



It is difficult to start, and for that matter, stop "commenting" on a sample of Russian poems about Soviet women and the Second World War.

Twenty million people were killed. They were mostly soldiers. Mostly men. Millions of women grieved. So did their families. To this day, even an unadorned statement of these facts sounds glib. Some ten poems picked out of an enormous number which for a half-century have been written on that theme — if it can be called that — testify to the narrowness and, hence, arbitrariness of this selection. How can it be otherwise?

Alas, the topic also triggers clichés even through the filter of goodwill or especially through it. "The war was not lost because of women and children." True. But it can no longer be put this way because the passage of time and the avalanche of writing about the war make it a cliché. And sacrilege. This is so because of the perils of sentimentality.

Even though I don't know what sentimentality is—which is a lie because I do know, especially in the sense that what's sentimental in one culture is not necessarily that in another— it is tempting to use saccharine in the very attempt, for instance, to transport the ancient Russian reverence for women across the Atlantic or any other ocean.

The Soviet intelligentsia has taken up remembering. Massively. The longer the memory stretches in this effort in which all factions of intellectuals and professionals seem to be currently swept up, the more the perception of the past splinters into glorification, sarcasm and skepticism. Thus, a unified attitude toward Stalinism itself turns out to be not altogether possible. And that's quite a problem. Even the diachronic matter of periodization of Stalinism in its three sequential manifestations—pre-war, war, post-war—is still a mess in terms of determining and accepting corporate responsibility for the crimes of that past. Therefore, the stubbornly lingering memories of war in recent literature still combine politicized materials with existentially irrepressible mourning.

In this small chapter, it has been undertaken to remember also. For outsiders, it behooves to remain sober, yet without a foolish attempt to crush compassion. What

Poems about the Great Patriotic War

BY VERA S. DUNHAM

might verily justify this effort is its modest intent. It is just a salute from afar to the power, passion, and pain of the tenacious memory of war. The first and the last poems, encircling more than four decades, seem to have emerged during the same sleepless night.

It is in 1945, as harbinger of peace, that Margarita Aliger wrote her "New Name."

New Name

MARGARITA ALIGER

After seeing him off to war
and saying the last farewell
for an instant it seemed
all of her strength was gone.
Surely it would not hurt
if she were to fall on the floor
and the heart would stop beating
forgetting it all.

But she did not fall
and she did not cry.
A voice close by said ringing:
"This is only the beginning."

She wanted to go home,
to lie down and weep.
But that's not what she did.
Things turned out otherwise.
Under a cloudy sky
firmly her feet obeyed.
She didn't forget on the way
to stop by for the bread.
She fed the baby
and put him to bed.
And she knew that she was
in the thick of the fight.
She knew she was now alone
at the very front.
"How to break the siege?"
not dodging a single attack.

Erect she marched on,
no more doubts, no more fear.
From afar she seemed old,
quite young from near.
She wouldn't give up
and her heart stayed warm
in the unthinkable frost
of the deepest rear.
No warmth of a fire, no rest,
not a single exemption.
The whole war you marched
in an infantry's grey platoon.
You waged war wrapped in longing,
the female urge for rest,
the faith in your loved defending
with the might of your breast.
The faith that he is known
as the bravest and best,
that he will come back
unharmd and safe
to return all that was
in the fullest way.

Others had failed
in this righteous faith.
Others were numbed
by the message of death.
People would comfort
and say: "Don't believe it."
What's yours isn't theirs
and their tears come easy.
"A misprint, maybe —
an error, maybe —"

Not to accept is easy,
to wait for that knock on the door,
to believe in the miracle
of his return from there.
But just try how it feels
to perceive with your blood,
to accept with your womb
the merciless title of widow.
Try to live up to it

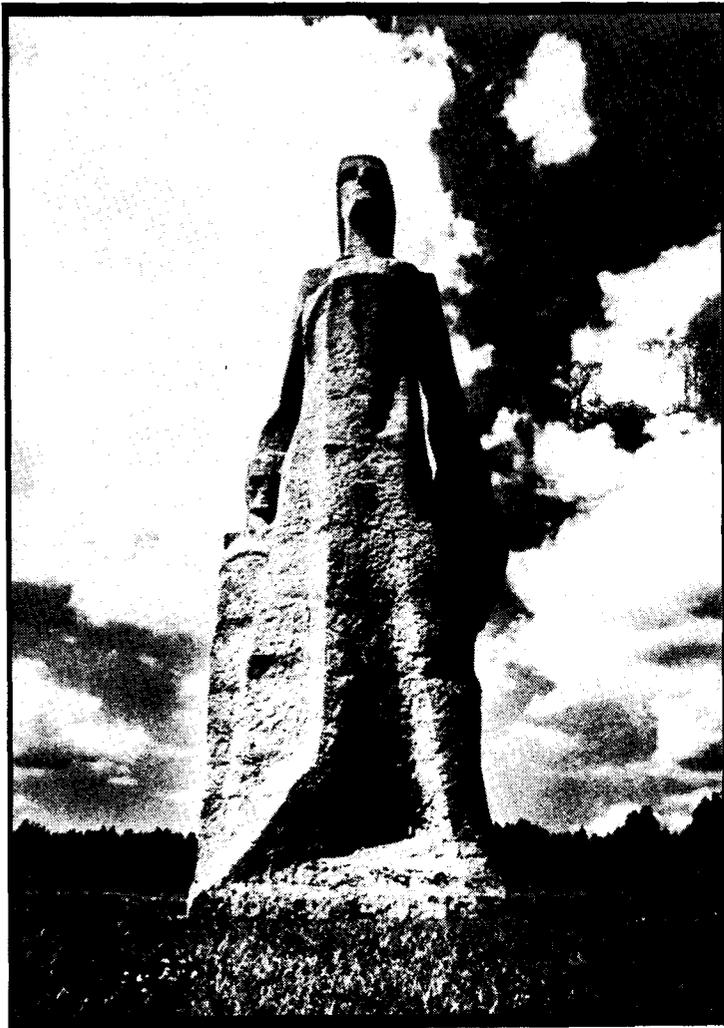
and make it a glory.
For some — it's not fitting,
for others — not pleasing.

Widows don't wear mourning,
do not cry in front of others,
do not hide their eyes in the morning,
do not throw their moans to the winds.
Lips pressed drier,
voice choked lower,
singed hearts
have nothing to fear.

And when the muzzles of our guns
will cool down,
when our worn-out men
will lay down their arms,

the hour will come to appraise,
soldierly, what matters.
Brothers, let's think and figure
like men, like brothers.
For those who honestly fought
in our camp,
for those who with us remained
after all that happened,
having marched in the wake of war
with a burden of tons,
for Russian women, widows,
who have looked at death,
who came through alive
with an unriddled strength,
for them in Russia
we must find a new name.

"Novye Stikhi," *Znamya* (No. 1, 1945).



*Was a new name found? Only one year
later Boris Slutsky's requiem commenced
for millions of fallen peasants and their
widows, a requiem both Russian and all-
human.*

In the Village

BORIS SLUTSKY

They line up by the rural post office.
A long line without end, without bound.
It's women who receive that which
Is due to them for dead husbands.

She has taken her due. She has
Shoved it into her breast pocket and
left.

Covered with smoking new snow,
The earth turned whiter than white.

Alone all alone like a chimney
On a farmstead burnt to the ground.
Work has made her hands stiff.
Hunger has emaciated her body.

What is it, soldier's widow, soldier's
Mother and sister of a soldier,
What is it that you whisper? Perhaps,
words
You had whispered to him long ago.

— 1946

Everybody weakened. Women weakened,
Through hunger and sickness, war and
draught,
They silently rocked the cradles,
Saving our sons.

Women were better. They were cleaner.
And they didn't betray their virginal
dreams
For bread, for this here food,
For medals, for new clothing.

Rabota (Moscow 1964), pp. 98, 99.

*At this point I cannot not remember
Mikhail Dudin's compassion for a woman
who remained "neither mother nor
widow."*

MIKHAIL DUDIN

Special words are needed
To console a widow.

But you — with your lost love —
You are alone,
Neither mother nor widow.

In your longing you have grown tired
Of waiting and of tears.
He had carried away two young lives
Straight from the graduation ball.

He left the cheerful school commotion
Without as much as looking back.
No straight and no roundabout road
Leads to him now.

With his battalion
From under Strelna
He stormed the Crow's mountain
He was the first to fall unto
the blizzard snow.
That January was as gray as gray
eternity.

Blood spots spread on the snow.
That snow had choked in blood.
He did not manage to give back
Your love to you.

The love of your open soul,
Like a flight through infinity,
Lives in his soul that has been killed
And does not give it peace.

Forever and ever the field post office
Has lost your addresses.
The entire world is a
Bullet wound.
Your lives are
Its opposite poles.

— 1963

From "Pesnya Voroniei Gore," *Dalnyaya
Doroga* (Moscow, 1982), pp. 157-159.

*Just as uncountable were the women
who went to war. Many, many of them
were adolescents.*

By Birth I Am Not From Childhood

YULIYA DRUNINA

By birth I am not from childhood.
I am from war.
And, therefore, probably,
I value more than you can value
The bliss of stillness
As well as each new day
I live.

By birth I am not from childhood.
I am from war.
Once, on my way
Through a guerilla path,
I firmly grasped that
We must love
All tender blades of grass.

By birth I am not from childhood.
I am from war.
And, therefore, possibly,
Not well protected.
Front soldiers' hearts are scorched.
And you, your hands are rough.

By birth I am not from childhood.
I am from war.

Forgive me.
Therein no fault of mine.

Den Poezii (Moscow, 1970), p.73.

*Boys and girls at seventeen, at fif-
teen...their youth ran out on them in the
trenches. But memory across decades
cannot run out — pride, grief and love.*

Decoration

ELENA MESHKOVA

I also held the rank of senior lieutenant
Just like the fellow who is coming to-
ward me.



I do recall the way we marched
That balmy night of June before the
war.
My gait was light and brisk and girlish.
Only — this was the very last time.
Thereafter — trenches and forest paths
And the blood of friends in heavy
battles and their death.
Hunger in fox holes. Lethal frost in the
trenches.

Four years of this. So many endless
days.
My youth ran out on me near Lenin-
grad.
Since then, my rank and title changed to
that of veteran.
The change is marked by decorations.
Please, let my grandsons be proud of
them.

Den Poezii (Leningrad, 1978).

Choosing one poem over another is especially unbecoming in the Russian cultural space of reverence for old women. In all of Evgenii Evtushenko's oeuvre — which remains important per se and for the vibrant record of the early post-Stalinist era — a passage in one of his long narrative poems is outstanding. This is the only excerpt that I permit myself to introduce.

EVGENII EVTUSHENKO

... I saw Christ for the first time not in
church but in a hut.
It was in Siberia, in 1941.
An old woman was praying for her son,
missing in action somewhere at the
front.
She bowed very low to the saint on the
icon.
He resembled a bearded guerilla fighter
to be found among documentary film
clips
put together into a book in Tashkent
to the sounds of peacefully murmuring
irrigation ditches.
The old woman bowed to God the way
one bows to wheat
when cutting it down with a sickle
which sweats with dew.
The old woman bowed to God the way
one bows to nature
when picking milk mushrooms
or mountain cranberries in the grass.
The old woman prayed to God barely
moving her lips

and God prayed to the old woman
without opening his lips at all...

"My Mother and the Neutron Bomb,"
Novyi mir (No. 7, 1982), pp. 5-6.

Motherhood and 1941. Motherhood and the siege of Leningrad. Aleksandr Rudenko is one of its poets.

A Leningrad Woman

ALEKSANDR RUDENKO

I can't remember a winter more fierce:
I have given you birth,
My son,
In Leningrad during the siege.
How hungry you were...
My breast
Could not still
Your hunger.

A woman next door
Grieved that I
Didn't have enough
Milk.
(Night after night
You cried
So terribly).
And she kept giving me
Half
Of her rations.

I was weak...
I took
Her bread
Because I couldn't
Wish you evil.
Because that neighbour
Used to say:
"That's the way
It should be."
And then
She died
Of hunger.

How tall you are,
How grown-up,
How strong...
But listen.
Until now,
My son,
That bread
Lies heavy
Upon my soul.

Reka, Molodaya Gvardiya (Moscow,
1984), pp. 29-30.

Mothers and waiting and a "judgmental," downright nasty poem by Liudmila Tatianicheva who wrote mostly about the war:

LIUDMILA TATIANICHEVA

A woman
Having abandoned her son,
Walks cheerfully unconcerned.
Her eyes shine a radiant blue.
Her arms move lightly
Like swift strokes of an oar.
On the river dock
All night long she carouses
With her new friend.
Helplessly
Her son calls her
In his first unfathomable
Sorrow.
He remembers his mother
And grieves,
Falling asleep
In his father's arms.
I want another woman
To become more precious
For him than his mother.
A woman who abandons her child
Cannot be understood.
I don't understand her
Nor do mothers
Who in the black blue dawn
Wait for their sons
Killed in the war.

Poeziya (No. 12, 1974), p.120.

In conclusion, two poems by Yunna Morits about her childhood. It is compelling to cite two unforgettable lines by Vladimir Admoni: "Childhood is not a preface. It is an independent text..." God knows.

Recollection

YUNNA MORITS

Children were thrown
from the burning train
unto the grass.
I slid
down the bloody, slippery ditch
of human guts and bones.
The pilot who flew over me —
brown pestilence —
bared his teeth and laughed
like a patient gone crazy.
He soared in his flying trunk

and bumped his head on the windshield.
 I saw the swastika on his arm
 and that which oozed from his forehead.
 And I also saw the red circle
 of the steam engine's wheel.
 From horror
 I had no hands
 to cover my eyes.
 The engine did not move
 but bloody steam and fog
 issued from the rolling wheels
 and the iron lever moaned.
 It was like an arm,
 with a bent elbow,
 torn off the body
 so that it should turn the wheels
 posthumously.
 Thus, in my fifth year
 the Lord sent me
 Salvation and a long road...
 But horror had poured into my blood
 and flesh.
 It rolls there like mercury.
 And when I fall asleep facing the moon,
 I cry so bitterly in my sleep
 that my tears flow down the wall
 in which I hide my memory

Na etom berege vysokom. Sovremennik,
 from "Posle Voiny" 1980 (Moscow,
 1987), p. 10.

*Farewell to a clean little girl and her
 clean mother and her clean hope:*

After the War

A little light flickers among the ruins:
 Someone is alive there, holding the
 flame in his teeth.
 And there is no war and we have left the
 bathhouse
 And the world is comely and my road is
 long.
 And for three miles around I smell
 Of a bar of strong laundry soap
 And a clean force soars above us all.
 And my flannel is clean and my hair is
 clean
 And I am wearing clean overalls
 And step by step I proceed with my
 clean mother
 And almost drop off to sleep along the
 way;
 And the clanging streetcar bathes my
 eyes with silver;
 The little bathhouse bundle of wash-
 rags
 Turns silvery too, and the universe

gleams like silver.
 There is no war and we have left the
 bathhouse.
 And I am light and my road is long.
 We do not dare sit down in the streetcar
 For after the bath we are free of lice
 And the world is comely and everyone
 is alive
 And we'll all live at least for a hundred
 years
 And the world is comely and my road is
 long
 And being poor is no longer a danger.
 And, Lord, how eerie and how beautiful
 Is the flickering of the little light among
 the ruins.

Ibid., p. 27.

*Comments and translations by Vera S.
 Dunham (last poem in collaboration with
 W.J. Smith).*

*Vera Dunham is Professor Emeritus at
 the Harriman Institute, Columbia Uni-
 versity. She has written extensively on
 Soviet literature, including In Stalin's
 Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fic-
 tion.*

The monuments photographed here are part of a memorial
 ensemble unveiled at Salaspils (near Riga, Latvia) in 1967,
 in memory of the victims of fascist terrorism. Salaspils
 concentration camp was the largest place of imprisonment
 and mass-scale murder of people in the Nazi-occupied
 Baltic. More than 100 thousand people were killed during
 the camp's existence: October 1941 to October 1944.

