both a personal and a national scale.

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<sup>100</sup> Podlubny, "Diary," 314-317.

<sup>101</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution*, 214.

<sup>102</sup> Podlubny, "Diary," 330.

<sup>103</sup> Hellbeck, *Revolution*, 216.

<sup>104</sup> Garros, Korenevskaya, and Lahusen, *Intimacy and Terror*, 219.

<sup>105</sup> Akhmatova. *Requiem*, 24.

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