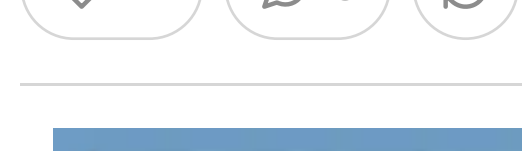


## Diary: Maria Stepanova on Nadezhda Mandelstam, Literature and Truth

JAN 6, 2024



Nadezhda Mandelstam (1925), Lydia Ginzburg (1940), Varlam Shalamov (1929)

Poet Maria Stepanova writes of the Soviet-era memoirs of Nadezhda Mandelstam, [Hope Against Hope](#) and [Hope Abandoned](#).

As far as we can judge she set out to write a novel, something along the lines of a roman à clef, with real but disguised heroes. Perhaps this seemed safer at the time. “N. Ya. began her memoirs in the form of a novel in which all the names were invented,” wrote Larisa Glazunova, a friend in Tashkent whose family looked after her notebook labelled “material for the novel.” At the time the idea that the experiences of the twenties and thirties should be somehow drawn into a large-scale prose work, new, modernist, post-Joyce and post-Proust, but a novel still, a single form capable of holding everything together, hung in the air.

In *Hope Abandoned* Nadezhda Mandelstam mentions the novel’s hold over the writing community in the twenties with something like ironic surprise, as if she had already discounted this fascination. Lydia Ginzburg made the same journey: from an initial intention to write the “grand novel” about her people and her time, she came to the understanding that the fragmentary, liberating structure of diary notes better reflected the times and the conditions. Her [Notes from the Blockade](#) and Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoirs were the first alternatives to the artistry and artifice of the old models, which were conceived of in times when the structure of events and the “stylistics” of a human life were defined by the individual, and were subject to personal will. In this new world where nothing depended on the living human only the truth of the document and the almost-chance nature of the witnessing fragment could be relied on: the excerpt, the note left on the kitchen table. We know today that Nadezhda Mandelstam’s books were (alongside other books written in other languages and countries but from a similar vortex of desperation) the beginning of a huge shift which has changed the literary map, moving the borders of fiction and making nonfiction the most influential area of contemporary prose, its cutting edge. A territory that teaches us to think and write in a new way.

It’s strange when you realize that the most important books written about the Soviet Union by those who lived there and survived—written from the inside, on the basis of personal experience—were in one way or another part of that hard-to-define area of documentary literature. Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, constructed from the witness accounts of hundreds of prisoners, the *Notes from the Blockade* of Lydia Ginzburg, and [Varlam Shalamov’s prose](#)—the last so shocking that the first Western publishers felt quite free to edit it as they saw fit, not realizing that this “literary material” was in fact the direct, unadorned and raw speech of the eyewitness. These works are all constructed in different ways, and their variety widens the possibilities of what may be conceived of in literature. Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoirs offer yet another mode of existence in the area of nonfiction, extremely radical—and at the same time inimitable, because the specific voice and history of the teller may never be copied by another.

✓ **Subscribed**

A mistrust of widows and other relatives of writers was a popular stance then (and now), almost a tradition. The poets Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva, her friends and contemporaries, both felt keenly a kind of “posthumous envy” toward the wives of great poets. They had no doubt that in the afterlife justice would be upheld and the great female poet would stand alongside her male peers: Pushkin and Pasternak. Gertrude Stein enacted something similar in her relations with living writers and artists: she would dispatch the wives from the doorstep, while she dedicated herself to “unobstructed” cultural dialogue. In the Russian-Soviet world with its patriarchal features, the *wife*, a woman without a profession, was clearly not worthy of anyone’s trust, let alone interest.

In the 1970s, when her memoirs were coming to be seen as indispensable works of the period in the West, Nadezhda Mandelstam was condemned by the entire literary world (or very nearly) of Moscow and Leningrad, all her husband and her time’s Sovietist circle, old friends and enemies, some new younger readers. It’s interesting to note that it was not her criticism of Soviet power that met with disapproval. It was something different: events, as seen by the memoirist, did not fit the already-formed narrative, her version had far too many sharp edges. The literary community defended its own, and its concepts of privilege, and spoke as one. It made two things clear: firstly, that she was not speaking the truth; and secondly, that nothing she said had any significance. The shade should know her place.

The second accusation lost its impetus almost immediately, or so it feels. The first is now perhaps more justified than it might have appeared in the past. In the mass of statements, the preserved and the salvaged, the countless details of the Mandelstams’ life together in Kyiv, Moscow, Voronezh, Samatikh, it is now possible to discern a layer of concealed and “corrected” material. In a courtroom we would have to say that Nadezhda Mandelstam did not speak the truth, that she insisted on her own subjective truth, her own bitter assessments and ancient grudges. She spoke as if she were dead and had earned the posthumous right to fearlessness and directness. To shame-free judgment and the shifting of reality at will—because that is how she remembered it. Writers feel and behave like this when they create fictional literature that stubbornly proclaims the primacy of invention over reality, and the authorial vision over facts and logic. Sometimes their claims are not without grounds.

Nadezhda Mandelstam’s texts do not eschew artfulness, they make no claim to be objective or a distanced account of “how it was.” It feels as if the fury at the heart of *Hope Against Hope* would be enough to explode the whole Soviet anti-utopia from within, and for several generations of Western readers her books were not just sources of information but a compelling case in the arguments around how to understand and evaluate the Soviet Union and what was going on inside it. The view that the Soviet experiment formed a moral alternative to the capitalist system, realized through a utopia of equality and justice, was established by the 1920s and it became particularly strong during the early years of the Cold War. This was in part due to the fact that voices from behind the Iron Curtain were barely audible, and no one wanted to believe them anyway. Nadezhda Mandelstam’s books weren’t just some of the first uncensored witness accounts, she was also the first voice that simply couldn’t be ignored.

Hers was a voice notable for its bravery: she refused to be cautious, or to choose her words carefully, or fear for her safety or the spiritual comfort of those who featured in her chronicles. Perhaps a writer has to lose everything, and be at peace with the idea of her own death being inevitable and hardly important, in order to achieve this quality of writing: to be *as one that had authority*; to be the one who knows the ultimate truth and allows herself to cast judgement, to condemn, and to conclude. The unforgettable opening of *Hope Against Hope* a book that even now reads like a page-turner, draws the reader into the very center of the Mandelstams’ lives, the almost unimaginable (to an outsider) insanity of the shift in understanding, expectation, and circumstance that reduces a life to a hopeless effort to keep alive, and an even more hopeless desire to preserve one’s individuality. *Hope Against Hope*, a book that despite its name and the name of its author never entertains the fiction of hope, turns out to be not just a document, but something entirely different. Before all its admirers, critics, and distrustful readers it rises, describing an arc that twists midair like a dolphin, becoming fiction, invention: the unthinkable novel that appears *after the end of the novel*.

Translated by Sasha Dugdale

Editor’s note: Polina Barskova [has written for Book Post](#) on the “Kolyma Stories” of Varlam Shalamov.

Maria Stepanova is the author of many books of poetry in Russian, as well as a prose reflection. In [Memory of Memory](#), which appeared in English in Sasha Dugdale’s translation in 2021. Sasha Dugdale has translated three volumes of her poems into English; the most recent, [Holy Winter](#), will appear this spring. This post is drawn from Maria Stepanova’s introduction to a new Everyman’s Library edition of Nadezhda Mandelstam’s [Hope Against Hope: A Memoir](#), in Max Hayward’s translation.

Sasha Dugdale is the author of six volumes of poetry, most recently the forthcoming [The Strongbox](#), and translator of many poets from the Russian. She is a former editor of [Modern Poetry in Translation](#).

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