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Hist 410

*Journey Into the Whirlwind Analysis*

In *Journey Into The Whirlwind*, Eugenia Ginzburg recounted the story of her accusation and trial, followed by her long years in prison and work camps during the Great Terror. She started out as naïve in the realm of politics and gained an understanding of the system by the end of the book. She placed the blame for the problems of the Terror on Joseph Stalin and his repressive policies and not on communism in general, even holding hope that one day in the future the survivors would be able to repair the damage that had been done. The book is a useful historical document because it describes in great detail the system of prisons and work camps and the people who inhabited them from a personal point of view instead of an impersonal textbook point of view.

Ginzburg's purpose in writing *Journey Into the Whirlwind* was to provide a record of the time for “honest people and true Communists” (Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, 417) and as a letter to her grandson. In her record, she wanted to give a description of the injustices in the prisons and work camps based on personal experience. To do so, she gave an extremely detailed account of her eighteen year experience, including everything from the conditions of the prisons to the personalities of the interrogators to the poetry she wrote and recited to herself to get through solitary confinement. She also gave explanations for things that wouldn't make sense to outside readers, such as instructions for the “prison alphabet” used to communicate between cells.

The book starts with her in Kazan as a teacher at the local university, on December 1, 1934 when Sergey Kirov was assassinated. Professor Elvov, a colleague of Ginzburg's, was soon arrested in 1935 because a chapter he wrote for the *History of the All-Union Communist Party* had "Trotskyist ideas." Ginzburg was soon accused of not denouncing him for being a Trotskyist and refused to admit "guilt." After interrogation, she was charged with relaxation of vigilance and eventually collaboration with the enemy. She soon lost party membership and was subsequently arrested. After several transfers and more interrogation, in which she refused to confess to her "crimes," she was sentenced to ten years in solitary confinement. She was brought to Yaroslavl, and had a cellmate as the prison was too full to have solitary confinement. After two years, Ginzburg's (and many others) sentences were revised, and they were sent to labor camps for the rest of their sentence. They traveled from Yaroslavl to Vladivostok over a month's time in the summer in a train labeled "Special Equipment." They then spend a month in a holding camp, and then traveled via ship to Kolyma. Ginzburg nearly dies on the trip and spent a month in the infirmary being nursed back to health. After ten days of hard labor she was "once more on my last legs" (Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, 368), and she escaped from further hard labor by bribing the team leader and earning a spot working in the guest house doing housework. Eventually she had to go back to hard labor, but her friends from the guest house put together enough money to bribe the team leader again, who got her a spot in the men's kitchen. After nearly being raped by the head of the kitchen, she was sent off to a camp at Elgen and was tasked with chopping trees in the frigid Siberian weather. She would have most likely died there, but was saved when a doctor recognizes her and gets her reassigned to a children's home as a medical attendant.

From the very beginning of the book, Ginzburg was suspicious of Stalin. When she saw him at Gorky's funeral she only commented on his ugliness. She objected to the hero worship, when she heard a woman murmur "I have seen Stalin. Now I can die." her only thought with exasperation was "You idiot girl" (Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, 26). When she was in the Butyrki Prison, she had a conversation with the loyal Stalinist Julia. Julia told her about what had been going on in the country, saying that treason had worked its way all throughout the party. Ginzburg quipped back with "But if all these people have betrayed one man, isn't it easier to suppose that he has betrayed them?" (Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, 155). While she realizes that Stalin was at the head of the Terror, she did not blame him alone. She referenced the NKVD in general as robbing and murdering the population. She called the interrogators and wardens names like Vulturidzes. She viewed the Terror as a tragedy brought upon the Party by Stalin and his followers.

Ginzburg realized the insanity of the Terror and that if it continued on for too long the Party would be completely destroyed. From this logic, she concluded that there were people out there who would eventually stop it and she needed to live to help when that day came, saying in her head to the judges when she was sentenced "Do you, with your codfish faces, really think you can go on robbing and murdering for another ten years, that there aren't people in the Party who will stop you sooner or later? I know there were-and in order to see that day, I must live" (Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, 174). She still held the Party in great regard and viewed herself as a loyal communist, refusing to run away into the countryside when she had the chance before she was arrested.

Ginzburg had a fantastic memory and was able to recount vast amount of detail about

her eighteen years in the prison system. Her book gives great insight into the minds of the people involved in the Terror, from the interrogators to the foremen at the work camps to the collaborators and fellow prisoners. Instead of giving an impersonal historical account of the time, she describes her day to day life and observations of the world around her and the people in it. Her book also gives a firsthand description of the different prisons and work camps involved in the Terror. She shows that while there were people who opposed Stalin's policies, there were also people who were orthodox Stalinists and thought that what he was doing was not only right but also necessary. Her book acts as a timeline of sorts, as the actions and attitudes of the people change as various events happen. She describes how the culture starts to become that of denunciation and lies and how some of the prison workers started to bend the rules after Lavrenty Beria came to head the NKVD and the Terror started winding down.

Her detailed accounts of her multitude of interrogations give some insight into the way the Terror worked. She gave detailed accounts into the prisons and the punishment cells she was put in. She showed that collaboration and temptations of accusing others of crimes to save oneself was a strategy used by the interrogators to gain confessions. They tempted her and played the good cop/bad cop game as well as calling in collaborators from the newspaper she worked on who accused her of wild crimes. This reflects on the Stalinist regime's policies of motivation in general, with the creation of wage hierarchies and the multitude of rewards for collaboration with factory worker and collectivization policy.

Most importantly, her book is useful because it describes and gives insight into the otherwise nameless people of this period in history. She went into detail about the personalities and thoughts of just about every character she interacted with. The records of her

conversations allow historians to draw conclusions about the varied attitudes of the Soviet people at the time of the Terror. There were some people, like Ginzburg, who placed the blame on Stalin and the NKVD and hoped that one day the survivors could take the Party back and restore it. There were some people, like Julia, who were ardent Stalinists and provided the regime with a legitimacy that helped enabled them to stay in power. There were people such as the storekeeper in Yaroslavl and the nurse at the labor camp that did their best to make the lives of the suffering a little bit better. At a stop on the way to Vladivostok, a door was open enough where the people of the city were able to sneak in milk and vitamins, and their "eyes were filled with tears and pity" (Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, 304).

Ginzburg condemned Stalin and his cronies for the Terror, and does not blame communism in general. Her book is valuable for historians because it gives insight into the attitudes of the Soviet people and the environment of the prisons and work camps. Fortunately, Ginzburg was proven right, and after Stalin's death the Party rehabilitated many of its members, including Ginzburg, and reversed some of Stalin's more repressive policies.