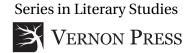
# Silver Age and After

Repressed Russian Poets, Artists and Philosophers during the Soviet Period

Roberto Echavarren



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In the Americas:
Vernon Press
1000 N West Street, Suite 1200,
Wilmington, Delaware 19801
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In the rest of the world:
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C/Sancti Espiritu 17,
Malaga, 29006
Spain

Series in Literary Studies

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024937243

ISBN: 978-1-64889-020-8

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*El Estado de derecho: Foucault frente a Marx y el Marxismo* (The Rule of Law: Foucault Facing Marx and Marxism), Argentina, Prometeo, 2020.

Archipiélago, Tres Novelas (Arquipelago, Three Novels), Montevideo, Penguin Random House. 2017.

#### Recent poetry publications:

#### In Spanish:

Verde escarabajo (Green Scarab), Buenos Aires, Mansalva, 2023.

Veneno de escorpión azul (Blue Scorpion's Poison), Montevideo, La Coqueta, 2021.

#### In Portuguese:

O monte nativo, Sao Paulo, Lumme, 2018.

Centralasia, Sao Paulo, Lumme, 2016.

#### In English:

The Virgin Mountain, U.S. Dialogos Books, 2017.

The Espresso between Sleep and Wakefulness, U.S.,

Cardboard House, 2016.

# **ABOUT**

"I read *The Silver Age* slowly, dipping in nightly for intense bursts of poetic and critical insight. What a lovely recreation of the era, in all its shimmering, mercurial complexity! Many congratulations. You clearly understand and, more importantly, *feel* the tragic power of the lives you chronicle and of the art these lives brought to us. I deeply admire the book's form: a kind of documentary narration, travelogue, and work of criticism rolled into one — with a philosophical drama as a lagniappe!"

#### Boris Dralyuk

[Executive Editor, Los Angeles Review of Books / https://bdralyuk.wordpress.com 1917: Stories and Poems from the Russian Revolution (Pushkin Press, Dec. 2016) The Penguin Book of Russian Poetry (with Robert Chandler and Irina Mashinski, Penguin Classics, 2015)

Isaac Babel's Red Cavalry and Odessa Stories (Pushkin Press, 2015 and Oct. 2016)]

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# **Foreword**

This book is aimed at a wide readership of people interested in Russian culture, scholars, students, poets, and readers who enjoy and profit from Russian literature, artistic endeavors, and thought.

I have written it through academic research and also through visiting the places, houses, museums, theatres, parks, and cultural monuments in Petersburg and Moscow, and from knowledgeable testimonies given by friends with whom one shares conversation and entertainment. I attempt to grasp the life of Russian culture through both written materials and life experiences so that *Silver Age and After* is, in part, a Russian travelogue, as Boris Dralyuk has pointed out. This information is through and through ratified by learned notes.

The Introduction presents lines of poetic, artistic and philosophical thought originating in the period known as the Silver Age, from the late nineteenth century to 1917. With hindsight, we clearly see that the authors dealt with here are the main creators of poetry, theatre, music, and thought through the Russian century. The Russian Parliament was inaugurated in 1906. These were years of remarkable economic growth and prosperity, relaxation of censorship, and liberal political life joined by a flourishing of modern Russian culture. This book analyzes the work as well as the lives of the creators, interacting with and responding to the historical and political conditions they underwent. When Lenin's dictatorship suppressed the elective Parliament, all the liberties recently acquired were lost. I chronicle the destiny of Russian creators under Soviet power when their work, as well as their lives, were suppressed.

One must bear in mind the political and economic conditions in which those lives developed under the apparatus invented by Lenin: the one-Party rule, placed above both the government and the citizens, the elimination of private property and private economic initiative, the abashment of the division of powers, the political police, and the GULAG.<sup>1</sup>

The composer Dmitri Shostakovich declared: "I just wanted to tell what I know well—too well. And I know that when all the necessary research is completed, when all the facts are gathered, and when the necessary documents confirm them, the people who were responsible for these evil deeds will have

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> For a more detailed account of Lenin's government I refer the reader to my book: *One Against All, Lenin and his Legacy*, Washington-London, Academica, 2022.

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to answer for them, if only before their descendants. If I didn't believe in that completely, life wouldn't be worth living."<sup>2</sup>

The crimes were not punished, but memory is another kind of punishment. One of the fundamental traits of our existence is the fact that our destinies acquire the form of our relationship with power, of our fight with or against it. The point of these lives, where their energy concentrates, lies precisely there, where they collide with power and attempt to escape from its traps.

Lenin was the creator of a new model of autocracy, the one-Party system, followed by Stalin, reproduced and adapted by Hitler, Mussolini and Putin (although, in the case of Putin, power masquerades behind a supposed democratic framework). As throughout the twentieth century, today, democracies are in danger of being overcome. On the 6th of January 2021, Trump attempted a coup that almost destroyed American democracy. In 2014, Putin invaded Crimea, and in 2022 he invaded the Ukraine. Autocracy is a clear and present reality. In Putin's Russia, censorship, particularly at this moment, is comparable to Bolshevik censorship. Just to take the case of sexual minorities: the Stalin law of 1934 punished homosexuality with five to eight years in the GULAG. Putin's laws of 2013, 2020 and 2022 made sexual minorities completely invisible, with stiff fines for any infringement of the norm. In July 2023, Putin signed legislation that bans people from officially or medically changing their gender, representing a further blow to Russian sexual minorities. It also annuls marriages in which one person has "changed gender" and bars transgender people from becoming foster or adoptive parents.

The ascent of the State of law is subject to interruptions, surprises, and corrupt attempts to subvert it. It would be easier to dismantle power if it simply watched, prohibited and punished instead of compelling people to act and speak according to its propaganda.

All translations from Russian or other languages are mine unless I quote a specific source. I worked with a native speaker of Russian, Nina Popiena. The reader will find an Index of historical names, plus a considerable Bibliography.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Shostakovich, Dmitri, *Testimony*, edited by Solomon Volkov, New York, Harper, 1979.

# **Prologue**

By contrast to Pushkin's and Lermontov's Golden Age, the period between 1890 and 1917 has been called the Silver Age in Russian intellectual history. Generally speaking, this refers to poets, artists and thinkers who started their careers before 1917.

I offer here a comprehensive view of the destiny of the main poets, Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Alexander Blok, Nikolai Gumilyov, Nikolai Klyuev, Vladimir Mayakovsky, the writer Isaac Babel, theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold, composer Dmitri Shostakovich, and the philosophers of the *Vekhi* group. They judged and acted with freedom despite the harsh conditions under which they lived under Lenin and Stalin. The Soviet government handled cultured intelligentsia brutally. The regime repressed thousands of writers, artists, scientists, researchers, and professors. They were either murdered or sent abroad; many died in the GULAG.

For ten years after the fall of the Soviet Union, Vitaly Shentalinski researched the archives of the Soviet political police and unearthed abundant information about literati who were victims of terror. He exposed his findings in books such as *Crime without Punishment*. Extraordinary testimonies, Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Against All Hope* and *Hope Abandoned*, or Nina Berberova's *The Italics are Mine*, add to a plural portrait of the victimized intellectuals.

Anna Andreievna Gorenko, known as Anna Akhmatova, was one of the few who, by a rare miracle, survived Stalin. She became the living link within a tradition of Russian verse stemming from Derzhavin in the eighteenth century, passing through Pushkin and Lermontov, Nekrasov, Fet and Tiutchev in the nineteenth, to the Russian Symbolists, Acmeists, Futurists, and the peasant poets in the twentieth.

Between 1906 and 1917 a relaxation of censorship had taken place in Russia. The government became a constitutional monarchy. Encouraged by the successful initiatives of Prime Minister Piotr Stolypin, there was an enormous increase in agricultural output. The rate of industrial production in 1913 was not equaled in the Soviet Union until 1930.

All the new conquests—elective government, economic expansion, freedom of the press—were abruptly erased by Lenin's dictatorship. The October coup against the Provisional Government and the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly (elected by universal vote, including women) in January 1918 opened an era of penury and terror such as the country had never known before.

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Artistic autonomy was compromised. Furthermore, options not in accord with heterosexual norms were equated to disaffection with the regime.

Pushkin's political suffocation under the wing of Nicholas I was a precedent to the lot of Russian artistic creators under the aegis of Lenin and Stalin. The poets Mayakovski and Tsvetaeva were driven to suicide; Nikolai Klyuev, Nikolai Gumilyov, Osip Mandelstam, and Sergei Yesenin were murdered, as well as theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold; Alexander Blok died of extenuation. They weren't the only victims of social prophylaxis.

Just like the pair of blue pants that Tolstoy had hung from a tree in Yasnaia Poliana—"Tolstoy was sitting on a bench under a tree to which he had tied a rope, and had hung there to dry a pair of enormous blue pants... And like an immense blue sail, furious in appearance, the blue pants hanging from the rope inflated and blew," Nikolai Klyuev wrote in *The Destiny of the Northern Ducks*—and like the blue cloth Mother Sabat unfolded in a poem also by Klyuev, what capacities of joy, of enthusiasm, Tsvetaeva, Akhmatova and the others must have had in order to navigate the waters of political suspicion! Pushkin wrote: "There is no happiness on earth, but peace and freedom." Not external, but internal peace; not external, but internal freedom: autonomy of judgment.

The first to die was Nikolai Gumilyov. Arrested in the summer of 1921, shortly after the killing of the Kronstadt sailors, he was made to dig his own grave. This was part of Lenin's campaign to intimidate the cultured intelligentsia. Having executed dozens of accused writers and professors together with Gumilyov, Lenin sent the survivors to the northern lagers. A year later, he expelled many intellectuals with their families.

Some of the poets of the Silver Age were trapped inside the country. Some were denied a visa. Others stayed by their own choice. Akhmatova did not leave Russia, while others, like Marina Tsvetaeva, did—fully justified. Almost all of those who stayed in Russia perished through the 1920s and 1930s. Akhmatova survived, always with a foot inside prison, with two husbands killed by the regime (Nikolai Gumilyov was the first) and her only son imprisoned in the GULAG. Despite that, she managed to give her testimony about oppression and terror.

"Manuscripts don't burn" is a phrase in a letter by novelist and playwright Mikhail Bulgakov. It sounds like a paradox in front of the destructive furor of the political police. Through the 60s and 70s of the last century some manuscripts that hadn't "burned" started to circulate in the Soviet Union in clandestine typed copies.

The chapter "Under the Horses of the Alexandrinsky" is an introduction to the work of the two main theater directors of the Silver Age, Konstantin Stanislavski and Vsevolod Meyerhold. They were challenged by the best legacy Prologue xiii

of Russian nineteenth-century plays, *A Month in the Country* by Ivan Turgeniev and the dramas by Anton Chekhov. The play by Turgeniev is clearly the source of Chekhov's rural dramas. In Stanislavski and Meyerhold's polemics about realism, Chekhov was certainly their tug of war.

In 1928, Lunacharsky left his position as Commissar of Culture. Trotsky had been deported. This changed the cultural landscape. Stalin's ascension and his declarations on "socialist realism" ended an era of relative tolerance towards the Meyerholdian avant-garde. Anyone with ties to an experimental movement was considered an enemy by Stalin. Any artist he did not like was labeled a "formalist," guilty of "cosmopolitan leftist avant-gardism." Despite this, in an attempt to remain faithful to his vision of theater as a public forum—an assembly or "soviet"—Meyerhold asked Vladimir Mayakovsky to write two plays for him. If The Bedbug (1928) was a critique of Bolshevik terror and Puritanism, Mayakovsky's next play for Meyerhold, The Bathhouse (1930),1 focused on the government bureaucracy. It presents a caricature of the Supreme Leader, Stalin, as the utmost bureaucrat. He is called the "Principal Administrative Coordinator" of the Soviet Union. The NEP (New Economic Policy, which had partially restored the market economy between 1921 and 1928) was over and done with, to be replaced by Stalin's Five-Year Plan and forced collectivization of agriculture. Mayakovsky and Meyerhold were both brave enough to speak the truth. This hilarious sci-fi satire appealed, in a broader sense, to poetic justice—not the justice of the current overlord. They bet on the future. The author and director were heading towards disaster.

The writer Ilya Ehrenburg receives an entire chapter, although he does not belong in the company of the above-mentioned repressed writers. Vladimir Nabokov said that Ilya Ehrenburg was a journalist, not an author. I deal with him here not because of his excellence as a writer but rather for his role as a Silver Age figure who eloquently illustrated the relationship between literature and politics in Stalinist times. He was not a victim but rather an instrument of Stalin, although he was censored and in danger of being executed by his boss several times. He was friends with Marina Tsvetaeva, Boris Pasternak and Isaac Babel. He performed as "ambassador of Soviet letters" in the European continent, participated in the Spanish Civil War, and forged ties with French writers such as André Gide and André Malraux. Ehrenburg and Gide broke up when, soon after the latter visited Soviet Russia in 1936, he dared to accuse the Soviet system in his *Return from the URSS*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> *The Bathtub*, by Vladimir Mayakovsky, in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Russian Drama*, John Gassner editor, New York, Bantam, 1963. Also *Bath* [Russian] by Vladimir Mayakovsky, Audiobook.

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Isaac Babel (Ehrenburg's writer friend and guest at the 1935 Congress of Paris organized by him) was arrested in May 1939.<sup>2</sup> A search was conducted at his apartment in Moscow. The NKVD officers confiscated many manuscripts, 18 notebooks and pads, separate sheets, cards, postcards, telegrams, and all his unpublished works, likely including two secret novels. He was shot in 1940.

Although not a Jew himself, the composer Dmitri Shostakovich identified with the suffering of the Holocaust. To a certain degree, he assumed a Hebrew identity; he chose to express himself as a composer in that musical language and incorporated Hebrew folkloric themes into his compositions. What he liked about that music was its ability to construct a melody that was both happy and sad at the same time. Shostakovich was attacked in *Pravda* in 1936. Stalin—who personally oversaw the film industry—believed he was irreplaceable in his role as composer of soundtracks for Soviet films, so his life was spared.

One penalty included in the brand-new Penal Code of 1922 was deportation for life with the express stipulation that returning to the country implied immediate execution. This article was put into place a few months after the killing of the Petrograd intellectuals. It was instrumental in arresting and deporting groups of persons, writers, philosophers, critics, university presidents, professors, and people who still tried to think independently.

On May 22, 1922, the Politburo established a special commission to gather information about the intellectuals to be arrested and deported.

In September, the first group of 25 families boarded a boat destined for the port of Stettin in Germany. A second boat, carrying another contingent of writers, philosophers, academics and their families, departed six weeks later for the same destination. Sixty-seven intellectuals and their families were expelled on two boats, a total of several hundred people. The philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev was among those deported. This is the subject matter of a play included in this book as an Appendix.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Shentalinski, Vitali, *De los archivos literarios del KGB*, Madrid, Anaya, 1994, p. 39.

# Introduction

This will last out a night in Russia, when nights are longest there.

Shakespeare, Measure for Measure

The Revolution of 1905 had pressed toward intensive reorganization of political life in Russia. An elected Duma, or Parliament, was added as a tool of government in 1906. The Duma interacted with the Tsar's Ministers to implement policy. For the first time, the country had elections, a relative freedom of the press, and saw the birth of civil society. Prime Minister Piotr Stolypin's policy (1907-1911) helped increase agricultural production. Russia became the world's main exporter of grain. Industrial development was increasing swiftly. Russian Modernism in thought, literature and the arts was built up and brought forth in those years.

This stupendous movement was eroded, first, by WWI, a collision of competing European empires, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the German Empire, the Russian Empire, the British Empire, colonialist France and also imperialist USA. Empire meant a politics of expansion, annexation and subordination. The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is the latest volcanic eruption of Russia's imperial ambitions.

But before we get there, let's examine the development of poetry, artistic and philosophical practice in the period that Nikolai Berdyaev baptized the "Silver Age," dating from the last few years of the nineteenth century to 1917. The new Russian intellectual minds wanted to come to terms with European contemporary poetry, art, and thought. Most of the Silver Age poets and thinkers had their education abroad. The poets were interested in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Verlaine. The famous sonnet by Baudelaire on the *correspondences*, as well as *The Birth of Tragedy* by Nietzsche, were points of departure to Symbolist poetics.

In addition to this admiration of French and German poets and writers, the Silver Age authors considered themselves inheritors of the Russian Romantics, Alexander Pushkin and Mikhail Lermontov, plus the Post-Romantics Afanasy Fet and Fiodor Tiutchev.

The Silver Age group included some first-generation figures, such as Valery Bryusov and Vyacheslav Ivanov, just to name the ones that produced not only poetry but poetics, a reflection on their own task, and made explicit the readings that oriented their work.

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Having assumed the word Symbolism to their practice, a pleiad of younger poets followed: Anna Akhmatova, Nikolai Gumilyov, Osip Mandelstam, Marina Tsvetaeva, Boris Pasternak, Nikolai Klyuev, Sergei Yesenin and Vladimir Mayakovsky.

Mikhail Kuzmin, poet and narrator, and Alexander Blok were the hinges between the older and the younger symbolists.

Marina Tsvetaeva (1892-1941) wrote a memoir, *An Evening out of This World* (*Nezhdieshni vecher*), where she recounted a gathering of the younger group of poets in Petrograd in December 1915. Upon learning of Mikhail Kuzmin's death in 1936, Tsvetaeva, exiled in Paris, wrote an account of her first and only meeting with him in Petrograd. The title alludes to the title of a verse collection Kuzmin had published in 1921, *Evenings out of This World (Nezhdeshnie vechera)*.

In the essay *Earthly Signs*, she wrote: "Parallel to our unworthy life—there is another life: solemn, indestructible, absolute... The same words, the same movements—the same everything, for hundreds of years. Outside time, meaning outside treason. We do not remember this enough." The oncereligious emotion concerning life after death, the transcendent paradise of Christians, is experienced by Tsvetaeva all in all within history, within some kind of temporal haul ("for hundreds of years"); within history but strangely, also, "outside time."

For a poem to reach that property, the property of being both in history and outside time, it needs to have been written: "without treason." "Without treason" to what? To the writer's idiosyncratic diction, the way he sees things and the faculty to give impulse to an idea, a matter of rhythm. The survival of a poem, pithiness and durability, a historical perspective, depends on some sort of integrity, the integrity of the soul.

#### **Symbolism**

Valery Bryusov's (1873-1924) novel *The Fiery Angel* (1908) can be linked to the poem *The Demon* by Lermontov and to Mikhail Vrubel's (1856–1910) painting "The Seated Demon" (1890), inspired by Lermontov's poem as well. The Demon is an archetypal "fallen angel" who bridges men and female figures. Vrubel's Demon is incongruous: a feminine head over a hyper-developed masculine body, an androgynous creation, an erotic non-binary mystery, an enigma that tantalized the whole age. It brought to the fore something that was previously hidden. It had to do with corporeal intensity and was justified by Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Tsvetaeva, Marina, *Indicios Terrestres (Earthly Signs*), Spain, Meridianos, Versal, translator into Spanish Selma Ancira, p. 144.

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The demon was a childhood perception to Marina Tsvetaeva, a concrete hallucination, a collage of different animal species. Something was coming out, the revelation of another side of classical culture, also a sign of the times: this Fiery Angel, this Dionysos, required from the writer a pagan emotion concerning artistic pathos.

From the vantage point of 1928, when the Silver Age period was over, poet Vladimir Khodasievich wrote:

The Symbolists didn't want to separate the writer from the person, the literary from the personal biography. Symbolism aimed to be not only an artistic school but a literary movement. It constantly strove to become a method for both art and life; that was perhaps its profound truth; its whole history flowed in constant striving towards the truth. It was a series of attempts, at times truly heroic, to find the alloy of both life and creativity, a sort of philosophical stone of art. [...] The events of everyday life [...] were never lived through as only and simply life; they immediately became part of the inner world and a part of creation. And the inverse: something that someone had written became real, a life event for everyone. [...] In this unusual life, in this 'Symbolic dimension,' they lived on several planes at once. They wanted to reach the end, the limit, and fullness and demanded the same thing from other people. [...] Their motto could have been: all or nothing. They sought a superlative degree in everything. The great error of Symbolism, its mortal sin was: having declared a cult of personality, Symbolism assigned it no tasks besides self-development. [...] How, in the name of what, and in what direction, it did not indicate, didn't want to indicate, and indeed didn't know how to. The unceasing striving to reconstruct thought, life, relationships, and even one's own very habits in accordance with the imperative of the next experience [...] was a theater of fervid improvisation. They knew that they were playing, but the playing became life. The penalties were not theatrical.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Valery Bryusov (1873-1924)**

In his essay *Key to the Mysteries* (1904), Valery Bryusov defined poetic as "those moments of ecstasy, of supersensible intuition, that offer a different comprehension of worldly phenomena, penetrating more deeply under the external covering into the core."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Khodasievich, Vladimir, "The End of Renata" (1928), in *Russian Silver Age Poetry, Texts and Contexts*, Sylabus, by Sibelan Forrester and Martha Kelly, Boston, 2015, pp. 485-489.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Ivanov, Vyacheslav, Russian Silver Age, p.269.

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