**Experience as History**

Evgenia Ginzburg's *Journey Into the Whirlwind* provides an intimate portrait of one woman's experience as a political prisoner and gives the reader insight into the broader history of that woman's time. The work also describes the lives of those close to Ginzburg throughout various points in her ordeal, and these lives vary so greatly that the extensive nature of Stalin's purges is evident. The wide range of people Ginzburg encounters suggests that the terror of the purges was both real and justified, as anyone could fall victim to arrest. Robert Thurston argues that the "Great Terror," was not nearly as widespread as we are led to believe, but Ginzburg's memoir demonstrates that ordinary people were affected, and their sufferings must not be minimized. The idea that fear was not a constant part of existence for everyone in the Soviet Union during this time is potentially true, but that does not change the fact that fear did exist and existed for good reason, as Ginzburg's story highlights the consequences that could be faced by anyone during the time of Stalin's Terror.

Ginzburg's telling of her experience is very personal and very real. She writes bluntly, sparing no horrific details. Every intimate moment is placed on display in the text, revealing the stark reality of prison life while allowing the reader to invest himself or herself in the eventual outcome. Small details throughout the text provide insight into the overall exaggeration of crimes that took place during the purges. One such moment occurs early in Ginzburg's interrogation. She is searched and then remarks, "My terrorist equipment consisted of a pair of nail scissors I happened to have in my bag."[1] The heightened fear surrounding the arrests and interrogations led to a situation in which even the smallest thing, like possessing a pair of nail scissors, could be turned into a heinous crime. Ginzburg also relates her experience on the

[1] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 51.

"conveyer," an NKVD interrogation tactic which was fairly common but which seems all the more horrific when Ginzburg describes it.[2] Because many of the things Ginzburg describes, like the "conveyer," can be backed up with historical evidence, her work is provided with a sense of legitimacy that has a powerful affect on the reader.

The artfulness of the memoir is apparent in Ginzburg's frequent citation of historical events. As the work is a memoir, the historical references provide an anchor for the text overall. The timeline of the text is, in some ways, framed by the information Ginzburg and her fellow prisoners receive about the status of prominent Party members like Bukharin, Rykov, and Yezhov. The text also contains frequent footnotes, which provide the reader with additional historical information about the people and places mentioned. Major, more familiar historical events shape Ginzburg's experience and affect her emotions. She recalls, for example, the immense grief she felt at the death of Krupskaya, noting that it was the first time any of the prisoners cried after arriving at Yaroslavl.[3] The prisoners clung to what information they could receive from newspapers like the *Northern Worker*, which Ginzburg was able to read while in prison at Yaroslavl, and thus written news stories are used to provide historical context for Ginzburg's narrative.

Literary allusions are also present throughout the text. Ginzburg includes many direct quotations from poetic works, all of which serve to provide cultural context for her experience. For Ginzburg, poetry was a means of staying sane, of finding a reason to live.[4] She also found that "poetry is a common bond for everyone."[5] In this way, all of literature, and thus memoir, can provide a means by which to unite others. Ginzburg's ability to recite the works of Pushkin

[2] Hosking, *The First Socialist Society*, p. 191.
[3] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 237.
[4] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 198.
[5] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 282.

potentially saved her life during her month-long train journey, and her ability as a writer would provide her with at least an iota of immortality. It was important to survive the gulag in order to make sure the terror and injustice of the time was not lost to history, and novel and memoir became a means of translating a sense of what living through the camp system would have been like to a younger generation. The idea of translating history through literary means is also evident in the works of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Nadezdha Mandelstam. Through these written records, a sense of experience can be applied to historical knowledge.

Surviving the Terror provided a backdrop against which writers could share their experiences while enacting a sort of revenge upon Stalin's regime. Upon receiving her prison sentence of ten years instead of a death sentence, Ginzburg states, "I intended to stay alive. Just to spite them. I was consumed by the desire to survive the tragedy which had befallen our Party."[6] She narrates with the fire of a loyal Party member, one who believes firmly that truth will win out and those who have been made captive will reclaim the Party for the true Communists. Her memoir serves to illustrate how the Terror did not destroy the Party outright, as Ginzburg herself never completely denounces the Party and is sure normalcy will return at the conclusion of the "personality cult." The reader is constantly reminded of who Ginzburg is and what she stands for while reading, which serves to personalize history.

Ginzburg possesses a dark, ironic humor in her writing, perhaps a testament to the spirit she must have had in order to survive eighteen years as a political prisoner. Though her situation was dire, when reflecting back on it she is able to provide insight and critique her own actions and the actions of others. In describing a prison stairwell, she notes that "The well was protected by thick wire netting so that no one might take it into his head to jump from the second floor and

[6] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 175.

die on his own initiative instead of at the moment laid down by higher policy."[7] The starkness of this statement highlights not only the fact that suicide was perhaps a preferable alternative to prison, but also that prisoners were completely deprived of any personal choice. This moment is another detail that gives Ginzburg credibility and also tells the reader something they could probably not have learned in a purely scientific historical text.

The artfulness of the memoir also highlights the artificiality of experience and the surreal qualities of the whole interrogation process. Ginzburg writes that it was nearly impossible to make sense of one's experience as a political prisoner, as the system itself had no rhyme or reason to it. Her personal knowledge of suffering and the fact that she survived to tell her story are the only elements grounding her sense of experience in reality. One moment of the text that is particularly telling of the randomness surrounding the Terror is Ginzburg's encounter with the older peasant woman referred to as "Grandma Nastya." "Why she had drawn such an unlucky number in the lottery it was hard to say. Nobody could make anything of the accusation of 'Trotskyist terrorism' against Grandma."[8] This episode highlights why widespread fear was justified and why Robert Thurston's argument is not completely solid, as even ordinary people like Grandma Nastya could be arrested and sentenced to harsh punishments. Ginzburg herself cannot find any rhyme or reason in this situation, and can only reassure herself that her interrogators and judges were in fact the traitors.[9] Throughout the text, she never loses this sense of herself, never once believing herself to be guilty. This belief is one shared by many of Ginzburg's fellow prisoners, who range from loyal Party members to Social Revolutionaries to people like Grandma Nastya.

[7] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 194.
[8] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 181.
[9] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 182.

Ginzburg makes particular note of the diversity of prisoners she encounters. When she has knowledge of their eventual fates, she shares it. This serves to remind the reader that these were real people. Often, Ginzburg informs the reader of what happened to certain individuals when they are first introduced, as is the case with Garey. The memoir is not told in a strictly chronological order, as Ginzburg reflects on certain experiences and certain people when she first mentions them. The reader knows that she spends two years at Yaroslavl from the outset, before she goes into any detail of that experience. This technique ensures that the reader will remember the outcomes, for it is one's final fate which was most important during this time period. Whether one lived or died is a crucial element for Ginzburg's portrayal of her fellow prisoners and others she encounters. This focus on what actually happened to people in the end lends a sense of humanity to the statistics concerning the number who died, providing faces and giving the reader a more intimate sense of history.

Another way in which Ginzburg successfully narrates history is in her description of the labor camps. The labor camp hierarchy usually gave preference to ordinary criminals, who often had a greater chance to obtain better jobs.[10] This is a fact Ginzburg notes in her memoir, as she remarks that political prisoners were considered the lowest of all. "The camp population was divided by the devilish ingenuity of our torturers into numerous 'classes.'"[11] In Ginzburg's experience, the prisoners at the bottom of this hierarchy – the political prisoners with the longest sentences, those convicted under Article 58 –were often the least guilty of any inmates.[12] Those who had been arrested earlier, before longer sentences were introduced, were more likely to have actual ties to counterrevolutionary activity. Ginzburg notes this with a sort of ironic clarity, her tone suggesting that, at that point, nothing could surprise her anymore.

[10] Hosking, *The First Socialist Society*. p. 201
[11] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 333.
[12] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 334.

Ginzburg also showcases the speed with which the tide could turn on those living in this time period. Her own experience is evident of this, as one day she was a respected Party member and the next she was dismissed and arrested. In addition, Ginzburg encounters many people whose luck would eventually run out, like Popov of the Butyrki prison. "Before two of three months were out, he had ceased to be the governor of the jail and became one of its inmates."[13] Later on, Ginzburg also notes the fall of Yezhov, a man she saw as the architect of her experience, and the rise of Beria. Eventually, Beria too would find disfavor, but through everything people like Ginzburg managed to survive even the harshest treatment. These people are the faces of history, and their experiences provide insight into the history as a whole. These experiences alone speak to the terror of the late 1930s, and it is these experiences which are ultimately more important to history. In this sense, Robert Thurston's argument that fear was not widespread during this time misses the point, as fear was very real for victims of the purges.

Robert Thurston argues that pervasive fear was not commonplace during the time of the purges. The majority of Soviet citizens did not live in constant dread of sudden and inexplicable arrest. Thurston cites several people, including one whose father was arrested, as stating they felt that life continued as normal during the late 1930s.[14] In some ways, this was probably true, as even Ginzburg suggests early on in her memoir. She herself did not fear arrest before she was arrested, although as a Party member she was affected by the death of Kirov. She feels as though the horrors of that December first follow her from then on, connecting her experience directly to Kirov's murder.[15] In contrast, Thurston argues that "The fear that resulted from Kirov's murder was probably more genuine anxiety regarding enemies than apprehension vis-à-vis the state."[16]

[13] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 164.
[14] Thurston, "Fear and Belief in the 'Great Terror,'" p. 217.
[15] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 1.
[16] Thurston, "Fear and Belief in the 'Great Terror,'" p. 216.

If fear existed, it was because people were worried about the emergence of enemies to the state instead of a reaction to some state conspiracy. Throughout the purges, most Party members remained loyal – even those Party members who were arrested, like Ginzburg.[17] Loyalty and fear, however, were not mutually exclusive, a fact Ginzburg highlights again and again in her descriptions not only of her own actions but also in the actions of others. The notion that fear was a natural reaction to events was all too true for those who were arrested, and this fear understandably drove deeper in some groups than it did in others.

It can be determined, then, that fear was more widespread among certain groups, including Party members, the military, and intellectuals.[18] Especially in the case of the Party members, however, it would have made little sense for them to live in such a way that suggested their fear. Ginzburg notes that free Party members could not stand up to Stalin but were instead forced to bide their time and remain inconspicuous. One of Ginzburg's fellow prisoners speaks to the rationality of this inaction – "A time will come for them to speak out, but why should they put their heads into the noose now when it won't do any good?"[19] Assuming this statement is true, Party members who were not arrested likely did not go about their lives in a way which belied their fear but rather tried to maintain an aura of normalcy. For many members of certain ethnic groups, the Intelligentsia, and others, betraying one's fear of arrest suggested that one had done something to warrant arrest. Instead, Thurston takes the appearance of normalcy as a sign that most people were not living in fear. Additionally, Thurston makes little note of the peasants, who "were major victims of the 1936-1938…Terror."[20] The group he focuses on the most, the

[17] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 75.
[18] Hosking, *The First Socialist Society*, p. 195.
[19] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 311.
[20] Conquest, "What is Terror?" p. 236.

young Party members, were in fact the ones who had most to gain from Stalin's purges.[21] This group had no reason to doubt the legitimacy of the arrests and executions. It also stands to reason that speaking out against the arrests was a surefire way to ensure one's own arrest, so any protest would have been in vain.

The historical record suggests that most Soviet citizens did not feel the frequent arrests and executions were completely unwarranted.[22] Many observers "felt there must be some substance to [the] charges."[23] Great leaders would not confess to crimes they had not committed, or so it seemed to many at the time. This was especially true given that someone could be charged with treason for having even the smallest connection to someone like Trotsky, but all the public saw was the word "treason." It was difficult to believe that former Soviet heroes would willingly "slander themselves in this extravagant manner in public" if the charges against them were false.[24] Thurston also notes that even those who were arrested often believed that everyone's sentence was just but their own.[25] This is contrary to what Ginzburg describes, however, as there is a general sense in her memoir that she encountered very few, if any, truly guilty people.

There was some doubt surrounding the legitimacy of the show trials, as it was difficult for people to fully accept the testimony given at court.[26] The court records themselves were limited to confessions and witness testimony, not hard evidence, which calls into question the overall legality of the process.[27] At the same time, "even if a person recognized that some injustice was occurring, that did not necessarily shake the conviction that enemies had to be

[21] Conquest, "What is Terror?" p. 236.
[22] Thurston, "Fear and Belief in the 'Great Terror.'" p. 216.
[23] Hosking, *The First Socialist Society*, p. 189.
[24] Hosking, *The First Socialist Society,* p. 189.
[25] Thurston, "Fear and Belief in the 'Great Terror.'" p. 226.
[26] Hosking, *The First Socialist Society*, p. 189.
[27] Hosking, *The First Socialist Society*, p. 189.

rooted out.[28] Even if the government did sometimes arrest innocents, as was understood and somewhat anticipated, their efforts in general supported Soviet security. Thurston argues, however, that it makes little sense for a government to arrest innocent, loyal people, even in the name of preserving the state.[29] This is something Ginzburg notes as well, and her struggle to come to terms with her own arrest is present throughout her memoir. Based on Ginzburg's experiences and thoughts and those of others she depicts, it is possible to conclude that many prisoners were not able to figure out why they had been arrested or what the larger purpose of the purges was. These personal experiences shed light on what was clearly a very confusing period to live through.

Thurston is critical of memoirs, however, saying they "must be used with great caution."[30] Memory is not a perfect thing, and exaggeration of events or people is highly possible. Ginzburg counteracts this by stating, "During the long months and years I spent in various prisons, I was able to observe the virtuosity that human memory can develop when it is sharpened by loneliness and complete isolation from outside impressions."[31] Just as she was able to remember exact lines and minute details from things she had read long ago, so was she able to reconstruct her experience in the Soviet prison system into a unified history of her life. It is, however, still likely that Ginzburg created some of the dialogue from her imagination, not from memory, but the overall scope of her experience is supposedly accurate. She views it as a record of her ordeal, designed to inform a younger generation of all that transpired.[32] What is ultimately important about Ginzburg's memoir is not that it details a widespread fear, but rather that it speaks to a universal hope that can be found in the darkest of times.

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[28] Thurston, "Fear and Belief in the 'Great Terror.'" p. 226.
[29] Thurston, "Fear and Belief in the 'Great Terror.'" p. 231.
[30] Thurston, "Fear and Belief in the 'Great Terror.'" p. 215
[31] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 71.
[32] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, Epilogue.

Ginzburg's memoir focuses on the experience of life as a political prisoner, but her remarks about the arbitrary nature of arrest and sentencing suggest that fear was justified, even if it did not exist to the extent that is commonly portrayed. Fear was not necessarily widespread, or, if it was, it was not felt before 1937.[33] This is a reality repeatedly confirmed by Thurston, but it is also something suggested by Ginzburg. The fact remains, however, that fear need not be widespread in order to exist in some form. Just because they may not have lived in constant fear does not mean that the Soviet people did not suffer during this period.[34] A sense of suffering, then, is the most important piece to take away both from Ginzburg's memoir and from this historical moment in general. The purges represent one of the worst examples of human suffering, and Ginzburg's memoir serves to put a face on that suffering. It can be determined that the purges did instill terror into the Soviet citizenry, and if they did not feel this fear constantly they at least suffered to a great extent, whether that suffering was economic, social, or emotional.[35]

The question of whether fear was a constant companion to all Soviet people during the late 1930s does not lend insight into what really occurred during this historical moment. The important element of this time period is not that fear was widespread, but rather that fear existed because of a real threat posed by Stalin's regime. In the end, the result of the purges, no matter the hysteria surrounding them, is that 700,000 were shot, ten to twelve million died in camps, and critical Soviet groups were decimated.[36] *Journey Into the Whirlwind* provides an insider's view into this time period while conveying a sense of the larger historical context. Ginzburg's text is a testament to the human will; she remarks that "People can get used to anything" and can,

[33] Thurston, "Fear and Belief in the 'Great Terror,'" p. 218.
[34] Hosking, *The First Socialist Society*, p. 195.
[35] Conquest, "What Is Terror?" p. 237.
[36] Rosenberg, History 434 Lecture, 14 February 2008.

in fact, survive anything.[37] The importance of the Great Terror is not that terror was necessarily all-encompassing, but that it did affect the lives of every Soviet citizen in some manner or another. Some were affected more than others, and some did not survive at all, but the collective experience of those who survived serves as a lesson for future generations, and this is a lesson that can perhaps best be taught through the use of literary texts.

[37] Ginzburg, *Journey Into the Whirlwind*, p. 244.