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# A ONE-YEAR CHRONICLE BY ANNA AKHMATOVA

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## A ONE-YEAR CHRONICLE: BY ANNA AKHMATOVA

Anna Akhmatova (1888-1966) is one of the most highly regarded poets and prophets in Russian literature. She enters the poetic scene in the first decade of the twentieth century from her hometown, Tsarskoye Selo, which is also the seat of the royal family, near Saint Petersburg. From the outset, contemporaries recognize her as a Russian Sappho, after the famous female poet of Greek antiquity, as Akhmatova introduces into Russian literature the Eros and observations of life, including war, love, sexual experiences, and honor.

Akhmatova's early life, from 1905 to 1914, appears to be an endless chain of blissful events during an otherwise turbulent time across Russia. For it is during this time, the Romanov's dynasty celebrates its tercentennial (1913) and life is stable and well grounded for the intelligentsia; however, three tragic events, the defeat of the Russian navy at Tshshima in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905, Bloody Sunday on January 9, 1905, and Minister Stolypin's murder in 1911 by a terrorist in Kiev portend the black clouds on Russia's horizon.

Akhmatova studies law in Kiev; marries Nikolay Gumilyev (1886-1921), a poet and the founder of Acmeism in Russian literature; she journeys to France and Italy, and gives birth to their only son, Leo Gumilyev (1912-1992). The then and still-currently famous cabaret, "The Stray Dog," on Nevsky Avenue in Saint Petersburg is her favorite artistic haunt. There, Akhmatova meets other famous Russian poets, composers, and artists, and she reads her works to the acclaim of an adoring crowd. She publishes two love-based poetry books, Evening (1912) and Rosary (1914) in her happy years.

But then, Akhmatova notes, *January 9 and Tsushima were a shock to me for my entire life,*

*and since they were the first shocks, it was particularly terrible.*<sup>1</sup> Today it is impossible to draw conclusions about her comments concerning these events as she does not portray them in her poetry or record them in her journal. This absence is justified for two reasons. First, no one from her immediate family participates in these battles; and secondly, Tsushima, a group of islands, is in Japanese territory, eleven times zones from Saint Petersburg. However, Bloody Sunday is altogether different. Akhmatova witnesses her parents' helping "local politicians." In particular, she watches her father, Andrey Gorenko (1848-1915); help his friend, Lieutenant Nikitenko, who is later hanged at the Petropavlovsky Fortress for making a bomb giving it to revolutionists. The bomb is traced to terrorists who kill members of the Tsar's family. Inna Stogova (1856-1930), Akhmatova's mother, joins a terrorist organization, "The People's Will" and gives 2,000 rubles to the terrorists to aid them in killing the Tsar.<sup>2</sup> Also, Vladimir Vakar, one of Akhmatova's cousins, is arrested in December 1906 in Kiev as he is an active member of the revolutionary movement. At eighteen, Akhmatova spends Christmas Holidays with Vakar's family, and on December 31, 1906, she writes to Sergey von Shtein: *I spent my Christmas Holidays with my Aunt Vacar ... the conversations on politics and fish depressed me.*<sup>3</sup>

A few years later, two Balkan wars break out: in 1912 and 1913, harbingers of World War I, in which Germany declares war against Russia on August 1, 1914 (on July 19, 1914—Julian Calendar or Old Style). Akhmatova calls 1914 *the last year*<sup>4</sup> as it symbolizes the final year of the otherwise peaceful Nineteenth Century and is the true launch of the bellicose Twentieth

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<sup>1</sup> Черных, В.А.: 1996, *Летопись жизни и творчества Анны Ахматовой 1889-1966*, Москва, ч. 1, 21-22.

<sup>2</sup> Proffer, E: 1977. *Стихи, переписка, воспоминания, иконография Анны Ахматовой*. Ann Arbor: Ardis, 115-127.

<sup>3</sup> Черных, В.А. : 1996, *Летопись жизни и творчества Анны Ахматовой 1889-1966*, Москва, ч.1, 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Fear and the Muse: The Story of Anna Akhmatova*. A production of the New York Center for Visual History. New York, 1999.

Century. Historians call World War I the “first total war,” as the world’s countries mobilize sixty-five million men—half of whom are killed or maimed—and it involves all their economic resources. Also, World War I introduces the concept of a *home front*, wherein civilians were directly and critically involved in the outcome of the war. Developing the concept of home front, in May 1915, the National Ministry in Britain replaces the term *military* with the term *national* in their slogans. Adding to the vast number of killed and wounded, for the time in history, World War I armies use rifles with large magazines capable of up to ten shots per minutes, flamethrowers, hand grenades, poison gas, and tanks.<sup>5</sup>

In 1965, one year before her death, in a written flashback, Akhmatova notes, *Fifty-one year ago that war started, how well I remember that day—(in Slepnyovo)—there were other quiet verses about another life in the mornings—she speaks about her verse—I am not asking for your love—(“And how could I help you? I don’t cure anyone of happiness”)—and all life is smashed to smithereens in the evening. This is one of my main days.*<sup>6</sup>

Akhmatova goes on to mention her son: *Puzzled, Leo said many times: Ania, my grandma, is crying, my mom is crying, my Aunt Huha is crying. All peasant women began to howl in our village.* The last statement in Akhmatova’s notes is significant as it expresses the females’ opinion of war. Following Russian traditions, peasant men, who serve in the army, are called recruits or *soldaty*. Often recruits serve in the Tsarist army for twenty-five years or until a war ends. Their military service is considered by the public a family’s grief and is described in Russian proverbs: *A soldat is a state man, If a soldat writes his home, he asks his family to remember him, but a soldat is cut off from his family.* Recruits’ wives have a difficult time, and

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<sup>5</sup> Britannica 23. Chicago, London, Toronto, Geneva 1963, pp.748B – 789.

<sup>6</sup> Записные книжки Анны Ахматовой (1958-1966). Edited by K.N. Suvorova, Москва, Torino, стр. 652.

their destinies are hard, particularly on people in the countryside where they are labeled *soldatky*. Their married status is not clear as is reflected in another proverb: *Soldatka is not a widow, soldatka is not a wife*. About recruits' children, *All the village is the father of recruits' children*.<sup>7</sup>

In 1914, Russia mobilizes twelve million troops to confront Germany and lost a quarter of a million men in East Prussia that year. Nikolay Gumilyev joins the Tsarist Army on August 14, 1914, and on Christmas Eve that year, Akhmatova sees him off to the Western front in Vilna, Lithuania. From her journal, Akhmatova writes, *We slept over in the hotel. In the morning, I saw in the window, how the people were praying on their knees and were moving to the church, where there was the icon of [Chenstokhov] Ostrobramsk Madonna*.<sup>8</sup>

Thus begins Akhmatova's heightened views of World War I, her two-year-old son's traumatic experiences, the departure of her husband, peasant women's state of terror for their families, and her own religious faith merging in a chaos in her imagination as she has never experience before. Fear, political frustration, separation from family, lost love, the role of religion and anger fuse in a mish-mash in her mind. Therefore, we can easily partition her life into the two decades: *before* and *after* 1914. These conflicting inner forces radically alter Akhmatova's poetic voice. Too, a growing feminine intuition within a Christian context seeks salvation and plays a significant role in her work against the backdrop of World War I and Russia's role in it. These are central to her third poetry collection, *White Flock* (1917).<sup>9</sup> The terms *war—voina*, *Russia—Россия* and *motherland—родина* are feminine gender nouns in Russian. Using the grammatical category of gender and poetic form, Akhmatova analyzes these

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<sup>7</sup> Даль, В.И.: IV, Толковый словарь живого великорусского языка 1979. Москва, стр. 264-265.

<sup>8</sup> Черных, В.А.: 1996, *Летопись жизни и творчества Анны Ахматовой 1889-1966*, Москва, ч.1, 80.

<sup>9</sup> Hemschemeyer, J.: 1992. *The Complete Poems of Anna Akhmatova*. Boston: Zephyr Press; Edinburg: Canongate Press.

concepts from different views. She begins White Flock with an epigraph from a poem by Innokenty Annensky (1855-1909), Akhmatova's mentor in the lyceum at Tsarskoye Selo: *To grief, even at night, the road is bright*. This epigraph introduces suffering into White Flock.

The untitled verse *We thought: we are beggars, we have nothing, / But as we lost one thing after another, / So that each day became / A Remembrance Day - / We began to compose songs / About God's great munificence / And about how rich we once had been*. Written in laconic and simple form, this verse reflects Akhmatova's view of Russia's powerful, prosperous past and pitiful present. Russia loses control of Poland in 1915 and Finland in 1917. Akhmatova begins her verse with the personal pronoun *we*, which represents the plural form of the personal pronoun *I*. In *we* a single voice of her lyric character merges with the voices of all Russians and reflects national pride and patriotism. All Russians appeal to God and ask Him to save Russia in the future. The mentioning of *Remembrance Day* is based on the collective memory of all those who have died. According to the Russian Orthodox Church's calendar—based upon the Julian Calendar—there are three days of public remembrance called, Dmitrii's Saturday, Thomas's Tuesday and Great Thursday, or *radonitsa* in Russian<sup>10</sup>. Also, remembrance days of the dead are made on the third, sixth, ninth, fortieth days and the year after a person dies. In this, Akhmatova conveys that every day is a day of mourning for some family across the vastness of Russia. It allows me to draw a parallel to folk genre which Russian call weeping. Weeping, or keening, is a sorrowful and mournful wailing to a dead person. Usually a woman who knows these sounds is invited to attend someone's funeral. A mother whose son becomes a soldier, uses the same keening sounds, and this allows me to compare Akhmatova's verse to a notable poem in Russian

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<sup>10</sup> Даль, В.И.; III, Толковый словарь живого великорусского языка 1979. Москва, стр. 273.

literature, Orina Is the Soldier's Mother by Nicholas Nekrasov (1821-1877).

Akhmatova's second masterpiece, "JULY 1914," consists of two parts and illustrates her new approach to the rhythms and chaos of life. Akhmatova's character adopts her five senses to an acute level, seeing and smelling the sounds and fury of the bloody, reeking war around her. Akhmatova capitalizes the name, JULY, to stress the month in 1914 which she is chronicling. *It smells of burning. For four weeks / The dry peat bog has been burning. / The birds have not even sung today, / And the aspen has stopped quaking. / The sun has become God's displeasure, / Rain has not sprinkled the fields since Easter. / A one-legged stranger came along / And all alone in the courtyard he said: / "Fearful times are drawing near. Soon Fresh graves will be everywhere. / There will be famine, earthquakes, widespread death, / And the eclipse of the sun and the moon. / But the enemy will not divide / Our land at will, for himself: The Mother of God will spread her white mantle /Over this enormous grief.* The first stanza is based on folk symbols commonly used to express God's rage such as fires, earthquakes, and drought. Chirping birds never portend catastrophes. Aspen fluttered and quake in peaceful times. The one-legged stranger's prophesy is based on Matthew's book 24:7, *Nations will fight against other nations; kingdoms will fight against other kingdoms. There will be times when there is no food for people to eat, and there will be earthquakes in different places.* The last stanza is based upon the Slavic Orthodox prayer to the Kazan's Madonna, *Madonna, save me under your shroud; Madonna, save me from all evil.*

The second part of "JULY 1914" consists of the three stanzas. *The sweet smell of juniper / Flies from the burning woods. / Soldiers' wives are wailing for the boys, / The widow's lament keens over the countryside. / The public prayers were not in vain, / The earth was yearning for rain! Warm red liquid sprinkled / The trampled fields. / Low, low hangs the empty sky / And a*

*praying voice quietly intones: "They are wounding your sacred body, / They are casting lots for your robes."* In Slavic mythology, the juniper tree symbolizes death. Akhmatova introduces soldiers' wives moans and focuses on the archaic ritual of the sacrifice of blood as a metaphor of water and rain. The sky nourishes the Earth and symbolizes the Savior's body and blood in the last stanza. The earthly sufferings are the Savior's sufferings. Akhmatova uses the book of Mark 15:24, *The soldiers crucified Jesus and divided his clothes among themselves, throwing lots to decide what each soldier would get.* Using the biblical metaphor, Akhmatova likens the sufferings of her motherland to the tragic biblical events in Mark.

On July 18, 1916, Akhmatova speaks again about JULY 1914. In her masterpiece In Memoriam, July 19, 1914, she writes, *We aged a hundred years, and this / Happened in a single hour: / The short summer had already died, / The body of the ploughed plains smoked. / Suddenly, the quiet road burst into color, / A lament flew up, ringing, silver ... / Covering my face, I implored God / Before the first battle to strike me dead. / Like a burden henceforth unnecessary, / The shadows of passion and songs vanished from / my memory. / The Most High ordered it – emptied – To become a grim book of calamity.* In Memoriam, July 19, 1914, is written in the past tense and lets Akhmatova lyric character interpret the beginning of World War I and describe her general feelings about Russian society. Akhmatova female character uses memory as a phenomenon, which can store and retrieve information about the past. This is one of the psychological verses of Anna Akhmatova as her nameless female character discusses length of time, duration life, and the woman's role in Russia. The first stanza points out the speed of time, the shortness of human life, and their relationship to war. The second stanza pictures horrors of a war, reproduces sounds and colors of someone's funeral, and tells us about the main character's request to God: To kill her. The third stanza is God's message to her. Not



to die, but to live and speak out loudly about Russia's national tragedy of 1914. In this last stanza, Akhmatova, also, describes what she sees as the role of a female poet: to create a historical chronicle of Russian life and continue the literary traditions of Nestor whose Povest' vremennykh let (1113; Tale of Bygone Years also known as The Russian Primary Chronicle) reflects the early history of the East Slavic tribes. Following the traditions of the chronicles, Akhmatova dates all her masterpieces as human memory recurs history on those specific dates.

As Akhmatova witnesses it, World War I collapses and destroys life in imperial Russia, and soon thereafter falls into the quagmire of Civil War from 1917-1922. Akhmatova's brother, Viktor Gorenko (1896-1976), serves in the Russian navy. Neither Akhmatova nor her relatives receive any news from Viktor until 1925. Separation with her brother deeply influences her. Akhmatova dedicates to Viktor one of her masterpieces *Why then did I used to / Hold you in my arms, / Why did your strength shine / From your blue eyes! You grew up tall and handsome, / Sang songs and drank Madeira, / Then took your torpedo boat / To far-off Anatolia. / At Malakhov Kurgan / They shot an officer. / For one week less than twenty years / He had looked upon God's world.* The mentioning of Malakhov Kurgan reflects her social experiences. Malakhov Kurgan symbolizes the heroic defense of Sevastopol' during the Crimean War (1853-1856). Akhmatova grandfather, Gorenko Anton Andreevich (1818-1891), is a participant in the Sevastopol's defense<sup>11</sup>.

Interestingly, if one reverses the last two numbers in 1914 it becomes 1941, the year Germany declared another war on Russia, then known as the Soviet Union. Thus, one-year chronicle ends in 1945 in Russia as World War II ends on May 9, 1945.

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<sup>11</sup> Черных, В.А.: 1996, *Летопись жизни и творчества Анны Ахматовой 1889-1966*, Москва, ч.1, 13.