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# The Presence of the Past in Contemporary Russian Prose Fiction: A Comparative Reading of Guzel' Iakhina and Sergei Lebedev


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**Summary:** This article studies the poetics of historical reimagination in works by Guzel' Iakhina and Sergei Lebedev, two contemporary Russian prose writers. The main tendencies in Russian official history politics and memory culture of the last decade form the backdrop for the study. I illustrate these tendencies by a case study analysis of the representation of Stalinist repressions in the history park *Rossiiā — moia istoriia* (Russia — My History). The comparative reading of Iakhina's and Lebedev's novels seeks to determine the key poetic features of the two authors' fictional treatment of the past, also assessing to what degree, and how, these treatments challenge, promote, or negotiate current official history politics and memory culture. The analysis discusses the two authors' shared concerns but also reveals fundamental differences in their poetics. Whereas Iakhina's fictional universe has distinct boundaries that confine the story to the time and space where it takes place, Lebedev's novels deal with the past from the perspective of today. The contrasting narrative perspectives have implications for how the past is represented — or made present — and how the reader is drawn into the narrative.

**Keywords:** history politics, memory culture, contemporary Russian prose, historical reimagination, Sergei Lebedev, Guzel' Iakhina

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# 1 Introduction

For more than twenty years, the Russian human rights organization Memorial<sup>1</sup> has arranged an essay competition for school children entitled “The human being in history: Russia and the 20<sup>th</sup> century”. The aim of the competition is to “привлечь молодых людей к исследовательской работе по российской истории минувшего и нынешнего века, пробудить в них интерес к локальной истории, к судьбам самых разных людей, к их повседневной жизни — к тому, из чего складывается «большая история» страны” (22. vsrossiiskii konkurs 2020) [“to draw young people into researching Russian history of the last and current centuries, awake their interest in local history, in the destiny of people of all kinds, their daily life, in all that which makes up the countries ‘big history’.”<sup>2</sup>]. Ironically, the same phrase “человек в истории” [“the human being in history”] appears as a subchapter in the most recent textbook standard for teaching history in schools.<sup>3</sup> The aim of this subchapter is explained as follows:

[В]оспитанию патриотизма и гражданственности у школьников при изучении отечественной истории способствует обращение к ярким примерам трудовых и воинских подвигов многих поколений россиян. Величие побед и тяжесть поражений убедительно раскрываются через жизнь и судьбы людей, в том числе отцов и дедов школьников, через историю их рода и семьи. Поэтому особенно важно, чтобы в учебниках было отражено присутствие человека в конкретных событиях. [...] При этом речь идет как о выдающихся личностях, лидерах, которым посвящаются отдельные биографические справки, так и об обычных, «рядовых» людях. [...] История должна предстать как увлекательный рассказ о прошлом, о людях и их характерах, о повседневной жизни. (Kontseptsia 2015)

[T]he development of patriotism and citizenship among schoolchildren in the study of Russian history is fostered by highlighting outstanding examples of the achievements of many generations of Russians in labour and military service. The greatness of victories and the gravity of defeats are convincingly revealed through the lives and destinies of people, including the schoolchildren’s fathers and grandfathers, through the history of their kin and their families. It is, therefore, particularly important that textbooks reflect the presence of human beings in concrete events. [...] Meanwhile, this includes both outstanding personalities and leaders, to whom individual biographical sketches are devoted, and ordinary, “rank-and-file” people. [...] History should be presented as an exciting narrative about the past, about people and their characters, and about everyday life.

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**1** Both the main organisation, International Memorial, and its human rights wing, the Memorial Human Rights Centre, were liquidated by the Russian authorities in December 2021.

**2** Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.

**3** History textbooks in Russia in the 2000s and 2010s have been subject to several in-depth analyses, see, e.g., Bürger 2018.

While the two conceptions of “the human being in history” share a focus on the concrete individual and “everyday life”, the textbook standard, with its emphasis on “outstanding examples”, history as “an exciting narrative”, and the fostering of patriotism and citizenship, evokes some of the main priorities of official Russian memory culture in the 2000s and 2010s. As shown in recent accounts, official history politics and memory culture have tended to highlight certain key events of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian and Soviet history, above all victory in WW2, and to foster a set of virtues with reference to the past linked to unity, continuity and reconciliation (e.g., Bækken & Due Enstad 2020; Epple 2020; Miller & Efremenko 2020; Nelson 2019; Malinova 2019; Bürger 2018; Miller & Lipman 2012). In this picture, complex and troublesome parts of the past tend to be neglected or represented in a manner that downplays their complexity. Such ideology-laden imagination of the past leads to abstraction, distance and thus to a lack of a living connection to the past from the viewpoint of the present, a problem that only increases with the flow of time and waning number of historical witnesses.

In this situation, literary fiction would seem to play an important role, given its ability to make the past present and to focus on individual human destinies.<sup>4</sup> In this article, I will analyse the poetics of historical reimagination in works by Guzel' Iakhina (born 1977) and Sergei Lebedev (born 1981), two contemporary Russian prose writers. I will first discuss some of the main tendencies in Russian official history politics and memory culture, illustrated by a case study of the representation of Stalinist repressions in the history park *Rossia – moia istoria* (Russia – My History), before turning to a selection of novels by Iakhina and Lebedev. In my reading, I seek to determine the key features of Iakhina's and Lebedev's poetics, zooming in on issues of narrative perspective, temporal structures and stylistic features, which are all decisive for their literary treatment of the past. This approach will, in turn, help us assess to what degree, and how, the two authors challenge, promote or negotiate current official history politics and memory culture.

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4 For a general theoretical introduction to the vast research field of literature and memory, see Erll & Nünning 2005; Etkind 2013 is of particular relevance for the post-Soviet context.

## 2 History politics and memory culture in the 2000s and 2010s

The politically volatile decades of the post-Soviet era are reflected in the shifting tendencies of state history politics and official memory culture.<sup>5</sup> A hallmark of the perestroika period in the mid and late 1980s was the opening of archives and public debates about Soviet totalitarianism. In the 1990s, this critical but inquisitive attitude towards the recent past was gradually superseded by a rejection of all things Soviet, including ideology, historical myths and values. The radical break with the past created a void in several domains. In particular, the public sphere did not create ample venues for thorough, balanced discussions of individual and collective responsibility that could lead to processes of sober assessment and ultimately to meaningful forms of transitional justice. This development paved the way for a flourishing of pseudohistorical writings as well as a rise in nostalgic feelings towards the Soviet past, which again became an important prerequisite for the state's renewed initiatives within history politics and memory culture in the 2000s and 2010s (Noordenbos 2016; Nelson 2019).

The Putin regime has taken an eclectic approach to the past, emphasizing historical continuity, unity, a strong state and a centralized leadership. In this process, a selectively and ideologically filtered version of the past has come to serve as a powerful symbolic resource for the government in legitimizing contemporary power structures (Lunde 2019: 9–31; Bækken & Enstad 2020). The 2020 amendments to the Constitution proclaiming that the state should “protect historical truth” (Novyi tekst 2020), a phrase repeated in the latest version of the Russian National Security Doctrine (O strategii 2021), is only a logical consequence of this development. In February 2022, these tendencies reached a new and unprecedented level as certain ideas about Russian and Ukrainian history, propagated by Putin himself on several occasions over the past few years, were used as one of several legitimation strategies for Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine.

In the official memory culture concerning the Soviet era, the glorification of Russia's victory in WW2 is the predominating feature. Commemoration practices of the dark sides of the Stalin era — the repressions, Gulag, collectivization, war crimes — are more ambiguous (Sniegon 2019; Bækken & Enstad 2020; see also Ganzenmüller & Utz 2014). A recent poll surveying the knowledge about the past

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<sup>5</sup> Research on post-Soviet history politics and memory culture is an active and growing field. Recent monograph-size assessments include Bürger 2018, Wijermars 2019, Nelson 2019, Miller & Efrementko 2020, Pearce 2020 and Epple 2020.

among various generations reflects these differences. While in 1989, 13 % of Russians claimed to know “little” or “nothing” about the repressions of the 1930s to 1950s, this percentage had risen to 20 in 2020. Moreover, in the age group 18–24, it was as high as 41 %. By contrast, knowledge about “the events at the front during WW2” was and still is much more widespread. In 1989, 3 % reported they knew “little” or “nothing” about this, while in 2020, the number had risen to 5 %. In the youngest age group (18–24), the percentage was 11 % (41 % *molodezhi Rossii* 2020).<sup>6</sup>

As Tomas Sniegon (2019: 25) has shown, over the last 10–15 years, the authorities have tried to strengthen their control over the narratives and activities in a number of central memory sites devoted to the repressions of the Stalin era. In particular, Sniegon analyses recent state attempts to combine the promotion of active patriotism, especially among young people, with the commemoration of Stalinist repressions, as witnessed by how key memory sites, such as the Butovo execution range, the State Museum of Gulag History and the Perm–36 campsite, have developed.

Let us look at a concrete example to see how the described tendencies play out in practice. The vast exhibition project *Russia — My History (Rossiia — moia istoriia)* is a top modern multimedia installation housed in pavilion 57 of the VDNKh complex, a gigantic exhibition park from Soviet times.<sup>7</sup> Organized by the Russian Orthodox Church in cooperation with the Moscow city government, it consists of four main parts, the Rurik dynasty, the Romanov dynasty, 1917–1945 and 1945–2016. Two rooms are devoted to Stalinist repressions. The first displays

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6 In another poll from 2017, where Russians were asked which period of the country’s history they are most interested in, WW2 tops the list with 38 %. (The second and third place are held by the reign of Peter the Great (31 %) and the Middle Ages and early modern period (8<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> centuries) (28 %) (*Istoriia Rossii* 2017). People’s concrete knowledge about the WW2 victory, on the one hand, and the repressions, on the other, may also partly explain Stalin’s continued position as the number one historical figure in Russia of all times, as witnessed in the Levada centre’s poll from May 2021 (*Sa-mnye vydaishchiesia lichnosti* 2021).

7 The following analysis is based on my fieldwork at the Moscow exhibition in January 2018. There are now replicas of the exhibition in 24 Russian cities. For a fascinating article tracing the prehistory and development of the exhibition project from the mid-1990s up until 2018, focusing on the representation of the 1917 revolution, see Klimenko (2021). The history parks have also been analysed (from a critical viewpoint) in a series of articles published in the journal *Istoričeskaia ekspertiza* throughout 2018. Kaz’mina (2020) examines intersections between the activities of The Russian Military Historical Society and the Russian Historical Society and the history park project and concludes that the two societies play an important role in linking the parks with schools and other educational institutions, all within the framework of the new textbook standard intended to foster patriotism and citizenship. Suslov (2021) analyses the interpretation of history as laid out in the history park within the broader ideological context of the Putin regime.

31 photographs of representatives of the church (28 men and 3 women) who “sacrificed their lives for their faith in Christ”. The viewer easily gets the impression that the repressions were directed mainly against the church. Representatives of the church suffered; however, they were certainly not alone. The broad span of target groups of the Great Terror is one of its distinguishing characteristics. They included representatives of the church, intellectuals, artists, workers, peasants and many other groups in society. Also, there was a short distance between being a perpetrator and being a victim. A camp commander, guard, police officer or NKVD operative could easily fall out of favour and be arrested or executed. A famous saying by Anna Akhmatova from 1956 divides Russian society into two groups, those who *sideli* (‘were sitting’, that is, were in jail) and those who *sazhali* (‘were making people sit’, that is, put people into jail). This is also partially why coming to terms with the troubled past has proven so difficult for Russian society at large.

Returning to the first room devoted to the repressions, it is remarkable that the church’s role in Soviet times is not discussed at all. This lack of any discussion of a possible collective, shared responsibility (not only concerning the church) is consistent throughout the exhibition and characteristic of post-Soviet memory culture in general.

To enter the second room devoted to the Stalinist repressions, one must pass through a big, circular room with portraits all around. The visitor’s first impression is that this must be a new group of victims, but it turns out to be a line-up of great Soviet women and men — from poets and composers to scientists and cosmonauts — while the circular space above the photographs displays a film collage commemorating the outstanding achievements of the Soviet Union in agriculture, military, science and technology. After this intermezzo, one enters the second room devoted to the Stalinist repressions. Here, dry statistics and numbers prevail, with no discussion of responsibility or justice, while the terror is described in short bits of text, such as:

Государственные репрессии по политическим мотивам в форме «революционного насилия», «красного террора», «классовой расправы» стали активно применяться с первых дней советской власти. «Террор вытекает из природы революции, — писал Л. Д. Троцкий, — цель (социализм) при известных условиях его оправдывает». Вопрос об общем количестве жертв красного террора до настоящего времени остается открытым. Современные исследователи считают, что установить точные цифры погибших входе красного или белого террора не представляется возможным.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> *Rossiia – moia istoriia*, Moscow, transcribed by the author 8 January 2018.

State repression on political grounds in the form of “revolutionary violence”, “red terror” and “class reprisals” began to be actively used from the early days of Soviet power. “Terror derives from the nature of the revolution”, wrote Lev Trotskii, “under certain conditions the aim (socialism) justifies it.” The question of the total number of victims of the red terror is still open. Scholars today believe that it is not possible to ascertain the exact number who died during the red or white terror.

The text is not unambiguous. On the one hand, there is some justification for the repressions in the words of Trotskii; on the other, responsibility is thereby lifted from subsequent leaders as the “guilt” is placed with Trotskii.<sup>9</sup> Further statistics in the room show the distribution of “the highest form of punishment” (execution), “imprisonment”, “exile” and “other measures”, without any kind of contextualization or concretization. Other texts emphasize the great contribution of Gulag prisoners to Soviet industry, economy and, eventually, the (victory in the) war. The very few documentary photographs from the Gulag camps show relatively nice scenes from the club, the kitchen and the hairdresser.

A history exhibition without historical artefacts is in itself remarkable. Photographs and posters are projected on large screens using elements of collage and animation, all within a specific pattern of colour and light, music and sound effects (Klimenko 2021). For example, we see and hear the flames of the Moscow fire of 1612 or the water, storm and rain of the large St Petersburg flood of 1824. Historical paintings, documentaries and clips from feature films are combined with posters, pictures, text and a vast amount of authoritative, de-contextualized quotations, so as to provide a coherent representation of Russia’s “thousand-year-old history” emphasizing its formative power in shaping the national identity of today.<sup>10</sup> This aesthetics implies a strong visualization of history, but the use of non-documentary sources, animation and collage techniques at the same time renders history abstract, distanced and — above all — unprocessed. As already mentioned, there is little or no discussion about individual or collective responsibility, and historical events are generally presented unambiguously, putting forth simple truths that pronounce positive developments and soften or ignore the bleaker sides of the past.

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<sup>9</sup> Lev Trotskii, who was a *persona non grata* in Soviet times has, until recently, rarely been subject to debate or artistic representation. On the 100-year anniversary of the revolution in 2017, a high-budget TV series on Trotskii was released on Russia’s Channel One. Here, Trotskii is depicted as the bad guy — decadent, destructive and brutal — while the revolution is portrayed as a Western plot. When the series premiered on Netflix, journalist Luke Johnson (2019) claimed that the show was “taking contemporary Russia’s anti-revolutionary ideology global”. The Russian release of the series in 2017 also provoked debate as well as critique from Russian professional historians, see, e.g., Sokolov 2017.

<sup>10</sup> On the concept of “Russia’s thousand-year-old history”, see Mjør 2019.

Upon completing the tour, the visitor may take a quiz with ten sets of questions. Since every set contains several questions, it is hard to get it all correct; but if the visitor succeeds, she is awarded the designation “genius”, accompanied by a large portrait of Stalin displayed on the huge screen.

Not surprisingly, the history park has been criticized by Russian professional historians (see, e.g., Obrashchenie 2017). Also, in a broader perspective, the state’s involvement in the memory of Stalinist repressions has been somewhat indecisive and partly inconsistent, leaving room for more ambiguity than the commemoration of WW2. Håvard Bækken and Johannes Due Enstad (2020) view current Russian memory politics in conjunction with processes of securitization and argue that these processes have been selective. While celebrating victory and military achievements in a unifying narrative with reference to WW2, the state’s approach to Stalinism is less clear-cut and has included concessions to various groups, such as the liberals, the Orthodox Church, or neo-Stalinists (Bækken & Due Enstad 2020: 343–344). Above all, it is important to keep in mind that there are initiatives and movements in the society that represent alternatives to the main state-promoted narratives of Stalinism. These include the annual event “Vozvrashchenie imen” (‘Return of the names’): readings of the names of individual victims in numerous Russian cities (and in some cities abroad); the project “Poslednii adres” (‘The last address’): the placing of memorial plaques at houses (the last residential addresses) of victims of the repressions;<sup>11</sup> the endeavours of Karelian historian Iurii Dmitriev to locate mass graves, identify victims (and perpetrators) and establish sites of commemoration; and the school competition “The human being in history”, which I mentioned in the beginning.<sup>12</sup> In addition, there have been instances of intense debate on the question of responsibility, transitional justice and other forms of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* following the publication of names of concrete perpetrators by individuals or the Memorial.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, the success of journalist and Youtuber Iurii Dud’s long film about Kolyma (2019), actually inspired by the lack of knowledge among young people about the Stalinist repressions, reflects a wider societal interest in this legacy. What such initiatives and debates have in common is an increased focus on the indivi-

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**11** The project is inspired by the German *Stolpersteine*. The fact that any initiative for the placement of a plaque comes from individuals, and not organisations, is important for this project, which has as its slogan “Одно имя, одна жизнь, один знак” (“One name, one life, one sign”). For a recent assessment of the project and its relation to official Russian memory culture, see Veselov 2020.

**12** For a brief overview with further references, see Epple 2020: 95–111.

**13** For a discussion of specific occasions of publications of lists (with the names of concrete NKVD officers or other people responsible for the persecution of individuals) and the public debates aroused by these events, see Giesen (2019: 442–469).



dual — in contrast to the tendency towards abstraction, numbers and statistics that we observe in the official memory culture — on questions of responsibility and on the necessity of establishing a link between the past and the present — in the form of sites of memory, the personal involvement in the history of one's own family, and other activities and events that give the past a meaningful role in today's society. Let us now turn to literary representations of Stalinism in order to see how fictional reimaginings of the past respond to the trends in official and societal memory culture.

### 3 Literary representations of Stalinism

Russian literature has been characterized as being “obsessed” with the past, with history.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, partly due to the lack of public debate venues for extensive periods of modern Russian history, literature has often provided space for discussing philosophical and social questions. In this context, the role and interpretation of the past has been a major theme. The particular “aesthetics of responsibility” (Wachtel 2006; Koschmal 1995) flourishing in 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Russian literature was demonstratively discarded in the 1990s (Erofeev 1990), but since the early 2000s, the theme of the past has been returning to prose fiction with a variety of literary reimaginings ranging from the patriotic and/or nostalgic to the experimental. Literature about the 20<sup>th</sup> century prevails (e.g., Mikhail Shishkin, Svetlana Alexievich, Vladimir Sorokin, Vladimir Sharov, Dmitrii Bykov, Zakhar Prilepin), but other periods are popular too, in particular the Middle Ages and early modern time (e.g., Evgenii Vodolazkin, Mikhail Gogolashvili).<sup>15</sup>

Bearing in mind the priorities within official history politics and memory culture, it is interesting to note that the theme of WW2, which was popular both in its glorifying and critical forms throughout the Soviet Union, has occupied Russian literature considerably less in the last couple of decades. In the 1990s, critical literary treatments of the war such as Georgii Vladimov's *General i ego armia* (The General and his Army, 1996) still spurred engagement and discussion in the public literary debate, while in the year 2000, many writers confirmed, in a survey conducted by the journal *Znamia*, that the war was no longer a prominent theme

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<sup>14</sup> Cf., e.g., the title of Andrew Wachtel's book, *An Obsession with History: Russian Writers Confront the Past* (1994).

<sup>15</sup> In Lunde 2018, I discuss several of the writers mentioned here from a related perspective, that of “the language question”, investigating how contemporary Russian prose fiction responds to linguistic ideologies, language policies and the language debate. Both history and language policies of the last 10–15 years are part of the Russian state's increased involvement in the field of culture.

in contemporary literature. They believed possible reasons lie in the generational shift but also in the fact that the prevailing atmosphere in the country did not incite feelings and values such as patriotism, self-sacrifice and heroic action (*Literatura i voina* 2000).

If the latter perspective is correct, one should have expected a new wave of war literature to arise in the last 10–15 years, where “patriotic” values have been promoted and WW2 is high up on the agenda of official memory culture. It seems, however, that the war theme’s decreased popularity is not only due to a generational shift but also a shift of both genre and medium. In literature, WW2 has migrated to certain genres of popular fiction (in particular, alternate history novels), while newer representations of the war mainly take place on screens. State funding of films has, since 2014, actively promoted “patriotic films”. Also, other, more recent wars have supplanted WW2 in literary fiction: Afghanistan, Chechnya and Ukraine. As mentioned earlier, official memory culture targeted at Stalinism is less clear-cut than the official commemoration of WW2. One might speculate if that is also part of the reason why Stalinism has become a significant theme in Russian literature over the last 15–20 years. With the monologization of state memory culture directed towards WW2, writers may find it more rewarding to target more ambiguous and troublesome parts of the Soviet legacy. Thus, new forms of post-testimonial cultural representations of various aspects of Stalinism have arisen, with such disparate examples as Zakhar Prilepin’s *Obitel’* (Abode, 2014), Evgenii Vodolazkin’s *Aviator* (The Aviator, 2015) and Viktor Remizov’s *Vechnaia Merzlota* (Permafrost, 2021).<sup>16</sup>

With this literary landscape and the main priorities of state memory culture in mind, I will turn now to Guzel’ Iakhina’s and Sergei Lebedev’s writings. Guzel’ Iakhina is a bestselling writer of Tatar origin, who entered the literary world with *Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza* (Zuleikha Opens Her Eyes) in 2015, winning both the Big Book and the Yasnaya Polyana Prize that year. Since then, she has published *Deti moi* (My Children, 2018) and *Eshelon na Samarkand* (The Train to Samarkand, 2021). Sergei Lebedev, a trained geologist, made his literary debut with *Predel zabveniiia* (Oblivion, 2010). He has since published four novels, *God komety* (The Year of the Comet, 2014), *Liudi Avgusta* (People of August, 2015<sup>17</sup>), *Gus Frits* (The Goose Fritz, 2018) and *Debiutant* (Untracable, 2020).

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**16** For theoretical discussions of the fundamental difference between survivors’ accounts and post-testimonial works about the Gulag, see Toker (2000: 210) and Lachmann (2019: 435–70). For a range of perspectives on the ethical and aesthetic implication of post-testimonial Holocaust narratives, see Lothe, Suleiman & Phelan 2012.

**17** The book was first published in a German translation (2015) before appearing in Russian in 2016.

## 4 Guzel' Iakhina: representations of the past

Iakhina's novels are all set in the first decades of post-revolutionary Russia and the Soviet Union. *Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza* focuses on the late 1920s to early 1940s, *Deti moi* covers the period 1916–38 and *Eshelon na Samarkand* takes place in 1923.<sup>18</sup>

Iakhina's first novel tells the story of Zuleikha, a 30-year-old Tatar woman who lives with her husband Murtaza and her mother-in-law in the Tatar countryside. Having borne four girls who all died in infancy, she lives as her husband and evil mother-in-law's slave, a life characterized by hard work and little joy but still representing a form of stability. This stability is broken when the collectivization intrudes into their life. Murtaza refuses to give up their few animals and is killed, while Zuleikha is deported to Siberia together with hundreds of other peasants, intellectuals and criminals. After a long and perilous journey that takes six months and many human lives, the survivors – 29 people – are set to build their own settlement on the banks of the Angara River. Zuleikha is pregnant and gives birth to a son in the settlement, Juzuf. In the beginning, everything revolves around survival, but eventually, a material and social community is established, and life falls into a daily and seasonal rhythm. Gradually, Zuleikha enters into a relationship with the camp commander and her husband's murderer, Ivan Ignatev; she sees her son grow up and builds a life on an independent basis.

The novel's focus on a woman of Tatar origin is original, as most of the classic Russian camp literature focuses on men and seldom on minorities. Moreover, *Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza* tells the story of a woman who paradoxically liberates herself through life in a forced settlement. The story is told in third-person narration shifting between the perspectives of Zuleikha and Ignatev. As I will show below, the way these perspectives develop in the course of the novel is central to Iakhina's way of representing the past.

In the village, Iulbash, Zuleikha's thoughts and actions are consumed by others, be it Allah, the spirits, Murtaza or the mother-in-law. She even applies an outside perspective on herself, addressing herself in the second person and using her mother-in-law's invectives: “Ну же, Зулейха, мокрая курица, поторопись” (Iakhina 2017: 12) [“Go on, Zuleikha, you pitiful hen, hurry” (Iakhina 2019: 5)].

Gradually, Zuleikha learns to refer to herself as “I”, a change that also implies a switch from Tatar to Russian. At the daily roll call during the journey, she replies with the pronoun “I” (as is customary in Russian), which leads her to reflect as follows:

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<sup>18</sup> Recent analyses of Iakhina's novels, most of which focus on her first book, include Pavlova 2018, Lunde 2019: 144–165, Urupin & Zhukova 2020, Gillespie & Korneeva 2021 and Heinritz 2021.

Зулейха Валиева!

– Я.

За всю жизнь она не произнесла столько раз «я», как за месяц в тюрьме. Скромность украшает – не пристало порядочной женщине якать без повода. Даже язык татарский устроен так, что можно всю жизнь прожить – и ни разу не сказать «я»: в каком бы времени ты ни говорил о себе, глагол встанет в нужную форму, изменит окончание, сделав излишним использование этого маленького тщеславного слова. В русском – не так, здесь каждый только и норовит вставить: «я» да «мне», да снова «я» [...] (Iakhina 2017: 155)

“Zuleikha Valieva!”

“I’m here!”

In Zuleikha’s whole life, she’s never uttered the word “I” as many times as she has during this month in prison. Modesty is a virtue, so it doesn’t befit a decent woman to say “I” a lot without reason. The Tatar language is even constructed so you could live your whole life without once saying “I.” No matter what tense you use to speak about yourself, the verb will go into the necessary form and the ending will change, making the use of that vain little word superfluous. It’s not like that in Russian, where everybody goes out of their way to put in “I” and “me” and then “I” again. (Iakhina 2019: 146)

The switch to the first person is one of many minor incidents in a line of development where Zuleikha is transformed from a subdued servant to an independent woman. While *en route* to Siberia, she begins to perform small acts spurred by her own initiative, and in the settlement, she discovers that she has a great talent in the highly male-dominated arena of hunting and becomes central in providing food for the settlement.<sup>19</sup>

Parallel to this identity journey is the literary portrait of Ignatov, Murtaza’s murderer, who oversees the transport to Siberia and, against his own will, becomes the commander of the settlement. In the beginning, his thoughts are concentrated on himself, combined with a patriotic vision of a bright future for his homeland. While he sees all his actions as necessary elements of this “greater cause”, he gradually begins to realize that he has the responsibility not of a group of “enemies of the people” but of individual human beings. Faced with the burdensome but hitherto routine task of crossing out the names of deceased prisoners on the lists, he suddenly starts to remember their names and recognize their faces.

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<sup>19</sup> Alena Heinritz (2021: 150–151) relates Zuleikha’s emancipation process to vision and shows how she proceeds from “darkness” to a new, clear vision as she realizes her vocation as a hunter. For a broader analysis of Iakhina’s visual poetics, see Pavlova (2018).

Уже на подъезде к Красноярску, вычеркивая огрызком карандаша из серой папки с надписью «Дело» очередных *убывших*, Игнатов поймет, что при взгляде на кучно напечатанные фамилии видит не строчки и буквы, а лица. (Iakhina 2017: 200)

As they approach Krasnoyarsk, Ignatov will use a pencil stub to cross out yet more names in the grey «Case» folder. He will realize that he sees faces rather than lines and letters when he glances at the surnames typed closely together. (Iakhina 2019: 191)

By focusing on the two main characters, Zuleikha and Ignatov, and their development as individuals and in relation to each other, Iakhina creates an intense dynamic that gives human depth to the historical backdrop. At the same time, this focus foregrounds the individual “identity journeys” of Zuleikha and Ignatov more than the historical experience itself, in a manner that at times borders on the aesthetics of socialist realism.

Nevertheless, Iakhina’s novel brings in several important perspectives on the history of Stalinism. A case in point is Ignatov’s reflections on guilt and responsibility, which evolve in parallel with his actions. In this way, the novel implicitly touches upon the question of the repressions not as one man’s (Stalin’s) crime only. Stalin, in fact, plays a very passive role in the novel: a couple of times, he is observed on a poster by Zuleikha, who does not even know who he is – these passages are written with great irony by Iakhina. The crimes and their executors are represented as something almost every part of society is in some way involved in. Iakhina’s book thus raises a crucial question that is often suppressed in official history policy, memory culture and the public debate: the social foundations of Stalinism.

*Deti moi* also takes place in a clearly defined historical timespan, 1916–1938, featuring revolution, civil war, famine and collectivization. The novel is set in the Volga German Republic (1924–1941) and tells the story of schoolteacher Iakov Bakh (Jakob Bach), who leads, in the beginning, a stable and regulated life in the village of Gnadental. Bakh is invited to a remote farm to teach a 17-years-old girl to read and write. Klara has been isolated on the farm all her life, and her father is terrified of exposing her to the outside world. Eventually, Klara seeks refuge with Bakh in Gnadental. The two move back to the abandoned farm by the river (Klara’s father has emigrated to Germany) and settle down. Their simple but idyllic life is only burdened by one grief: their desire for a child is not fulfilled. One night, life is turned upside down as three uninvited guests break into the house. Klara is raped, and their lives change radically. Bakh loses the ability to speak. Klara dies in childbirth. Bakh takes care of the newborn girl, Anche (Antje). The little family is expanded with a hard-bitten boy, Vas’ka, a *besprizornik* (orphan) who expresses himself in colourful Russian and eventually teaches Anche to talk. Towards the end of the book, the family is “discovered” by the authorities and the children are taken away from Bakh to be raised in an orphanage.

Bakh observes the effects of historical events through what he sees on the bypassing river and during occasional visits to Gnadental. He responds by giving the years his own naïve, poetic names: 1918 – Year of Ruined Houses, 1919 – Year of Madness, 1920 – Year of the Unborn Calves, 1921 – Year of the Hungry, 1922 – Year of the Dead Children [...] (cf. Iakhina 2018: 487). His own peculiar family life unfolds against the backdrop of this “big history”:

Жизнь его и детей — *маленькая* — текла по своим законам. И время в ней текло по-иному: неприметно, едва-едва. Бах желал бы, чтобы оно и вовсе остановилось, вот только это было не в его власти. (Iakhina 2018: 398)

His life with the children — the *small* life — flowed according to its own laws. And in it, time flowed differently: imperceptibly, barely. Bakh wished time could be stopped entirely, but it was not in his power to do so.

In this way, history is mirrored and echoed in Bakh’s poetic perception of the flow of time. When we approach the years of the Great Terror, Bakh perceives time as falling apart, frozen in one long, perpetual November:

Необъяснимым образом распалось и время. Казалось, оно течет, как и прежде, от рассвета к закату, ото дня к ночи. Но случилась в нем какая-то поломка, какой-то странный сбой, заметный то ли всем, то ли одному Баху: осень не кончалась. Вернее, никак не кончался ее последний месяц – ноябрь, – чтобы уступить месяц зиме. [...] Наступило время *Вечного Ноября*. (Iakhina 2018: 445–447)

In an inexplicable way, time as well fell apart. It seemed to flow, as before, from dawn to dusk, from day to night. But there was a disruption in it, some strange failure, perceptible either to everyone or to Bakh alone: autumn did not end. Or rather, its last month, November, did not come to an end, giving way to winter. [...] It was the time of *Eternal November*.

On yet another narrative level, Iakhina embeds four chapters about Stalin. In the first chapter, Stalin, named “the guest”, is on a sickbed visit to Lenin, where he reflects on the “nationality issue” in connection with the Volga Germans. The second chapter, in which Stalin figures as “He”, tells of a train journey that ends with a spontaneous visit to Pokrovsk, the capital of the Volga republic, where everyone is competing to please the leader. In the third Stalin chapter, Stalin is the *uchenik* – the pupil of the billiard master Chemodanov. In Stalin’s mind, the fight on the billiard board becomes an imaginary battle between Stalin and Hitler (the latter role assumed by poor Chemodanov). The fourth chapter depicts a carp meal in Abkhazia, where Stalin, now referred to as the *vozhd’* (“leader”), reflects on the politics of the Volga Germans in the late 1930s – with accusations of espionage, forced displacement and repression. The story blends with the surreal as Stalin picks up the carp untouched, walks down to the sea with it, throws it to a

stray dog and is immediately attacked by a whole pack of hounds. He is struck by a horrible feeling of fear for a short moment before the crew saves his life by shooting the attacking dog and chasing away the others.

Through the juxtaposition of “the little man” Bakh and the *vozhd'*, a terrible parallel is established. Bakh's role as a loving father for his two children, both of whom are not his biological children, is contrasted with Stalin's role as “the father of the peoples”. While Stalin the *uchenik's* emotions are intensely aroused in the hatred and struggle against the imagined Hitler, Bakh — “the teacher” — loses his feelings and senses one by one. He lost the ability to speak when Klara was raped, and when the children are taken away from him, he loses his sense of pain and cold, while hearing is replaced by a ringing in his ears. Significantly, in the end, he also loses his fear, which has accompanied him all his life, while it is precisely the fear that haunts Stalin in a few intense seconds towards the end of the book.

*Deti moi* is where Iakhina weaves together the “big” and the “little” histories most intricately. The characters' lives unfold against a flow of historical events throughout the novel, albeit historical events are not presented in detail. Rather, Iakhina clothes both the “big” and the “little” histories into a veil of poetic, and at times surrealistic, language in the tradition of magical realism, giving the book a fairy-tale-like quality.

*Eshelon na Samarkand*, Iakhina's most recent novel, takes place in 1923 and portrays a group of starving orphans being evacuated from Kazan to Samarkand, a six-week train journey. The historical backdrop for the story is the great famine in this region in 1921–22, which killed more than five million people. The book focuses on two adults accompanying the train: Deev, who is in charge of the transport and food supply, and commissar Belaia, who is in charge of the 500 children. The two have distinct personalities, with different approaches to their challenging tasks and frequent dilemmas. Deev has a meek heart — his main concern is to do good (we understand he has things to rectify) — whereas Belaia is more pragmatic, cunningly navigating the harsh conditions. Deev and Belaia solve all kinds of major obstacles during the journey; Deev, in particular, comes across as a fairy-tale-like, heroic character.

Rather than focusing on the children and the famine, the book's central conflict is the dynamic between Deev and Belaia, on the one hand, and the war veteran Deev's dealings with his own troublesome past, on the other.

There is a sharp contrast between the adults' objectifying designation of the children (mainly when dealing with various kinds of authorities) as *goldeti* (the typical Soviet-speak shorthand for *golodnye deti* — ‘hungry children’) and the long list of telling names of every individual *besprizornik* (500 in all) that Iakhina includes once they have reached Samarkand and been admitted to the local orphanage. A few examples:

Буйный Геласка. Фурункул. Настя Прокурорша. Гной Гордей. Каюм Безглазый. Лаврушка Выкидыш. Гришка Судорога. Король Артур. (Iakhina 2021: 490)

Unruly Gelaska. Furuncle. Nastia Prosecutor. Pus Gordei. Qayyum Eyeless. Lavrushka Mis-carriage. Grishka Cramp. King Arthur.

Even if the names convey a suggestive glimpse into each child's history, we learn little about their backgrounds, earlier lives or present concerns, with one important exception. One boy's story is told in detail, in a separate chapter entitled "Один" ("One"/"Alone"), in a stream-of-consciousness-like first-person narration.<sup>20</sup> Earlier in the book, we are told that this boy was found on the tracks one day. He does not respond to Deev's many questions but clings to him when Deev lifts him up and does not leave his side for the rest of the story. In "One", the narrative perspective shifts as the scene on the tracks is repeated in the young boy's own account. The boy, it turns out, has lost his mother and little sister under gruesome circumstances and has been wandering around, half dead from hunger and pain, when he lies down between the rails to distract himself for a moment from the harsh reality. It is only at this point that his identity is revealed to the reader, and on the following pages, the story of his finding is told anew from the boy's point of view, replying to Deev's questions in his inner monologue:

— Слышишь меня? — злится уже.

Да как же не слышать мне тебя, человек?! Если ждал я тебя то ли долгие месяцы, а то ли годы. Тосковал. Выл. На рельсы лег, чтобы только легче стало.

И вот появился — ты. Все у тебя — как и у меня: голова, волосы, кожа без шерсти, а под кожей кровь. Говоришь, ходишь, сердисься — как и я. Пахнешь сильно. Я тебя еще и разглядеть толком не успел, а уже люблю.

— Руками-ногами шевелить можешь?

Могу. Не то что шевелиться — я для тебя горошком плясать буду. Работать на тебя буду, пахать как верблюд. Все сделаю — лишь не пропадай. Будь со мною, человек! (Iakhina 2021: 301)

— Do you hear me? — he's already angry.

How could I not hear you, human being?! I've been waiting for you for long months, or long years. Grieving. Howling. I lay down on the tracks just to get some relief.

And then you appeared. Everything about you — is like me: head, hair, skin without fur, and blood underneath the skin. You talk, walk, get angry — just like me. You smell strongly. I haven't even had time to look at you properly, but I already love you.

— Can you move your arms and legs?

I can. Not only move — I will dance to your tune. I will work for you, plough like a camel. I'll do everything; just don't disappear. Stay with me, human being!

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**20** Iakhina's afterword to the novel suggests that this boy, who is given the name Zagreika, is autistic.



In this passage, Iakhina's powerful poetics of affect reaches a climax. The 500 children that eventually reach Samarkand are not the same 500 that left Kazan six weeks earlier. Several children have died during the trip. Deev insists on bringing along orphans they meet on their journey, turning bureaucracy into compassion. *Eshelon na Samarkand* portrays horrible historical events in fictional form but is ultimately about the good in all human beings.

## 5 Sergei Lebedev: from representation to presence

Lebedev's novels deal with the past from the perspective of today. Several of his books are journeys into the past from the present, and the tension between the horrors of the past and how to deal with these horrors today is of utmost importance. I will here consider two of Lebedev's novels, his debut book *Predel zabveniiia*<sup>21</sup> and *Gus Fritz*.

In the opening prologue of *Predel zabveniiia*, the protagonist — an adult and first-person narrator — stands “на пределе Европы” (Lebedev 2012: 1) [“at the boundary of Europe” (Lebedev 2016: 11)],<sup>22</sup> from where he heads backwards into time and history. The novel describes the relationship between the protagonist as a young boy and a neighbour who gradually assumes the role of a family relative referred to as “Grandfather 2”. Grandfather 2 is blind but watchful; he seems harmless but yet to possess power and control. He is eager to exert his influence on the young boy, to the point of a blood transfusion that becomes fatal to the old man. The boy's feelings towards this enforced closeness are — for reasons still unknown to himself — difficult and complex, evoking sinister expectations also in the reader.

As a young adult, the protagonist embarks upon a long geological expedition into the north, where he stumbles upon ominous remnants of the (Gulag) past. Meanwhile, Grandfather 2 leaves his flat and belongings to the protagonist, and when his old housekeeper dies, the protagonist enters the flat and finds fragmentary remnants of some past life, including a batch of letters from someone who seems to have been a former work colleague of Grandfather 2 in the far north. He travels north himself and learns that Grandfather 2 was a high-ranking prison camp commander and reveals details about his family life and the gruesome cir-

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<sup>21</sup> Recent analyses of the novel include Frieß 2017, Heinritz 2017, Jandl 2020, Urupin & Zhukova 2020 and Lunde 2020. The following discussion repeats and expands on some observations in Lunde 2020.

<sup>22</sup> For the English translation, I use Lebedev 2016, but since this edition contains some authorized abridgements, I occasionally adjust and/or supplement the quoted passages.

cumstances leading to the death of his young son. Torn between the forces of memory and forgetting, and feelings of guilt and responsibility, the protagonist's journey turns into a quest to overcome the trauma that has been almost deliberately passed onto him by his "grandfather".

In his endeavours to evoke a sense of the past in the present, Lebedev explores several poetic strategies. These span from elements of tactility to uses of the grotesque, sometimes in combination. In a range of key episodes, the touching of a concrete thing (a nail, blood, a stick, stone, body parts) spurs a flow of intense thoughts, feelings and associations pointing towards the past, often resulting in some kind of (fragmentary) insight:

Я смотрел на палку; теперь я видел, что она не была такой же — она была той же, именно той палкой, что переломила хребет черному псу; [...] палка была как зримая рифма, как одинаково звучащее окончание двух, может быть, разных слов; я не просто узнал в ней конкретный предмет из своего прошлого — ее существование показало мне истинный объем этого прошлого, как будто в затемненных помещениях за границей памяти вдруг вспыхнул свет. (Lebedev 2012: 278)

I was looking at the stick; now I saw that it was not just similar to, it was the one, the stick that had broken the black dog's back; [...] the stick was like a visible rhyme, like the similar-sounding endings of two — perhaps different — words; I didn't just recognize in it a concrete object of my past — its existence showed me the true dimension of that past, as if a light suddenly flashed into dark spaces beyond my memory. (Lebedev 2016: 199)

In this episode, the protagonist recognizes in the stick he sees before him the same stick that Grandfather 2 used to kill a dog that had attacked him (the protagonist) as a young boy. Note how the vision of the stick and the realization of it as being *that particular stick* (which it cannot logically be, of course) leads to the active perception of a concrete link to the past "я [...] узнал в ней конкретный предмет из своего прошлого" — and a vision of true insight about this past: "ее существование показало мне истинный объем этого прошлого", experienced as a flash of light beyond memory.

"The true dimension of the past" is revealed in glimpses, frequently of grotesque character, as in the "deathly communion" referred to early in the novel — an image of how the past takes possession of our bodies. The protagonist recalls how he once ate the meat of a grayling caught in the water where dead corpses of prisoners had been thrown: "Тебя тошнит, но нечистота не проходит, она в твоём теле, в твоей крови навсегда." (Lebedev 2012: 20) ["You threw up, but the uncleanness remains, it is in your body, in your blood forever." (Lebedev 2016: 20)].

The ways Lebedev makes the past come alive in *Predel zabveniia* may be subsumed under a poetic strategy that I have elsewhere termed "enargetic rhetoric"

(Lunde 2004). *Enargeia* is a concept that pinpoints the endeavour to evoke the (subjective) presence of elements of the past rather than an (objective) representation of them. *Enargeia* (in Latin *evidentia*) may be defined as the power of language to create a vivid presence of that which is set forth in words. Constitutive characteristics of *enargeia*, as described in rhetorical handbooks of Classical and Late Antiquity, amount to visual clarity, immediacy, closeness and presence, whilst what is represented verbally acquires, as it were, “its own reality” in the minds of both speaker/narrator and audience/reader.<sup>23</sup> In *Predel zabveniia*, we can see enargetic rhetoric at work in many instances: tactile episodes function as mediating situations where moments of (fragmentary) insight may arise, while elements of the grotesque help conjure up the nature and dimension of this past by their strong appeal to the senses. The novel’s focus on the experiencing I of the protagonist may also be read in terms of enargetic rhetoric, which requires the active perception of speaker/narrator and audience/reader.

This last aspect is even more pronounced in *Gus Frits*. The protagonist and first-person narrator, Kirill, is a professional historian who turns down a scholarship to Harvard to investigate his own family history. The first clue to this history is a place of commemoration: the German cemetery, where Kirill’s grandmother Lina (born Karolina Schwerdt) brings the boy regularly. One day, without much explanation, she shows him the grave of his ancestor, whose name and years can be deciphered only when the moss is scraped off the stone: Balthasar Schwerdt, 1805–1883. To Kirill, the scene is a true revelation:

Бабушка Лина что-то прошептала по-немецки, словно хотела удостовериться, закрепить явившиеся буквы, не дать им исчезнуть.

Кирилл никогда не знал, что бабушка говорит по-немецки, и потрясение было таково, как если бы заговорил камень; а камень и вправду заговорил. (Lebedev 2018: 54)

Grandmother Lina whispered something in German, as if to fix the letters in place and keep them from disappearing again.

Kirill did not know she spoke German, and the shock was as if the stone had spoken; and the stone had spoken, in fact. (Lebedev 2019: 47)

The image effectively conveys both the fragile nature of the past and the seemingly impenetrable barrier between the past and the present. Kirill’s subsequent journey into the past is both temporal and spatial, as he travels from place to

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<sup>23</sup> For a detailed discussion of the constitutive features of *enargeia* based on its treatment in rhetorical handbooks of Classical and Late Antiquity, see Lunde 2004. A thorough account of the concept’s historical development can be found in Manieri 1998, while Lethen and colleagues 2015 offer a broad discussion of a variety of conceptions of *evidentia/enargeia* and its aesthetic and epistemological capacities.

place in Germany and Russia where members of the family had stayed, to search the archives, meet with people, or just take in the cities, buildings and surroundings. The travels are complemented by studying postcards, letters, diaries and other suggestive items (such as two unused concert tickets) from grandmother Lina's archive. The result is the story of Balthasar Schwerdt, who travelled in 1830 from Leipzig to Russia, and his descendants throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As in Iakhina's novels, we can trace lines of developments intertwining the family's history and the "big history". In *Gus Frits*, seminal historical events and periods, such as the Napoleonic wars, the Russo-Japanese War, the Great Terror, the siege of Leningrad, and the transitory 1990s, are portrayed from the perspective of the family and its fate as Germans in Russia, or Russian Germans. As it turns out, the perspective provided by the "quiet mysteries of daily life" is decisive for the interpretation of the past: "тихие мистерии повседневности, кристаллы, сквозь которые видна самая суть происходящего." (Lebedev 2018: 264) ["the quiet mysteries of daily life, crystals through which you can see the essence of events." (Lebedev 2019: 221)].

The Schwerdts are a family of physicians and entrepreneurs. The peak of the family's influence and prosperity was at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where industrial magnate Gustav Schmidt, the father-in-law of Andreas Schwerdt, Balthasar's son, supplied the growing economy of imperial Russia with iron and technical equipment. In post-revolutionary Russia, life grew ever more difficult, as the "Germanness" of the family led to suspicion, distrust and persecution. As a result, individual family members were forced to make decisions that proved fatal for themselves and the family.

Kirill is our guide into this story but also its investigator, interpreter, and, at times, inventor. His active involvement in his own and the country's history is decisive for how this novel presents the past. His endeavours to "make the stone speak" lead to an endless number of discoveries and revelations, and with every new turn of events, what was before must be reinterpreted:

[...] благодаря ярким лучам солнца Кирилл чувствовал, что произошедшее с ним как бы иначе осветило прошлое, бросило на него новый, смещающий тени блик; и будто бы буквы, цифры, изображения под обложками очнулись, ощутили между собой новые, не бывшие прежде связи смыслов; сами собой сложились в книгу, которую он так долго хотел написать и не мог даже приступить к ней. (Lebedev 2018: 36)

[...] thanks to the bright sunlight, Kirill felt that what had happened to him cast an altered light on the past, a sunspot that shifted the shadows; the letters, numbers, and images under the covers seemed to wake up, sussing out among them new connections that had not existed before; they formed themselves into a book that he had been wanting to write and was unable to begin. (Lebedev 2019: 32)

The fragile and ever-changing past is mixed with the present perspective in a “многослойный спорящий палимпсест” (Lebedev 2018: 41) [“multilayered, squabbling palimpsest” (Lebedev 2019: 36)] — again an image from one of the cemetery visits. Significantly, the various layers of the past enter the present with the help of Kirill’s involvement: “Кирилл положил поверх дневника прадеда Арсения письмо бабушки Каролины; и его поразило, что только он может смотреть в оба текста; он — третий, он — видящий все.” (Lebedev 2018: 257) [“Kirill put his grandmother’s letter on top of his great-grandfather’s diary; he was stunned by the realization that he was the only one who could read both texts; he was the third, he was the all-seeing.” (Lebedev 2019: 214)].

Space constraints prevent me from considering Lebedev’s remaining three novels in detail. Suffice it to say that they, too, display several of the narrative and poetic devices that I have discussed above. A central motif is the investigation of the past by a first-person narrator and protagonist, as in *God komety*, a coming-of-age story set in the late 1980s, told from the point of view of a young boy, whose way into the past runs through his two grandmothers; or in *Liudi avgusta*, where the protagonist and his father search for the lacunas, everything that grandmother Tania left out in the written account of her life. In *Debiutant*, the narrative structure is slightly different, with alternating third-person accounts told from the point of view of the main characters, Kalitin and Shersnev. Here, investigation turns into introspection: fragments of their past and (re)interpretations of their meaning are revealed to the reader, and in many ways also to themselves. In all of Lebedev’s novels, people are haunted by the past; its dark essence is often depicted using grotesque imagery, and, most importantly, the past is of utmost significance to the present.

## 6 Conclusion

It is not surprising that fictional treatments of the Soviet era, and Stalinism in particular, differ in many respects from official renderings of the past, but a closer look at the poetics of historical reimagination of the two authors we have discussed reveal interesting variations between the two in focus, emphasis and approach.

Iakhina and Lebedev both attempt to illuminate aspects of the past that are less salient in the official narrative, and they do so in a manner that makes this history come alive in a concrete way. Both focus on the interrelationship between the “big history” and the destinies of individual human beings; both apply “magic” or surreal elements and raise questions of responsibility and guilt. Moreover, several of the books we have discussed feature a transgenerational

perspective. This perspective is explicit in *Predel zabveniia* and *Gus' Frits*, but it is only implicitly present in *Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza*, as the author has referred to her grandmother's story as a direct inspiration for *Zuleikha*.<sup>24</sup> In this detail lies, in fact, a fundamental difference between the two writers' approach to the past.

Iakhina's fictional universe has distinct boundaries that confine the story to the time and space where it takes place. The perspective on history is a contemporary perspective within the narrated time-space. True, this opens for reflections on guilt and responsibility as the story unfolds — as in Ignatev's growing awareness of the “enemies of the people” as human beings or in Deev's contemplations on his war-time transgressions. The main focus, however, seems to be not on conflict or contestation but on reconciliation. The human and inhumane labours of *Eshelon na Samarkand* are all overcome; in *Deti moi*, Iakov Bakh finds consolation in visiting the children that were taken away from him and in transforming his own house into an orphanage; the community of deported settlers in *Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza* build a well-functioning society on the banks of Angara River. In the representation of its larger-than-life heroes and their successful battles, Iakhina's prose may be said to resonate not only with the style of socialist realism but even with some of the priorities of the state recommendations concerning history teaching, with “outstanding examples” and “exciting narratives”. At the same time, there are elements that disturb the one-dimensionality of socialist realistic fiction, such as the multi-perspective story of the autistic boy in *Eshelon na Samarkand*, the Stalin chapters in *Deti moi*, elements of magical realism, as well as the poetic quality of the narrative, broadening the scope of interpretation.<sup>25</sup>

If the reader is drawn into the story, it is by affect rather than intellectual involvement. The author's poetic language reinforces the character's emotions, as in the imitation of the engine rhythm in Deev's ragings, senseless from hunger and pain, or in the poetic, almost magical nature descriptions in the portrayal of Bakh and his daughter Anche's wordless communication. Feelings and values, however, are depicted in ways that emphasize their universal character, rather than their particular historical embeddedness, which may also explain the broad appeal and wide readership of Iakhina's novels. This fact does not, of course, prevent the reader from reflecting, for example, on the macabre juxtaposition of Bakh, the loving “father” of two non-biological children and Stalin, the “father of

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<sup>24</sup> In 1930, Iakhina's grandmother, Raisa Shakirova, and her parents were deported to the Angara River region where they spent 16 years, see, e.g., Iakhina & Pul'son 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Iakhina characterized her latest novel as “увлекательный и страшный” (“exciting and horrible”, *Uvlekatel'nyi i strashnyi tekst* [2021]).

the peoples”, but such a critical, inquisitive stance is placed outside the fictional universe itself.<sup>26</sup>

In the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, Lebedev’s prose transposes this kind of reflective attitude to the fictional world by foregrounding the narrator-cum-protagonist and his intellectual and oftentimes physical journey into the past. Violence, grief and agony are not overcome but drawn into the present time of narration. To depict the past in all its horrors, Lebedev frequently resorts to the grotesque, while elements of tactility, embodiment as well as concrete experiences in specific “historical” locations help create a vivid presence of the past, or, in other words, connect the past with the present. Just as the moment of narration is clearly post-Soviet/contemporary, with occasional references to Russia of the 1990s, 2000s and 2010s, the connection to the past may become ruthlessly concrete, as in *Predel zabveniia*, where the protagonist falls into a sinkhole upon heaps of human corpses, preserved by the permafrost. These are prisoners from the Gulag camp, expelled to a remote island, and the protagonist becomes, in this bizarre way, a true eyewitness of the past.<sup>27</sup>

Rather than promoting reconciliation with former times, Lebedev insists on the moral necessity of every individual human being taking a stance and involving oneself in a personal investigation of the past. This is no easy task. In Lebedev’s historical reimagination, the past is complex and not fixed in one valid interpretation but subject to change in the minds of the reflecting characters as the stories unfold.

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<sup>26</sup> Incidentally, Iakhina’s prose has caused heated debates, in particular *Zuleikha otkryvaet glaza* (both the book and especially the mini-series) and *Eshelon na Samarkand*. On the debates surrounding *Zuleikha*, see Anisimova 2020.

<sup>27</sup> The eyewitness criterion for truth is a *topos* throughout Antiquity. Rhetorical *enargeia*, in turn, may be seen as an attempt to produce the effect of visual testimony in words (see Lunde 2004: 55).

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