TOTALITARIAN TRAUMAS: A Reading by Writers from the Former USSR

Description

Five writers from Ukraine, Russia, the Baltics and other former Soviet republics stage a response to the war in Ukraine and the traumas of the totalitarian upbringing it has reawakened. In reading from our fiction, poetry, memoir and journalism work, we present a deeper view of the region and offer textural solutions to making the political personal.

Category: Multiple Literary Genres Reading

Organizer & Moderator

Sasha Vasilyuk is a Russian-Ukrainian-American journalist and author of the forthcoming novel *Your Presence is Mandatory*, set between Hitler's Germany and post-WWII Ukraine. Her writing has been published in the *New York Times, TIME, NBC, Harper's Bazaar, Los Angeles Times, Narrative,* and *USA Today*.

Participants

Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry, a Russian-Armenian, won 2020 Raz/Shumaker Prairie Schooner Prize for her first story collection, WHAT ISN'T REMEMBERED, long-listed for the PEN/Bingham Prize and short-listed for W. Saroyan International Prize. Her debut novel, THE ORCHARD, was published in March of 2022.

Anna Halberstadt is a poet and a translator, author of two poetry collections in English– *Vilnius Diary* and *Green in a landscape with Ashes*, two in Russian – *Transit* and *Gloomy Sun*, as well translations of American poetry – *Selected Selected* by Eileen Myles and *Nocturnal Fire* by Edward Hirsch.

Anna Fridlis is a US-based, Soviet-born immigrant writer. She graduated from The New School with a nonfiction MFA in '14 and has been teaching first year writing at her alma mater since. She's working on a memoir in essays about immigration, trauma, family and identity. She edits for *Seventh Wave Mag*.

Julia Kolchinsky Dasbach emigrated from Ukraine as a Jewish refugee when she was six years old. She is the author of three poetry collections: *The Many Names for Mother, Don't Touch the Bones,* and *40 WEEKS* (YesYes Books, 2023). She is the Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at Hendrix College and starting next fall, she will be the Assistant Professor of Poetry at Denison University.

Opening Remarks

Welcome to "Totalitarian Traumas: A Reading by Writers from the Former USSR". Thank you for making the time to hear about this complex and not always cheery topic. Today you will hear from five writers who were born in different parts of the Soviet Union and who work in a variety of genres, including poetry, memoir, short story, essay, novel, and journalism. For all of us, Russia's attack on Ukraine has had a profound effect on the understanding of our identities, culture and our individual and collective histories. In so many ways, this isn't just a war about the future of Ukraine, Russia or Europe. It is also a war about the past. Some of the major cultural conversations happening in both countries revolve around trying to understand what role has the past played in how we got here. Soviet repressions, famine, World War II and the fall of the USSR have become relevant again and as writers, we are searching for ways to translate those experiences and their lasting effect for audiences who've never lived under a totalitarian regime.

Today, I want to begin our panel by defining what totalitarian trauma means to each of us and how it shows up in our work.

For me, totalitarian trauma is the silencing of history. In the USSR – as in today's Russia – history with its inconvenient nuance was substituted with mythology. It was the government that created that mythology, but it was the individual people who proliferated it by concealing their private stories that could have contradicted the official mythology. In recent years, there has been more and more books that tell the stories of the "Greatest Generation", a revealing of grandparents' terrible secrets the family had no idea were there. My novel *Your Presence Is Mandatory* began the same way after my family found my Ukrainian Jewish grandfather's confession to the KGB after he died. We realized we had had no idea who he really was or the horrors he'd gone through. But to me, it wasn't

just his story that was interesting, but also the six decades of his silence. Translating it into fiction, I wanted to know about the price of that silence for him and for his family. And by extent, the price of that silence when it's perpetuated by an entire generation.

Participant Initial Remarks

Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry

To me, totalitarian trauma is one, long, continuous narrative of loss—the loss of relatives and dear friends, of love, dreams, innocence, one's identity and country. The German philosopher Theodor Adorno once said, "For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live." I find his words disarmingly true. I live in my books, my stories, the lingering memories of my youth. *The Orchard*, my debut novel, is a commemorative tale about a childhood friendship; it is also my attempt at remembering those who died young fighting on the streets, defending Russia's newly fledged democracy, and who I lost without ever being able to say goodbye. *The Orchard* grew out of that loss, the inability to mourn someone other than through a narrative act. I think that fiction writers revisit and revise their past in their books because they keep searching for answers nobody can provide but that must exist somewhere in the hidden pockets of their imagination. The searching allows us to go on, "to survive *whole* in a world where," according to Toni Morrison, "we are all of us, in some measure, *victims of something*."

Anna Halberstadt

Both my parents were Holocaust survivors. To me, totalitarian trauma is the silencing and denying the truth of the dimensions of the Holocaust and Lithuanian complicity in the annihilation of the Jewish population in Lithuania (95 percent of the population).

When I came to Vilnius in 2013, I was shocked to find out that the main entrance to the ghetto was on the street that I had taken to school every day for 11 years. Yet I had to learn its history from an American student who led the trip.

Totalitarian trauma to me was also state sponsored anti-Semitism, which cut my high school gold medal down to silver and prevented me from being accepted into a PHD program despite insistent recommendations of my

professors. All because of paragraph FIVE in my passport, which describes my ethnicity.

I will read a few poems from my books “Vilnius Diary” and “Green in a Landscape with Ashes”. My long story “Coney Island” describes my work with Soviet emigres in a psychiatric clinic in 1980s.

Anna Fridlis

My experience with totalitarian trauma is through the filter of the family. Soviet state oppression manufactured fear, helplessness, conformity and the erasure and denial of individual voice in its citizens. Both politically and culturally through Communist Party-based K-12 and university education, policies limiting free speech, and clamping down on individual rights and freedoms, the Soviet government stunted many citizens’ psycho-emotional development into fully autonomous adults capable of dissent and agency — adults connected to their own feelings and inner world.

This kind of severing from the self that totalitarianism deploys as a method for controlling its citizens is a deep trauma to human beings, who are biologically wired to connect to their own emotions and to those of others. This connection is the basis of empathy and intimacy that animates and gives meaning to our human lives. Without it, we wither and atrophy. Without it, I developed complex PTSD from the developmental trauma that emotional neglect within my immigrant Russian-American family caused me.

It’s almost all I can write about as I work through the layers of trauma that have shaped the unfolding of my life and the evolution of my relationship to those who raised me.

Julia Dasbach Kolchinsky

In order to define totalitarian traumas, we must first define each of the complex terms in this compound phrasing. Totalitarianism, etymologically, a bringing together of “complete” and “authoritarian” is a system of government that is centralized, dictatorial, and requires complete subservience to the state. Trauma, etymologically comes from the Latin for “wound” and according to trauma theorist Cathy Caruth, is “an event that fragments consciousness so irrevocably, it prevents direct linguistic representation.” The reason I bring up these definitions and etymological origins, is that a physical wound heals,

however, the thing about wounds caused by a repressive regime, is that even once body has recovered, scabbed over, and traces linger on skin only as ghostly scars, the psyche, as Caruth suggests, “is irrevocably damaged.” The psyche even mistakes traumatic experiences as normal, expected, and even desired–even once the people have left the totalitarian regime, they take its oppression with them.

This carrying of trauma across the water is what I’ve witnessed in my parents and grandparents trying to find their way in America, always under a heavy shadow of perpetual fear. From everyone. From this country. From their friends. Even from family members. Doctors. Neighbors. Strangers. Everyone. Always certain that the worst will happen, because it always has before. As I write in the opening poem, “Afraid Ancestral” of my first book, The Many Names for Mother. “Mom is afraid / the sky will fall / because it’s fallen / before / and there / is no recovering / from the weight / of clouds.” And now, the war against my birthplace, Ukraine, is all the more evidence for them, that the sky will fall again and again, that genocide will continue seep into the chernozem, the most nutrient rich soil in the world, fed by bodies upon bodies.

For me, as a grandchild of survivors of the Holocaust by Bullets, who immigrated from Dnipro when I was six years old, I find myself perpetually writing into and out of the totalitarian trauma I’ve been inscribed into by my ancestry, and, in which I am inadvertently, but very self-reflectively inscribing my children. In front of them, I try to be unafraid. To raise them without my ancestral fear, fear of existing in the world as Jews, fear of speaking a foreign language, fear of any change leading to catastrophe. I try and I write, and sometimes, I find myself shedding some of this fear too. My neurodiverse, 7yo son asks everyone we meet, “Do you speak Russian?” trying to find a way back to his mother-tongue in strangers, trying to process the war he knows is happening, aware too of the assumptions about our language, always clarifying, “My mom’s from Ukraine,” but blissfully, never afraid to ask the question, to be different, to be himself, to be perhaps, not yet completely inscribed in our ancestry, not yet, not yet, though the poems I’ll share with you today may reveal otherwise.

Moderator Questions

- Why is writing about totalitarianism relevant today?

- What has been your biggest challenge in translating the Soviet or post-Soviet experience for the American reader?
- What ways have you found to resist playing into Western stereotypes of what life under totalitarianism was/is? How do you find the right balance between the outsider view and the native view of the experience on the ground?

Responses to Moderator Questions

Q&A Session