anna akhmatova
the poet who buried stalin
by lev lurie
In 1913 Petersburg was like a horseman perched on
a cliff, like a Roman on the last day of Pompeii. *Troikas*
galloped to the spit of Yelagin Island during White Nights;
the Duma raged; at the Mariinsky Theater, Tamara
Karsavina danced. But the Great Imperial Era, which
began when Peter the Great moved the capital from
Moscow to Petersburg, was coming to an end. It was the
time of Rasputin, and only a blind person could not see
where things were headed ...

Culture is always nostalgic – for childhood, for the
past, for love, for the Golden Age. In Petersburg at
the beginning of the 20th century, a group of poets began
to eulogize the city and its imperial past. They sang
praises to a city that was, not long ago, during the days
of Dostoyevsky, just an ugly assemblage of barracks and
rented apartments, in which the residents were anti-
nationalistic and cosmopolitan. The poets called
themselves Acmeists. Their manifesto called for a
poetry of clarity, precision and restraint (in contrast to
the abstract decadence of the Symbolists). Their mentor
was a translator of Euripides, a poet and former director
of the Tsarskoye Selo gymnasion, Innokenty Annensky.

The poets lionized the city just as it was on the verge of
collapsing as the center of Peter the Great's State. The
Acmeist cult anticipated the end of Pushkin's Russia,
expressing a nostalgia for life and art during the era of
Empire and duels.

Strangely enough, however, those who were the blood
heirs of the 19th century traditions – the members of the
capital's fading "high society" – did not feel connected to
them. They loved the theoretical "Russian style" and the
shrines of Moscow. Acmeism's adherents were, instead,
from the first true generation of Petersburgers – the
children of raznochintsy (19th century intelligentsia
which did not descend from nobility), foreigners and
non-Orthodox believers: the artists Alexander Benois and
Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, the poets Osip Mandelshtam and
Anna Akhmatova.

Anna Akhmatova, who was married to the leader of
the Acmeists, the poet Nikolai Gumilyov, published her
first collection of poems, *Evening*, at 23. Her
subsequent publication, in March 1914, of *Rosary* – a
"little book of love lyrics," as she called it – made her
wildly famous. She became the idol of *kursistkas*
(students at women's colleges), their model for
emulation. Painters fell in love with her. There was not a
female student in love who did not try on the role of
Akhmatova's lyrical heroine – a stylish femme fatale, a
heartbreaker. In the 1910s, Akhmatova's heroine was to
young women in Russia what Brigitte Bardot was for the
French in the 1950s. And only a few suspected, in the
words of Osip Mandelshtam, that "her poetry is nearing
the point where it will become one of the symbols of
Russia's greatness."
After 1918, when the capital was moved back to Moscow, the only thing that remained of the old Petersburg was its architectural ensembles, the Kirov Ballet, the Hermitage, the famous cakes of Nord café ... and Anna Akhmatova. Pretension, irony and etiquette protected one from the new reality and helped "preserve the right tone."

Akhmatova, unlike many of her contemporaries, did not "abandon her country into the destructive hands of the enemy." She did not emigrate, but remained in communist Leningrad.

No, not under an alien sky,
Not protected by alien wings,  
I was with my people then,
There, where my people, unfortunately, were.

Requiem

Remaining led to a life of suffering and persecution. Her first husband, Nikolai Gumilyov, was shot for participation in a White Guard plot; her third husband, Nikolai Punin died in a labor camp. Her son, the scholar Lev Gumilyov, spent much of his life in Stalin's camps. Akhmatova herself was never arrested.

From the mid-1920s on, Akhmatova's poems were barred from publication. As a result, in the Leningrad of the 1930s, she was the incarnation of silent resistance to totalitarianism – again a model for emulation, the personification of dignity. Akhmatova behaved in Stalin's Leningrad the same way she had in Nicholas' Petersburg. She protested the fear and terror which gripped Russia with a voice clearly cracked from personal experience.

The glass doorbell
Lets loose.
Could this really be the day?
Linger at the doorstep,
Wait just a moment,
Don't touch me
For God's sake!

Requiem

By the Hammer and Sickle they swore
Before your martyr's death:
"For treason we pay in gold,
For songs we pay in lead."

Akhmatova lived through her darkest years – the 1920s, 30s and 40s – in the garden wing of the Sheremetyevsky Palace. She had briefly had an apartment there with her second husband, Vladimir Shileiko, then moved in there with her third, common-law, husband Nikolai Punin, the situation made the more difficult by the presence of
Punin’s ex-wife and family. Akhmatova met and survived the Siege winter of 1941-42 here; she returned here after her evacuation to Tashkent. Today, the building is a museum devoted to her life and work.

Sheremetyevsky Palace, or Fontanka (“Fountain”) House, as the part of it which runs along the river is known, once belonged to that famous court family. The motto on the Sheremetyev’s coat of arms — Deus conservat omnia (God preserves all), became the epigraph for Akhmatova’s masterwork, “Poem Without a Hero.”

Third and Last Dedication

Enough have I been frozen from fear,
Better to summon Bach’s Chaconne,
And behind it a man will enter...
He will not become a beloved husband,
But together we will accomplish
The twentieth century’s unsettling.
I mistakenly took him
For one, mysteriously bestowed upon me,
To share a most bitter fate,
He will visit me at Fountain Palace
Late on a foggy night,
To drink New Year’s wine.
And he will remember this Epiphany evening.
The maple in the window, the wedding candles

And the poem’s mortal flight...
But it is not the first lilac branch,
Not a ring, nor the sweetness of prayers,
But death he shall bring.

(Poem Without a Hero, January 5, 1956)

The man who did not become Akhmatova’s “beloved husband” was the famous English philosopher and literary critic Isaiah Berlin. By “upsetting the Twentieth Century,” Akhmatova meant sparking the Cold War. Akhmatova believed that her chance meeting with the British diplomat in Fountain House brought the world to the brink of nuclear war. And, although poets have a tendency to attach great meaning to the events in their lives, in this particular case Akhmatova may have been at least partially correct.

In November 1945, Isaiah Berlin, then a diplomat at the British Embassy, visited Akhmatova at Fountain House. They had not previously met. Akhmatova turned 56 that year, Berlin 36. He spoke Russian fluently, as his parents had emigrated from Petersburg in 1919. An Oxford graduate, Berlin went on to become a professor. When war broke out, he entered the diplomatic service. In 1945, the British Foreign Office sent him to the USSR.

In the autumn of 1945, in a bookstore on Nevsky Prospekt, Berlin was talking to Vladimir Orlov, an Alexander Blok specialist and expert on the “Silver Age” of
Russian poetry. Berlin asked about the fate of writers in the city, to which Orlov replied, “You mean Zoshchenko and Akhmatova?”

Berlin could not believe Akhmatova was still alive and Orlov offered to take him to meet her, as she lived right around the corner from where they were talking. “It was as if I had suddenly been invited to meet Miss Christina Rossetti,” Berlin later wrote. “I could hardly speak; I mumbled that I should indeed like to meet her.”

Orlov took Berlin to Akhmatova’s sparsely-furnished apartment. “Anna Andreevna Akhmatova was immensely dignified,” Berlin wrote, “with unhurried gestures, a noble head, beautiful, somewhat severe features, and an expression of immense sadness … she looked and moved like a tragic queen.”

Orlov and Berlin’s visit to Akhmatova was, however, soon interrupted by shouts from the building’s courtyard: “Isaiah, Isaiah!” It was the journalist Randolph Churchill, son of the British prime minister. Having found out from mutual acquaintances that Berlin had gone to Fountain House to meet Akhmatova, he went to find the place, as he wanted to enlist Berlin’s help as a translator. The appearance of Churchill – who was certainly being followed by the Soviet Secret Police (as was, likely, Berlin) – broke up the literary meeting and eventually led to rumors in the press that “a foreign delegation has arrived to persuade Akhmatova to leave Russia.”

Berlin returned to Akhmatova’s apartment later that evening. They talked until morning about literature and mutual friends. She recited for him her still unfinished Poem Without a Hero (“even then, I realized I was listening to a work of genius,” Berlin wrote) and Requiem. Neither work was published in Russia in its entirety until after the end of Soviet rule.

“She spoke of her loneliness and isolation, both personal and cultural.” Berlin wrote. “Leningrad after the war was for her nothing but a vast cemetery, the graveyard of her friends: it was like the aftermath of a forest fire – the few charred trees made the desolation still more desolate… All poetry and art, to her, was – here she used an expression once used by Mandelshtam – a form of nostalgia, a longing for a universal culture … of nature, love, death, despair and martyrdom, of a reality which had no history, nothing outside itself. Again she spoke of pre-revolutionary St. Petersburg as the town in which she was formed, of the long dark night which had covered her thenceforth. She spoke without the slightest trace of self-pity, like a princess in exile, proud, unhappy, unapproachable, in a calm, even voice, at time in words of moving eloquence.”

In January, Berlin met with Akhmatova once again. That day Akhmatova presented him with a poem:
Sounds decay into the ether,
And dawn feigned darkness.
In the eternally muted world
Are just two voices: yours and mine.
And from the wind of unseen Ladogas,
Through a ringing not unlike bells,
The night's conversation is transformed
Into the light glitter of rainbows entwined.

It would be another year before the post-WWII split between the wartime allies became an unbridgeable chasm. But the fault lines began showing up in early 1946. The USSR had begun “sovietizing” Eastern Europe, confrontation brewed over the Bosporus Straits and there were contentious negotiations over war reparations, Berlin, and what would become the Marshall Plan.

A Russian-speaking British diplomat (translation: “spy”) meeting with a Russian poet who was in virtual “internal exile,” could only be interpreted as interference in the internal affairs of the Soviet Union. Akhmatova's very name had immense political weight in Russia. The former Soviet counterintelligence chief and defector, Oleg Kalugin, alleged that he saw Akhmatova’s file when he was deputy head of the Leningrad KGB (the file was never published): she was investigated for “spying” after her meeting with Berlin.

In 1965, traveling to Oxford, where she was awarded an honorary degree, Akhmatova again met with Berlin. At that time, she told him that, the day after he met with her in January 1946, uniformed guards had been posted outside her apartment building and that officers had ceremoniously installed a visible bug in her apartment. Stalin, Akhmatova averred, was personally enraged that “our little nun now receives foreign spies.” She went on to say that she felt that the two of them “inadvertently, by the mere fact of [their] meeting, had started the Cold War and thereby changed the history of mankind.” Berlin said he did not object to her interpretation, “because she would have felt this as an insult to her tragic image of herself as Cassandra – indeed, to the historico-metaphysical vision which informed so much of her poetry. I remained silent.”

Yet Akhmatova was right. Berlin dismissed her interpretation because he saw the Cold War through the prism of geopolitics, as the resident of a western democracy. But, viewed through the prism of Akhmatova's life and existence in Leningrad, her conclusion made complete sense. The domestic Cold War, signified by cultural isolationism, the war on “cosmopolitanism,” the Leningrad Case and other attendant lunacies of Stalin's last six years, began shortly after this leading icon of Russian literature “received a foreign spy.”

On August 14, 1946, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union approved a resolution condemning the journals Zvezda and Leningrad for publishing the works of Akhmatova and Mikhail Zoshchenko. In his report to the Central Committee, Andrey Zhdanov squealed:

Anna Akhmatova is one of the representatives of this empty reactionary literary swamp. She belongs to the so-called literary group of Acmeists, who emerged from the ranks of the Symbolists, and is one of the standard-bearers of an empty.
aristocratic, drawing-room poetry, which is totally
totally alien to Soviet literature ...

The thematics of Akhmatova’s poetry are personal
through and through. The scope of her poetry is
wretchedly limited, it is the poetry of a lady foaming
at the mouth, constantly dashing from the drawing
room to the chapel. Her basic theme is erotic love ...
She is neither a nun, nor a harlot, but really both ...

For Akhmatova, the Cold War was an intimate,
profoundly personal tragedy. She was expelled from the
Writer’s Union, unable to publish once again. In 1949, her
son was arrested for a second time, just months after her
third husband, Nikolai Punin, was taken away.

Even Stalin’s death, on March 5, 1953, did not bring
peace. The Central Committee resolution was not
rescinded. Punin died in the camps in 1953, and her son
was not released until 1956.

You should have been shown, you tease,
Beloved of all your friends,
Happy sinner of Tsarskoye Selo,
What your life would become.
How, three-hundredth in line with a parcel.
You would stand outside Kresty prison
Your hot tears burning
Through the New Year’s ice.
There, the prison poplar sways.
And there is no sound. But how many
Innocents are dying there...

Requiem, Poem IV

But Akhmatova survived Stalin by more than a decade,
mentoring some of the leading poetic lights of the next
generation, including Nobel Laureate Joseph Brodsky.
Brodsky, whose dignity and independence led him first to
exile and then into emigration, inherited his cold disdain
for totalitarianism from Akhmatova.

In a touch of historic irony, Anna Akhmatova died 13
years to the day from Stalin’s death (a day she and her
friends had turned into an annual celebration), on March
5, 1966, in the suburbs of Moscow. Her body was taken to
the morgue of the Sklifosovsky Institute – formerly a
charity home started by the Sheremetyev family. Over the
institute’s entrance are inscribed the same words as at
Akhmatova’s long-time home: Deus conservavit omnia. In
Leningrad, the funeral procession led from the House of
Artists in Komarovo, along the Fontanka, stopping at
Fountain House.

Twenty-five years later, Leningrad became St.
Petersburg once again. The Cold War is now over a decade
since gone by; and no monument to Stalin remains in this
watery city which he hated. But, on Vosstaniya Street, just
off Nevsky Prospekt, there is a monument to Anna
Akhmatova. History, it seems, has judged in favor of the
defendant. RL

A short essay cannot begin to capture the full measure
of this great poet’s life and work. We offer the following
ideas for suggested additional study.

Suggested Reading

For a wonderful biography of Akhmatova and her times, see
Roberta Reeder’s Anna Akhmatova: Poet and Prophet (Picador,
$35).

Judith Hemschemeyer has translated all of Akhmatova’s
poetry in the wonderful (and weighty) tome, The Complete
Poems of Anna Akhmatova (Zephyr Press, $29 •
www.zephyrpress.org). This volume also has an excellent
biographical essay by Roberta Reeder, and the portion of Isaiah
Berlin’s Memoirs relating to Akhmatova. For a selected
bilingual collection of Akhmatova’s verse, see Selected Poems
of Anna Akhmatova, with translations by Judith Hemschemeyer,
edited and introduced by Roberta Reeder (Zephyr Press,
$16.95).

Akhmatova’s prose also makes for interesting reading, and a
fine collection of selected, translated prose was translated and
edited by Ronald Meyer: Anna Akhmatova, My Half Century
(Northwestern University Press, $18.95).

Berlin’s essay on Akhmatova can be found in his The Soviet
Mind (Brookings, $28.95 – see page 60 of this issue).

For a look at Akhmatova’s life and work through the prism
of her meeting with Berlin, see Gyorgy Dalos’ The Guest from
the Future: Anna Akhmatova and Isaiah Berlin (FSG, $25).

The Akhmatova Journals: 1938-1941, by Lidia Chukovskaya,
offers an intimate look at the poet’s life and work, through
the vivid words of her close friend and confidante. (Northwestern
University Press, $24.95).

A fine, prosaic video was produced about Akhmatova: Fear
and the Muse.

Links to purchase all these items can be found online at
the Russian Life website (www.russianlife.net).