

## Regime of Timelessness: On the Centennial of the Meeting of Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam

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Translated by Inga Leonova

Historian Timothy Snyder recently posed a question: Which key lessons from twentieth-century resistance to tyranny will be most useful in the near future?<sup>1</sup> To understand the experience of resisting terror and overcoming fear, we should not only read Hannah Arendt, but also Nadezhda Mandelstam.

The world discovered Nadezhda Mandelstam soon after the events of

1968, when her astounding memoir was published in the West. The book told about the Leninist and Stalinist terror that befell the generation of her husband, the great poet Osip Mandelstam. Varlam Shalamov wrote about the book:

The history of the Russian intelligentsia, Russian literature, Russian public life has acquired a new person of great stature.

This essay is based on a paper delivered at the conference “Uomini liberi: La ‘cultura del samizdat’ risponde all’oggi,” October 12–15, 2018, in Seriate, Italia.



<sup>1</sup> Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2017).

Nadezhda Mandelstam, Yalta, 1926.

Osip Mandelstam, Moscow, 1923.

<sup>2</sup> Varlam Shalamov quoted in Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Собрание сочинений* (Yekaterinburg: Гонзо, 2014), vol. 1, 42–3.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Pevear, “On the Memoirs of Nadezhda Mandelstam,” *The Hudson Review* 24.3 (Autumn 1971): 427–40.

<sup>4</sup> Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Собрание сочинений* (Yekaterinburg: Гонзо, 2014), vol. 1, 44.

<sup>5</sup> Varlam Shalamov quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope: A Memoir*, trans. Max Hayward (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 266. This quotation has been retranslated to be more faithful to the original. GPU was the abbreviation of the secret police, a predecessor of NKVD and the KGB. —IL

The essence, as it turns out, is not that it is the widow of Mandelstam who has faithfully kept and transmitted to us the poet’s legacy and his secret thoughts, and who has told us the tragic truth about his terrible fate. No, this is not the main thing at all, although of course those tasks have been achieved. It is not the partner of Mandelstam who is entering our public life, but a stern judge of the time, a woman who has performed and is performing a moral feat of extraordinary difficulty... She has created a document which surpasses in its internal honesty everything I know in the Russian language. Its value is enormous.<sup>2</sup>

Shalamov’s valuation is echoed by Richard Pevear in an essay that juxtaposes the unusual structure of the memoir with Homer’s *Iliad*.<sup>3</sup>

Readers of Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoir discovered that she had performed a masterful anthropological analysis of the Communist experiment. She noted certain Soviet personal characteristics that still stubbornly refuse to become extinct: “The desire to ask permission from one’s

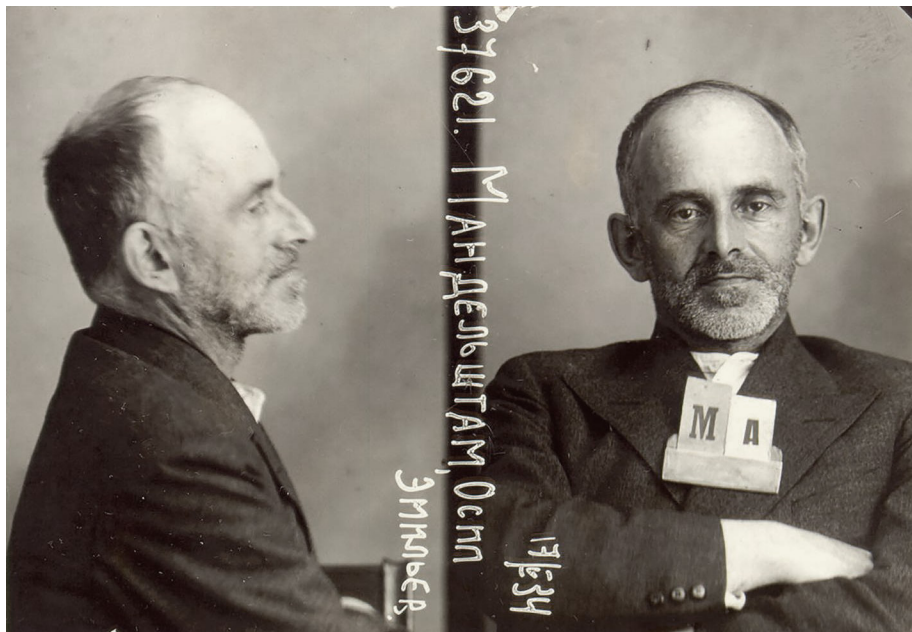
supervisors for everything. The conformity called ‘moral unity’ or ‘the highest social discipline.’ The desire to denounce others before they denounce you; everyone’s ambition to become some kind of supervisor, to feel connected to the state power. The desire to control the will and life of the others. And above all—cowardice, cowardice, cowardice.”<sup>4</sup> As Shalamov noted, Mandelstam’s text did more than simply diagnose the problem: “The power of resistance is also great, and this power of resistance, spiritual and emotional, is noticeable on every page.”<sup>5</sup>

### A New Antigone

Mandelstam examines the epidemic development of the virus she calls “the GPU’s despising of people” (*гепэушным презрением к людям*).<sup>6</sup> In many places, her analysis of “leaderism” (*вождизм*) recalls Hannah Arendt’s 1951 book *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. Mandelstam elaborates on the history of this disease across three generations of Soviet society. Her book is distinguished by the rare nerve of her testimony to the Soviet regime’s destruction of her husband Osip, the silenced voice of an entire

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Osip Mandelstam’s  
prison photos, 1934.



epoch.<sup>7</sup> Paul Celan, the great translator of Osip Mandelstam's poetry, called his *Tristia* the best poetry book of the twentieth century. Recently the contemporary poet and critic Tomas Venclova has confirmed that this praise is not exaggerated.

Father Alexander Schmemmann has observed the tragic essence of Nadezhda Mandelstam's witness:

Against the background of total silence and indifference it is not just a great poet who perishes, but a poet whose poetry, and this is N. Y.'s [Nadezhda Yakovlevna Mandelstam's] thesis, presents the last "antidote" to the demonism which has overcome Russia. The task of N. Y. is not only to defend her husband's memory, to tell his story and to preserve his literary heritage, but also to demonstrate the entire depth of this tragedy, the non-accidental meaning of the death of Mandelstam, and the very manner of this death. In this context the perception of this death by the "writers" and "literature" assumes a key meaning. Whether or not N. Y. is right in her grandiose scheme is a different question, but it seems to me that it is impossible to "diminish" her arguments in any manner. In a way her personal "attacks" elevate those she attacks, brings them up to the level of tragedy whose understanding can alone, using N. Y.'s expression, bring "catharsis."<sup>8</sup>

Osip Mandelstam was killed in the Gulag in the winter of 1938. The place in the Far East where his body was thrown into a nameless pit is forgotten. Everything the poet created was also destined for death and oblivion by Stalin's regime. This *damnatio me-*



*moriae* was precisely the kind of state abuse of power against which the poet's widow conducted her lonely lifelong struggle. She memorized not only Osip Mandelstam's poems, but also his prose and essays, in order to save them from destruction.

Nadezhda Mandelstam became the voice of the millions of voiceless and rightless Soviet widows. She wrote, "Millions of unrequited Antigones kept to their corners, filled out forms, went to work, and did not dare to bury or even to mourn their dead. A crying woman would have been immediately fired and starved to death. To slowly starve to death is much harder than to be executed."<sup>9</sup> People said to her face, "Nad'ka barely stays on her feet. . . . Oh well, Antigones don't have days off."<sup>10</sup>

Mandelstam lived day and night in expectation of being arrested, until her eventual death in Moscow at the end of 1980. She was even arrested after death, albeit briefly. On December 31, 1980, the KGB and the police came to her one-bedroom apartment in Cheremushki where her friends were keeping vigil around her casket and forcibly removed her body to the morgue. They did, however, allow for her church funeral service and burial

Nadezhda Mandelstam's funeral service, January 1, 1981. On the left are Father Alexander Men and Deacon Alexander. Photo: Igor Palmin.

<sup>7</sup> See Sergey Averintsev, "Судьба и весть Осипа Мандельштама," in *Osip Mandelstam, Сочинения* (Moscow: Художественная литература, 1990), vol. 1, 5–64.

<sup>8</sup> Alexander Schmemmann to Olga Andreyeva Carlisle, 1973, in "Посмотрим, кто кого переупрямит . . .": Надежда Яковлевна Мандельштам в письмах, воспоминаниях, свидетельствах, ed. P. M. Nerler (Moscow: АСТ, 2015), 433.

<sup>9</sup> Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Собрание сочинений* (Yekaterinburg: Гонзо, 2014), vol. 2, 165.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.



by Fathers Alexander Men and Alexander Borisov together with her true friends. A memorial sign reading “To the blessed memory of Osip Emilievich Mandelstam” was installed near her grave.

### The Centennial of the Meeting of Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam

Osip first met his future wife in Kyiv, the city of her childhood and youth, on May 1, 1919. Nadia Khazina was a sickly child, and between 1905 to 1914 her parents took her on various trips to Switzerland, Germany, France, and Italy for treatment. Thanks to these trips and her studies in the best Kyiv schools, Nadezhda learned French, English, and German. As a young woman, she entered the circle of Kyiv avant-garde artists such as Kazimir Malevich and Alexandra Exter.

Despite this happy pre-war childhood, Nadezhda called her meeting with Osip Mandelstam the real beginning of her life:

My life begins with meeting Mandelstam. The first period is our life together. I call the second period life after the grave, and that is how it feels to me, not in eternity but in the indescribable world of deathly terror in which I spent fifteen years (1938–1953), and altogether twenty years of continuous waiting (1938–1958). . . . I have been haunted by the feeling of a breach between the first and the second periods—two disconnected pieces, one full of meanings and events, another devoid of everything, even continuity, duration. . . . The only reality in those years were the meetings with [Anna] Akhmatova, but these were only brief tête-à-têtes.

The third period began in the beginning of the fifties, when I received the right to say my name, to explain who I am and what I think. Almost immediately, both parts of my life, the first and the third, connected. . . . Life became whole and unified. It became even more whole when I wrote in my first book about what had happened to us.<sup>11</sup>

Father Alexander Men helped Nadezhda Mandelstam find words for the witness of her faith: “If I didn’t believe in a future reunion, I wouldn’t have been able to live those dozens of lonely years. I laugh at myself, I don’t dare to believe, but faith doesn’t leave me. There will be a meeting, and there is no separation. This has been promised, and this is my faith.”<sup>12</sup>

Osip Mandelstam was arrested on the night of May 1, 1938. Nadezhda recalled: “At night, during lovemaking, I caught myself thinking, what if they enter now and interrupt us? This is what happened on May 1, 1938, leaving behind a particular trace, the combination of two memories.”<sup>13</sup>

During their life together, Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam celebrated and often remembered the day of their first meeting. For example, in 1926 Osip wrote, “Nadiushok, on May 1 we will again be in Kyiv together, and will go to that Dnepr hill.”<sup>14</sup> May 1, 2019 marked the centennial of that first meeting of Osip and Nadezhda. Let us hope it stimulates new attention to their books. Indeed, much in those books sounds as though it had been written today. The issue is not only the return of neo-Stalinists and their fellow travelers. The issue is the catastrophic results of the lack of attention to the Soviet anthropological catastrophe. Today, once again, the

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 381.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>13</sup> Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Об Ахматовой* (Moscow: Три квадрата, 2008), 111.

<sup>14</sup> Osip Mandelstam, *Собрание сочинений*, vol. 4: *Letters* (Moscow: Арт-бизнес-центр, 1999), 68.

political consequences of the nihilistic destruction of culture are threatening the minority of “sane” readers.

The world knows and continues to read Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil. But many who read those great women of the twentieth century have not yet read the memoirs of Nadezhda Mandelstam. Yet she is the great witness of what was happening in the “bloodlands” described by Timothy Snyder. Long before the appearance of Snyder’s historical study *Bloodlands*, she wrote in her memoirs of “our bloodstained land.”<sup>15</sup> In 1928, Osip Mandelstam gave his last book of poetry to one of the Bolshevik leaders, Nikolai Bukharin, in an attempt to prevent innocent people from being shot. The inscription read, “Every line here is against what you are going to do.”<sup>16</sup>

The roots of the current discussion about “post-truth” lie in a historical situation described by Nadezhda Mandelstam: “It is easy enough to fabricate documents; people signed the most incredible statements under torture, and nothing would have been easier than to put alarming ideas about police spies and provocateurs into the head of an old woman. . . . But how will the historians ever get to the truth if every minute grain of it is buried under huge layers of monstrous falsehoods? By this I mean not just the prejudices and misconceptions of any age, but deliberate and premeditated lies.”<sup>17</sup>

For her “minute grain” of truth, this new Antigone crossed the line of despair and fear.

### Farewell Europe?

“Isolate but retain”: the government’s instructions for the poet’s exile in

1934 meant that his extermination was temporarily put on hold. His wife was permitted to accompany her husband to his place of exile. She soon experienced the ominous effect of this “isolation” at the Moscow railway station. Nadezhda Mandelstam was accompanied to the station by Anna Akhmatova and various family members. She entered the railway car in which, in the farthest compartment, three guards were guarding Osip. His brother and Nadezhda’s brother were standing outside the window. “M. tried to open the window, but a guard stopped him: ‘It’s against the rules.’ . . . M. stayed by the window, desperate for contact with the two men on the other side, but no sound could penetrate the glass. Our ears were powerless to hear, and the meaning of their gestures hard to interpret. A barrier had been raised before us and the world outside. It was still a transparent one, made of glass, but it was already impenetrable.”<sup>18</sup>

On the train, under guard, the Mandelstams crossed the fatal line of civil death, losing all connection with their previous life, “due to our knowledge that we had all set out on a path of inescapable doom.” This doom cut them off from their closest friends, from the very essence of their life, which Nadezhda Mandelstam unexpectedly referred to as “Europe”: “It would be the end of everything—friends, relatives, my mother, Europe. . . . I say ‘Europe’ advisedly, because in this ‘new’ state I had entered there was nothing of the European complex of thought, feelings and ideas by which I had lived hitherto. We were now in a world of different concepts, different ways of measuring and reckoning.”<sup>19</sup>

Nadezhda Mandelstam describes the “shift of consciousness” of people whose radical experience of doom

<sup>15</sup> Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*, 178. See Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Hope Against Hope*, 113.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 41–42.

pushes them from the realm of worry and fear to complete indifference. What kind of resistance can be expected of people who have found themselves in this land of non-being? "In the face of doom, even fear disappears. Fear is a gleam of hope, a will to live, a self-assertion. It is a deeply European feeling, nurtured on self-respect, the sense of one's own worth, rights, needs, and desires. A man clings to what is his, and fears to lose it. Fear and hope are bound up with each other. Losing hope, we lose fear as well—there is nothing to be afraid for."<sup>20</sup>

When a person loses everything including despair, an oppressive, physically perceived indifference "like a heavy weight" piles up. The key feature of this stupor is a complete loss of the sense of time: "I also felt that time, as such, had come to an end—there was only an interlude before the inescapable swallowed us with our 'Europe' and our handful of last thoughts and feelings."<sup>21</sup>

The nihilistic suppression of "European feelings" condemned its victims to imprisonment in a zone condemned to the destruction of "Europe." This zone could be of any size, be it train or concentration camp, city or country. Reckoning with this experience today can inform the question of whether a particular country belongs to Europe or not. This question is no longer one of geography. It is a question of memory, in a particular place, of the "Europe" that once lived there but was exiled and destroyed. Moreover, the train to the east which, by the decision of Kremlin, transported the poet and his wife away under guard is a symbolically significant detail of Stalin's era. Nadezhda Mandelstam's description of the train's deadly course marks a conclusion to earlier discussions that

had juxtaposed Europe and Russia, by such thinkers as Berdyaev, Bulgakov, and Zenkovsky.

### The Future and the Regime of Timelessness

In Nadezhda Mandelstam's writing, the train becomes the symbol of an inexorable and irresistible force, dragging along the human masses with irrational inevitability, as if to say, "there is no return." The idea of historical determinism, with its mechanistic sense of inevitable necessity, deprives people of free will and judgment. This cynical way of looking at history insists that, everywhere and always, everything is ruled by violence and despotism. People repeat newspaper clichés to each other, insisting that "now everything is different," as if that justifies it all.

Nadezhda Mandelstam compares the power of this ideology with hypnosis: "We [were really] persuaded that we had entered a new era, and that we had no choice but to submit to historical inevitability."<sup>22</sup> Even those who had only heard about the terror accepted the inevitability of violence, and propagated this virus of doom like a psychological plague. Mandelstam describes in detail the circles of hell in which those who had abandoned the last vestiges of "European feelings" walked, pulling others along with them. The inhabitants of those Dantean circles, servants of the state and people of culture, hastened to reject the old world of humanity and to surrender to a regime that suffered no alternatives. They were ready to sacrifice anything to the idol of this regime: friends, family, everything they had lived by.

This regime of timelessness required absolute obedience to the current

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 42.

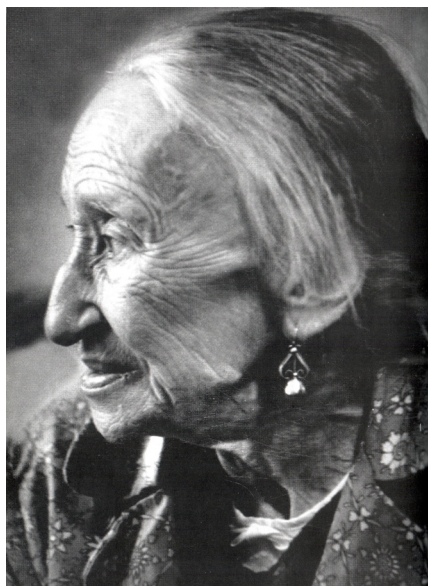
<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 44.

moment. It totally rejected the rights of the past and usurped total control over the future. Yet this blind spot contains its vulnerability. “All the murderers, provocateurs and informers had one feature in common: it never occurred to them that their victims might one day rise up again and speak. They also imagined that time had stopped—this, indeed, was the chief symptom of the sickness.”<sup>23</sup>

Mandelstam returns to this thought in her essay “My Last Testament.” “There is a wonderful law: the killer always underestimates the power of the victim, considering the destroyed and murdered ‘a fistful of camp dust,’ a trembling shadow of Babi Yar [a ravine near Kyiv where Nazi squads killed at least 34,000 Jews in 1941]. . . . Who would have believed that they would rise and speak?”<sup>24</sup> Europe’s new beginning after World War II was based on the experience of the camps and encounters with witnesses of the “shadows” who rose and spoke. Nadezhda Mandelstam survived Stalin’s timelessness and condemned it. The publication in the West of the poems and prose of Osip, preserved by her, symbolized the overcoming of Stalinism’s power.

Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoirs also push back against the new versions of the regime of timelessness that arose in the post-Stalin eras. The dictatorship of historical determinism erases the boundaries between law and lawlessness, between good and evil, between truth and lie, between crimes of the regime and the complicity of taxpayers. By denying the illusion of choice, the government takes away any sense of guilt and squashes the impulse to resist. Relapse into a sense of timelessness is like a paralyzing poison. Nadezhda Mandelstam’s way of thinking



Nadezhda Mandelstam, late 1970s. Photo: G. B. Pinkhasov.

contains an antidote, leading to liberation and to the reconsideration of newly relevant ideas:

1. Resistance to the criminal regime, in both large and small ways, focuses the attention on particular acts of rejecting evil or particular acts of complicity. Not everything disappears without a trace in the “camp ashes.”
2. Rejecting the axiom of the absence of choice gives the lie to the myth of the single track and the overpowering train carrying everyone in the same direction. One does have a choice to leave the train of the dictatorship.
3. Resistance to determinism and to the usurping of the future forms the basis of Nadezhda Mandelstam’s philosophy of freedom, embodied in the entire corpus of her texts. This is a unique synthesis of particular individuals’ real experiences of resistance, of their internal freedom, and of the practice of anti-totalitarian prin-

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 48.

<sup>24</sup> Nadezhda Mandelstam, *Мое завещание и другие эссе* (New York: Silver Age Publishing, 1982), 24.

<sup>25</sup> Osip Mandelstam, "The Age," trans. A. S. Kline (2000), <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Russian/Mandelstam.php>.

<sup>26</sup> Osip Mandelstam, "The Word and Culture," trans. Sydney Monass, *Arion*, new series 2.4 (1975): 532.

<sup>27</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Response to a Question from the *Novy Mir* Editorial Staff," in Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 4.

principles. It is their life's work, the work described by Osip Mandelstam:

To free life from jail,  
and begin a new absolute,  
the mass of knotted days  
must be linked by means of a  
flute.<sup>25</sup>

4. "The fan of times" (to use a phrase of Osip Mandelstam) opens the true text of culture, enlivened by "the breathing of all the ages."<sup>26</sup> Just as Simone Weil's *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force* analyzed the totalitarian experience of the twentieth century, so does Nadezhda Mandelstam's "Odyssey." She leads the reader from "Soviet time" to the "great time" described by her contemporary Mikhail Bakhtin: "Trying to understand and explain a work solely in terms of the conditions of its epoch alone, solely in terms of the conditions of the most immediate time, will never enable us to penetrate into its seman-

tic depths. Enclosure within the epoch also makes it impossible to understand the work's future life in subsequent centuries; this life appears as a kind of paradox. Works break through the boundaries of their own time, they live in centuries, that is, in *great time* and frequently (with great works, always) their lives are more intense and fuller than are their lives within their own time."<sup>27</sup>

5. The henchmen of the regime of timelessness close their eyes to this "great time" and do not see how it weighs them on its scales. Neither Leonid Brezhnev's nor Vladimir Putin's "timeless" regime has wanted to hear the conversations of its contemporaries in the acoustics of the great time of culture. The century of the Mandelstams appears as useless to them as Archimedes' fulcrum capable of moving the world. . . .  
But what if everything is different? ✱



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