Representations of Grief in Akhmatova’s Requiem and Pushkin’s the Bronze Horseman

Hillary R. Smith

Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/honorstheses

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Colby College theses are protected by copyright. They may be viewed or downloaded from this site for the purposes of research and scholarship. Reproduction or distribution for commercial purposes is prohibited without written permission of the author.

Recommended Citation

https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/honorstheses/294

This Honors Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby.
Representations of Grief in Akhmatova’s *Requiem* and Pushkin’s *The Bronze Horseman*

Hillary Smith

Colby College    English Senior Honors Thesis – EN 483    First Reader: Patricia Onion    Second Reader: Sheila McCarthy
Pat and Sheila: thank you both so much for having faith in me in my darkest hours and moments of senioritis (and for being my own personal bronze horseman when necessary) – I couldn’t have done it without you!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table of Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Note on Translations ................................................................. 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instead of a First Paragraph .......................................................... 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction ...................................................................................... 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pushkin – a Biography .................................................................... 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akhmatova – a Biography ................................................................. 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Parallel Journey’s of Akhmatova and Evgeny ............................... 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Geography of Grief ................................................................. 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Requiem for Russia .................................................................... 33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna Politkovskaya: A Modern-Day Akhmatova .................................. 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requiem: English Translation .......................................................... 46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bronze Horseman: English Translation ........................................ 52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography .................................................................................. 62</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Note on Translations

All translations used for this project (Akhmatova’s *Requiem* and Pushkin’s *The Bronze Horseman*) are my own. The exact language is very important for my analyses, and additionally a prose translation of *The Bronze Horseman*. 
Instead of a First Paragraph:

In the desolate commencement of spring semester 2007, I spent three months wondering how to combine my English and Russian majors into a glorious single entity. My English advisor gave me a book of poetry for social justice and my Russian advisor suggested that I read Pushkin’s *The Bronze Horseman*. I discovered a common theme of universal suffering between Anna Akhmatova’s *Requiem* and *The Bronze Horseman*.

My advisors asked:

-Can you write about this?

And I said:

-I can.

My passion for all things Russian began in the spring of my senior year of high school. I took a Russian literature course with a teacher so passionate about the subject that he would wear a fake nose when discussing Gogol’s “The Nose” and threaten to send us walking barefoot through Siberia if we didn’t turn in our homework. The uniqueness of the literature was so striking to me - after that class I knew that I had to read all of those texts in Russian.

Freshman year at Colby I was inspired to take first semester Russian. I would often leave class feeling overwhelmed and discouraged, but something kept me going. I was convinced that I would drop the language immediately after the first semester. Even though I always thought that I was good at languages – I took French for ten years and became almost fluent - learning the entirely different Cyrillic alphabet was very challenging for me. Needless to say, I did not drop Russian and progressed from a Russian minor to double majoring in English and Russian.
I remember one of the first things I read in Russian was an excerpt from Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. The cool, stinging simplicity of the language was fascinating. In the English version, the work is filled with gigantic SAT words while in the Russian text, the language is so crisp and curt that it creates a much more terrifying effect. I distinctly remember the scene where Raskolnikov kills the old pawnbroker and “blood poured from her neck like water from a glass.” Such simple language sets a mood that can only be understood from reading the actual Russian. Additionally the sounds of the words are so different from English that they create a very different feeling.

My fascination with Anna Akhmatova also began freshman year of college. All students are required to participate in a Russian poetry slam during the spring semester. This is a demonstration of the importance of the Russian oral tradition of poetry memorization. In Russia, starting at a very young age children will memorize a repertoire of poems that they can recite at leisure for friends and family. I found a poem that Akhmatova wrote about her husband Gumilov:

```
He loved three things in life:  
Evening songs, white peacocks,  
And faded maps of America.  
Didn’t like it when children cried,  
Didn’t like tea with jam  
And “women’s hysteria”  
…and I was his wife.
```

This poem was so cold and beautiful that I immediately wanted to read more of her writing. I continued to read Akhmatova outside of class, but it was difficult to pursue my interest without specific goals in mind or a way to intertwine Akhmatova’s poetry with my existing classes. Finally, an opportunity presented itself.
I hadn’t really considered writing a thesis. Obviously the notion that something I wrote could be bound and eternally stored in the library was a very wonderful concept. After I declared the English major I was assigned to a new advisor. The moment I stepped into her office, before we had introduced ourselves, she said “so obviously you will be writing a thesis.” I didn’t question her words and began to brainstorm ideas right away. This was the beginning of my junior year.

I spent the following January in St. Petersburg. It was striking how different the people looked and interacted with each other. They are a constantly marginalized people, and they often suffer in silence. People no longer want to have children in Russia because of financial constraints and because the environment is so miserable; my host family complained of small apartments, long working hours, and expensive necessities. I began the month in a very good mood, smiling at people I passed in the streets and looking at all of the glorious architecture with wonder and amazement. By the end of the month I was scowling along with the rest of the Russians and seeing the city as more of a cleverly decorated prison than anything else.

Being in the city of St. Petersburg did, however, bring Russian literature to life for me. I could walk in the footsteps of Crime and Punishment’s Raskolnikov and look into the apartments of Pushkin and Dostoevsky. Being up close and personal with the statue of Peter the Great immortalized atop his bronze steed made me feel Pushkin’s character Evgeny’s suffering so much more in The Bronze Horseman. Here is the glorious, confident leader who has unknowingly destroyed and cursed every following generation of people by foolishly attempting to bend nature to his will, through the creation of his new capital city.
St. Petersburg’s literature is filled with and highlights “little people.” Like Pushkin’s Evgeny, the lives, thoughts, feelings, and actions of these “little people” are virtually insignificant and go unnoticed. They look especially insignificant when juxtaposed against a figure like the horseman, or an idea like Stalin’s terror.

I choose to incorporate Pushkin’s *The Bronze Horseman* in my discussion of Akhmatova’s *Requiem* because of several overlying similarities. A loved one is lost, intense grieving follows, and only one voice speaks the devastation of others. A flood captures Evgeny’s Parasha, while Stalin’s prison camps sweep the nation and claim Akhmatova’s son and husbands. Pushkin and Akhmatova are the candles in the dark, the faces in the multitudes, and both encounter miserable misfortune and suffering. What do their sacrifices accomplish? Hope for voiceless others.

I conclude this project with a contemporary Akhmatova – Anna Politkovskaya. Like Pushkin and Akhmatova, Politkovskaya risks her reputation and life to speak when no one else will – this time about the war in Chechnya. There are very obvious differences between journalistic and poetic work, but the sentiments of all three writers is the same – use of the written word to speak out about the dominant government. While censorship laws silenced Pushkin and Akhmatova, Politkovskaya received the ultimate silencing – she was murdered in the elevator of her apartment building on October 7th 2006.

I can only hope that by writing this thesis the words, ideals, and memories of Pushkin, Ahkmatova, and Politkovskaya will be further preserved, revered, and remembered.
Introduction

Anna Akhmatova composed Requiem largely before 1940, but it was not published until the mid 1960s – after her death. It is now known to be one of her best works. Requiem is a cycle comprised of fifteen poems, the entireties of which are introduced by a personal reflection written in prose. The specific structure of the cycle carries much significance. As these poems were not published until long after they were written (for fear of persecution), the structure of fifteen shorter poems allowed them to be memorized by close friends and confidants of Akhmatova, and thus orally preserved for years. These poems serve to document the suffering of the Russian people during Stalin’s reign of terror. They are sometimes written in the first person, and sometimes in the third, and thus they universalize and combine Akhmatova’s personal pain as a wife and mother with the suffering of those around her.

Alexander Pushkin wrote his lyric ballad The Bronze Horseman in 1833 about the tremendous flood of 1824 in St. Petersburg and the involvement of the bronze equestrian statue of Peter the Great. Everything that the protagonist, Evgeny, cares for is destroyed, and he blames the Tsar for his losses. This poem serves to highlight the differences between interests of the state and the Tsar (represented by the bronze statue of Peter the Great) and the common or “little person,” Evgeny. Although the subject matter of The Bronze Horseman is quite different from that of Requiem, there are several overlying commonalities in theme.

Akhmatova herself and Pushkin’s Evgeny have a nearly parallel journey throughout their respective tales. There are elements of grief related insanity in both, and a small glimmer of hope towards the end. Both works have many layers of meaning.
Akhmatova’s cycle is sometimes construed as a lament or true Requiem for Russia. There are, however, many aspects of the poem that are very hopeful. *The Bronze Horseman* similarly is a multi-layered, multi-faceted piece. The tragic tale is written in a very jovial manner, and thus is an ironic attack on the decisions and reactions of the state to the suffering of the people.

Another very unique commonality between the two works is their use of geography and physical elements to convey grief and suffering. Instead of the real people and created characters respectively expressing their distress, the land speaks for them in their silence. This element takes their pain to the next level as it establishes a miserable silence and displays that the suffering of the common or “little people” is still going unspoken.

Although these two poems were written nearly 100 years apart, the common themes and sentiments serve to highlight the classic and continual silent suffering which still goes on in Russia today – nearly all writing and speech is censored.

This work ends with a reflection on the life of Anna Politkovskaya. Politkovskaya serves as a link between Pushkin and Akhmatova’s works and the world of today. The themes present in *The Bronze Horseman* and *Requiem* are persistent and ever-present. Politkovskaya’s life and work continues what Pushkin and Akhmatova started, and makes their stories more accessible and understandable.

To fully understand the factors surrounding each writer and the situations in which they were writing, however, one must first examine each of their respective biographies.
Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin was born on May 26, 1799 on fashionable German Street in Moscow and has since been named the father of Russian poetry. Pushkin’s childhood was filled with neglect and disorder, so much that he often referred to it as being “intolerable”. His father was Sergey L’yovich Pushkin who descended from ancient nobility, had exquisite manners, and spoke perfect French. He had a bad temper, however, and would frequently beat his children. His mother, Nadezhda Osipovna was the grandchild of Abram Petrovich Gannibal, an African slave and favorite of Peter the Great. Because of her ethnic background, Nadezhda was known as “the beautiful creole.”

The Pushkin family lived in the Yusupov palace from 1802-1803. Pushkin had an older sister, Olga, and a younger brother, Lev. Their grandmother, Maria Alekseevna, taught Pushkin how to read and write Russian, because at that point the Russian aristocracy only read, wrote, and spoke French. Pushkin was writing verse on his own in Russian by the time he was eight years old. Lev recalls Pushkin reading for entire nights in their father’s library unsupervised.

When Pushkin was 12, his parents sent him to a new lyceum in Tsarskoe Selo in Tsar Alexander I’s palace. Pushkin was soon writing for all of the Lyceee’s magazines. Pushkin was also somewhat of a troublemaker in school, and he was often the ringleader in pranks. School was more important to Pushkin than home had ever been. Because Pushkin spent such an important developmental stage of his life in Tsarskoe Selo, the town was renamed “Pushkin” after his death.
The Pushkins were one of the oldest noble Russian families. “Seven Pushkins were members of the Parliament of 1613 which called the Romanovs to the throne of Russia, and in the seventeenth century three Pushkins were boyars. In 1698 a Pushkin took part in the conspiracy of the Streltsy and was beheaded by Peter the Great” (W.E.B Dubois 265).

After Pushkin graduated from the Lyceum, he was given a political office and had very little actual work to do. Because of this free time on his hands, he pursued his literary career. He wrote many radical poems, one that glorified political murder. When news of these poems came to the attention of the Tsar, Pushkin was exiled to the south of Russia. Pushkin also wrote a number of poems that became rallying cries for the Decembrist movement although he was not a member himself.

In roughly three weeks Pushkin completed his tragic poetic tale about the great St. Petersburg flood of 1824 and titled it: The Bronze Horseman. The lengthy epic was a reaction to the complete disregard to the suffering of the people by the Russian government. In 1833 Pushkin requested permission from the Emperor to publish his work. Tsar Nicholas objected and said that certain ideas and themes did not pass censorship laws, and that the tale also had other “questionable” points. Only the prologue to The Bronze Horseman was published during Pushkin’s life. The majority of the prologue is an ode to St. Petersburg and Peter the Great. Because the remainder of the

---

1 Boyars occupied the highest state offices and were very influential in decision-making processes until Peter the Great abolished the Boyar Duma (council) in 1711.
2 The Decembrist revolt took place on December 14th 1825 and was a protest by 3,000 soldiers against Nicholas I’s assumption of the throne after his elder brother Constantine removed himself from the line of succession.
work was filled with negative ironic commentary on the state of Russia’s political system, the remainder of the poem was censored. 

Pushkin proposed to his future wife, Nathalie Goncharova, when she was only 17 years old and was refused. He was persistent and she finally accepted his second proposal a year later in 1830 and they were married in February 1831. The Pushkins had three children, Marie, Alexandre, and Gregoire.

In 1834 an Alsatian officer, d’Anthes, came to Russia after a Russian baron adopted him. D’Anthes took quite an interest in Pushkin’s Nathalie. Pushkin challenged d’Anthes to a duel, but it never occurred. Nathalie continued the affair and finally in 1837 Pushkin challenged d’Anthes for a second time and the duel was fought in secret. Pushkin was shot and severely wounded. He died on January 29, 1837 at the age of 38, and instantly the popularity of his work greatly increased.

Russian literature virtually began with Pushkin; his writing extends from novels to critical essays to poetry. Pushkin influenced many Western writers such as Henry James, and also inspired many operas and ballets. The lyrical poem *The Bronze Horseman* is considered to be one of the most significant works of Russian literature; the bronze statue of Peter the Great on horseback in St. Petersburg subsequently became known as the Bronze Horseman because of the poem’s influence. Pushkin’s writing created and developed the literary Russian language – many of Pushkin’s works are considered to be masterpieces. Pushkin created a literary tradition for all future writers to attempt to live up to – one of the greatest admirers of his life and work was Anna Akhmatova.
Akhmatova – A Biography

Anna Andreevna Gorenko was born on June 23rd, 1889, almost 100 years after Pushkin, near Odessa in Ukraine. Her father, Andrey Gorenko, was a maritime engineer, and her mother, Inna Erazmovna, belonged to the Russian nobility. After her father’s retirement, Anna’s family moved to Tsarskoe Selo/Pushkin where Pushkin also spent his youth. Pushkin’s presence and writing permeated Akhmatova’s life in every way, beginning with their common venue of Tsarskoe Selo. It was there that Anna wrote her first poem at age 11. Anna’s father did not like the idea of her becoming a poet and forced her to take a penname so as not to shame the family. Anna chose the surname of her maternal great-grandmother, Akhmatova.

Like Pushkin, Akhmatova studied at the Gymnasium in Tsarskoe Selo, and the famous Smolni Institute in St. Petersburg, until her parents divorced in 1905. Akhmatova then moved to Kiev and attended a gymnasium there for her final year. She attended Law school in Kiev where she met the poet Nikolai Gumilyev. He became the single most important theme in her poetry until his execution in 1921. Akhmatova and Gumilyev were married in 1910 and had a son, Lev, in 1912. It was in this same year that Akhmatova published her first book of poems entitled Evening. Akhmatova became extremely popular with this edition and published another book, Rosary, in 1914. After Rosary’s publication (which delighted the public) it became clear that an “Akhmatova” school was emerging among young poets. Her husband, Gumilyev enlisted in the army in 1913, and shortly after his return in 1918, he and Akhmatova divorced but still remained
close friends. Akhmatova briefly married Vladimir Shileiko in 1918. Shileiko was an Assyriologist and also a poet.

After the October Revolution, Akhmatova virtually retired from literary society. She worked in a few publishing houses, but was otherwise in seclusion. One of the only times she emerged was for the funeral of Alexander Blok in August 1921 – two weeks later Gumilyev was executed for having “counterrevolutionary” ideas. He was accused of distributing anti-Soviet pamphlets in Crimea and was charged with participation in conspiracy. Gumilyev’s death was very shocking and saddening to Anna, and following his funeral she again secluded herself from the public. During her seclusion, Anna studied the history of St. Petersburg, old architecture, and the life and works of Pushkin. One of the main functions of Akhmatova’s ties to Pushkin in her life and writing is the renewal of poetic tradition.

At the beginning of the Nazi siege of Leningrad, Akhmatova was evacuated to Tashkent, Uzbekistan and lived with the Chukovsky family – old friends of Akhmatova. During the siege, her poetry was copied and circulated among the suffering people - it was recited in bomb shelters and gave hope and comfort to the multitudes. Akhmatova returned to Leningrad in June 1944.

Because of her association with Gumilyev and other anti-revolutionaries, there was an unofficial ban on Akhmatova’s work from 1925 until 1940 and she continued to be threatened by the NKVD through the late 1940s. Because of his radical parents, Lev was first arrested in 1935, which is when Akhmatova first began to write Requiem.

---

3 Dedicated to the linguistic, historical, and archaeological study of ancient Mesopotamia and the neighboring cultures.

4 An influential Russian poet in the early 20th century, Blok was a leader of the symbolist movement. His poetry often included daring rhythmic patterns and uneven beats.
(Requiem’s remaining poems were written between 1938 and 1940.) He was not officially imprisoned until 1938, however, and Akhmatova wrote a pro-Stalin cycle of poems in 1950 called In Praise of Peace (and Stalin) to try to secure his release. This work glorified Stalin and his ideas, and included lines such as: "Legend speaks of a wise man who saved each of us from a terrible death." Of course writing this cycle was brutally agonizing for Akhmatova. Lev was finally released in 1956 after he had suffered eighteen years in prison camps.

Although the majority of the Requiem poems are about her son, Akhmatova also writes about her third husband Nikolai Punin’s arrest and imprisonment: He was imprisoned in 1949 and died in a Siberian prison camp in 1953.

Due to changes in political climate, Akhmatova was finally accepted into the Writers’ Union after World War II. In her later years, Akhmatova translated many works including those of Victor Hugo, Rabindranath Tagore, and Giacomo Leopardi and was awarded an honorary doctorate from Oxford University in 1965. Akhmatova died on March 5th, 1966 in Leningrad at the age of seventy-seven.

Requiem was first published in Munich in 1963, and not published in Russia in its entirety until 1987.

Today there is a small museum dedicated to Akhmatova in the apartment where she lived with Nikolai Punin in the Fountain House in St. Petersburg. Akhmatova’s reputation continues to grow after her death – she has become a symbol of suppressed Russian heritage for her countrymen.
The Parallel Journeys of Akhmatova and Evgeny

Pushkin and Akhmatova have very different tones in The Bronze Horseman and Requiem. The Bronze Horseman is written in a very ironic flowery, poetic manner, while Akhmatova’s poems are ice cold to the point of being unfeeling. However, these two very different styles serve a very similar purpose. Akhmatova’s text chills the readers to the bone, because it expresses her suffering and the suffering of those around her in her words. Pushkin’s tragic tale, superficially does not take the suffering of the Russian people seriously – this irony serves to spotlight the corrupt nature of society and the ignorance of suffering. These two works establish Pushkin’s Evgeny and Akhmatova herself to be “little people.” They are virtually defenseless against their respective foes – both equally daunting and unconquerable. Evgeny faces a stone Tsar, while Akhmatova faces the idea of terror itself. The very fact that each of these characters stand up to their fears is quite remarkable and heartening for those around them.

Akhmatova’s emotion is conveyed through explicit ordinary words. These words are so commonplace and universal that they become all the more powerful. When she writes that words “fall like stones,” the reader can actually feel that happening. This is much more effective than something verbose and lyrical like “the words filled me with terrible emotions and a heaviness of heart”. The simplicity of her language effectively conveys how she has felt dead inside for a great portion of her life. Her poetry seldom enters her intimate, emotional sphere, and thus Akhmatova mainly expresses how she feels only through external actions. She highlights ordinary things that before were entirely unremarkable. She transfers emotions and abstractions into a concrete realm.
This seemingly un-emotional writing is juxtaposed to Pushkin’s portrayal of his protagonist Evgeny – near manic with constant thoughts and feelings.

Although Pushkin and Akhmatova are writing about historical events, they wish to bring history to a more approachable and personal level by giving the suffering of the Russian people a face to relate to. It is easy to give concrete numbers of dead, wounded or poor, but people seldom relate these statistics to being actual people with families whom they loved and who love them. The suffering of the people becomes much more real when you can witness and feel the personal suffering of even only one of the multitudes. These representative individuals in *The Bronze Horseman* and *Requiem* are Evgeny and Akhmatova herself, respectively.

There are several overlying similarities between Akhmatova’s *Requiem* and Pushkin’s *The Bronze Horseman*. A loved one is lost, intense grieving follows, and only one voice speaks the devastation of others. A flood captures Evgeny’s Parasha, while prison camps sweep the nation and claim Akhmatova’s son, Lev. Evgeny and Akhmatova are the candles in the dark, the faces in the multitudes, and both are met with miserable misfortune and suffering. Their stories provide a voice for all when they do not accept the obliteration of silence.

When we are first introduced to Evgeny he has a very concrete plan for his life: he will marry his fiancé, Parasha, secure a good government position, and start a family whom he can readily support:

*I already have some savings  
As well as a humble, simple home  
And there Parasha would be comfortable.  
Maybe next year  
I will marry Parasha  
Start our family*
Evgeny’s future is clear-cut down to his grandchildren. Akhmatova alludes to her earlier life as being quite similar to Evgeny’s desired future in the form of questions she poses to her former self:

*Would you show the mocker,*  
*The love of all friends,*  
*The cheerful sinner of Tsarskoe Selo,*  
*What happened to your life?*

In her childhood and youth, Akhmatova was quite content with her life. She seems almost disdainful of her self for being so happy as she refers to her cheer as being sinful. She cannot comprehend how vastly her life has changed since then.

Akhmatova and Evgeny were both fairly carefree and happy before the tragedies that would forever change their lives occurred. The fact that Evgeny’s life is so organized and polished is almost suspect – one can only imagine how he will react to anything getting in the way of his dreams. Additionally, this “cheerful sinner” Akhmatova, must not have been anticipating anything getting in the way of her carefree happiness.

Evgeny’s demise is the flood, which veritably destroys St. Petersburg and his beloved, while Akhmatova is crushed by the arrest of her son, and the death of her former husband. Both Evgeny and Akhmatova are overcome with frustration and grief at the rest of the world’s apparent disregard for the intense tragedies that took place and affected them so greatly. The morning after the flood has receded, St. Petersburg has virtually gone back to the status quo:
In the morning
The pale, tired clouds
Dazzled a quiet capital
I already had found no traces
Poor yesterday
Already it was evil
Everything came in order
Already in the streets free
With their cold cruelty
Walk the people. Working people,
After leaving their homes
To work they go.

Even though the streets are filled with wreckage and dead bodies, the people do not seem to notice or care. They simply go about their lives as if nothing has happened. At the end of Akhmatova’s *Requiem* even though every day of her life and the lives of those around her are filled with death and pain, it seems as though life for others is going on quite normally:

> And a prison dove murmurs in the distance
> And quietly go ships along the Neva.

All of the terror going on has not stopped ships coming and going, and quietly at that. Of course the greater metaphor is that to those authorizing the killings and imprisonments of the “spies” and “conspirators”, causing grief is just another day for them. Because of the intense tragedies surrounding both of their lives, a very major component of Evgeny and Akhmatova’s parallel journeys is a mild sort of insanity that comes hand-in-hand with extreme grief.

After the flood, while Evgeny is searching for Parasha he is extremely distressed. This is a perfectly normal reaction to the destruction that ensued. He begins to talk to himself and physically hurt himself, which leads one to believe that there may be deeper
issues at hand and finally, after Evgeny discovers that Parasha is indeed dead he begins to laugh:

He stopped.  
Walked back.  
Looks...walks...looks again.  
There is the place, where their house stood.  
There were the yves, there were the gates.  
Show them, where is the house?  
And, full of twilight  
He walks in a circle,  
Speaking loudly to himself  
And suddenly throws his head in the air,  
And laughs.

This is a definite sign that Evgeny has lost his mind. Parasha’s death is such a blow to him: not only was she the love of his life, but her death has completely ruined Evgeny’s perfect plan for life. Akhmatova has a similar reaction after she discovers that her son has been sentenced to death:

Already the insanity has spread its wings  
Soul halfway covered  
And given fiery wine  
And beckon in black valley

Akhmatova’s metaphorical and poetic language here is very similar to a poem by Pushkin about insanity called «не дай мне бог сойти с ума» (God, don't let me lose my mind) which presents insanity as having two distinct sides. On one hand, insanity can be viewed as complete freedom for the mind. You do not have to abide by rules, you are free to dream and do outrageous things, and in that sense insanity is very liberating. From a different perspective, however, insanity is a terrifying state. You are not in control of your mind and thus you can't prevent yourself from 'seeing' things that frighten you or that you do not wish to see.
Akhmatova and Evgeny both experience a type of mind-body separation – they strive to alleviate their physical pain by living internally. Akhmatova begins to refer to herself in the third person:

*This woman is sick
This woman is alone
Husband in his tomb, son in prison
Pray for me.*

This is Akhmatova’s effort to remove herself from her suffering. The “woman” she describes is most likely herself – her son is in prison, she is sick, she must feel very alone, and her two previous husbands, Gumilyov and Shileiko, are both dead. She is writing as if she is looking at her own suffering from another’s perspective. But, finally at the end she asks others to pray for her and thus admits that she is the woman about whom she speaks. This detachment from her physical body, however, is a definite indication that her mind is not altogether well. She tries to simplify her suffering by making a to-do list for herself:

*Today I have a lot to do:
Need to kill memory to the end,
Need to turn soul into a stone,
Need to once again learn how to live.*

All of these items in her list are not things she could accomplish in a day or most likely a lifetime. Akhmatova attempts to rationalize her life so the pain she is feeling becomes a more concrete, approachable entity. This, of course is an impossible feat. Evgeny also tries to rationalize his situation. He blames Peter the Great for what happened to Parasha – why did he not build a stronger city? Evgeny approaches the statue of Peter the Great upon his bronze horse and speaks to him:

*Blood boiled, he became grim*
With awful teeth and clenching fingers
With force he said:
“Good day miraculous creator!
He whispered angrily
Fear me!“
And suddenly fled
Running to escape.

Peter the Great is obviously not a living person and thus cannot hear Evgeny’s threats. A fearful respect for authority is so embedded in Evgeny, however, that he immediately flees the scene and believes that Peter is chasing him. Evgeny’s crazed hallucinations lead to his eventual demise. He dies in fear of the inanimate horseman on the threshold of Parasha’s old house.

Evgeny and Akhmatova are both little people. They are not Tsars or Dukes; they are just common people whose lives virtually don’t matter at all. Their reactions to their suffering set them apart from their peers, however. Their stories have given readers a one-way ticket into their minds, but we have no way of knowing whether they are alone in their thinking because countless others refuse to speak up. Even though these two people, one fictional, one real, lived their lives about one hundred years apart, it is as though only their surroundings have changed. The similarities in their personal journeys allow for countless other connections to be made in their respective historical situations.
The Geography of Grief

In both Pushkin and Akhmatova, suffering is often manifested in physical or geographical entities. The Russian people described in each of their respective works have been so dehumanized that they can no longer feel - they are thus forced to express their grief in the geography that surrounds them.

With the help of the NKVD (Narodniy Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del or The Peoples Commissariat for Internal Affairs or Soviet secret police) Joseph Stalin meticulously eliminated his opposing political threats, the army, the church, ethnic groups (to enforce the “Russification” of the Soviet Union), and sent over 20 million Russians to the Gulag labor camps where around half of them died. All of these purges occurred between 1934 and 1939. During the time from 1936 to 1938, which was known as “The Reign of Terror,” (in reference to Stalin’s purges) Nikolai Yezhov was the leader of the NKVD and hence that period is sometimes referred to Yezhovshina or the Yezhov era.

In her “Instead of an Introduction” Akhmatova describes herself standing outside of the Kresty prison in St. Petersburg with her most trusted friend Lydia Chukovskaya waiting for news of her imprisoned son, Lev. Akhmatova begins writing Requiem but only has physical words on paper for a very short amount of time to avoid them being discovered. She shares her poems with Chukovskaya, who memorizes them, and thus they are orally preserved.

Russia itself is suffering. The people are not permitted to express themselves in any way or else there will be immediate consequences. Because there is nowhere or way for these emotions to be expressed by the Russian people, it is up to the land and the city
itself to convey the suffering of its people. Akhmatova describes this in the first few lines of the introduction to *Requiem*:

> Before this grief, bend mountains,  
> Stops the flow of the great river,  
> But can’t break strong prison bars

The grief of the people is so strong that it can destroy all of the natural geographical elements. It cannot, however, break the prison bars that are something that mankind itself created.

> And your hot tears  
> Burn the ice of the New Year.  
> There the prison poplar bends,  
> Without sound. And how many  
> Innocent lives are ending...

The New Year is the most important holiday for the Russian people. It is a time of joy for all, young and old. For tears to burn the ice of the New Year is a very depressing concept indeed. No one can hear the prison poplar bending in the wind, just as no one can hear how many lives are now ending inside of the prison. Many executions took place in secret in the prison cellars. It is also notable that a poplar has invasive roots that extend usually forty meters away from the tree trunk. If this poplar were actually outside of the prison, the roots would be symbolically trying to reach into the cellar of the prison, just as Akhmatova and her companions strive to do. The ellipsis at the end of the last line represents the unexpressed pain of those waiting for news, but at the same time knowing that there is never much hope.

There are also many stone motifs in *Requiem*. When Akhmatova writes about hearing news of her son’s sentence, she describes the feeling as:

> And stone words fell
On my still living breast.

One word determines whether a loved one will live or die. To Akhmatova that word explains that her son will be soon executed, (the decision is later repealed, however) and feels like a stone falling onto her chest. Again, when Akhmatova is explaining her plan of action after her son is sentenced she describes her soul as stone:

Need to turn soul into a stone,
Need to once again learn how to live.

Akhmatova is no longer a real person, but just like all of the other faceless, nameless, suffering people who have lost loved ones. From her own suffering, she can relate to how others are feeling around her:

I learned how faces fall
How under eyelids terror looks out
Like hard lines on stone pages
Suffering is brought out on cheeks

These are no longer people but stone pages etched with grief. Their suffering which they cannot speak of is clearly visible upon their faces like etchings are visible on stone tablets. Akhmatova also speaks to the diminishing of their physical appearances because they have endured so much pain. These are not the bright, rosy-cheeked girls which Pushkin describes in *The Bronze Horseman*, but stone faced automatons who will never be the same.

Near the end of the Poem, Akhmatova devises a way for everyone’s suffering to be eternally remembered:

And if sometime in this place
They think to erect a monument to me
I would consent to this celebration
But only with this condition don’t place it
Around the sea, where I was born
(My last connection to the sea was lost).
Not in the Tsar’s courtyard near the treasured stump
Where a shadow searches for me
But here, where I stood for three hundred hours
And where for me bars weren’t opened

Just as Peter the Great’s statue stands where he first thought out his new city,

Akhmatova’s words envision a bronze statue of herself in front of Kresty prison in St. Petersburg, where she waited for three hundred hours for news of her son. Akhmatova and the other mourners were, in effect, statues when they were waiting outside of the prison for news or sightings of their loved ones. Very much unlike Akhmatova and her nameless companions, Peter the Great’s statue is a symbol of safety, security, and strength for the Russian people. Akmatova hopes to have the same effect. Although no such statue has been built, *Requiem* serves as a type of monument to those who died, and those who suffered and mourned the dead and imprisoned.

Another important geographic theme in *Requiem* is stars. For thousands of years, voyagers have been using stars to navigate safely to their ports of call. These stars are symbolic of safety, and comfort - In Akhmatova’s poems, stars are representative of the dead, which eternally shine down upon the living people. Just as sailors used stars for navigation, Akhmatova attempts to lead her people to a better place by using star-like ancestors in her poetry.

*The stars of the dead stand above us,*
*And the innocent Rus*
*Under bloody boots*
*And under wheels of Black Marias.*

Old Russia or Kieven Russia was comprised of modern-day Ukraine and Belorus. All three republics together were then considered “Rus” which was the term used by Old Russians to describe themselves, their lands, their culture, and their historical period.
Kieven Russia was first established in the year 862 when the people of Novgorod called in a group of Viking lords called Varangians to rule them and create order in their land. This state of Kieven Russia was a cultural melting pot – unlike more recent Russian history, the Rus were not prosecuted or subjugated due to their ethnic backgrounds. In this sense, the Rus are an innocent people as Akhmatova states. The innocent Rus are objectified by Akhmatova as stars looking over the Russian people. The Russian people are so marginalized that they are literally and figuratively being trodden upon by the boots of Stalin and his followers, and being crushed under the wheels of the black trucks which take scores of innocent Russians to the Gulag or to their deaths. Akhmatova is hoping that the Russian people will look to the start or to their Rus ancestors to change the way they are living today and become peaceful. This star motif continues later on in the poems:

*And directly into my eyes stares*
*And fast destruction threatens by*
*A bright star.*

Because the stars are representative of the dead, the bright star shining in Akhmatova’s eyes instead of being a beautiful beacon of hope is extremely ominous. For her it means that someone she cares about (most likely her son) is facing impending death.

*Like you, son, in prison*
*White nights looked,*
*Like they look again*

The white nights are a few weeks around the summer solstice in June when the sun sets very late and the sun rises very early so darkness is never complete. The white nights are still the same now that Lev is in prison, however life is so different for
Akhmatova now that her son is gone. In prison and outside of prison the white nights are the same. Because her son is now behind bars he has a completely different view of something that was once so familiar and comforting.

To me all is the same now. Yenisei whirls,
The Polar Star shines
And blue brightness of beloved’s eyes
Cover the last horror.

The Polar Star is often and traditionally used in celestial navigation as it is aligned exactly with the earth’s axis of rotation. The horrors are covered because nobody is overtly reacting to them. It is easy to forget about something if there are no vast changes in your immediate surroundings. The stars still shine at night. The Yenisei River, referred to in Akhmatova’s lines, is the fifth longest river in the world and the greatest river system flowing to the Arctic Ocean. The middle section of the river is controlled by a series of hydroelectric dams that were built for the most part by laborers in the Gulag during Soviet times. Thus the Yenisei is constantly fueling the Soviet machine and thus represents the suffering of the Russian laborers.

Akhmatova was not the first Russian writer to express grief in geographic terms. The father of all Russian literature, Alexander Pushkin, establishes the suffering of the Russian landscape in the prologue to his epic poem, The Bronze Horseman.

Pushkin goes to great lengths to describe the dismal geography of the Petersburg area before Peter the Great handcrafted it into his new capital. It was a swamp that had to be utterly reformed before it could support any real buildings.

100 years goes by, and the young city,
From northern area pretty and wonderful,
From dark forest, from marshy swamp
Rises magnificently and proudly
Peter founded St. Petersburg in 1703 at the mouth of the Neva River and in 1712 Peter declared it the new capital of Russia. Because of the harsh geographical conditions of the area though, many thousand serfs died while constructing the new city. St. Petersburg was Peter’s attempt to ‘Europeanize’ Russia once and for all. In 1739 the Italian philosopher and critic Francesco Algarotti stated that Petersburg was: “this great window recently opened in the north through which Russia looks on Europe.” Pushkin employs this language in his prologue:

*Through nature here we can*  
*CUT a window to Europe*

Unknowingly, Peter the Great has started a silent war between mankind and nature. There have already been thousands of human deaths due to the natural climate, not to mention the destruction of the original landscape. The language Pushkin uses to describe the construction and development of Petersburg is almost warlike:

*Neva is dressed in granite,*  
*Bridges hang above the water;*

Peter the Great has imprisoned the Neva River with canals and bridges. The Neva has a significant amount of power in Petersburg; the layout of the city is divided into a scattering of islands separated by the river. Petersburg is thus ‘weakened’ by the Neva and always at the mercy of nature. It is only a matter of time before the Neva will retaliate with full force. Pushkin also writes about the Neva as if she were a human being:

*Neva is bothered, like an invalid*  
*Restless in their bed.*  
*It was already late and dark;*  
*The rain was angry on the window*  
*The wind blew in sad howls.*
Neva is not content in her granite prison. This is clear from the intense flooding which occurs in St. Petersburg on an almost yearly basis. Peter the Great has thus eternally cursed his city by attempting to tame the surrounding natural environment. This is also indicative of the classic system of power in Russia – Russia is one of the most nationalistic countries in the world because the people are so programmed to conform to whatever their leader has in store for them. This makes them very strong as a whole but weak on an individual basis. Pushkin’s rationale behind his lyrical ballad is to show his disgust at the Tsar’s reaction to the suffering of his people – the Tsar sees no reason why his people should disagree with his actions and decisions. Pushkin presents an image of the Tsar in his poem:

*The Tsar of Russia (already now dead)*
*Walked onto the balcony,*
*Sad and confused he went,*
*And said “No Tsar is master over* 
*God’s elements.” He sat*
*And in his mind were mournful eyes* 
*And disaster stared.*

This Emperor is Tsar Alexander I. He makes an excuse for his lack of action, stating that he cannot control the elements – and in fact no Tsar can. This, of course, is exactly what Peter the Great did to construct his capital city. He makes it seem as if there is nothing he can do to compensate for the destruction the flood has caused, when indeed there are several ways he can aid his homeless and injured people. By making the Emperor’s presence in the poem so limited, (all of seven lines) Pushkin shows the lack of involvement he actually has with his subjects. Pushkin’s writing is thus filled with hidden messages to the Russian people as well as authority figures.
Russia and the city of St. Petersburg embody the suffering of their people. The layout of St. Petersburg is representative of how internally and individually divided and subsequently weak the Russian people are. They are socialized to never challenge the feared authority, and are accused of conspiracy if they go against norms. Because those suffering are such a silent group, the land itself feels for them. Rivers are angry, mountains bend, and stars threaten. Perhaps the land will in turn give power and voice to the people who walk upon it. But in the meantime the land will continue to be the heart and soul for its people, as only the land is a true witness to their pain.
A Requiem for Russia

A requiem is a religious song to commemorate the souls of the dead. It seems strange that Akhmatova would write a requiem for her son or husband as they are still living. This work can thus be read as a symbolic requiem for Russia and the Russian people; however there are some interesting references that may put a more positive spin on the cycle. Pushkin’s *The Bronze Horseman*, also contains some Requiem-like attributes to which yet again link the two works together. The flood is a very religious experience for Evgeny – he loses everything that matters to him and must virtually be reborn. At the very end of *Requiem*, Akhmatova writes:

> But here, where I stood for three hundred hours  
> And where for me bars weren’t opened  
> For that reason death I blissfully feared  
> To forget the noise of Black Marias  
> Forget the sound of the closing door  
> And an old woman screaming like a wounded animal  
> And from my bronze eyes,  
> Like tears the snow melts

The pain the Russian people experienced during Stalin’s reign of terror is incomprehensible. Not knowing if loved ones are dead, standing in lines outside of the prison day after day in terrible conditions – this dreadful saga is something that one would hope to immediately forget. Akhmatova wants to remember this pain, however. She does not want the Russian people to simply gloss over this event, but to commemorate it and keep the feeling of collective suffering within them forever.

To symbolically mourn the loss of Russia, *Requiem* describes the experiences of Akhmatova waiting for her imprisoned son and the emotions of hearing his death sentence. Akhmatova began to write after the charges against her son were declared as
“terrorist activity.” Instead of ten years in Siberian prison camps, he was condemned to be shot at Kresty prison in St. Petersburg. While Akhmatova was waiting in lines outside of the prison, hoping for news of her son, she first wrote “Instead of an Introduction.” Because she was afraid to write it on paper, Akhmatova and her dearest friend Lydia Chukovskaya (who was waiting for news of her imprisoned husband) committed the poem to memory, and thus commenced the oral tradition of Requiem.

This orally preserved epic contains several descriptions of and allusions to traditional Russian Orthodox funeral ceremonies. During the traditional funeral process, the body of the deceased is carried in a coffin feet-first into the church and set in the center facing the altar. The coffin is then opened and an icon of Christ or the deceased’s patron Saint is placed in their hands while a wreath is placed on their forehead. A priest lights candles that are distributed to the worshipers and held throughout the service. After the priest speaks, friends and family kiss the cross on the side of the coffin or the icon. The closest relatives are given an opportunity to spend several minutes with the departed alone. After the final farewells, the coffin is closed and carried out of the church and bells are rung slowly. The priest gives a final service next to the grave. The first allusion to this funeral service is when Akhmatova describes someone dear to her being taken from her:

You were taken at sunrise
After you, like in mourning I went,
In dark room children cried,
The holy candle swells.
On your lips - the chill of the icon.
Dead sweat on brow...don’t forget!
Will I, like wives of Streltsy
Under the Kremlin towers be.

It is likely that Akhmatova is referring to her ex-husband Nikolai Punin in the
following passage, as she was present at the time of his arrest, while she was absent when her son Lev was taken. Akhmatova writes about her experience during Punin’s arrest as nearly identical to attending a Russian Orthodox funeral for him. His body is brought procession-style into a dark room with lit candles. His lips are cold just like the icon that Akhmatova has kissed, and his body is no longer living.

In the final two lines, *Will I, like wives of Streltsy/Under the Kremlin towers be.* Akhmatova makes a historical reference to the similar suffering of women before her. The Streltsy were soldiers and Old Believers who didn’t see Peter the Great as fit to rule – and they spent three days murdering Peter’s family members, and then making his half-sister Sophia into the regent. After another uprising in Moscow in 1698, Peter had over one thousand of the Streltsy murdered and left hundreds of corpses dangling at the gallows for months in front of their wives and families. Punin’s literary funeral continues later in the poem:

*Let black cloth cover,*
*And let the lanterns be carried away.*

This is the symbolic conclusion to Punin’s funeral. There is a sense that Akhmatova is trying to let go of her doomed loved ones but also trying to hold a funeral for her suffering. Because of this detachment from earthly pain, from this point on, the poem takes a very religious turn.

At the end of the cycle, Akhmatova takes on the role of the Virgin Mary. The Russian word she uses for “veil” here is покров/pokrov, which means veil of the Virgin. The physical world can no longer be a home for the Russian people because their
suffering is embodied in it. Akhmatova calls to her people to hear her words and follow her and live internally.

*Home isn’t precious earth*
*And she who would shake her beautiful head*
*Said: “going there is like home”*
*Wanted to call all by name*
*The copy taken away and nowhere to learn*
*For us I weave a wide veil*

Akhmatova is hoping to hide and protect her people from the pain they have already witnessed, and additionally from the pain that they are sure to experience in the future. Going to the prison became as mindless and usual as going to daily mass:

*Like going to early mass*
*Around the capital the wild go*

The prison virtually becomes the church for the countless people waiting for news of their loved ones. It is the place where day-by-day they pray together for the swift release of their friends and family. Life for those waiting in prison lines is very bleak indeed. So dismal that Akhmatova alludes to taking her own life:

*You come just the same – why not now?*
*I wait for you – it is very hard.*
*I put out the light and opened the door*
*To you, so simple and marvellous.*
*Appear in pleasing form*

This piece is in Akhmatova’s section entitled “To Death.” At this point in her life, experiencing the pain of living is far worse than death. Death appears to her as a friend, all people inevitably die, so what difference does it make to Akhmatova whether she dies now or later – her life is essentially over already since everything she cares about has been taken from her. Akhmatova goes on to describe “life” in death:
To me all is the same now. Yenisei whirls,
The Polar Star shines
And blue brightness of beloved’s eyes
Cover the last horror.

Just as Lev experiences the same white nights while he is inside and outside of prison, life will go on with or without Akhmatova—rivers will still run, stars will still shine. Since she thinks her son is going to die, seeing him in the afterlife will be a comfort to her. These religious themes continue throughout the rest of the poem.

At the beginning of her section entitled “Crucifixion,” Akhmatova includes a nearly direct quotation from an Orthodox Easter service:

*Do not weep for me, Mother, when I am in my grave.*

She also includes language that suggests an Apocalypse of sorts:

*A choir of angels proclaim the great hour
And heaven melts in fire*

Akhmatova’s comparison between her own suffering (and the broader suffering of the Russian people) and the suffering of Christ suggests that she and the people will experience a resurrection of sorts after the crucifixion and Easter. The resurrection means that after this Apocalypse of Stalin’s terror there will be no more death and suffering for the Russian people. This places a very optimistic spin on a poem that is quite dark at first glance. This masked optimism is displayed again in the last two lines of the poem:

*And a prison dove murmurs in the distance
And quietly go ships on the Neva.*

The dove is a classic Christian symbol of peace, love, and friendship—of course this dove is in prison. This image of the captive dove is another allusion to rebirth after the
Apocalypse – the dove does not change whether in prison or free, it glows with hope for the future.

The ending to Akhmatova’s *Requiem* is very similar to that of *The Bronze Horseman*. Akhmatova loses faith in herself and her fellow Russians because she is grieving so much. Evgeny loses faith in the Russian people when there are no apparent reactions or changes in daily behavior immediately following the flood:

*In the morning*
*The pale, tired clouds*
*Dazzled a quiet capital*
*I already had found no traces*
*Poor yesterday*
*Already it was evil*
*Everything came in order*
*Already in the streets free*
*With their cold cruelty*
*Walk the people. Working people,*
*After leaving their homes*
*To work they go.*

Evgeny cannot comprehend how these people can choose to ignore and mask their suffering. It seems to Evgeny and to the reader that these people are cold and unloving. However there is a glimmer of hope for humanity at the very end of the poem:

*At the threshold*
*My madman was discovered,*
*And there his calm corpse*
*Was buried for the sake of god.*

Evgeny dies on the threshold of Parasha’s old house. Even though the streets of Petersburg are covered in wreckage, these humble men who discover Evgeny’s body find it in the goodness of their hearts to give him a proper burial. This small expression of kindness represents a glimmer of hope for the Russian people – it is almost as if these fishermen are trying to apologize to Evgeny for their lack of emotion after the flood.
These two poems may each be a Requiem in a sense, however perhaps they are a different kind of Requiem than we are led to believe. Even though the subject matter of both poems is fairly dismal, there is a sense at the endings that if we just wait and see, things will be better. These endings are representations of the traditional Slavophile dogma that redemption comes only through suffering. These poems are also a reminder to the Russian people to have faith in themselves, and their families, because just as they are strong when they are united under a Tsar, Emperor, or President, they are equally as strong when they unite together and support each other in their most difficult times.
Anna Politkovskaya: A Modern-Day Akhmatova

Today there is another Anna who comes to mind when one thinks about suffering in Russia - Anna Politkovskaya who was brutally murdered in an elevator in her Moscow apartment building on October 7th, 2006 which is, ironically, Russian president Vladimir Putin’s birthday. She took three close-range bullets to the chest and one to the head. On that day, Politkovskaya was allegedly going to file a long story on routine torture practices conducted by certain members of the Chechen security forces and supported by Russia. After her murder, Russian police seized her notes, computer hard drive and two photographs of the accused. Her ex-husband, son, daughter, and granddaughter survive her.

Anna Politkovskaya was born Anna Mazepa in New York in 1958. Both of her parents were Ukrainian diplomats at the United Nations. She grew up and went to school in the US, and then later attended Moscow University where she studied literature and journalism and wrote a thesis about the poetry of Marina Tsvetaeva. While at school in Moscow, Politkovskaya married Aleksandr Politkovski, a well-known Russian TV anchor. Upon her graduation in 1980, she began working as a journalist for Izvestia, a leading Soviet newspaper, and additionally as a foreign correspondent for Aeroflot Soviet Airlines.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Politkovskaya became part of the founding group of Novaya Gazeta (New Newspaper) that first sent her to Chechnya. She did a great deal of work there, visiting hospitals and refugee camps to interview victims, and would return thirty-nine times.
In October 2002 Chechen separatist terrorists took 912 people hostage in the Dubrovka theatre in Moscow during a performance of Nord-Ost. The terrorists stated that all hostages would be killed unless Russia withdrew its troops from Chechnya. Politkovskaya was asked to participate in the negotiations to save the lives of the hostages, however no agreement was reached and after two and a half days, Russian Special Forces stormed the building. This invasive act resulted in the deaths of thirty-three terrorists in addition to 130 hostages; none of the Russian troops were harmed. The Russian government also made sure to close television stations and censor radio coverage during the siege which was greatly frustrating to Politkovskaya.

Politkovskaya was a witness in many high-profile criminal cases in Russia – in particular cases dealing with wrongful deaths in Chechnya. Scott Simon, in his forward to Politkovskaya’s book “A Russian Diary” writes:

Anna Politkovskaya was prominent among those reporters who sent back vivid and infuriating stories of Russia’s scorched-earth campaign of kidnappings, rapes, massacres, and the bombing of innocents (ix).

She survived at least three attempts on her life including a severe poisoning on a plane to Chechnya in 2004. Politkovskaya’s dangerous and active lifestyle led her husband to leave her after she returned from reporting on a Russian rocket attack on a maternity hospital that killed scores of new mothers, grandmothers, and babies.

Politkovskaya gave up her entire home and family life for her work. At the end of her book A Russian Diary, she includes a personal reflection entitled “Am I Afraid?”

People often tell me I am a Pessimist; that I do not believe in the strength of the Russian people; that I am obsessive in my opposition to Putin and see nothing beyond that.
I see everything, and that is the whole problem. I see both what is good and what is bad. I see that people would like life to change for the better but are incapable of making that happen, and that in order to conceal this truth they concentrate on the positive and pretend the negative isn’t there […] If anybody thinks they can take comfort from the ‘optimistic’ forecast, let them do so. It is certainly the easier way, but it is also a death sentence for our grandchildren” (342).

Currently *A Russian Diary* is not being published in Russia - UK Channel 4's main news anchor Jon Snow writes in the foreword to the book's UK edition:

*Her murder robbed too many of us of absolutely vital sources of information and contact. Yet it may, ultimately, be seen to have at least helped prepare the way for the unmasking of the dark forces at the heart of Russia's current being. I must confess that I finished reading *A Russian Diary* feeling that it should be taken up and dropped from the air in vast quantities throughout the length and breadth of Mother Russia, for all her people to read.*

The Glasnost Defense Foundation reports that during 2005 alone:

- Six Russian journalists were murdered.
- Sixty-three were assaulted.
- Forty-seven were arrested.
- Forty-two were prosecuted.
- The editorial offices of twelve publications of broadcasters were attacked.
  - Twenty-three editorial offices were closed.
- Ten were evicted from their premises.
- Twenty-eight newspapers or magazines were confiscated outright.
- Thirty-eight times, the government simply refused to let material be printed or distributed.
- Thirteen Russian journalists have been killed – in Russia, not in Chechnya, Iraq, or Afghanistan – since Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000.
Politkovskaya is yet another fearless writer. Although her death was tragic, she is a modern-day reminder of the corrupt censorship still ever-present in Russia. Politkovskaya is in effect a martyr for truth and the power of the written word. Her death was a wake-up call for many, and hopefully a lesson will be learned from her death: watch out, Putin, those who are stifled often find creative ways to come back to haunt you.

One of the most important components of Russian leadership is that nobody is permitted to doubt that the Tsar or President is always correct in whatever they say or do. If the Russian people even begin to question the authority of the present ruler, the country is weakened immensely – if everyone has the same mindset they are veritably impenetrable. This state of never questioning authority is taken to a terrifying point. For Example, in Russia today, nearly nothing is done to commemorate Bloody Sunday when Tsar Nicholas II killed thousands of innocent protesters. This is what makes Pushkin, Akhmatova, and Politkovskaya unique. They are fighting their own quiet (and sometimes not so quiet) battle against authority in their writing and actions. Censorship has always been one of the most important means to control pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet society. And thus the progression of writing for social justice is very clear throughout time with the transition from poetry to prose to journalistic work. The words and meanings change from hidden and symbolic to more and more clear and explicit as time goes by.

Pushkin will write:

Here will the city begin  
To spite its arrogant neighbor  
Nature here was condemned  
To Europe is chopped a window
To consolidate by the sea
Here by new sea routes
States of every flag shall come to us
Let us feast on open space

While Akhmatova writes:

Verdict…and immediately tears gush,
All already finished,
The pain of life drawn from the heart,
And roughly overturned backwards,
But let her go…unsteady…alone...

And finally Politkovskaya writes:

December 23rd: Ritual murders are taking place in Moscow. A second severed head has been found in the past twenty-four hours, this time in the district of Gonianovo in the east of Moscow. It was in a rubbish container on Altaiskaya Street. Yesterday evening, a head in a plastic bag was found lying on a table in the courtyard outside Apartment Building 3 on Krasnoyarskaya Street. Both men had been dead for twenty-four hours before the discovery (36).

The messages of Pushkin, Akhmatova, and Politkovskaya are all the same even though their words are different. Pushkin and Akhmatova censor their messages through descriptions of the landscape or religious allusions while Politkovskaya could not be more explicit in her statements and anecdotes.

Censorship is almost a positive in that it automatically creates an outside society who must communicate in codes that only they know and understand. It has thus made the Russian people extremely strong and resilient however silent. Pushkin and Akhmatova were ostracized and persecuted for their writing, while Politkovskaya was completely eliminated for exposing the many faults of the government. It will be interesting to see
how Russia progresses in the next hundred years in terms of censorship and journalism – one can only hope that writing in Russia will keep evolving for the better.
Requiem

Instead of an Introduction

In the terrible years of Yezhov, I passed seventeen months in prison lines in Leningrad. Once someone identified me. At that time, standing next to me was a woman with blue lips who, of course, never in her life had heard my name, woke from our frozen state, and asked me in the ear (there we all spoke in whispers):
-Can you write about this?
And I said:
- I can.

Then something like a smile slipped across what had never been her face.

April 1st, 1957
Leningrad

Dedication

Before this grief, bend mountains,
Stops the flow of the great river,
But can’t break strong prison bars
And behind them “prisoners’ burrows”
And deadly anguish.

For some fresh wind blows
For some basking in the setting sun –
We don’t know, we are the same everywhere,
Hear only the scratching keys
The heavy steps of the soldier
Like going to early mass
Around the capital the wild go
There we met lifeless dead,
Sun beneath and Neva foggy,
But hope sang in the distance.
Verdict…and immediately tears gush,
All already finished,
The pain of life drawn from the heart,
And roughly overturned backwards,
But let her go…unsteady…alone…
Where are my nameless friends
From two of my frenzied years?
That appear to them in a Siberian blizzard,
That seem to them in the circle of the moon?
I say farewell to their hello.
March 1940

**Prologue**
It was when only the dead smiled  
Calm and happy.  
And the unneeded sign dangled  
Near prisons of their Leningrad.  
And when, terrified from torment,  
Convicted prisoners already went,  
And the short song of separation  
Was the locomotive whistle  
The stars of the dead stand above us,  
And the innocent Rus  
Under bloody boots  
And under wheels of Black Marias.

**I**
You were taken at sunrise  
After you, like in mourning I went,  
In dark room children cried,  
The holy candle swells.  
On the lips- the cold icon.  
Dead sweat on your brow...I don’t forget!  
Will I, like wives of Streltsy  
Under the Kremlin towers be?

**II**
Quietly flows quiet Don,  
Yellow moon enters the house.  
Enteres with crooked cap  
The yellow moon sees a shadow

This woman is sick  
This woman is alone  
Husband in his tomb, son in prison  
Pray for me.

**III**
No, it isn’t me, it it’s someone else’s suffering  
I can’t take what happened  
Let black cloth cover,  
And let the lanterns be carried away.  
Night

**IV**
Would you show the mocker,  
The love of all friends,  
The cheerful sinner of Tsarskoe Selo,  
What happened to your life?
Like the three hundredth in line with a parcel,
Under the crosses will stand
And your hot tears
Burn the ice of the New Year.
There the prison poplar bends,
Without sound. And how many
Innocent lives are ending…

V
For seventeen months I shout
I call you home
Threw my leg at the executioner
You son and horror of mine
Everything was mixed forever
And to me could not be disassembled
Now, who is animal, who is human
And long I wait for executions.
And only dusty flowers,
And the sound of the incensory and tracks
Somewhere in nowhere
And directly into my eyes stares
And fast destruction threatens by
A bright star.

VI
Easily fly weeks,
What happened, I don’t understand
Like you, son, in prison
White nights looked,
Like they look again
A hawk’s hot eye,
About your tall cross
And speak about death.

VII
The Sentence
And stone words fell
On my still living breast.
Nothing. In fact I was prepared,
I will consult with these like nothing.

Today I have a lot to do:
Need to kill memory to the end,
Need to turn soul into a stone,
Need to once again learn how to live.

Not quite…hot summer rustle,
As though a holiday was through my window.
I had a presentiment for a long time
Bright day and deserted house.

**VIII**
To Death
You come just the same – why not now?
I wait for you – it is very hard.
I put out the light and opened the door
To you, so simple and marvellous.
Appear in pleasing form
Poisonous shot floods in
Or sneak up, like an experienced bandit,
Or to be poisoned by typhoid fumes,
Or storyteller thinking of you
and all until familiar nausea, -
Because I saw the tops of blue hats
And pale from fear of officers,
To me all is the same now. Yenisei whirls,
The Polar Star shines
And blue brightness of beloved’s eyes
Cover the last horror.
19 August 1939

**IX**
Already the insanity has spread its wings
Soul halfway covered
And given fiery wine
And beckon in black valley

And I remember, that to him
I must give up victory,
Take heed in him
Already like foreign trudges

And not permit anything
He carried me away with him
(as if without persuasion
and without pestering entreaties)

Not son’s terrible eyes
Motionless suffering
Not the day when the thunderstorm comes
Not the hour when prison visits

Not dear cool hands
Not the lime trees’ agitated shade
Not quiet distant sound
Consolation’s last sound.
May 4th 1940

X
Crucifiction
“Do not weep for me, Mother, when I am in my grave.”

I
A choir of angels proclaim the great hour
And heaven melts in fire
To Father say: “why have you left me?”
And to Mother: “Oh, don’t cry for me…”
Magdalene beat herself and sobbed,
Favorite follower turns to stone,
And there, where silent Mother stood,
So nobody stared or dared.

Epilogue
I
I learned how faces fall
How under eyelids terror looks out
Like hard lines on stone pages
Suffering is brought out on cheeks
Like locks ash and black,
Suddenly become silver,
Smile fades on submissive lips
And in dry laughter fear trembles
And I pray not for myself alone,
But for everyone who stood there with me,
In fierce cold and in intense July heat
Under blind red walls.

II
Yet again remembered approaching hour
I see, I hear, I feel you:
And that only just up to the sentry’s window
Home isn’t precious earth
And she who would shake her beautiful head
Said: “going there is like home”
Wanted to call all by name
The copy taken away and nowhere to learn
For us I weave a wide veil
From the poor, they have words overheard
Of them remember always and everywhere
Of them don’t forget in new misfortune
And if my worn-out mouth heals
Which cries for one hundred million
Let them understand me
On the eve of my funeral
And if sometime in this place
They think to erect a monument to me
I would consent to this celebration
But only with this condition don’t place it
Around the sea, where I was born
(My last connection to the sea was lost),
Not in the Tsar’s courtyard near the treasured stump
Where a shadow searches for me
But here, where I stood for three hundred hours
And where for me bars weren’t opened
For that reason death I blissfully feared
To forget the noise of Black Marias
Forget the sound of the closing door
And an old woman screaming like a wounded animal
And from my bronze eyes,
Like tears the snow melts
And a prison dove murmurs in the distance
And quietly go ships on the Neva.
The Bronze Horseman
By Alexander Pushkin

Prologue

On the banks deserted by waves
Stood he, thinking mighty thoughts,
And in the distance gazed. In front of him the wide
River moves forward; the poor boat
Heading alone along her
Along the marshy shore overgrown with moss
Here and there peasant huts were scattered,
Where very poor Finns lived;
And the forest, unknown to the rays of light
In the fog of the hiding sunshine,
Rustles around

And thought he:
From where will we be threatened by the Swedes?
Here will the city begin
To spite its arrogant neighbor
Nature here was condemned
To Europe is chopped a window
To consolidate by the sea
Here by new sea routes
States of every flag shall come to us
Let us feast on open space

100 years go by, and the young city,
From northern area pretty and wonderful,
From dark forest, from marshy swamp
Rises magnificently and proudly
Where before the Finns fished
Poor by unloving nature,
Alone with thin shores
Thrown in unknown waters
Your large old fishing net now there
By the lively shore
Well-proportioned masses are restricted
Palaces and towers; ships
Mobs with all ends of land
To rich warfs seek;
To the granite dress of the Neva;
Bridges hung from under the water
Quiet-green gardens
Her colored islands
And in front of the young capital
Fades away old Moscow
As if in front of a new Tsar
A purple widow.

I love you, Peter’s creation,
Love your strict, strong walls
Neva’s strong flow,
Her granite banks,
Your patterned iron fences
Your thoughtful nights
Transparent dusk, shines without a moon,
When I am in my room
Write, read without lamps,
And clearly sleeping bulk
Deserted streets, and lighted
Admiralty spire,
And at night darkness does not set
On the golden heavens,
One dawn replaces another
Hurried half-hour of night.
I love your harsh winters
Unmoving air and frost,
Sleighs run along the wide Neva,
Girls’ faces brighter than a rose,
And shine, and noise, and balls,
And hours of bachelors’ feasts
The hiss of foaming goblets
The punch turns blue.
I love the lively military
The fields of Mars,
Troops of Infantry and horses
Superb beauty,
In their surging, shapely formation
Tatters of victorious banners
Gleaming copper helmets,
Thoroughly shot-through in combat
Love your military capital,
Your fortress of smoke and thunder
When the Queen’s
Son is in the royal house,
With victory over the enemy,
Russia triumphed again,
Or, broke his blue ice,
Neva it has the seas
And days spin.
And I stand
Unflinchingly as Russia,
Yes, same to you
And defeated element;
Ancient animosities and his prisoner
Let the wave of Finland forget
And anger will not be in vain
Alarmed by Peter’s eternal sleep!
It was a terrible time,
I begin my tale,
My story will be tragic.

Part One

Over shadowed Petrograd
Breathed November’s autumn cold.
And noisy waves
In her shapely walls,
Neva is bothered, like an invalid
Restless in their bed.
It was already late and dark;
The rain was angry on the window
The wind blew in sad howls.
At that time from a friend’s house
Comes young Evgeny…
We will call our hero
By that name. It
Sounds pretty; and also
My quill is already acquainted with it.
We don’t need to give him a surname,
Although in past ages
It may be famous
Or under the quill of Karamzin
Heard of at home
But now under light it
Is forgotten. Our hero
Lives in Kolomna; and serves somewhere
And yearns
Not about forgotten ancients.
Or other antiquities
And so, Evgeny went home
But for a long time he couldn’t sleep
Because of many different thoughts.
What did he think about? About,
How poor he was, that his job
Was difficult
And wished that
God could have given to him
Brains and wealth. That would be
Such carefree happiness,
Where life was easier!
That he served only two years;
He thought, that the weather
Wasn’t good; that the river
Was rising, and
With Neva’s bridges already removed
He would be separated from Parasha
For two days, or maybe three
Evgeny sighed
And dreamed out-loud like a poet:
“Married? Me? Why not?
It is difficult of course;
But then I’m young and healthy,
I work day and night
I already have some savings
As well as a humble, simple home
And there Parasha would be comfortable.
Maybe next year
I will marry Parasha
Start our family
And raise children…
And we will live until death
Arm in arm we will go,
With our grandchildren…”

This is how he dreamed.
And it was tragic.
All night he wished
That the wind was not so sad
And that the rain on the window was
Not so angry…His tired eyes
Finally closed. And then
Harsh night.
Pale day already begins
A Terrible day!

The Neva all night
Was storming to the sea
Mountains of admiring spray
Waters raging with foam
Winds from the Gulf forced her
And suddenly, like a wild animal,
It rushed at the city
And ran all around
Suddenly deserted, water
Collected in underground basements
And poured in channels
And items surfaced like tritons
Immersed in water.

Siege! Attack! Evil waves
Like thieves climb through the window.
With sticks and logs they beat.
Demolished bridges,
Cemetery’s corpses
Swimming on the streets!
    People wait.
All is lost
Where will we take ourselves?
    In that dreadful year
The Tsar of Russia (already now dead)
Walks onto the balcony,
Sad and confused he went,
And said “No Tsar is master over
God’s elements.” He sat
And in his mind were mournful eyes
And disaster stared.
There were lakes
And then wide rivers
Which joined the streets.
Islands seemed sad.
The Tsar appeared – at the end of the end,
By neighborhood streets and past
In a dangerous path in the turbulent waters
His generals went.

    There in Peter’s square
Where the house in the corner stood as new,
Where above the porch
With a paw like it was alive,
Stood two guard lions
On top of the marble
Without a hat, arms clutching the cross
Sat unseeing, terribly pale
Evgeny. He feared
Not for himself. He didn’t hear,
How waters rushed
He didn’t feel
Rain falling on his face,
Or wind,
His desperate eyes
Were pinpointed
And unseeing.
On distant island
Was that…
Oh no, oh no!
There the home
Of his love, his Parasha?
His dreams…or in a dream
He saw them?
But it is nothing like a dream.
He couldn’t go! Around him
Water and nothing more!
And nearby he
Stands with outstretched arms
On a bronze horse.

Part Two

But now after ruin
And weary of her insolence
Neva still elated
With turbulence
Retreated and left stranded
Her spoils. Like a villain
With his fierce gang
In raiding a village, cuts
Crushes and pillages; tearing, gnashing
Winning the war!
My Evgeny
Heavy hearted
With hope
Sped to the river
But it was still in turmoil
Like as if a flame under us
And frothing Neva
Like a horse covered with foam.
Evgeny watches; sees a boat;
And runs to her
He hails her driver
And quickly row to familiar island.
He was not prepared.

New, miserable
Streets ran
In familiar places. Could not
Look at details Horrible sight!
All in front of him awash;
What wreckage, what rubble
Destroyed houses,
Waves shifted around
As if in the field of battle.
Evgeny
Rushed, not remembering anything,
 Exhausted from anguish
He runs there, where it waits for him
An unknown fate,
Like a sealed letter
And there he runs
And there the bay closer to the house…
Is that it?..
    He stopped.
Walked back.
Looks…walks…looks again.
There is the place, where their house stood.
There were the yves, there were the gates.
Show them, where is the house?
And, full of twilight
He walks in a circle,
Speaking loudly to himself
And suddenly throws his head in the air,
And laughs.
    Night haze
In the city anxiously goes;
But long he didn’t sleep
And couldn’t have explained
About the last day.
    In the morning
The pale, tired clouds
Dazzled a quiet capital
I already had found no traces
Poor yesterday
Already it was evil
Everything came in order
Already in the streets free
With their cold cruelty
Walk the people. Working people,
After leaving their homes
To work they go. Small brave tradesmen,
Not yet opened
Fill their basement,
With items discarded by the former
In droves. And also carried
Drifted boats from lawns.
    Graf Khvostov,
The favorite poet,
Already sings immortal poems
Of Neva’s unhappy shores.

    But my poor, poor, Evgeny
…his troubled mind
Against terrible turmoil
Could not withstand. Heard the noise
Of the Neva and the wind blowing
In his ears. Thinking terrible thoughts
He is silent.
His tormented life is some sort of dream.
Weeks turn into months – he
Never returned home.
His deserted apartment
Was lost after the deadline came,
The new owner is a poor poet.
Evgey in his goodwill
Didn’t come. His life
Was alien. Every day wandering on foot,
And slept on the dock; subsisted.
His clothing was dilapidated.
Wicked children
Threw stones at him.
He was deafened
By sounds of inner noise.
And so he
Not animal, not human,
Not a resident of light
Not a dear ghost…
    Once he slept
On the dock of the Neva.
Days went from summer
To fall. Breathing
Wind. The grim wharf
And like a petitioner at the door
Judges him.
His waking hours were bleak
Romantic rain, sad wind
And with them
Evgeny remembered
His last horror, hurriedly
He goes, tired, and suddenly
Stops – and looked around.
His eyes became calm
With wild fear in his face.
He found himself under pillars
Of a big house. On the porch
A paw.
It was a guard lion.
And in a dark height,
Above the cliffs
With arms outstretched,
Sat the man on the bronze horse.

Evgeny
Clarified his frightening thoughts. He knows
This place, where the flood played
Where waves pushing their prey
Were angrily around him.
The statue and lions
Still towering
In the darkness a copper head
Whose fateful idea was
Under the city founded by the sea…
In a haze he thought
What person in the Duma?
What strength does it have?
Where do you find a proud horse?
And where do you find hooves?
For the eternal fate of a powerful lord?
Not while you are above the abyss
Was your iron height which
Raises Russia.

The wild madman
Looked upon the face
Of the leader
Eyes hazed with mist
His heart ran like fire
Blood boiled, he became grim
With awful teeth and clenching fingers
With force he said:
“Good day miraculous creator!
He whispered angrily
Fear me!”
And suddenly fled
Running to escape.
To him the formidable tsar
Was angry
He thought he heard a noise
Like rumbling thunder
As if the horseman was free.
Over the pavement and
Across bridges
All night the poor madman,
Flees through the city,
Behind him the Bronze Horseman
With his heavy clatter.

And since then, when he passed
By the square
To his heart
He hastily placed his hand
And he would remove his cap
From his head
And never would he raise his eyes.

There is a small island
Along the shore where sometimes
With their nets
Fisherman will moor
And eat their supper
Or a civil servant
Playing in a boat
Will come on Sunday
The island is bare and desolate
Without grass
An empty vessel lies there
All was destroyed.
And upon the threshold
They found my madman,
And they took his poor body
And buried him for the sake of God.
Bibliography


