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Between Space and Time: Conceptualizing Memory in the Archival Novel

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BETWEEN SPACE AND FORM:
CONCEPTUALIZING MEMORY IN THE ARCHIVAL NOVEL

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
Of Bard College

By
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For Ashli Ruiz

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What's past is prologue

—Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

someone will remember us

I say

even in another time

—Sappho, fragment 147

Introduction

For nearly a year now, my mornings have started with Tavernise's¹ voice reporting testimonies of human suffering during the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as I make my coffee. War, a most violent and inhumane rhetorical tool, is Putin's approach towards territorial expansion and human subjugation, as well as one of his many methods to control ideological and historical narratives. Ownership over the collective memory of the former Soviet population seems to be among the top priorities. Last April, Putin signed a federal law that established fines and a penalty of up to 15 days in detention, for anyone who publicly identified the USSR with Nazi Germany, or denied the Soviet Union's "humanitarian mission" during World War II². Before signing this law, he had already banned media outlets from using the words "war" or "invasion", prohibiting the necessary vocabulary to talk about the Russian attacks on Ukraine. Putin's motives to revise history, and the restrictions he has placed on language speak to the prescience and urgency of the volumes I will discuss.

The themes of memory, nostalgia, and trauma, as they are contemplated by the post-Soviet population and diaspora, are central to Maria Stepanova's *In Memory of Memory*, Svetlana Alexievich's *Secondhand Time*, and Masha Gessen's *The Future is History*. Both Gessen and Alexievich arrive at these subjects by their backgrounds in journalism. They approach their nonfiction storytelling by conducting interviews that become the basis for the narratives they tell. Alexievich compiles and arranges the transcriptions of her interviews which she forms into an assemblage, her own "oral history". *The Future is History* combines the

¹ Sabrina Tavernise is a journalist for the New York Times and co-host of the NYT podcast "The Daily"

² US Department of State. "Vladimir Putin's Historical Disinformation." May 6, 2022

devices of a biography and a “Russian novel”. Alongside their own reportage, Gessen recounts the stories from their interviews to trace several lives as they process their experiences in a changing Russia following Perestroika. Stepanova calls *In Memory of Memory* “a romance”, and writes her own meditations on memory alongside that of historical figures and family documents. She is a poet, and she aligns her perspective on the past with her poetic vision: memory as a poem in the making. Each of these works, which I have categorized as “archival novels”, adopt various literary devices to open up dialogues about the wounds inflicted by Soviet terror, the abrupt changes that occurred during Perestroika, and daily life under Putin’s regime. They probe Russian history and society to reveal what Stepanova describes as “a suite of traumas” (76).

What is an Archival Novel?

In *Ficciones de Verdad*, Patricia López-Gay poses the question, “Cómo se transforma con el archivar, si lo hace, la relación entre el recuerdo y el olvido, donde se configura la memoria?”³ (6). If memories gestate in an archival womb, then they also find themselves embodied in Gessen, Alexievich, and Stepanova’s writing. While their overarching subject is the discussion of the past, their archival novels appeal to this topic as containers of memory. The three volumes which I discuss, “are not so much historical as archival: instead of giving us the imagined experience of an event, they offer the ambiguous traces that such events leave behind”, to borrow from Lucy Ives’ language. Archival novels are assembled through the practice of collection. Each of the authors that I contemplate collect voices, stories, scraps, and mimetic objects which they organize into personal and cultural trauma narratives. Alexievich, for example, collects dialogues that she arranges into thematic parts and sections with headings like “conversations from around the table at the wake”, or “as told by her mother”. Gessen compiles the personal

³ “How, if at all, is the relationship between remembering and forgetting transformed by the archive, where memory is configured?”—Translation my own. From “Ficciones de Verdad,” López-Gay, Patricia. Iberoamericana, 2020.

stories of a cast of protagonists, weaving them together where they intersect in surprising and elegant ways. Stepanova, too, is a collector: *In Memory of Memory* is composed as a museum in book-form where she curates ideas, personal documents, and descriptions of objects.

In the essay *Unpacking my Library*, Walter Benjamin claims that “the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories” (2). Archives are the link between collection and memory—they provide the evidence that the past really did happen, that our memories are imagination rooted in truth. The act of collecting which archives require, is itself a process of collective memory-work. Jaques Derrida has stressed that “The question of the archive is not, we repeat, a question of the past” (27). How is it possible that collections of historical documents are not matters of the past? There is an argument to be made that the purpose of memory is to inform our current decision-making in order to orient the future. Much to this effect, Derrida continued that the archive “is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow” (27). The archival novel is a future-oriented style of literature that embodies the structure of a novel, within a framework of collecting. There are many archival novelists whom I have left out of my discussion—W.G. Sebald, Anne Carson, and Bela Shayevich come to mind. They have also developed interesting methods of assemblage such as the inclusion of photographs, translation, and scanned documents within their prose.

A Note on the Selection of Texts

The primary texts which I explore are all written by women and non-binary authors. I was deliberate in my choice to not center men in my discussion of memory, first as a feminist methodological choice (although I do not discuss these archival novels in a mode of feminist

criticism), and second, because historically in Russia, women have been the line of transmission of memory. Eugenia Ginzberg, wrote a first-hand account of her time in the Gulag in her memoir, *Journey into the Whirlwind*. In her epilogue, she wrote that during her time in the prisons, she “strove to remember all these things in the hope of recounting them” (414)⁴. The poet Anna Akhmatova also wrote about her experiences which she knew would hold historical significance. When she wrote *Requiem*, Akhmatova asked her closest female friends to memorize parts of the poem, including her revisions, because Stalin had restricted her freedom to write and publish. As long as the women lived, the poem could be orally transmitted to future generations. The authors which I discuss follow in this tradition.

A Little History

Boym suggests that time itself was re-engineered at the advent of the Soviet Union: “After the October revolution, Soviet leaders performed one invisible nationalization—the nationalization of time. The revolution was presented as the culmination of world history to be completed with the final victory of communism and ‘the end of history’” (Boym 59). Around the same time as the end of the revolution, constructivist artist Aleksandr Rodchenko too declared “I have reduced painting to its logical conclusion ... I affirmed it’s all over”⁵. Of course, neither painting, nor history, has been tied together into such a neat conclusion. The suggestion that the October Revolution marks the culmination of history makes the argument that everything which is to follow must be *absolument moderne*⁶. But newness is as old as history itself. Nonetheless, the unceasing trajectory of time, change, and progress is less significant to Boym’s point. When

⁴Ginzburg, Eugenia. *Journey into the Whirlwind*

⁵Saltz, Jerry. “What the Hell was Modernism”

⁶ See Rimbaud, Arthur.

she examines ‘the end of history’, she conveys that time in the Soviet Union contains a backwards current stuck in one ideological moment.

To contextualize the following chapters, I want to cite an origin myth stemming from Catherine the Great’s policy of imposed homogeneity. During her reign the empress oversaw a period of expansion by both conquest and diplomacy. Belarusians, Ukrainians, and Russians were grouped into one people, and their integration required the absorption and eradication of cultural differences. This process was expedited by a policy of conversion to Christianity, and spawned a historical trend towards national and religious – or, broader, ideological – uniformity. Nearly a century later, the development of “Russification” became characteristic of Alexander III by his determination to enforce the Russian language and Eastern Orthodoxy on the empire’s previously non-Russian Subjects at the expense of cultural diversity, indigenous practices, and the persecution of the Jews. “Reforms” of Alexander III thus marked an even more decisive end of cultural diversity in Russia while cementing the mythology of benevolent homogeneity first perpetuated by Catherine II⁷. As Alexander Etkind suggests, the “conquests” of the Russian empire in the 18th and 19th centuries were conducted within its territorial borders, creating the nation that is, even now, in its Post-Soviet condition, subjected to “internal colonization.”

The bygone history of conquest and domination in Russia prompts me to ask, how can a fabrication of the 18th century become so widespread and entrenched as to motivate contemporary warfare against “brotherly” states, some of them with a Slavic population, and all of them, former Soviet republics or autonomous districts within the USSR? Why do 70-80% of Russian citizens currently support Putin’s war against Ukraine? Is it possible that the myth of national uniformity has replaced both history and memory of Putin’s war ideologues, governmental administrators, supporters, allowing them to justify their leader’s actions and insist

⁷ See Chapter 3 of Fuller, William C. *Strategy and Power in Russia 1600-1914*

on the conquest of Ukraine as every Russian's "patriotic duty"? Can a government actually succeed in controlling memory? Furthermore, can a fictitious historical consciousness be dismantled?

I. MODES OF REMEMBERING IN ALEXIEVICH'S *SECONDHAND TIME* AND STEPANOVA'S *IN MEMORY OF MEMORY*

I don't often visit memory
 And it always surprises me
 – Akhmatova, *The Cellar of Memory*

1.1. Neighbors in Memory

The past is our collective inheritance, and each inhabitant of the present is its guardian. The question of who owns the past, proposed by Maria Stepanova, is challenged by Svetlana Alexievich's storytelling. In her 'oral history', *Secondhand Time* (2013), Alexievich offers the past freely to a multitude of people whom she interviewed to compile a comprehensive picture of the personal and psychological fissures caused by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In *In Memory of Memory* (2017), Stepanova engages the past by contemplating the application of memory to art and literature alongside her own family history, weaving together episodic and semantic memory⁸. The treatment of the past unquestionably leads both writers to conceptualize memory and nostalgia, and, in spite of their shared interest in the past, Alexievich and Stepanova deal with these notions in ways that often diverge from one another. I will explore these writers' works by viewing memory as resistance and as a process, while conceptualizing nostalgia, in line with Svetlana Boym's definition, as "a romance with one's own fantasy"⁹ – a quixotic yearning for the resurrection of the dead.

In this chapter I will examine how Stepanova and Alexievich objectify memories in metaphorical and literal senses. My exploration of *In Memory of Memory* alongside *Secondhand Time* is conducted through the lens of the Soviet Past as a territory, an object, and a process. I

⁸ See Kourkenm Michaelian for a comparison of episodic and semantic memory, where episodic memory is viewed as a mode of mental time-travel.

⁹ See Svetlana Boym's full definition in *The Future of Nostalgia*, p. XIII

believe that both authors use these optical devices either poetically or ekphrastically. The metaphors of “occupation” and “borders” will take the center of my analysis as I look at instances in which the authors depict the past in terms of space. In the two narratives, both tropes figure prominently, and I find it important to compare and clarify them in relation to Stepanova’s and Alexievich’s approaches to the Soviet past in the context of a post-Soviet present. There is value in acknowledging and remembering past horrors, because it is the past which orients the future, as both authors suggest.

In Russia, propaganda once again dominates national history, while protests and truth-tellers are being silenced. Before the war against Ukraine, the Russian non-governmental organization, *Memorial*¹⁰, which sought to archive, collect, and share evidence of Soviet state terror, was ordered to be shut down. By the legislation of various censorship laws,, Putin’s government is locking the doors on history. The weight of memory that clarifies the relation between the present and the past, therefore, again falls on literature which can be dispersed among a population that exists beyond the closed doors and curtained-off borders. It is worthwhile to consider the ways in which memories are processed and shared by those who survived totalitarian oppression or are able to contemplate it at close range. For Stepanova and Alexievich, the question of how memories may affect a reader’s view of the past and vision of the future is not a meaningless one.

The two books expand the genre of documentary prose: they approach narrative as a collage and history, as a collective scrapbook. Newspaper clippings, photographs, and dialogues are pasted onto the page through Stepanova and Alexievich’s language. This corpus of factual

¹⁰ Gessen, Masha. “The Russian Memory Project That Became an Enemy of the State.” *The New Yorker*, 6 Jan. 2022.

and verbal responses provides an astute composition which looks at history through the eyes of the average person. Even when Stepanova writes alongside the ghosts of the 20th century's great thinkers, her storytelling always returns to her own family— a cast remarkable only in that she has documented their lives. Thus, *In Memory of Memory* is at once a memoir, a piece of fiction, an essay, and a work of documentary prose, while *Secondhand Time* is an “oral history” – or a compendium of voices that polyphonically refract and reflect the past. Although willing to pay these genre characteristics their due, I would address the two as “archival novels”¹¹ which piece together monological memorialization and first-hand accounts.

The two archival novels I study place the quotidian aspects of life within the context of “History with a capital H,” to borrow Perec’s phrasing.¹² The documentary inclinations of both Stepanova and Alexievich allow them to create a patchwork of perspectives on it. Stepanova resurrects the words – and the world – of her ancestors by including letters written by them, and Alexievich stitches together interviews and article clippings to form her chronology. Alexievich is the recipient of the monologues of others, and she is also, in the process of compiling her book, the solitary member of their audience. She said, of her process, in a 2017 interview for the *Paris Review*:

I have a different view. From all these fragments, I want to create a novel out of the voices. They were writing oral history. They were writing it down randomly. Like Studs Terkel, the American. He wrote things down. There are many oral historians in America, but my books are made using the rules of novel writing. I have a beginning, a plot, characters.¹³

¹¹ As Lucy Ives defines archival fiction, it “does not focus on fact but on fact's record, the media by which we have any historical knowledge at all. In so doing, such books call the reader's attention to both the problems and the pleasures of history's linguistic remains.”

¹² Perec, Georges, and David Bellos. *W, Or, the Memory of a Childhood: Georges Perec. Transl. by David Bellos*, Godine, Boston, 2010, pp. 6–6.

¹³ Chew, Mieke. “Suitcase Full of Candy: An Interview with Svetlana Alexievich.” *The Paris Review*, 16 Oct. 2017.

When Alexievich applies the conventions of the novel to her archivist process, she acts as a creator of fiction, and thus, as a listener who single-handedly processes the experiences of others.

This is very different from *In Memory of Memory*, where Stepanova places herself in conversation with a broad cast of thinkers, including Susan Sontag, Marina Tsvetaeva, and W.G. Sebald. Stepanova opens a dialogue that seeks not only to remember the unrest of the 20th century, but to also analyze methods of remembering. She speaks predominantly from her own perspective, lingering on different philosophical concepts and works of art. Between her meditations on the subject of memory, she inserts sections titled “Not a Chapter,” which contain primary historical documents – namely, the letters written by her ancestors. In placing these epistles under the title of “Not a Chapter,” Stepanova separates her own words from that which was written before her, in the archival documents, which she restores in her own text. She does not act as a novelist, and instead she acts as a poet and curator of history. She weaves images of the past into her poetic discursions about nostalgia. Alexievich, on the other hand, makes her book entirely out of the voices of others, and, rather than bringing them from the past into the present, she compiles an archive of contemporary narratives who speak of history in the context of their current lives.

Stepanova suggests that the past is an active space independent from the contemporaneous. To her, “the present is so certain that it owns the past, just as once ‘both th’Indias’ were owned” (Stepanova 108). By emphasizing the certainty of the present – *so certain* – she implies that the “present” ought to be less convinced of its ownership of the “past.” What is meant by “ownership of the past” in Stepanova’s work is not immediately clear. I can only assume that what Stepanova means by “ownership of the past” is the conceit of those in the

present that the past can only exist through the people in it. In Stepanova's view, the past has no agency over itself and how it is perceived. She likens the occupation of the past to the colonization of India, and in doing so implies that the past, too, becomes Westernized – it loses its borders, becomes differently paced, and is drawn to eurocentrism.

I will compare her stance to that of the South-African post-colonial critic Achille Mbembe who also speaks of memory in the context of colonization. He describes an example of memory work in which a statue of Cecil Rhodes, a racist mining magnate who used his power to inflict pain on the black population of South Africa, was taken down from the University of Cape town. Mbembe wrote that the removal of monuments is one of the ways which we can “*demythologize that history and put it to rest* – which is precisely the work memory properly understood is supposed to accomplish” (3). For Mbembe,¹⁴ memory work is a physical and literal process that must occur for the sake of justice and futurity. Historical narratives are mythologized and reconstructed by those in positions of power in the present. In order to deconstruct structures of power, the mythologies fabricated by oppressors must be dispelled—such is the task of memory, whose breadth is smaller than History, but is strengthened by its precision and humanist perspective. Unlike Mbembe, Stepanova lingers in memory's lobby, just approaching a process of dismantling the internal structures of historical storytelling.

¹⁴ Achille Mbembe. “Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive”. In *Platform for Experimental Collaborative Ethnography*. <https://worldpece.org/content/mbembe-achille-2015-%E2%80%99Cdecolonizing-knowledge-and-question-archive%E2%80%9D-africa-country> (Date of Access: December 5, 2022). Mbembe provides the following disclaimer: “This document was deliberately written as a spoken text. It forms the basis of a series of public lectures given at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER), University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg), at conversations with the Rhodes Must Fall Movement at the University of Cape Town and the Indexing the Human Project, Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Stellenbosch. The nature of the events unfolding in South Africa, the type of audience that attended the lectures, the nature of the political and intellectual questions at stake required an entirely different mode of address – one that could speak both to reason and to affect.”

However, her very suggestion that the past is a space that can be “owned”, falls into a colonial ontology dictated by the fictive hierarchies set up by those in power.

Both Stepanova and Alexievich seek to demythologize history, and in doing so, deprive structures of Soviet power of their grip on the present. Alexievich’s methodology confronts Stepanova’s approach and transforms it into a chorus of collected voices that are as melodious as they are dissonant. Alexievich wrote that “[she] reminisced alongside [her] protagonists. One of them said, ‘Only a Soviet can understand another Soviet.’ We share a collective memory. We’re neighbors in memory.” (Alexievich 5). In my opinion, this emphasis on memory as a community project performed by “neighbors,” makes Alexievich better suited for discussing the “colonization” of history. Firstly, she comes from Belarus, the territory occupied by the Russian Empire, and then by the Bolsheviks, and, therefore, unlike Stepanova, has a deeper grounding from which to develop her perspective. To me, her work expresses the idea that colonized spaces could have agency over themselves, and should seek such a freedom.

The two authors reflect on memory from the perspective of nostalgia – a mode of writing that has many moods. In *Secondhand Time* and *In Memory of Memory*, nostalgia can be melancholic, wistful, and tender – a phantasmagoric play of innocence and experience. Both archival novels interact with manifestations of memory that are at times romantic, and at other times violent or banal. What has precipitated this type of reflection? The perspective of Alexievich and Stepanova is shaped by the “memory boom,” which, in Russia, occurred at the start of the new Millennium. Svetlana Boym identifies it in *The Future of Nostalgia*:

Perestroika was accompanied by a memory boom, ironic and reflective nostalgia in the arts and a lively debate about the past in the press; the latter was accompanied by a

popular nostalgia either for the nation's past glory or at least for the stability and normality that preceded the epoch of great changes." (66)

As Boym helps us see, both Alexievich and Stepanova write on the cusp of this chasmal political shift. Because Alexievich situates the content of *Secondhand Time* in *Perestroika*, or 'reconstruction' defined as a period of economic chaos and policy reform under Gorbachev that, as many hoped, would bring Russia closer to democratization, her narrative becomes the axis on which tales of the past and ideas of futurity rest. Often, her interlocutors reminisce about an idealized past which felt meaningful and orderly, while others grieve about a period of starvation and persecution. Sometimes the same speaker produces these two responses. This disconcerting response to recent history also figures in Stepanova's archival novel, although more latently. When Stepanova's writing reaches into a further past, recalling WWII as a primary subject of her nostalgic investigation, it ties a larger, global history to her present being.

1.2 Memory as Material Form



There is a photograph by Richard Pare, at MoMA¹⁵, of the experimental housing project Narkomfin, located at 25 Novinski Boulevard, Moscow, Russia. The image depicts a dining room built in 1933, with its peeling robin's egg blue wall, on which hangs a trio of reproductions (one of them, of Raphael's *Sistine Madonna*), and a small tapestry that slopes above a cushioned hearth. On both the table at the foreground of the picture, and the mantel at the back, sit an array of old tchotchkes and kitchenware. The photograph was taken in the nineties, decades after the space was constructed, yet it offers a passage to the aesthetic essence of a different time by the

¹⁵ The photograph is pictured above, and is scanned from p. 24 in *The Lost Vanguard: Russian Modernist Architecture 1922 - 1932*

architecture of the space and the objects arranged within it. Objects change in value as they age, however, they also shift from a functional to an aesthetic and sentimental purpose. Georg Simmel wrote that in holding any antiquity in our hands, “we command in spirit the entire span of time since its inception; the past with its destinies and transformations has been gathered into this instant of an aesthetically perceptible present” (385). Things that have aged, that have shifted in value and purpose, and that are displaced into the present, are materialized in both Alexievich and Stepanova’s writing. As new and cheap objects litter the current moment– “jeans, malboroughs, and chewing gum” (Alexievich 110) – the two authors and their subjects find themselves reflecting on that which is old.

Such contemplation of *things*, speaks to how we think about the past: objects become placeholders for memories. Bruno Latour explained that, “the material world confronts us only to serve as a mirror for social relations and a source of entertainment for sociologists. Of course, it carries meaning, it can receive it, but it does not fabricate it” (19). The objects that become apparent in the Pare photograph, in *Secondhand Time*, and in *In Memory of Memory*, do not create history, nor do they necessarily contain it, but rather they reflect memory back at the reader, viewer, or holder. This is effective in collectivizing memory because the representation of objects in writing and in photography allows these mirrors to reach a wide audience in which each member can witness their own past reflected back into the historical theater. In his analysis of Alexievich within the context of the “literary reportage” genre, John Hartsock wrote that “In an attempt to provide a history of feelings, we see [Alexievich] ... embracing the “sentimental” of Shklovsky derived from the 18th century meaning, one found in the details of the open ended present that seeks to escape tendentiousness” (122). Often the objects in Stepanova’s and Alexievich’s writing undergo a Shklovskian process of defamiliarization. The estrangement of

certain objects, ranging from medals to children's toys, can open a matryoshka set of traumas: they form an asymmetric juxtaposition of the past— a capsule of Soviet terror and nostalgic romances—with the disordered and everchanging present.

The objects in Pare's photograph are compelling not because they are old, but because they are estranged by their existence in the (recent) past, while still verified by the medium of photography. The tchotchkes and their arrangement conjure style and memory, and their decorative functions lie on a spectrum which ranges from holy, to practical, to kitschy. For Stepanova, the same organization happens to her memory. She writes, "After the Soviet Union disappeared, everything began rising up to the surface, objects regained little by little their primary function, and our accumulated and preserved past became once again what it was to begin with: a museum of cultured life at the beginning of the twentieth century" (27-28). Like Alexievich's many speakers, Stepanova also notices the sudden appearance of objects once the Soviet Union and its ideologies have begun to fade. While Alexievich does not curate a museum of objects, she collects dialogues as "raw material"¹⁶ for composing a narrative, and within these voices traces patterns of objects as they appear.

It is important for us to understand why, for both authors, one's effort to freeze the past within a material object, be it symbolic, mimetic, or a tangible souvenir, can evoke kitsch. I add the notion of kitsch to the conversation about memory with apprehension, because it further objectifies the fluid and abstract concept. However, given the trope of a souvenir conceptualized by both Stepanova and Alexievich, I think that it is worthwhile to explore what an idea of an estranged object does within the collective memory narrative. Clement Greenberg writes that "Kitsch is mechanical and operates by formulas. Kitsch is vicarious experience and faked

¹⁶ Hartsock, John C. "The 'Elasticity' of Literary Reportage." *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience*, University of Massachusetts Press, 2016, pp. 82–123. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1hd18zq.8>. Accessed 20 Sep. 2022.

sensations” (10). In this sense, kitsch is inextricably tied to nostalgia: it can create a surrogate impression of an imagined past. When we close-read *In Memory of Memory*, we discover that Stepanova’s metaphorical objects of memory do echo the proliferation of materiality in *Secondhand Time*.

Let us return to the passage from *In Memory of Memory*, which I discussed earlier, where Stepanova compares the past to a colonized territory. She follows this metaphor with a description of a store and the objects in it. Stepanova writes: “How easy it is to be thrilled by the jubilation, the opening of the stores where you can purchase any colonial souvenir from the past and interpret it as you see fit, without even considering what the mask or the rattle meant in its own time and place” (Stepanova 108). In depicting the journey back in time as a visit to a souvenir shop, she suggests that the past can not only be owned, but also colonized and usurped by the objectification of memories and experiences. Her metaphor implies that perhaps today’s time travelers are consumers who are too casual in appropriating the past by transforming into relics something which lacks definite form .

Stepanova’s apparent suspicion of the appropriation and flippant “consumption” of the past is palpable. In contrast to Stepanova, Alexievich views the past as something that cannot stand on its own and may not have the agency to do so. This can be explained by her reliance on a polyphonic chorus of voices to bolster memory. In a 2021 interview, she says that “The most reliable narratives are people's own”¹⁷. For Alexievich, the past rests on the shoulders of those who speak about it. To me, her work is a process of invention of memory, which must be recalled and repeated by as many voices as possible. In Stepanova’s case, the *objet trouve* foraged from the past is categorized into kitsch due to its inherent sentimentality and the formulaic quality of

¹⁷ Haubec, Anne, et al. “Svetlana Alexievich - New Times Will Come.” *Louisiana Museum of Modern Art*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSxx4Vozi5I>.

the objectified past – the “market” in which it is sold. The memories that Stepanova alludes to as “souvenirs” generate precisely the “vicarious experience and faked sensations” that Greenberg describes because they function as place-holders for memory.

Stepanova’s suspicion of memory-work as an appropriation of the past is provocative, but also subversive. She compares the past to land, to an occupied territory. The past is, as Stepanova suggests, a contested space. It is a frontier onto which competing interpreters may project beliefs, values, and generational perspectives. The objects found beyond it contain that same mirroring quality. For Stepanova, objects of the past are sacred and untouchable, and conversely, when “touched” by a casual interpreter, they become desecrated. In Stepanova’s writing, they are made sacred by their relationship to the dead– all the people who can no longer testify for themselves. In *In Memory of Memory*, she writes that “the dead agree to everything we do with them, and with such compliance that it provokes the living to do ever more” (107). She finds that it is more respectful, and therefore correct, to consider what “mask or the rattle meant in its own time and place”, which is to say that one must make an effort to understand an objectified memory by the hands of the dead who can no longer handle or experience it. By choosing to interpret the object “as [we] see fit”, Stepanova suggests that we make the objectified memory kitsch. We relocate it to a new territory of time, or rather, we resettle the past into the present. This resettlement is a process, and, from my perspective, it is also a metaphorical dead end, because it shuts out opportunities to explore the expansive capacity of time.

In the interview cited above, Alexievich said, “There has always been this ingrained idea in people’s minds that books are there to teach you how to live, that they create ideals for you to uphold. Especially in the Soviet times, when they were actually remaking a human being, [...]

literature was there as a major tool of support.”¹⁸ This statement demonstrates that Alexievich forgoes the idea of literature as a didactic form— and relinquishes the notion of support as coming from the writer who may be a teacher or prophet. This is why she collects voices— and leaves them untouched, without objectification. Her work is the work of the organizer of memories. In the act of transcribing stories into a book, she lets human beings see themselves through the colored glass of others’ perspectives. In *Secondhand Time*, in particular, she lets her speakers respond to objects as symbols of memory. As the past in their self reflective narratives begins to spill into the present, it becomes littered with images of salami, lingerie, and kitchen appliances which are both material and symbolic objects of memory. They become symbolic insofar that Alexievich’s speakers reflect on them semiotically, for example, in a glimpse of a kitchen conversation, an unnamed figure remarks that “A new breed of goods appeared ... we finally got the stuff we’d always dreamed of: blue jeans, winter coats ... Everything bright and beautiful. Our old Soviet stuff was gray, ascetic, and looked as if it had been manufactured during wartime” (27). The visual qualities of goods— their color, luster, and design— are viewed as allegorical to the political periods in which they were made. In this case, the present objects are interpreted as positive emblems of Yeltsin’s Russia. Objects of the Soviet past are associated with war and scarcity, while the new items fabricated under new freedoms and Russian capitalism are affiliated with beauty and hope. In another passage, jeans also appear as a signifier of capitalism and Westernization from a negative view. A man interrupts one of Alexievich’s interviews in Red Square and proclaims, “that’s how our children will remember us. “Our parents sold out a great country for jeans ...” they’ll say” (124). Here, jeans are not symbolic of the present, but still function to not only indicate the present but also foreshadow future memories.

¹⁸ Freeman, John, and Svetlana Alexievich. “How the Writer Listens: Svetlana Alexievich.” *LITERARY HUB*, 22 Aug. 2016.

Sometimes, Alexievich latches onto the same concepts that Stepanova finds meaningful, but rather than objectifying the past, memory is resurrected by reflections on the objects which have survived a traumatic past. For example, a tension between the sacred and kitsch arise in her “oral history”, when certain objects provoke profound, personal, and discordant reflections of the Soviet experience in both Alexievich and her interlocutor. When Margarita Pogrebetskaya, a woman who had moved from Moscow to Minsk, speaks in *Secondhand Time* of her return to the capital for a short time, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, she is shocked and dismayed at what she observes in the Red Square. She describes a vendor selling souvenirs and Soviet memorabilia, including flags, party membership cards, and medals. Citing her husband, who was there with her, Pogrebetskaya reacts in disgust to the array of objects being sold for dollars. The vendor is astonished by their reaction, he answers: “[W]hat rock have you been living under? These are relics from the era of totalitarianism” (94). By letting Pogrebetskaya recall this exchange with such detailed urgency, Alexievich reveals how a heroine of her archival novel ends up being shocked to think of the signifiers of her past, the things she held sacred during the Soviet era, as “just refuse”.

In this case, both for the shocked heroine – and for the author who reflects on her experience, – the cavalier treatment of Soviet objects, placed in a space where a radical shift in ideology has occurred, is a source of trauma. We are allowed to hear how Pogrebetskaya ruminates: “[B]ut the foreigners liked them, Soviet symbols are in style over there, so now they were hot commodities” (94). Alexievich’s trauma is her distance and alienation from her subjects, and their emotional and intellectual separation. Her trauma is the unscarred wound caused by the severance of ties with “her” nation. Alexievich regrets and is pained by the Soviet past, while Pogrebetskaya is nostalgic, and pained by its relegation to history. For both

author-transcriber and dialogist, the past is resurrected by the Shklovskian placement of “Soviet symbols” for sale in the globalized capitalist setting of a vendor who caters to tourists.

Russian Orthodox Christian philosopher Nikolai Federov, who was fixated on resurrection and immortality, wrote that “[H]istory is always resuscitation and not judgement, because the subjects of history are not *the living* but *the dead*. [...] For thoughtful people history is merely a verbal resuscitation ; for those endowed with imagination it is artistic resuscitation” (77-78). In this passage, as is often the case in *Secondhand Time*, Alexievich prompts a discussion of history as it is resurrected by someone’s perception of objects. While Federov claims that the subjects of history are “the dead”, Pogrebitskaya, along with each person whom Alexievich approaches, is a survivor of historical trauma inflicted by Soviet terror. Therefore, when History is ‘resurrected’ in items which have withstood it, it is also immortalized by those who carry its memory. Matei Calinescu wrote that “kitsch always implies the notion of *aesthetic inadequacy*. Such inadequacy is often found in single objects whose formal qualities are inappropriate in relation to their cultural content or intention” (236). For Nabokov, in his turn, political kitsch is inadequate to modernity’s project of shedding attachments to the past. When reflecting on kitsch’s Russian twin, *poshlust*, he wrote: “Propaganda (which could not exist without a generous supply of and demand for *poshlust*) fills booklets with lovely Kolkhoz maidens and windswept clouds.”¹⁹

Fittingly, in Alexievich’s archival novel, tourists see the souvenirs as *kitsch*, while to Pogrebitskaya the selling of these symbolic objects is imbued with deep political and personal significance: they are no longer propaganda, but they are vulgar and cheap (*poshlyi*). Pogrebitskaya’s confusion and anger stems from the warping of the formal qualities of the medals, flags, and membership cards by their recontextualization into souvenirs which draw

¹⁹ See Nabokov, Vladimir. P. 97

them further into ‘aesthetic inadequacy’. Their displacement as objects sold within a capitalist logic created friction with their ‘cultural content’ – namely, their patriotic value. The propagandistic quality of the Soviet objects set before Pogrebetskaya therefore could not help but slip into the realm of the unacceptable. Alexievich offers us a glimpse of the “relics” of the past as containers of nostalgia, a lenticular picture that can represent either corrupted or valuable qualities. With Alexievich, we witness the deep association of political memory with symbolic objects, and its perception by a woman– a guardian of memory– who has also undergone a process of recontextualization, who has leaped out of a past *modus operandi* and into capitalist present initiated by Perestroika.

Stepanova’s objectification of the past is problematized by the distortion of historical concepts to suit a presentist archetype. For instance, referring to one’s need to “sort through” the past– she writes, “when you start sorting through the things and concepts of the past you can tell instantly which are still wearable, like old clothes, and which have shrunk, faded, like a jumper that's been in the wrong wash” (241). Her simile is figuratively interesting because it suggests a corporeal nature of her relationship with memory. In grouping *things* together with *concepts*, Stepanova makes material objects and intangible ideas appear inherently connected. She also defines “things and concepts of the past” in terms of their “fitting” the current moment: they are either “wearable” or unsuitable, “shrunk”. To Stepanova, the concepts of the past are thus the material items which conceal it, adorn it, and possibly lose their functionality. For the past to be shrunk, is for its attitudes to be outdated, or irrelevant to the present.

It is impossible to separate Stepanova’s image of memory as an item of clothing apart from the subject of style – both the style of her own writing and the style of the past which may no longer fit in with that of the present. Style is never neutral– it always evokes an opinion or

perspective. When Stepanova mixes similes and metaphors in describing the past as clothing, Sontag's statement comes to mind "To speak of style is one way of speaking about the totality of a work of art. Like all discourse about totalities, talk of style must rely on metaphors. And metaphors mislead." (Sontag 17). Do Stepanova's tropes – the past being "wearable," for example, – mislead us? What should we make of her other figures of speech, such as these: "Those yellowing suede gloves, like plate armor in a museum, look as if they belong to a school girl or a doll" (Stepanova 241)? Stepanova shifts devices from simile– "like old clothes," – to mimetic objects – "those [...] gloves". She is a poet, of course, and in this case, she oscillates between simile and metaphor in her positioning of these objects besides one another. What is concrete and what is symbolic become blurred in this flurry of pictures: "gloves," "armor," and "doll" vying for the author's recognition of their validity as well as for the reader's attention.

As Sontag suggests, Stepanova's metaphors (and similes) do mislead: they redirect our attention to an assortment of images and away from her initial statement about the "concepts of the past." Stepanova's poetic language suggests that "those yellowing suede gloves" might serve as an example of a "concept of the past". According to the passage, outdated notions and ideas that continue to persist must "belong to a school girl or doll". The interchangeability of the 'school girl' and the 'doll' asis implied by the conjunction *or* suggests the figure of a girl who is both young and plastic, in possession of agency and objectified. Both school girls and dolls have styles dictated by others – their dress falls beyond the reach of personal autonomy. Thus, Stepanova suggests that for a concept rummaged from the closet of the past to function in the present, it must be "wearable" by a figure most tightly molded by society. Stepanova's young girl– a metaphoric doll–, is the mechanism which tells us which parts of history are fashionable.

The figure of the doll is also featured in Alexievich's writing. When Maria Voiteshonok tells her story, she recalls her childhood; "The scraps... where had those bits of fabric come from? [...] Someone had brought them to me and I sewed little people out of them. I would cut off pieces of my hair to make them hairdos. [...] I'd never seen a doll, I didn't know anything about them" (Alexievich 227). Voiteshonok's doll is made significant by an absence – she'd "never seen a doll". By telling Alexievich that she had to make her doll from scraps, Voiteshonok reveals the lived experience of poverty and scarcity as seen through her own eyes. Unlike the readers of Stepanova's *In Memory of Memory*, readers of Alexievich's *Secondhand Time* have to connect Voiteshonok's brave remembrance of childhood poverty and the collective trauma of mourning the meager Soviet past.

1.3 Memory as a Spatial Practice, or the Architecture of Nostalgia

The ruin creates the present form of a past life, not according to the contents or remnants of that life, but according to its past as such

— *Simmel* 385

Spaces are designed within the customs of social hierarchies, and their physical structures remain long after cultures of dominance have expired. The past is the 'space' in which both Stepanova and Alexievich dwell. The two authors pose interventions on the imperialist, patriarchal, and Soviet modes of thought that they have seen projected onto the past. The term 'critical spatial practice' has been used by Jane Rendell "to define modes of self-reflective artistic and architectural practice which seek to question and to transform the social conditions of

the sites into which they intervene”²⁰ (Rendell 1). In *Secondhand Time*, territories are not metaphorically defined, but instead act as real agents which govern the lives of her interlocutors. The landscapes in which Alexievich sets her archival novel are collective, contested, or gated. She unfurls her writing into a map which guides readers through kitchens and borderlands. Stepanova, on the other hand, approached memory work as a spatial practice by viewing the past itself as a site which needs to be conquered and newly charted. She cuts herself out a paper house²¹ with *In Memory of Memory* by describing her own writing in terms of space. In an interview she said, “I wanted to create a space in which I could arrange the few remaining photographs, letters, and testimonies, and to make it so that they would feel good in this space, so that they would be seen and understood in the right way. This is how you work when curating an exhibition – you start with the space”²². In her process of writing, Stepanova works as a curator, using language as the spatial plane in which she places different selected events. She arranges her own reflections on a piece of art by a description of a photograph, and frames them between letters written by her relatives. Curation is a spatial and aesthetic undertaking – objects, images, and concepts are organized within a white cube or blank page in order to create a sense of aesthetic unity, which implies a tendency towards beauty.

In *Secondhand Time*, territories are not metaphorically defined, but are instead real agents which govern the lives of Alexievich’s interlocutors. The spatial planes in which it is situated are post Soviet spaces– they are tangible and unsettled, old and newly born. In *The Condition of Postmodernity* Harvey wrote that “[...] the dimensions of space and time matter, and that there

²⁰ Rendell, Jane, 2016. Critical Spatial Practice as *Parrhesia*. *MaHKUscript. Journal of Fine Art Research*, 1(2), p.16.

²¹Cixous, Hélène, et al. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–93. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239>. Accessed 20 Sep. 2022.

²² Satchkova, Svetlana, and Maria Stepanova. “Telling the Story of People Who Didn’t Want to Be Noticed: An Interview with Maria Stepanova.” *Punctured Lines*, 3 Feb. 2021.

are real geographies of social action, real as well as metaphorical territories and spaces of power [...] that have to be understood both in their own right and within the overall logic of capitalist development” (Harvey 355). *Secondhand Time* takes place in “real geographies of social action”, where Alexievich’s speakers seek to understand their identities and that of their land within a new capitalist plane. The concepts of East and West which repeatedly arise are one of the few metaphorical borders in Alexievich’s archival novel. When Russian President Boris Yeltsin signed the Bolvezh Accords, which recognized Ukraine and Belarus as independent states, a new network of borders was formed. Given a repeated treatment of the past as a metaphorical landscape, what happens to memory when a culture shifts from a collectivized to a privatized approach to land?

Alexievich’s archival novel mediates these two visions of the past by organizing individual memories and voices into a collective ensemble. The similarities between individual histories are brightened in contrast with their nuanced differences of experience. The past itself, therefore, ceases to exist as a territory, although spatial conceptualizations remain significant in her memory-work. There are actual landscapes in which memories reside. The new web or borderlands become markers of freedom and capitalism, liberty and division. For example, this is how Pogrebetskaya speaks about life in Tajikistan in 1990: “All of them were like me, they were Soviets [...] They woke up one morning, looked out the window, and there was a new flag. [...] They became foreigners overnight.” (Alexievich 104). The shifting of borders becomes the shifting of national and personal identities causing a rift that bred both freedom and violence. While it is the borders – the geometric container – of the landscape which has changed, it is the inner socio-political force of the shape, and its countless variations, that affect its occupants.

Stepanova's metaphor of the past as a spatial territory arises again when she introduces her analysis of Francesca Woodman's life and photography: "There are those who manage to work in the past's territories (to use the poet Dmitri Prigov's expression: "to bide there, and yet to emerge dry"), as if without noticing where they are" (Stepanova 179). She describes Woodman as a figure whose art explores "past territories" seamlessly and perhaps unintentionally. But to speak in terms of territories is to speak in terms of borders and edges which may be contested, conquered, stretched, or squashed. Borders are always somehow defined. The artistic process of photography intimately deals with spatial planes and edges. Taking a photograph is like defining a territory— the photographer chooses who and what is shot and what may remain within the photograph's borders, as well as what is left beyond the frame, unclaimed and expelled from the scene. Sontag wrote that "in a world ruled by photographic images, all borders ("framing") seem arbitrary. Anything can be separated, can be made discontinuous, from anything else: all that is necessary is to frame the subject differently" (On photography 22). If borders are made arbitrary by the ubiquitous presence of photography, then perhaps such borders placed on the past, the "territorializing" of it, is also arbitrary.

By thinking in terms of edges, Stepanova places boundaries on metaphors, and her metaphor of the past as a territory transforms the past into a space contextualized by nations and borders. At the conclusion of her archival novel, Stepanova writes that "Those places where the people of my family walked, sat, kissed, [...] none of them revealed themselves to me. The green and indifferent battlefield was overgrown with grass" (374). There is a boundary drawn between the author and the past which she attempts to overcome. However, in making the past itself a territory, Stepanova can never reach it. She cannot perceive the "battlefield" when it is "overgrown with grass". A once violent and destructed landscape moves forward in time, bearing

life which covers its scars. Edouard Glissant wrote that “It is passage, not primarily spatial, that [...] confronts the imaginary” (Glissant 188). Stepanova’s passage is not the spatial landscape of her battlefield, but the temporal passage which alters space. The land is indifferent, and offers no route towards imagining, with visceral clarity, the events which traversed it.

1.4 The Personal is Collective

Both authors use objects to cement, differentiate, and probe at scenes from the past. Material and spatial modes of conceptualizing memory in *In Memory of Memory* and *Secondhand Time* are used as mnemonic devices to revisit personal and collective experiences. Serguei Oushakine wrote that “a constant shift of emphasis from the semantic linkage to physical texture, the perpetual play between indexicality and materiality of these embodiments of the Soviet, provides no final closure but only reveals a ceaseless slide down the signifying chain”²³. He suggests that this type of reflection is but the beginning of a longer process. When Alexievich conducts her polyphonic score, she disrupts this “signifying chain” by acknowledging and recording the signifiers which appear spontaneously as her interlocutors recall their past: personal memory becomes collective. At the same time, Stepanova makes the collective narrative personal by working large themes into metaphoric and mimetic objects. When the past is objectified, it becomes palpable, deliberate, and fragile.

²³ OUSHAKINE, SERGUEI ALEX. “Totality Decomposed: Objectalizing Late Socialism in Post-Soviet Biochronicles.” *The Russian Review*, vol. 69, no. 4, 2010, pp. 638–69. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40927436>. Accessed 6 Sep. 2022.

II. CARNIVAL, MOURNING, AND CHILDHOOD IN GESSEN'S *THE FUTURE IS HISTORY*

The struggle of man against power is the
struggle of memory against forgetting
— Milan Kundera

2.1 A Backwards Stream

In the poem, *Le Pont Mirabeau*,²⁴ Apollinaire compares the passage of time to the River Seine's current passing under a bridge. The poet positions himself on the Mirabeau bridge, and reflects in a melancholic soliloquy on his past romances. The poem is composed as if his visions of them pass away beneath him. In Chapter One, I examined harmony and estrangement within the symbolic fields of nostalgic objects and spaces, but have not yet discussed memory as the mechanism by which the present is relocated to the past. This chapter addresses this question by analyzing forms of memory and mourning-work in which the protagonists of *The Future is History* adopt rhetorical methods of backwards time-travel, embrace progressive change, and reject futurity.

Memory commands us to cup the water from below Apollinaire's bridge in our hands, yet unless it is recorded in language or music, visual art or performance, it can never become completely tangible. Just as in Apollinaire's poem, Masha Gessen's *The Future is History* makes it apparent that in order to re-emerge, memory needs form, and that form is given to it by language – yet the untold past is defined by absences and narrative gaps – it leaks away into a backwards stream of the subconscious. Gessen makes the argument that Russians do not have a future which does not replicate the past, unless memories are pulled out of the censored mind,

²⁴ Apollinaire, Guillaume. "Le Pont Mirabeau." 1913. *Alcool/s*, Wesleyan University Press, March 2011, p. 12.

examined, shared, and surgically restored to their keepers. At the end of their book, Gessen registers an alarming pattern:

The first generation of people who had no memory of Stalin's terror had not succeeded in overcoming the totalitarian legacy; the first post-soviet generation—those born into perestroika and reared in the 1990s—had been the face of the protests of 2011-2012, but they no longer embodied hope; now it was up to the generation of kids born under Putin. (477)

In *The Future is History*, Gessen is interested in uncovering what the current population might know about the past – experiences of Soviet Terror, exposure to propaganda, and the culture created by an authoritarian government – and what older relatives have kept hidden. The three generations discussed above embody the responses to repeating waves of totalitarianism, each marked by protest and discontent. Gessen observes a lack of communication across a span of time, propelled by censorship and trauma.

A younger generation of Russians constitute the cast of this archival novel. Gessen's subjects are born in a Russia that is both severed from its past by the collapse of the Soviet Union, and bound to historical idealism. They trace the storylines of seven characters as they process their personal and collective histories by utilizing different lenses, including psychoanalysis, sociology, academia, motherhood, childhood, and politics. Within their storytelling, memory contains a strange, almost cinematic, temporality. Gessen's narrator introduces the life stories of survivors of the post-Soviet turmoil, the outcome of which was the country's dramatic socio-political relocation to the past, using an approach that suggests that the mind edits its reflections on historical events by superimposition, flashback, and afterimage.

For example, Gessen describes a character, Lyosha, and his easygoing and uncomplicated relationship with a man named Ilya, then contrasts this story of romance with a

newsflash that is stark and disturbing: “On January 25, the parliament took the first of three required votes on the “[gay] propaganda bill”” (403). References to news outside of the personal lives of Gessen’s characters thus intersect with and influence their storylines. This volume of archival prose will be the focus of this chapter, because some of the questions Gessen raises in it help me understand the relationships between mourning, memory, and the formulation of identity, by showing the unraveling of a status quo in which Russia’s actions are disquieting to the external world, but leave much of the internal population largely unconcerned, or at the very least, silent.

Emotional, powerful, and sincere as it is, memory is also warped and imperfect. Etkind wrote that “On the stage of postcatastrophic memory,” – such as the aftermath of the Soviet experience, in which *The Future is History* is set – “the dialectics of repetition and remembering produce warped imagery, which combines the analytic, self conscious exploration of the past with its reverberations and transfigurations" (16). In order to make sense of memory and mourning in a post-Soviet culture, scholars and the “people who try to understand” (Gessen 4) must address “the warped, the uncanny, and the ghostly” (Etkind 36). In their turn, Freud and Lacan²⁵ make a case for the dialogic practice of psychoanalysis by arguing that remembering requires an active engagement of dialogue, monologue, or polylogue. In other words, memories are the stories we tell each other and ourselves in order to affirm their conflicting synthesis of past and phantasy.

Gessen’s *The Future is History* reveals to the reader that in any attempt to contend with the lacunose fragmentation of the past, the psyche is forced to leave things out, or to placate the mind’s *horror vacui* and fill in the empty spaces with narrative. Gessen’s characters and their authorial alter ego agree that remembering as a process can only be accessed by storytelling and

²⁵ See Terdiman, Richard.

play – it is history as reshaped by the human imagination. The protagonists that I will discuss, Lyosha, Masha, and Arutyunyan, are gathered in this biographic compilation to transmit and transmutate their memories, thus becoming what Johan Huizinga describes as *homo ludens*²⁶, - individuals who perform memory, waltzing up and down the signifying scale.

The element of play operates on two levels in Gessen's nostalgic theater. First, their archival novel is playful in form – it is not a documentary work which strives for the same precision as most biographies, and that stakes the legitimacy of a primary source.

While Alexievich, in *Secondhand Time*, or Stepanova, in *In Memory of Memory*, experiment with the organization of found speech, or with the tropes that mark and elaborate mnemonic spaces, Gessen toys with the perspectives of a broad cast, alongside an authorial narrating voice, in the context of their first-person narratives. Second, play and reenactment arise as thematic features in *The Future is History*. Hidden within the actions of agents who are not fully identifiable, or mysterious links between individuals that need to be solved, narrative play becomes a form of masquerade and carnivalesque²⁷. There are moments in *The Future is History* where characters bring themselves into their national and personal histories, reliving the past through psychological, social, or carnivalesque means. National celebrations of bygone events become pivotal moments of experience and transition, memories of the Gulag infiltrate family dinners, and outdated values are reinforced at the same time as they are dismantled.

2.2 Feast of Becoming (and Undoing)

Ceremony and celebration are ways in which people have historically drawn lines between the past and the present. On Sundays Christians sing hymns and symbolically drink

²⁶ See Huizinga, Johan.

²⁷ See Santino, Jack.

wine representing the blood of Christ in communion, immortalizing Jesus's crucifixion. Each Passover, in remembrance of enslavement in Egypt centuries ago, Jews dip bitter herbs in salt-water, allegorically tasting our ancestor's tears, and children lead religious services by asking questions. Tethered between solemnity and playfulness, these practices all upend the rules of normal society. Holidays, returning on a cyclical timeline, invite the repetition and reenactment of past events. This is nowhere more so than in the pre-lenten festival of carnival celebrated in many countries. Bahktin wrote that "Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. [...] Thus carnival is the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter." (8). An all embracing experience, carnival creates the illusion of an altered reality.

While carnival has religious roots, carnivalesque rituals became national in the Soviet Union, where the government held ambitions of state atheism (*gosateizm*).²⁸ Carnival is secularized in the holiday commemorating victory over the Nazis on May 9, celebrated throughout the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. Until Perestroika in the 90s, when the new government shifted policies and priorities, Victory Day was observed with ceremonial gatherings, parades, fireworks, and speeches. More recently, Vladimir Putin has made a habit of placing himself at the center of Victory Day celebrations, exploiting the holiday to reignite patriotism as Russian citizens wrestle a fraught national identity with the nostalgia for a period characterized by pride and heroism. In 2005 and 2010, studies were conducted by the Levada Center²⁹ which showed that over time, the amount of people surveyed who saw Victory Day as a

²⁸ Bachman, Ronald and Koenker, Diane. "Revelations from the Russian Archives : Documents in English Translation" Washington, D.C. : Library of Congress, 1997.

²⁹ The Levada Center is a non governmental Russian polling and research center. The organization was declared a "foreign agent" by Putin's government in 2016.

national celebration for the Russian community rose, while the number of people who considered the holiday a celebration for war veterans declined³⁰. May 9 has become an all-encompassing holiday, symbolic of a perceived identity and unity, luring in believers, and disorienting skeptics who are caught in its whirlwind.

Participation in this secular, nationalist carnival is inclusive of all ages; Victory Day becomes a mimetic space in which children are raised to understand themselves in the context of a taught heritage. On the Russian social media platform VK, parents can buy WWII costumes and conduct photoshoots for their children for the equivalent of \$15³¹ – this has become particularly popular as a family-oriented May 9 project. In a *Komersant* article on the trend, child psychologist Irina Obukova claims that it is “essential” for children to “identify with their ancestors” by participating in such masquerades³². Within Obukova’s claim rests a popular attitude towards the past in Russia– an attitude which embraces nationalist storytelling constructed to acknowledge, alter, and suppress cultural traumas. This attitude, along with the deep wounds it inflicts on the national psyche, is a theme in Gessen’s *The Future is History*.

When dependence on accepting a certain worldview becomes foundational to a community, that community turns inwards, or rather, looks backwards for a justification of its behaviors, political institutions, rituals, and myths. In *Trauma and the Failure of History*, David Janzen explains this inward and backward self-reflection by suggesting that “communities and their leadership depend on widespread acceptance of worldview for their existence [...] and histories tend to repress trauma precisely because historians have no way to make sense of it” (87). In fact, there is an expectation, according to Janzen, for “trauma to be repressed and

³⁰ Ločmele, Klinta, Procevska, Olga, and Zelče, Vita. “Celebrations, Commemorative Dates and Related Rituals” in *The Geopolitics of History in Latvian-Russian Relations*. Latvia: University Press of Latvia, 2011.

³¹ Pictures of children in WWII costumes are available here: <https://vk.com/albums-87787960>

³² “Little Soldiers: Controversy Over Russian Children in WWII Uniform” *France 24*, 5 September 2019.

overwritten as groups create their pasts in the stories they tell” (87). Gessen’s representation of Russia exemplifies and complicates this thesis. Many former Soviet citizens are still traumatized by a period of fear, hunger, and subjugation to a totalitarian regime, and pass down these traumas to younger generations. This is why they repress history and instead engage their children in a narrative of victory. The horrors of war undergo a process of Disneyfication – they are packaged neatly into costumes, toy rifles, and home-made military tank parade floats. Palatable reproductions of the past are mirrored at each other over and over again until history becomes its own linear story with a plot, beginning, middle, and end. Patriotic celebrations like May 9th take on carnivalesque qualities, consuming (or casting out) any bystanders and participants in their intoxicating atmospheres.

Gessen’s *The Future is History* supports Janzen’s thesis that trauma is repressed and overwritten, and at the same time combats this prevalent reaction to cultural trauma by unearthing the stories that do not get told– the subtext beneath the myths. The narratives which Gessen tells resonate with Bakhtin’s calling the carnival a “true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal” (10). Their characters experience the overlapping of cultural change and rebirth with personal growth and “becoming”. One of Gessen’s protagonists, Masha, unconsciously enters this political carnival as a child. Gessen recounts that on May 9, 1995, Masha is invited to attend the 50th anniversary of Victory Day in Moscow. They write that “Military bands from all over the world paraded [...] in front of the History museum, and this was the part of the festivities that Masha got to attend. She thought it was awesome” (Gessen 181). As a child, contrary to the dissenting opinions of her mother, Masha is fueled by patriotism and hopes to one day join the military. During her personal arc in her 20s, Masha both participates in, and is impacted by, government corruption, especially within the Russian

healthcare system. It is when she is later prevented from moving outside of Russia, that she reflects, “*Budushchego* net. There is no future.” (Gessen 322). Later, when she learns about an innocent man who is sentenced to prison, Gessen traces Masha’s journey into a life of protest, activism, and political engagement. According to Deleuze and Guattari³³, the concept of “becoming” is about movement and pace— it is a future-oriented process. In Gessen’s narrative, Masha does not experience transformation— she is not metamorphosed and recreated— but instead is constantly shifting. Masha’s personal becoming, as is the case for various characters in the book, is mediated through the carnivalesque politics of Russia’s own reconstruction.

Bakhtin also asserts that “[carnival] was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed” (Bakhtin 10). Therefore, the concept of carnival as it manifests in Gessen’s writing, cyclical and transformative, is about both repetition and change. Carnavalesque rituals are transitions into new cultural stages, complicating a hard-to-digest belief that this past is, by definition, gone. The figures in *The Future is History*, who have a tendency to reject the mythologies that they are supposed to accept, illustrate these points. Gessen’s constellation of *Homo Sovieticus* does not condescend to a people who only consume and excrete political propaganda, unable to draw their own conclusions. Rather, they describe a mind split in two, trapped in a circuitous motion of doublethink³⁴. The post-Soviet candle, to borrow from Millay, burns at both ends. This work delineates the outputs of reprogramming a post-socialist machine.

Gessen follows the lives of Masha and Lyosha, beginning in their childhoods— a departure from the narratives of other protagonists such as Marina Arutyunyan and Alexander Dugin, marked by their choice to refer to these characters by their diminutives³⁵ throughout the

³³ See Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. p. 272

³⁴ Gessen uses this term frequently, which the protagonist Levada borrows from George Orwell. It describes a mode of thinking in which people under totalitarian regimes become accustomed to hold two contradictory beliefs at the same time. (See Gessen p. 69)

³⁵ See Gessen p. xi

entire volume of archival prose. Why compose these narratives in bildungsroman form, and not begin with their lives as autonomous adults? The minds of children are open to belief as they begin to make sense of the world – swallowing a watermelon seed would certainly cause the fruit to grow in your stomach. Their reception of fantastical realities also leaves them vulnerable to propaganda. As Gessen illustrates the experiences of these characters growing up, they offset the childrens’ perspectives with journalistic research, juxtaposing fact with perception. These characters – portraits of real people – are not at all metaphoric. However, the two protagonists are raised during a period in which children themselves are viewed, especially by partisan organizations, through a symbolic lens. As Gessen writes about how they grow, readers observe how they change and who they become. As children, Masha and Lyosha are both beyond enthusiastic about participating in acts of patriotism. Meanwhile, Lyosha’s nationalistic spark dims throughout *The Future is History*, where he later comes out as gay, and ultimately moves to Brighton Beach in New York to remove himself from the homophobia that impedes his safety, job security, and mental sanity.

Lyosha is first introduced as the son of a single mother, Galina, who works as a principle at a “correctional school”. After summarizing his family history, the first piece of information about Lyosha himself that Gessen provides is that he was “born on May 9 – Victory Day – 1985” (43). Lyosha makes a personal identity of the holiday. They emphasize that he is captivated not only by Victory Day itself, but by its history and all of its ancillary events, songs, and narratives— it is a year-round passion for Lyosha. He spends much of his time studying the Eastern Front of WWII, which is referred to as “The Great Patriotic War”. For example, Gessen remarks that he read all of *The Wreath of Glory*, a set of “... collected works of fiction and nonfiction, with each volume devoted to one aspect of the war: a book on the defense of

Moscow, a book on Leningrad, a book on victory itself.” (Gessen 46). By drawing our attention to this particular anthology, composed of both fiction and nonfiction, Gessen reminds us that Lyosha’s perspective is both deeply knowledgeable of May 9th’s history, and also greatly influenced by its mythologies. When Lyosha was not reading about “The Great Patriotic War”, he listened to military songs, and memorized facts. Gessen reveals that at Lyosha’s birthday parties, he would “grill” relatives on their knowledge of war history, and as he grew older, he formalized this tradition “into a quiz”. Lyosha uses games as a way to materialize and make present a history he did not personally experience. Through play, he brings his own impression of the past into the present. In Gessen’s early representation of him, Lyosha adopts Victory Day as a “second life”, lived through music, literature, and games.

It seems counterintuitive that Lyosha, whose interest in WWII and victory over the Nazis is so sincere and deferential, also responds to these themes in a playful mode. In his analysis of medieval parody, Bakhtin suggested that laughter is directed at the same target as seriousness³⁶. The joy and enchantment of the festival becomes for Lyosha, as it does for his broader community, a mode of processing the brutal theater of a war barely survived by the generation before him. Just as in Bakhtin’s conception of carnival, Lyosha’s celebration of Victory day is inimical to “all that is completed”. In taking such elaborate measures to commemorate triumph over the Nazis, the war can never be fixed to the past – instead, it is placed into a constant cycle of reenactment and revival. Unlike Bakhtin’s carnival, Victory Day does not seem to inspire change or renewal. Rather, Lyosha undergoes a personal process of transformation and growth that is, in many ways, reactive to May 9 events. Gessen’s introductory portrait of Lyosha is wrapped up with an anecdote that recounts his birthday, one year, when his cousin gave Lyosha a collection of Great Patriotic War Sheet Music. They write that “Lyosha took lessons in playing

³⁶ See Bakhtin p. 88

accordion, not piano, but he could read music, and he had intense determination. He played using one finger” (46). The image of a young Lyosha attempting to play these songs with one finger is absurd. The humor appreciated by readers in this passage reveals the bizarre lengths to which can be taken.

When May 9 returns again in 2013, Lyosha’s experience of the holiday is inverted into a nightmarish, grotesque, and disheartening hall of mirrors. Gessen tells two stories in parallel, compelling readers to envision Lyosha’s warped and disfigured reflection in Vlad Tornovoy– the victim of a violent murder committed as a hate crime against the LGBTQIA+ community. Gessen first brings us into the atmosphere of Lyosha’s evening: he cooks dinner, invites friends over, and wishes a goodnight to his partner who leaves the birthday celebration to work a late-night shift. By this year, his party contains no military songs, trivia competitions, or other Victory-Day adjacent activities that glorify war and nationalism. As an adult, Lyosha finds no enchantment in the holiday. Outside of Lyosha’s apartment, there exists an entirely different scene. Gessen recounts the public, broadcasted, ethos of the holiday: over-the-top military parades, missile launches, and Putin exclaiming to the nation, “Glory to Russia!”. Outside of Lyosha’s sphere, Gessen portrays Victory Day as “a true feast of time”. They write: “The city of Volgograd also held a parade. Earlier in the year, the local legislature had voted to use the city’s old name during the festivities, so that day it was Stalingrad” (405). The holiday impels the entire city to travel back in time to Stalin’s regime. Celebrations of triumph and national pride are relegated to the past in Victory Days’ Stalingrad. Within the patriotic fog of the Victory Day carnival, the destruction of history masquerades as its restoration.

The past and present, carnival and cruelty, collide violently under the May 9th fireworks. Gessen slowly walks their readers from a parade to the murder of Vlad Tornovoy. They report

this sequence of events: first, Tornovoy and his friends begin their walk home from the festivities, then they have a few drinks in their neighborhood playground, “[t]hen his friends killed him” (404). Gessen uses short sentences, each action flaring against the last in a disorienting and chilling succession. Readers are turned into second-hand witnesses to the crime. Gessen spared no information from what took place— they narrate, with blunt specificity, how the killers beat, anally raped, tortured, and burned Tornovoy until he died. They write that “[the killers] explained that they had killed Tornovoy because he was gay. Television reported that the killers said his homosexuality ‘offended their sense of patriotism’” (Gessen 405). How can a night that began in such a jovial mood end so tragically? Bakhtin wrote that “[in] the atmosphere of [the carnival], reveling, dancing, and music, were all closely combined with slaughter, dismemberment, bowels, excrement, and other images of the material bodily lower stratum” (317). Tornovoy’s death is not a scene from a renaissance novel – his murder was recent, inhumane, and real. Gessen’s depiction of the murder, however, is part a text which they conceptualized as “a long Russian (nonfiction) novel that aimed to capture both the texture of individual tragedies and the events and ideas that shaped them” (4). Bahktin helps me understand carnivalesque motifs in this “Russian novel”, which includes this portrayal of Tornovoy’s murder. The concept of the carnival includes all that is joyful, and its grotesque underworld reflections.

Here, carnival’s hellish feast feeds on the bodies of the disenfranchised— gays are served as scapegoats to an entire nation. It is not possible for Lyosha to reconcile this type of “patriotism” with his own queerness. Gessen returns to Lyosha’s experience of this day, writing that, while his partner, Ilya, returned to bed in the morning, “Lyosha got up, sat down at the computer, and read about the murder of Vlad Tornovoy” (408). This marks an important

rhetorical shift in Lyosha's timeline. While he has already removed himself from the patriotic displays of May 9, it becomes apparent that he is not so far away from the violence which targets his identity. As his narrative evolves, his computer screen is not a sufficient barrier from the abundant homophobia supported by the media and the government. Any music or laughter that arises at this point of Russia's patriotic carnival is but a sardonic echo. Lyosha's "becoming" and conscientization³⁷ is incumbent on his witnessing of the undoing and tragic death of a man who mirrors his own identity.

2.3 Carnival and The Trauma of Lost Childhood

The figure of the Child is inherently contradictory: childhood aesthetics are by nature nostalgic, marked by sepia-filtered reminders of the loss of childhood naivete, while concurrently acting as reflectors of utopian futures and global change. Making a point about the significance of children's literature in shaping the moral values young generations, Ainsley Morse cited novelist Evgenii Zamiatin, who in 1923 wrote that children "come into life naked, uncovered by a single life of dogma, absolutism, or faith" (Morse 4). This suggests that ethics and ideological or religious beliefs are worn as costumes which mark the loss of innocence. Futurist poet Velmir Khlebnikov also describes children's faces as "transparent windows" with "empty eyes"³⁸ in his poem *Hunger*. In these two examples, both Zamiatin and Khlebnikov's children are transparent, naked, and empty—offering all of the imaginative possibilities of a blank page.

Are the once-Soviet children which Gessen describes, born decades later in the 1980s, just as susceptible to propaganda? Lee Edelman claims, in his subversive polemic *No Future*,

³⁷ The Freire Institute defines conscientization as "The process of developing a critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action. Action is fundamental because it is the process of changing the reality. Paulo Freire says that we all acquire social myths which have a dominant tendency, and so learning is a critical process which depends upon uncovering real problems and actual needs."

³⁸ The full stanza can be found on p. 105 in Khlebnikov, Velmir. "Hunger"

that politics authenticate social orders by the “transmission of the future in the form of its inner Child” (3). Edelman postulates that “That Child remains the perpetual horizon of every acknowledged politics, the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” (3). Politicians, poets, and parents alike might look at children to envision their own pasts, while the child’s shining face, looking up at their authorial figure, reflects back projections of the future. Gessen critically engages with this tendency when describing the experiences of children, such as Lyosha who was thrilled by military victory as a part of Soviet national identity, but as he grew gradually curbed his interest in “The Great Patriotic War”, until he ultimately found himself threatened by gratuitous displays of patriotism. They introduce us to the experience of such a child, Masha Chebotarev, who is shepherded into performing a Socialist future by the official institutions in charge of upbringing young Soviet citizens, at a moment when that vision is both fragmented and contested by Masha’s family and their emerging experience of questioning the predominant discourses on the past.

The Soviet Union found many ways to recruit children into civic and ideological engagement. State-sponsored youth groups such as the little Octobrists, Young Pioneers, and the Communist Youth league³⁹ all offered an approach towards childhood that did not view children as existing in a process of cognitive development and growth, but rather saw them as active citizens. The priorities and commitments of children were therefore compromised between their families and the state. In line with Edelman’s argument that understands children as a symbolic horizon used to propel any given political agenda, Morse contends that “After the 1917 October Revolution, the notion of children and the childlike became strongly politicized, with the realized metaphor of the infancy of the new Soviet state” (4). The Soviet state thus emerged from an

³⁹ Rosen, David M. “Child Soldiers in WWII” in *Child Soldiers in the Western Imagination : From Patriots to Victims*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015.

ideological womb, political twin to an entire generation. The first group of Little Octobrists was launched in 1924, when children who were as old as the aforementioned revolution were inducted into the organization. The Little Octobrists comprised a faction of the Communist Party for children who are indoctrinated between the ages of seven and ten. Gessen elucidates that at the organization's inception membership was entirely voluntary, but as time passed, the children's group came to mirror the expansion of the Communist Party. In the 1960s it was mandatory for all first graders to participate. They describe in abundant detail the various facets (the practices, rites, apparel, etc.) of life as a "little Octobrist" which spark enthusiasm in Masha Chebotarev's first-grade mind.

When Masha finally became a little Octobrist, 74 years had already passed since the end of the October revolution, and 38 years had transpired since Stalin's death. And yet, the images, lexicon, and routines reminiscent of another generation continued to circulate in Masha's school environment. While conceptually, revolution seeks to do away with the past— a bloodthirsty vehicle of reinvention— its latin root, *revolvere*, meaning "to turn, roll back" suggests otherwise. Masha's group of little Octobrists actively engages in this endless cycle of repetition, becoming a chimera of a turn-of-the-century vision of the future. Richard Terdiman claims that "Modernity is either haunted by the near- impossibility of determining a reliable past, or it is burdened by the compulsion to repeat a past we cannot shake off" (93). Masha, and Gessen, find themselves facing this same impossibility. While the systems that hold authority over young Masha are invested in reiterating a specific version of the past, her family supports an alternate truth.

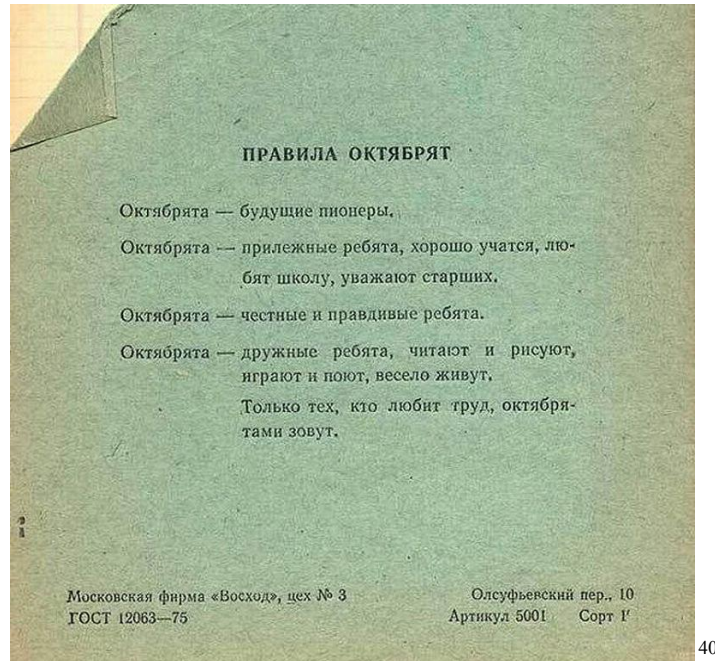
Gessen illustrates Masha's anticipation of the Little Octobrist induction ceremony, during which she would receive a pin to wear on her uniform lapel — "a red metal five-pointed star, with a picture of a toddler age wavy haired Vladimir Lenin in gold in the circle in the middle"

(Gessen 70). The youth group retained an unmitigated influence on Masha's education, imposing its own pedagogy which limited history to parochial narratives that seemed palatable to young minds and pleasing to authority figures. But eventually she could no longer accept the group's authority unquestionably. The teachers' statements on history were similarly unacceptable in their truncated or distorted form (e.g. when studying the 1930s, Masha "learned that <a> top Bolshevik, Sergei Kirov, was orphaned at an early age and spent part of his childhood in an orphanage. She did not learn that Kirov was assassinated in 1934 and that his death served as the pretext for one of the deadliest waves of Stalinist terror" (Gessen 71)). In *The Future is History*, Gessen's narrator juxtaposes what Masha Chebotarev perceived as official information with other sources, working as a reliable and probing fact-checker.

Gessen's application of dramatic irony allows an authentic account of Masha's childhood experience to coexist with historical truths which that experience aimed at concealing. The reader is granted the privileged knowledge of many factual disparities the little Masha could not understand. For example, the Little Octoberist bylaws are printed on the back of Masha and her classmates' composition notebooks. The aphoristic list declares Little Octoberists to be "future Young Pioneers" and instructs children to be studious, hard-working, honest, cheerful, and respectful. While on the surface these are all positive values to instill in young minds, the Party's expectations of the Soviet youth contain latent and pernicious Soviet messaging. A child programmed to be excessively honest, may grow to be someone who informs on their neighbors; to "respect their elders" can be manipulated into an indifferent obedience to all authority; and a standard of being "fun loving" at all times encourages children to don the mask of their rosy-cheeked depictions in propaganda posters while suppressing legitimate hardship, loss and

rage. Gessen explains how Masha's coming of age during Perestroika allowed her to question these values.

At home, she is met with a familial perception of history and national identity that is entirely different from the abridged narratives that she learned in school. When Masha returned from class as a Little Octoberist, her enthusiasm turned to disappointment – “In fact, no one in the family shared in Masha's joy” (72), Gessen remarks. Even Masha's grandparents insisted that “it was nothing to be proud of” (72). Masha's family was one, like many, which was personally made a victim of Soviet state terror. Gessen makes readers privy to the harrowing family history which Masha would have been too young, and perhaps too indoctrinated, to understand: “Galina Vasilyevna's father had been a highly placed Party apparatchik who failed to stand up for his Jewish wife during Stalin's antisemitic purges of the late 1940s” (72). Such a tragedy was not unusual, and when young Masha came home brandishing her Lenin pin, readers can empathize with her grandparents' reaction. By encountering Masha's school and home life, readers witness the awkward reconstruction of boundaries between public and private spheres which communism had sought to demolish.



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2.4 It Runs in the Family: Memory Work and Mourning Work

The “cerebral and romantic” (Gessen 22) Marina Arutyunyan, one of seven protagonists in *The Future is History*, processes the generational traumas inherited by herself and others through the lens of her psychiatry practice. Her personal and professional development evolves in stages that are synchronous to the Soviet government’s phases of opening up and then shriveling. When she first decides to study psychology, the program is new and tip-toes around the status quo. After she begins practicing psychoanalysis, there was a realization that the “post-Soviet psychoanalysts lacked the central qualification to their profession: they had not themselves gone through analysis” (Gessen 138), as a result, Arutyunyan and her colleagues traveled to neighboring countries to undergo analysis, moving back and forth between her own psyche and that of her patients. When Arutyunyan is working and developing her own ideas, the very concept of trauma and the idea that it can have external roots is dismissed and regarded as

⁴⁰ Image of back cover of a Soviet school notebook
<https://bigpicture.ru/wp-content/uploads/2014/01/soviet-school02.jpg> Accessed Dec. 5, 2022

unfounded. Gessen's depiction of Arutyunyan's journey through psychoanalysis is bumpy and uncharted, blurring the line between the academic, or clinical, and the personal.

Gessen illustrates a handful of case-studies of Arutyunyan's clients, all of which are somehow rooted in traumas and conditioning particular to the Soviet Union. She encounters one patient who complains about her 11 year old daughter's strange and unsettling behavior which included setting curtains on fire, and locking her grandmother outside in the freezing cold. The patient describes a dysfunctional family dynamic in which her mother is demanding and tyrannical, and her daughter has aggressive outbursts and is unable to manage her emotions. The three generations of women all unwittingly relate to one another in harmful ways. When Arutyunyan, alongside her client, discovers that the grandmother had worked as a guard in the Gulag, the origins of the family dynamic become clear. Gessen writes:

The family was now recast as a camp, complete with dead-end make-work, the primacy of discipline, and the total abolition of personal boundaries. The balcony incident looked particularly eerie in this light: it reproduced a common torture technique, when inmates were forced to stand in the freezing cold just outside their barracks. Arutyunyan remembered reading—back when she had access to some of Freud's writing—that humans play out that which they cannot remember. (50)

Memory is coaxed out and examined to reveal traces of the Gulag permeating Arutyunyan's client's home. Gessen describes this epiphany in theatrical terms, the family members are "recast as camp", playing roles that they never auditioned for, and the granddaughter "plays out" the scenarios from traumatic events that occurred before she was even born. She is possessed by her grandmother's disciplining ghost. Etkind wrote that "[The work of mourning] does not end once the past has simply been dug out and revealed. Only when they become public, as in a theater, do these excavations of the past, buried and unburied, complete the work of mourning" (13). The three women that Gessen illustrates are mourning a trauma that some of them are only subliminally aware of. Their relationships with each other, and patterns of interacting with one

another are all part of a repetitive performance of memory. Gessen suggests that it is Artyunyan's psychoanalysis which allows her client to unbury the narrative-map which directs this family dynamic, and that the work of mourning can be executed with Artyunyan as her audience.

2.4 Recovery

While Gessen's writing is critical of past and present structures of power, and often pessimistic about the ways things seem to be going, the documentation of harmful cycles becomes an act of generosity towards the future. Their writing positions itself alongside the perspective of new historicism, or historical criticism distinct in "its recognition that history is the 'history of the present', that history is in the making, that, rather than being monumental and closed, history is radically open to transformation and rewriting." (Bennet 116). Like Alexievich, Gessen examines the past through the lens of speakers ingrained and even marooned in the present: Soviet citizens with a long history of enduring the regime's oppression, as well as their children and grandchildren. Granted hindsight, they reflect on their memories, while Gessen as their interlocutor connects their narratives into a pattern of current events. Contrasting with traditional modes of historical nonfiction, their book places readers *in medias res* of historical events. Gessen does not make claims about 'how things were', but rather offers the more sensible, mutable, and authentic approach to history which stakes its legitimacy in "this is what I remember". The characters which I discussed each approach the suppression of memory by engaging in carnivalesque politics, and doing the work of mourning. When readers can glimpse the lives of people recovering from the slew of traumas associated with the Soviet Union, and its more entrenched imperial history as children, we are able to unravel, from a distance, how governmental modes of oppression can be disentangled in small and large ways.

Postscript

A few months before I conceptualized this project, I went to a psychotherapist who specializes in PTSD for a treatment called “prolonged exposure therapy”, where I moved through a painful memory by speaking about it in the present tense. The ambition of this memory-work was to modify the thoughts and emotions that I felt surrounding the trauma, and to assert control over the narrative. I was also given a homework assignment: to repeat the narrative on my own, in the present tense, record it, and listen to it. When I did this, I recoiled at the sound of my own voice. *Is this how I really sound?* The actual narration of the trauma, however, did not trigger an equally visceral response. My recorded voice seemed like a ghost, like a figure from a dream who seems familiar, but has neither form nor face.

When we listen to other people, sound is transmitted through the air, vibrating through the architecture and geography of our environment until it reaches the ears. On the other hand, when I speak aloud and hear myself, the sound is additionally conducted through my bones.⁴¹ Bone-conducted sounds wander through my head and throat until they reach a fluid-filled spiral in my inner ear. Listening to my recording, the trauma became incorporeal, disintegrating into air. Responses to psychiatric treatments are wide ranging, and while prolonged exposure therapy has yielded positive results for many, I was displeased by the physical estrangement of my past by an electronic device. I like the idea that there is a relationship between memory and the body, and that my past can live in my bones (so long as it is a considerate tenant). Clyde Snow, a forensic anthropologist, explained that “ “Bones... are often our last and best witnesses: they never lie, and they never forget”⁴². While memories can be easily forgotten, they still linger in our anatomies.

The archival novels *Secondhand Time*, *The Future is History*, and *In Memory of Memory* give a body for memories of the collective trauma of the Soviet Union to live in. Each of their spines hold together a compendium of narratives which recall the positive, painful, and even banal moments of the past. A woman in *Secondhand Time* remembered the subjects of her teenage diary— “my first love, my first kiss, and pages and pages about how much I loved Stalin [...] Notes of a madwoman...” (99). While the archival novels that I analyzed range in aesthetics and approach, politics, romance, history, and family all figure into their memory-work. At the introduction, I discussed Putin’s interest in controlling the past and creating a single, unified, historical narrative. Gessen, Alexievich, and Stepanova challenge this by asserting that the experiences of Soviet trauma all differ, and are often in conflict with each other. Doing the

⁴¹Hullar, Timothy. “Why does my voice sound so different when it is recorded and played back?” in *Scientific American*. 2009

⁴² Brodzky, Bella. *Can These Bones Live?* Stanford CA: Stanford University, 2007

memory-work for a nation, these writers approach memory democratically, inviting narratives to range.

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