

Annihilation of a Writer: Mikhail Bulgakov and the Soviet State

Amarica Dodd

A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Inter Studies: Russia, E Europe & C Asia

University of Washington

2021

Committee:

Galya Diment

James Felak

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Jackson School of International Studies

© Copyright 2021

Amarica Dodd

University of Washington

Abstract

Annihilation of a Writer: Mikhail Bulgakov and the Soviet State

Amarica Dodd

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:
Galya Diment
Slavic Languages and Literatures

Mikhail Bulgakov's mystifying relationship with the Soviet government, and with Joseph Stalin in particular, has long been understood to be a result of the dictator's aesthetic appreciation for the writer's early work. In an era defined by Stalin's Great Terror, Bulgakov escaped the tumultuous 1930s relatively unscathed in that he was never arrested, let alone executed. This is not to say that Bulgakov did not have a difficult life under Stalin's regime; pressures put on him by the state almost certainly exacerbated underlying health concerns that led to his early death. Brutal attacks on his work also caused financial and psychological hardship and led to what he referred to as his "annihilation." However, he was spared more violent persecution (such as that faced by many of his contemporaries) despite the fact that his body of work includes harsh criticism of Communism and the Soviet Union, as well as the fact that Bulgakov was unambiguous in his anti-Soviet politics. While any attempt to assign too much rationale or logic to Stalin's decisions during the purges is impossible, in this paper I examine several factors that I believe are overlooked in discussions of Bulgakov's relationship with the Soviet state and may have contributed to his treatment by the state and censorship machines. These factors include the nature of Bulgakov's satire and interactions with the Soviet state, his status as a political outsider, and his connections with foreigners within and without the Soviet Union.

Acknowledgements

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the people who played an invaluable role not only in the writing of this thesis, but also in my master's experience as a whole. Their contributions proved indispensable, and their encouragement is largely responsible for this completion of this project.

To Professor Galya Diment: Thank you for your continuous, unwavering support on this project, as well as others throughout the year. Your guidance truly made all the difference in the completion of this thesis. Thank you, also, to our writing group, from whom I learned countless valuable lessons on writing and life in academia.

To Professor James Felak: I am eternally grateful that you played such an essential role in my experience at UW from the outset. Thank you for the expertise that you lent to this project and the knowledge you imparted both in class and in your feedback.

To my cohort: Despite being separated due to COVID, all six of you remained pillars of solidarity and inspiration, albeit virtually, throughout our time in grad school. I am truly appreciative to have gone through this experience with such an outstanding group of people.

To my family: Thank you for everything, but mostly the many years of feigning interest in Russian literature whenever I talk your ears off, which is often.

Table of Contents

Table of Contents.....	5
Introduction.....	6
Life, Works, and Politics.....	11
Flattery Will Get You Everywhere	17
Outsider, Survivor.....	24
Foreign connections.....	31
Conclusion.....	39
Bibliography.....	42

“My annihilation as a writer has been effected.” – Mikhail Bulgakov

Introduction

The measure of Mikhail Afansayevich Bulgakov's life is best taken after it ended. The now-revered author spent the final two decades of his life in frequent poverty and despair, both rooted in the fact that his work would not be accepted for publication or production. Best known now for his magnum opus *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov was considered first and foremost a dramatist, as well as satirist, during his lifetime and spent most of the last ten years of his life attempting to work in theatrical circles, to little avail. A mere fraction of his work was published during his lifetime and even the work that made it past censors was ruthlessly condemned in the Soviet press and among government circles, although he achieved popular support and the general recognition that he was indeed an author of considerable talent. Despite his frequent appeals, Bulgakov was never allowed to travel or emigrate abroad, but neither was he permitted to make a comfortable, secure living for himself through writing, his true passion..

The root of Bulgakov's censorship and condemnation of his work is found in his counter-revolutionary politics and class status/sympathies. As a member of the intelligentsia and literati carried over from Imperial Russia, Bulgakov found himself out of place culturally and politically in the newly-constructed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Like so many of his colleagues and other like-minded artists, Bulgakov's life hung in the balance under Joseph Stalin, particularly during the Great Terror, when millions of his “enemies” were arrested, exiled, imprisoned, and executed. On paper, Bulgakov's political position and status as a “class enemy” made him an obvious candidate for Stalin's purges and there were many high-ranking officials who pushed for just that. While Bulgakov felt that his career as a writer, and therefore his stability, in the Soviet Union had been destroyed, it is imperative to note that his

“annihilation” looked much different than that of the people who come to mind when we recall the victims of the 1930s. Bulgakov was never arrested or sent to a labor camp, like his friend Osip Mandelstam, and he was not executed like true-believer Isaac Babel, or countless others who shared his fate. But neither was he allowed to emigrate like Evgeny Zamyatin, another close friend. It is true that Bulgakov was allowed to survive in freedom until his death of genetic nephrosclerosis (the same disease which killed his father) in 1940, but the conditions under which he was forced to live, physically and psychologically, undeniably exacerbated his underlying health conditions and made the last decade of his life a torment.

In his early diaries and personal correspondence, Bulgakov expressed extreme dismay that he could not function as a writer in a state which, as time went on, allowed increasingly fewer non-Communist, non-Party voices to secure a place in literature. It is one thing to live in a state whose very foundation is antithetical to your own, and quite another when elements of the state actively restrict your ability to earn money and therefore afford the barest of necessities for a comfortable life. By 1929, Bulgakov keenly felt this difference and began issuing personal pleas to the Soviet government, Maxim Gorky, and Stalin himself for publication or the ability to move abroad. In a letter to his brother Nikolay Bulgakov in Paris, written immediately following his first appeal to the government, Bulgakov complains “all of my plays have been banned from the stage in the USSR, and they will not print a single word of my prose...my annihilation as a writer has been effected” (*Manuscripts* 95). It is clear that, to Bulgakov, the inability to function as a writer in the Soviet Union was the equivalent of having his life and livelihood taken from him. Over the years, he would send many subsequent appeals to Stalin and other members of the government, but his pleas went largely, if not entirely, unheeded.

Initially, there seemed to be some hope, in the early years of the Soviet Union under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, that certain allowances would be made for writers and artists who did not subscribe to Communist ideology or who even criticized certain elements of the Party. Such hopes were dashed as soon as Stalin began to centralize control and implement his will as the will of the government. It seems odd, then, that Bulgakov avoided violent persecution when he had been consistently outspoken about Communism from the beginning and continued to write and attempt to publish works that satirized certain elements of the state. The reason for his relative safety and seemingly preferential treatment has puzzled scholars for years. Why was he never included on one of the infamous “lists” that put an end to so many bright futures? The general understanding is that Stalin enjoyed some of Bulgakov’s early work and recognized his aesthetic value as a writer, and therefore spared him harsher persecution. Certainly, the evidence for his appreciation of Bulgakov’s first writings is well documented. Stalin reportedly attended productions of Bulgakov’s most famous play, *The Days of the Turbins*, as many as 15 times (Shentalinsky 88). In turns, he defended Bulgakov when Party hardliners demanded his plays be pulled from stage but also led the charge on the censorship of some of his works, such as *Flight* (Proffer 276).

Here it is essential to mention that Bulgakov considered himself, and was considered by the state, to be a “fellow traveler” (попутчик). This term has popularly been used to identify foreigners who sympathized with the Soviet cause or Communist ideology in general and supported the USSR from their native countries. However, the term was also popularized by Leon Trotsky to describe writers within the Soviet Union who did not subscribe to Communist ideology, but who were willing to concede to Soviet authority and not create trouble in order to continue to live and work within the USSR. As Ellendea Proffer, among the first of Bulgakov’s

biographers in the West, explains, the term fellow travelers was “a designation used for virtually every good writer of the period. The term ostensibly referred to those who ‘went along’ with the Revolution, but were not ‘Party-minded’” (172). Such writers and artists were tolerated more kindly during the early years of the Soviet Union (the early 1920s under the New Economic Policy, or NEP)¹ than they were during Stalin’s reign and the eventual terror which he inflicted not only on “dangerous elements” within the government and military, but also on these writers who had previously received a certain amount of support from more lenient Soviet leaders.

There have been some suggestions that Bulgakov was “lucky” to have survived under Stalin, and, more specifically, through the purges. He may well have considered himself lucky as reports of arrests, disappearances, and executions increased in frequency in the latter half of the 30s. Beginning in late 1936, Yelena Bulgakova’s² diaries are overrun with entries noting the arrests and executions of prominent figures, many of whom the Bulgakovs knew personally. She reports Bulgakov’s palpable paranoia, fear, and despair which increased along with his complaints of worsening physical ailments tied to his illness. Rather than being lucky, however, I argue that Bulgakov made shrewd and carefully considered decisions in his work and personal life that, in conjunction with a talent obvious even to Stalin, barricaded him against further abuse by the state.

Any study or analysis of Stalin’s Great Terror must be accompanied by the acknowledgement that many aspects of his motivations and decisions will remain indefinitely

¹ Новая экономическая политика – instituted by Vladimir Lenin in 1921

² Yelena was Mikhail Bulgakov’s third wife who remained with him until his death. She is considered largely responsible for the publication of her late husband’s work as censorship standards eased following the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953. References to Yelena’s diaries in this paper refer to the translations which appear in J.A.E. Curtis’ *Manuscripts Don’t Burn*.

unknowable. We can only apply so much reason to the injustices enacted by Stalin who, of course, did not leave behind detailed notes on his intentions in instigating the Terror, which he may not have been able to do even had he desired to do so. Therefore, many conclusions about his motives must be inferred from the documents which we do have access to, such as government reports to and from Stalin about the status of arrests throughout the Soviet Union, and the firsthand accounts of what it was like to live during one of the darkest periods of Soviet history. Even now, our current understanding of the extent of the Terror is relatively new, with many details only revealed in the last years of the Soviet Union, before and immediately following its collapse. With the release of new information about the inner workings of the purges and repression, scholars have shed new light on what it meant to be an artist in Stalin's Soviet Union. This is to say nothing of the millions of average citizens who suffered similar, if not more horrific, fates during the 1930s and beyond. Still less information is available about common Soviet life during this period, making the few facts that we do have access to in regards to the lives of artists and writers all the more valuable for the gaps that they can fill in our understanding of the impact of this enigmatic decade. While few first-hand primary accounts were kept during this time, we thankfully have access to government documents discussing Stalin's orders for arrests and executions, as well memoirs from notable figures who experienced hardship during the Terror but lived to tell the tale.

For all the information on the Great Terror that we now have access to, even more continues to remain mysterious to us. Any attempt to apply fully sound logic or rationale to Stalin's actions during this period is a fruitless effort. Millions of Soviet citizens found themselves inexplicably caught up in the Stalin's violence; Bulgakov very well could have found himself in such a position. However, I argue that Bulgakov's life was spared through a series of

shrewd decisions on his part as well as several coincidences that shielded him from violent persecution. Because he held such an exceptional position within the arts in the Soviet Union, an examination of these factors can help us further understand the inner workings of Stalin's Terror as well as hold Bulgakov in comparison to his compatriots and fellow artists. In such circumstances, we can come to understand more deeply a decade defined by brutality through the study of an outlier, which Bulgakov certainly was.

Life, Works, and Politics

Before examining the reason that Bulgakov may or may not have been persecuted by the Soviet state to one extent or another, one must first understand how Bulgakov's social and political views opposed those of the Soviet Union, and of Stalin in particular. Without understanding the reasons Bulgakov may have been considered a class enemy or an anti-Soviet entity, one cannot understand or have a discussion of the circumstances that may have spared him a more violent fate. Bulgakov was raised in Kiev by a wealthy, ethnically Russian family with whom he maintained close relations throughout his life, despite the various paths which they took following the Civil War. The family's life in pre-Revolution Ukraine was comfortable and defined by what we may refer to as "bourgeois." The Bulgakovs were all well-educated (including the writer's mother and sisters) and enjoyed literature and the opera immensely. A particular favorite was *Faust* by Charles Gounod. This is notable not only because the mythology of Faust inspired Bulgakov in his writing of *The Master and Margarita*, but also because it instilled in him a love of the stage and may have determined his later career as a dramatist. Despite his early predilection for writing, a young Mikhail chose to pursue a career as a doctor following his primary education.

After several years, Bulgakov completed his medical training and served as a doctor in a remote village, an experience which he used in writing his first major work *A Young Doctor's Notebook* (*Записки юного врача*), a collection of largely autobiographical short stories published serially in medical journals between 1925-1926 and later compiled together. The stories achieved popular success; they mostly depicted the narrator's (and by extension, Bulgakov's) struggles to apply theoretical medical knowledge in practical application to peasants who were often hostile to outsiders and new understandings of health and medicine. These stories are inspired by Bulgakov's experience as a doctor prior to the 1917 Revolution and therefore contain few references to the country's political situation, focusing, rather, on the young doctor's internal demons and trials. Therefore, *A Young Doctor's Notebook*, sometimes referred to as *A Country Doctor's Notebook*, remains one of the few works which Bulgakov was able to publish without controversy or contention during his lifetime.

Following his mandatory medical service in the Smolensk Province, Bulgakov returned to Kiev and continued to work as a doctor throughout the Civil War and the Ukrainian Revolution. He also served as a doctor in the White Army, which took him to the Caucasus, where he remained until the Bolsheviks declared victory. Shortly thereafter, Bulgakov permanently abandoned his medical career in favor of what he saw as his life's true purpose: writing. The details of this period of his life inspired his first work of prose *The White Guard* (*Белая гвардия*), which would then later become his play *The Days of the Turbins* (*Дни Турбиных*). The first three quarters of the novel were published in *Rossiia* in 1925, but the journal was shut down by the government shortly thereafter and the final quarter of the work remained unpublished until the full work was released in 1966.

Both stories follow the three Turbin siblings (Alexei, Nikolai, and Elena) as they attempt to survive the invasion of Kiev by Bolshevik, Ukrainian, and German forces. The brothers serve in the White Army in different capacities and the family makes no secret of their loyalty to the then-deposed Tsar. They use language which is blatantly and openly critical of Communism as an ideology as well as of the Bolsheviks as a political entity. The play originally premiered to much success but was continually pulled (and then reinstated) by censors who were upset with the portrayal of the Red Army as brutes. Stalin's enjoyment of the play is one of the mysteries that have confounded scholars studying literature and culture during this period. It is also the pre-eminent explanation of his willingness to afford Bulgakov some freedom and not persecute him more directly. Some scholars of Bulgakov's life and works, such as J.A.E. Curtis, have also theorized that Stalin and some other higher-ups in the Soviet system were pleased with the portrayal of the Whites submitting to the relentless will of the Bolshevik forces in their storming of Kiev (*Mikhail* 101). However, this was not a position that was held by all Party members, some of whom condemned the work, justifiably, as anti-Soviet which contributed to the seemingly endless cycle of having the play produced and then pulled from the stage throughout the 1930s.

After years embattled with censors and bureaucracy, Bulgakov felt that he had reached his limit and, like many fellow travelers, reached out to Stalin directly, as well as to Gorky and other powerful Party members, requesting permission to emigrate. He would also make several other requests throughout his life to travel temporarily in Europe. In response to his request, he received a call from Joseph Stalin himself in 1930 during which the dictator suggested that "perhaps he really did need to move abroad" but, stunningly, offered him the alternative of taking the position of co-director at the Moscow Art Theater. Bulgakov accepted the co-

directorship before the phone call ended. The reasons Bulgakov may have made this decision, despite the fact that his diaries and correspondence suggest that he was fully convinced that he could have no successful or even comfortable life as a writer in the Soviet Union, have mystified scholars since the circumstances surrounding the event became public. Two such scholars are the aforementioned Curtis and Proffer, Bulgakov's preeminent English-language biographers. One possible explanation is that Bulgakov, having been put on the spot and overwhelmed with the sudden personal call from the General Secretary, may have become flustered, leading him to accept the position without fully considering the implications of such an agreement. This decision is one he would come to regret over the next 10 years. His later attempts to secure an international passport and travel abroad would be rejected time and time again and his pleas to Stalin to reconsider his offer would go unanswered.

The tale of the Turbins in both *The White Guard* and *The Days of the Turbins* is just one piece of evidence of the public manifestation of Bulgakov's politically divergent sensibilities, which in theory could, and perhaps should, have made him a greater target for persecution in an era when speaking out against the Party could cost you your life. For the remainder of Bulgakov's life and writing career, he faced a doomed battle against the Soviet censorship machine to have his work published or produced. After being appointed the co-director of the Moscow Art Theater, there seemed to be some hope that Bulgakov would at last be able to outright produce one of his works, though this would prove unfounded. Even in his new position, opportunities to publish and produce were dangled in front of Bulgakov, only to be pulled away at the last second by forces within the government and censorship apparatus. In the case of his play about Molière, Bulgakov and the theater company spent 5 years rehearsing the play, only to have it deemed politically inappropriate mere months before its scheduled premier.

A large part of his inability to publish was his insistence on remaining true to his artistic integrity. He states clearly and unequivocally in letters to colleagues and family that he is unwilling to change the more “unsavory,” from a Communist viewpoint, elements of his work and would rather suffer as he did in purgatory between publication and irrelevance than succumb to pressure to change fundamental aspects of his story. At several points in his career, he was told by directors, producers, and censors that if he were to change certain details of whichever work he was trying to have published or produced, they would be able to move forward with it. However, he would not cave on what he saw as the essential aspects of his work. He did consent to change minor details, but only reluctantly, and dug in his heels when he felt that a suggested change significantly altered the tone, flow, or message of a particular piece. This gave him the reputation of being difficult to work with and undoubtedly amplified the animosity directed towards him by his detractors.

While *The Master and Margarita* (*Мастер и Маргарита*) is widely known as his most popular and influential work, a discussion of the text is rather irrelevant in a discussion of his life in Stalin’s Russia as the novel was only published posthumously in a censored version in 1966 in the USSR and then in full in Paris the following year. The novel is indeed a reflection of his life during this period, particular his hatred for the absurd nature of Soviet literary societies, but the work more than likely remained unknown to authorities during his lifetime.

The final piece of prose that was actually published during his lifetime was *The Fatal Eggs* (*Роковые яйца*). It was successfully published in 1925 only because its dissident, satirical criticism of the 1917 Revolution initially went unnoticed by censors. After the initial publication, it became apparent that this was a thinly veiled criticism of Lenin for having created a monster, meaning the Soviet Union, which he could not control and which could end only in catastrophe.

This novella and its controversy were the impetus to have Bulgakov's home searched and his writing confiscated as well as his being dragged in front of the Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU)³ for questioning.

With the publication of *The Fatal Eggs*, Bulgakov tread the line between fellow traveler and dissident very closely. Such a direct criticism of a prominent Soviet leader was inexcusable for many within the Party and yet he still maintained a certain level of protection from persecution, primarily at Stalin's insistence. I will explore possible reasoning for this in the section entitled "Flattery Will Get You Everywhere." What could not be tolerated by censors or Party members to any extent was Bulgakov's novella *The Heart of a Dog*, which he initially attempted to publish in 1925. It was rejected but circulated in *samizdat*⁴ form until its official publication abroad in 1968 and in the Soviet Union in 1987. The story is, again, another absurdist, allegorical tale of a mad scientist pushing the limits of morality and exemplifying the dangers of Communist ideology. The story follows Dr. Preobrazhensky as he turns a stray dog, Sharik, into a human, only to find that he cannot control his creation. The darkly comedic novella questions how we are to return to normalcy and decency after pushing boundaries and crossing lines that ought not be pushed or crossed. It also features often hilarious criticisms of Soviet communal housing policies, which were a particular sore spot in Bulgakov's private life and his attempt to find a comfortable home for himself and family. Perhaps because the criticism in this novella was more thinly veiled, it had no hope of being published during Bulgakov's lifetime, like *The Fatal Eggs*, and also contributed to further scrutiny of his life and work.

³ Объединённое государственное политическое управление при НКВД СССР

⁴ Self-published and illegally distributed

Bulgakov attempted, in vain, to have several more works not listed here for publication during his lifetime, most of which were plays. While most remained unseen by the public during his lifetime, it has become apparent since their release that Bulgakov was a prolific and exceptional writer who, had he lived in a more nurturing time and place, would have had the opportunity to witness the impact of his work on Russian literature. As it stands, his most influential works reached their widest audience after his death, but his position as one of the greatest writers to emerge from the 20th century has been cemented. Therefore, the reasons for his relative freedom which I will discuss here take on a certain weight and can help elucidate some of the nuances of the Great Terror.

Flattery Will Get You Everywhere

One element that distinguishes Bulgakov from his contemporaries who were arrested or executed during the purges is the fact that, though he was generally very critical of Soviet politics, he never (openly) criticized Stalin directly, unlike someone like Osip Mandelstam. Stalin was well known to cultivate relationships with members of the literary and artistic communities in order to legitimize his position as an intellectual and cultural leader and Bulgakov was one such artist among many. While the two did not interact to the same extent that the others did, Stalin indicated his appreciation for Bulgakov's work, particularly *The Days of the Turbins*. Of all art forms, Stalin expressed a particular fondness for the stage and works of drama since he saw them as necessary entertainment for the masses. These factors combined elevated Bulgakov in his eyes. However, while some writers, such as Maxim Gorky, had extremely close relationships with Stalin and met with him often, Stalin and Bulgakov only spoke on the phone once, in a now-infamous exchange, mentioned previously, during which

Stalin offered Bulgakov the opportunity to emigrate abroad or take a position as the co-director of the Moscow Art Theater. This was the extent of their personal communication, and though, as also was mentioned above, Bulgakov continued to send letters to Stalin and other prominent members of the government requesting permission to travel abroad, he was never again granted the opportunity.

In his letters to Stalin, in which he appealed to the General Secretary to allow him to emigrate abroad or at the very least travel outside of the Soviet Union, Bulgakov uses deferential and respectful language when addressing the dictator. He opens nearly every letter with some form of “much esteemed” or “honorable” and appeals to Stalin as an educated man who cares about the arts. It is, indeed, somewhat startling to read that Bulgakov, someone whose ideals were so antithetical to Stalin’s, wrote to him in such terms, but I believe that we can assume this is out of fear or rather than out of genuine respect or admiration. Bulgakov’s politics could not have been in further opposition to Stalin’s policies, and he categorically refused to change certain aspects of his work to praise the Soviet Union or advocate for Communism, despite the fact that his life could have been made much more comfortable had he done so. Throughout his career he satirized many aspects of life as a Soviet citizen, but I believe the specific targets of this satire played a role in his survival.

One of the first instances in which Bulgakov made himself a target for criticism and accusation of anti-Soviet tendencies was the publication of his novella *The Fatal Eggs*. Read with an understanding of Bulgakov’s political sensibilities, it is immediately apparent that it is a satirical condemnation of the Soviet Revolution, portraying the entire government in a negative light. Multiple complaints were brought before the Central Committee, with many Party hardliners condemning “Bulgakovism” as dangerous. Why, then, after so obvious an affront to

the Soviet Union, would Stalin continue to show favor to Bulgakov and protect him from harsher persecution? I believe that the answer lies in the specifics of the novella's satire. The novella's protagonist, Professor Persikov, the scientist who discovers the "red ray" and unwittingly unleashes a swarm of monsters on the world, can be interpreted as a caricature of Lenin as well as the bureaucrats who enabled him and facilitated Communist rule. In the novella, a minor error in paperwork leads to chicken eggs being switched with snake eggs before being exposed to the "red ray," increasing the rate and size of their growth until the country is nearly taken over with reptilian beasts. While this satire highly critical of the Soviet system in general, it was not a direct attack on Joseph Stalin or any of his policies, but rather an attack on a man from whom Stalin was already attempting to distance himself. The primary targets in the first years of Stalin's Great Terror were Communist ideologues and military leaders with connections to the former regime, Leninists and Trotskyists, for example.⁵ Stalin himself was critical of these figures and intended to wipe them out of the Party and out of the country in general. Therefore, he would not have begrudged an author like Bulgakov for his criticism of these groups in the same way that he would have if an author, such as Mandelstam, had criticized him personally or his political actions.

If we contrast Bulgakov's case with that of Mandelstam, for example, the role of Stalin's megalomania and insecurity in his decision-making becomes quite apparent. Mandelstam's poem, known as either "The Stalin Epigram" or "The Kremlin Highlander," was an unambiguous personal attack on Stalin and he swiftly felt the repercussions, which would burden

⁵ Ethnic minorities and certain classes were also specifically targeted during the purges, particularly peasants in Ukraine and *kulaks* throughout the Soviet Union.

him for the rest of his life and eventually lead to his death in transport from one penal labor camp to Kolyma, the most notorious of the camps, in 1938, when he was just 47 years old.

Мы живем, под собою не чуя страны,
 Наши речи за десять шагов не слышны,
 А где хватит на полразговорца,
 Там припомнят кремлёвского горца.
 Его толстые пальцы, как черви, жирны,
 А слова, как пудовые гири, верны,
 Тараканьи смеются усища,
 И сияют его голенища.

We live, deaf to the land beneath us,
 Ten steps away no one hears our speeches,
 But where there's so much as half a conversation
 The Kremlin's mountaineer will get his mention.
 His fingers are fat as grubs
 And words, final as lead weights, fall from his lips,
 His cockroach whiskers leer
 And his boot tops gleam.

А вокруг него сброд тонкошеих вождей,
 Он играет услугами полулюдей.
 Кто свистит, кто мяучит, кто хнычет,
 Он один лишь бабачит и тычет,
 Как подкову, кует за указом указ:

Around him a rabble of thin-necked leaders -
 Fawning half-men for him to play with.
 They whinny, purr or whine
 As he prates and points a finger,
 One by one forging his laws to be flung

Кому в пах, кому в лоб, кому в бровь, кому в глаз. Like horseshoes at the head, the eye, or the groin.
 Что ни казнь у него - то малина And every killing is a treat,
 И широкая грудь осетина. – Осип Мандельштам For the broad-chested Ossete. – Osip Mandelstam

Mandelstam, unfortunately, was not selective enough of the group with whom he shared this poem and, though he never submitted it for formal publication (and therefore did not actively make censors aware of its existence), before long the secret police came knocking. His wife, Nadezhda Mandelstam, elucidates the circumstances surrounding his arrest, including the fact that David Brodski, a friend of the couple, came to visit that night and sat with them until one in the morning, seemingly refusing to leave, when the secret police arrived. “Brodski had not doubt been ordered to sit with us that evening in case we tried to destroy any manuscripts when we heard the knock on the door” (Mandel'shtam 6). Anna Akhmatova was also present during the arrest in 1934 and subsequently went to visit the Bulgakovs in Moscow to tell them of their friends' arrest and ask for their assistance. Both Akhmatova and Mandelstam were touched by the fact that Yelena Bulgakova apparently burst into tears and gave Akhmatova all of the money they had in the house to help finance the Mandelstams' journey to exile. In the same year, Akhmatova's son and ex-partner would also be arrested, ostensibly in response to the

assassination of Sergei Kirov, an event which can be seen as a catalyst for Stalin's Terror and purges against the military and government.⁶ Akhmatova again went to visit Bulgakov to ask for his advice, which was to write Stalin a personal letter appealing for the release of her son and husband, something that he had done several times at this point, not only in appeal for his own freedom as a writer, but also for that of his friends who had been arrested, imprisoned, and exiled. After Nikolai Erdman, Bulgakov's close friend and fellow dramatist/collaborator under theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold, was arrested and sent to an exile settlement in Siberia, he returned to Moscow illegally, in part to visit Bulgakov and share his recent work. In 1938 Bulgakov wrote a letter to Stalin asking for Erdman to be allowed back in Moscow on the basis that his work was valuable and necessary. Permission to do so was not granted but Erdman was successfully "rehabilitated" by the state several years later. Akhmatova heeded his advice and two days later was notified that they had been released. The fact that Akhmatova and the Mandelstams trusted Bulgakov to assist them, at no small peril to himself, speaks to the fact that he was trusted among dissident literati. Notably, this also indicates that it was recognized among this set that Bulgakov had some sway or influence with Stalin, as he had avoided violent persecution for himself and aided in the release or protection of several of his friends and colleagues. All of this is to say that, though it may seem odd, personal appeals to Stalin, even by those who disagreed with him and would not follow his Party line were sometimes successful in securing the release and safety of several notable figures who may otherwise be lost to history in one of the countless mass, unmarked graves that littered Stalin's Soviet Union.

⁶ Kirov was a Bolshevik revolutionary and bureaucrat who was assassinated in 1934. Stalin launched an investigation into his death, catalyzing the purges. There has since been speculation that Stalin himself orchestrated the assassination, ostensibly making Kirov the first victim of the Great Terror.

Acknowledgement of his power was of tantamount importance to Stalin, and these personal appeals were proof that even those who did not respect his politics respected (and feared) the tight grip which he controlled every aspect of Soviet life. In his interactions with Stalin, Bulgakov consistently acknowledges Stalin's power and addresses him as a rational, intelligent person, even in later years when it had become absolutely apparent who was behind the waves of violence and repression (there was some doubt in the very early years of exactly how involved Stalin was). Similarly, "appealing to Stalin's vanity – the desire for a face to face meeting – was a shrewd move; and of course Bulgakov would have been eager to see the dictator, just as he would have been eager to meet the various historical tyrants who peopled his works" (Proffer 330).

Mandelstam's arrest in 1934 (along with his subsequent arrests and death) had a profound effect on the entire writing community, but especially on Bulgakov who considered him a close friend with whom he shared his work and hopes and fears of the future. This arrest was an early sign of what was to come and was among the very first in a veritable tsunami of arrests, disappearances, and murders that would soon affect hundreds of so-called "counter-revolutionary" elements. Previously, in the 1920s, it was understood that some level of satire and criticism of the government would be tolerated. This period of relative leniency ended with the death of NEP in 1928 and Stalin's consolidation of control within the government, making his will the will of the Party (Proffer 89).

None of this is to say that Bulgakov was in the least bit coy in his disdain for the Soviet system. In fact, in multiple conversations and interviews with Party officials Bulgakov denounced communism point blank and declares that he will always be a conservative: "I am a conservative... 'to the core,' I was going to write, but that's such a cliché: well, in a word, a

conservative” (*Manuscripts* 52). He made no secret of this fact in his diary (before he destroyed it),⁷ to his family, or to the government. Through readings of his personal documents and those collected by the OGPU, it becomes clear that Bulgakov did not give in to Party pressure and did not keep his political sensibilities a secret. Instead, he walked the delicate line of the fellow traveler by keeping his harshest criticisms private while still maintaining his artistic integrity. He stopped short of the kind of dangerous criticism that would have had him arrested but also fulfilled what he saw as his duty as a writer to speak his mind and share his opinions openly and honestly. The personal and financial suffering which he endured throughout the last decade of his life are evidence of his unwillingness to bend and compromise where he felt it essential to remain firm in his convictions.

There is abundant evidence of dissatisfaction with Bulgakov from Party members and the Communist arts community, including pressure for Stalin to approve the pulling of his works from the stage and publication (Bauer 141). There was far more support for his silencing than allowing him to continue to work and publish. Bulgakov, in his letters to Stalin, cites a proverbial avalanche of negative reviews of all of his productions that had made it to stage so far. Such quotes include:

“...MISHKA Bulgakov, my friend, WHO IS ALSO, IF YOU WILL PARDON THE EXPRESSION, A WRITER, POKES AROUND IN RUBBISH-TIPS...I am asking you, brother, why you have such an UGLY MUG...I am a delicate type, just BASH HIM OVER THE HEAD WITH A BASIN...As common citizens we have no more need of the Turbins than a DOG NEEDS A BRASSIERE...THAT SON OF A BITCH just swans in, THAT TURBIN, LET’S MAKE SURE HE GETS NO TAKING NOR ANY SUCCESS” (*Manuscripts* 104).⁸

⁷ After confiscating Bulgakov’s work and diary, the OGPU made a copy of it for their records, which is now the only existing copy of the diary after Bulgakov burnt the original upon its return to him.

⁸ The capitalization of this passage is reflective of the original text.

This quote is one of many that Bulgakov includes in his letters to Stalin as evidence that he cannot have a writing career in the Soviet Union due to these attacks and gives us an idea of the kind of vitriolic language used against him and the hatred he inspired from Communist critics. This is in direct contrast to the popularity of his plays among audiences. Ultimately, *The Days of the Turbins* would run for almost 1000 performances by 1941 with every production run enjoying immense popularity and frequently selling out (Proffer 198). Both his popularity among audiences and the disdain he caused among Party hardliners can be explained by the fact that he refused to conform to the standard of Party media and literature at the time, the standard of which audiences were tired and which critics/Party members believed to be the only acceptable art form.

Outsider, Survivor

Bulgakov's antagonistic attitude towards the Soviet system is, at this point, well established. While this may, at face value, suggest that he would have been a greater target for persecution in a system where adherence to the Party line was mandatory, his resistance may have actually been a significant factor in saving his life and affording him a certain amount of comfort under Stalin. The primary function of Stalin's Terror was to rid the Party of "undesirable elements," which consisted mostly of Communist ideologues and Leninists/Trotskyists. Stalin, as General Secretary, intended to steer the USSR in a different direction than his predecessors, and anyone within the government organization who could oppose him was a threat. Criticism from within the Party could delegitimize him and threaten his power, while dissident voices outside of the system were arguably more easily controlled or dismissed.

Bulgakov was certainly on the opposite end of the political spectrum and was therefore considered anti-Soviet, therefore, and a class enemy. However, he was not in a position to rally a movement or try to change the system, particularly after he was appointed co-director of the Moscow Art Theater. In offering him this position, Stalin was able to ensure that he would maintain a close eye on Bulgakov's activities and keep him preoccupied by dangling opportunities to have his work published, only for this small glimmer of hope to be ripped away at the last moment. With few exceptions, the censorship machine was able to prevent the more provocative of his works from reaching a wider audience, thereby limiting his influence. By giving him a position that kept him occupied while simultaneously preventing most of that work from being produced, Stalin had him in an ideal position for control and monitoring.

Stalin likewise engaged in a kind of cat-and-mouse game with Bulgakov in that he teased him in an otherwise bleak and hopeless existence by suggesting that he may have the opportunity to go abroad. He indicated this in their phone conversation in 1930 when he said, "perhaps you really do need to go abroad" (*Manuscripts* 128). Whether or not Stalin would have followed through with this offer, had Bulgakov assented, remains unknown. Again, the possibility of travel outside of the Soviet Union was dangled in front of him in 1934, when he was informed that he and his wife would be issued foreign passports and allowed to take a tour across Europe for three months, only to find out after several days that it was a false promise and that their application had, in fact, been denied (*Manuscripts* 174).

In essence, Stalin had managed to back Bulgakov into a corner where he could be observed and managed to ensure that he would not find a wider audience for his dissident ideas and criticisms of the state. Further proving that Bulgakov posed no legitimate political threat, Bulgakov could certainly have been considered apolitical in his work from the mid-1920s

onward, when he acknowledged that the fight against Communism in Russia was a losing one. Some people in the Party believed that apoliticism was tantamount to being outright anti-Communist or counter-revolutionary, thus leading to the attacks on his work and personal life in the press (Proffer 311). Stalin, however, likely recognized that, even had he been allowed to publish freely, Bulgakov's work would not have played a substantial role in overturning the government in the event of a military coup or revolution. In fact, even in his most biting satire, the government itself is left largely unscathed.

While Bulgakov by no means agreed with the politics of the Communist Party, he saw the Soviet literary establishment, quite separate from Stalin, as the primary cause of his suffering and censorship. The reason for much of the vitriol directed at him in the press and among Soviet literati was primarily due to the fact that he refused to write positively about the revolution or Party, rather than the fact that he was writing anything particularly negative about it. While this angered many hardliners and "true believers," Stalin's concerns lay elsewhere. In fact, Stalin and several other Party leaders realized that the public was growing dissatisfied with cookie-cutter propaganda in media and the arts and were therefore clamoring for something new and innovative, though this point was contended among high-level bureaucrats in the Party (Clark 102). Bulgakov was excellently poised to fulfill the need for well-written entertainment, even if he refused to fall in the Party line.

While Bulgakov did portray the Whites positively and the Bolsheviks as brutal in his works, the monarchists in his works are consistently defeated by the Red Army, showcasing the brute strength of the Communist cause. Returning to *White Guard* and *The Days of the Turbins*, we can see his apoliticism in effect. While the Turbin family initially fights the various invaders and conquerors in Kiev, by the end of the story they realize the futility of their fight and wait to

see what the outcome of the war will be. The main thing is that they will face it together. In the end, it is a story of familial solidarity and, more than anything else, resignation. Both Bulgakov and his characters realized that, at a certain point, it was useless to try and deny the fact that they had been defeated by the Bolsheviks. Bulgakov's characters, like the writer himself, are resigned to the fact that they are defeated and to the absurdities that dictate their lives in the Soviet Union. For all Stalin's aesthetic appreciation of Bulgakov's work, this messaging was also certainly in line with his political aims. Even if the reader/audience's sympathies are with the White cause, anti-Soviet forces are ultimately vanquished, just as Stalin wished his enemies in the 1930s to know he would defeat them.

Bulgakov probably, like many others, assumed that it would be a short-lived victory and that Soviet hegemony would eventually fall apart; but for the time being, Communism was the law of the land and Bulgakov had no way of escaping. This central message, that of resignation and nonresistance, is more than likely why Stalin overlooked the controversial and politically divisive elements of the play and of Bulgakov's life. While Bulgakov refused to compromise his own beliefs, he also made it clear that he would not insert himself into politics beyond the role of satirist. Therefore, while his critiques of Soviet society ruffled the feathers of true believers and Communist hardliners, ultimately he did not pose a threat to Stalin's absolute control, which was the pretense for the purges.

Furthermore, Stalin more than likely agreed with some of the shots Bulgakov took in his satire, such as in *The Fatal Eggs* and *Heart of a Dog*, when they were directed at the same individuals and institutions that he would later subject to show trials, imprisonment, and execution, though it must be noted, of course, that the nature of Bulgakov's and Stalin's criticisms of said individuals and institutions were in opposition of each other. Such targets

include mid-level bureaucrats, housing officials, and the censorship machine itself. In reality, Bulgakov did not see Stalin or the Party as a whole as the executors of his career as a writer. His main detractors and tormentors, and therefore the targets of his satire, were members of the Communist literary establishment and, more specifically, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (Российская ассоциация пролетарских писателей) or RAPP. The organization was founded in 1925 in order to censor and condemn writers who did not support Party ideals in their work or who otherwise exhibited counter-revolutionary tendencies and was led by Leopold Averbakh, one of Bulgakov's most outspoken critics. A vast majority of their attacks were directed at fellow travelers, such as Bulgakov and Yevgeny Zamyatin, but they did also rebuke authors who would be considered "true believers," such as Maxim Gorky. In addition to Averbakh, Bulgakov faced vitriolic attacks from Socialist theater critic Vladimir Blyum, who campaigned against *The Days of the Turbins* in theater reviews and whose petitions contributed to the decision to pull the play from the Moscow Art Theater, despite its overwhelming popularity.

Bulgakov did have some supporters, albeit wavering ones, in the literary establishment coming to bat for him by defending his work and arguing for the continuing publication of his work. One such advocate, albeit a wavering and irregular one, was Anatoly Lunacharsky, literary critic and head of The People's Commissariat for Education (Narkompros). Lunacharsky is quoted as saying that "we have no other so clearly expressed counter-revolutionary writer as Bulgakov. But he sets an example. Moreover, he does his plays extremely cleverly" (Proffer 194). Most work (literature and drama) being produced at this time was regurgitation of the same stale, tedious Party propaganda, which all followed the same formulaic path to the same pro-Socialist message at the end. Audiences and critics were itching for inventive and original work,

which was only being produced by fellow travelers and those outside of the Party system. This speaks to the enduring nature of art; readers and viewers will always turn to artistic mediums for entertainment and enlightenment. Even Stalin was not impervious to the charms of non-ideological work, such as Bulgakov's. This charm, combined with Bulgakov's apparent unwillingness to insert himself more actively into politics beyond the role of satirist, must have ensured, in Stalin's mind, that he would not pose a threat to his power. Also, again, the target of Bulgakov's satire is of the utmost importance, because it did not embarrass or offend Stalin directly when the author called out the absurdity of his literary critics.

In fact, Stalin dissolved RAPP in 1932, to be replaced by the Union of Soviet Writers (Союз писателей СССР), of which Bulgakov was a member, albeit an oft-scorned and overlooked one. Providing still further evidence that, under Stalin, it was often more dangerous to be a true believer than an outsider or fellow traveler, many former members of RAPP were caught up in the purges themselves and arrested and/or executed. "The people whom Stalin most hated and feared were those who had been true believers – Communists, or at least leftists, of some stripe. These supposed heretics were the ones Stalin went after; at this time he was not interested in those who had never really supported the regime, or who appeared genuinely apolitical" (Proffer 473). Averbakh himself was arrested and shot in 1937 along with several other prominent members of RAPP, although this may also have something to do with the fact that he was brother-in-law of Genrikh Yagoda, former head of the NKVD and fellow victim of the purges.

Ellendea Proffer, also suggests that:

Another factor which cannot be discounted is the opponent syndrome, wherein one has more respect for one's opponent than one's converts. Bulgakov was, and remained, thoroughly unconvinced of the justness of the Revolution and the glory of the Communist Party... Stalin perhaps

enjoyed the power *to let someone live* almost as much as ordering their execution. As almost everything known indicates, the great leader was a monster of cynicism, and it seems to me very likely that he had more respect for the Bulgakovs and Pasternaks than he did for the Averbakhs who had committed the error of being true believers” (418).

Counter-intuitively, having the audacity and the will to push back against the norm established by Stalin may have been just the right display of strength to win the dictator’s favor. Stalin was constantly surrounded by sycophants, making them expendable during the purges. Bulgakov seemingly walked the delicate fine line between acquiescence and respectful repudiation, thereby saving his life.

However, even after RAPP was dissolved, their earlier attacks on his work hung like a shadow across Bulgakov’s life and affected his ability to publish or produce any work. Still, not one of Bulgakov’s works puts a worker or peasant in the position of hero or lead protagonist, something that was unforgivable to those who believed that the only true value or purpose of art was to highlight and advocate for proletarian ideals. Bulgakov refused to do so, which is the root of his unpopularity among Party members and his censorship. He blatantly told the establishment that he would never and could never write a proletarian work because it was antithetical to his beliefs and, indeed, his identity. To a modern audience, with a full understanding of the brutality of Stalin’s Terror, such a direct confession seems unthinkable. However, in 1930 Bulgakov began a letter to the Soviet government by stating:

After the banning of all my works, I began to hear voices among many citizens of my acquaintance, all giving me one and the same piece of advice: that I should write a ‘Communist play,’ (I am quoting them in inverted commas), and that quite apart from that I should address to the Government of the USSR a penitential letter, which would contain a renunciation of my previous opinions, as expressed in my literary works, and assurance that henceforth I was going to work as a fellow-travelling writer loyal to the idea of Communism...I did not follow that advice. I would scarcely have succeeded in appearing in a favorable light in the eyes of the government of the USSR by writing a mendacious letter,

which would have represented a sordid and indeed naïve political somersault. I did not even make any attempt to write a Communist play, being quite confident that I could not succeed in writing such a play (*Manuscripts* 103).

Bulgakov goes on to write the extensive letter outlining how the attacks on his work have made it impossible for him to survive in the Soviet Union and asking to be allowed to emigrate or, alternatively, given consistent work in a theater that would allow him to provide for himself and his family. "...the entire press of the USSR, together with all the institutions to whom control of the repertory has been entrusted, throughout all the years of my literary career, has unanimously and with EXTRAORDINARY FURY demonstrated that the works of Mikhail Bulgakov cannot exist in the USSR. And I declare that the Soviet press is ABSOLUTELY CORRECT" (*Manuscripts* 105). This is the letter to which Stalin responded with his infamous phone call. Countless subsequent letters and appeals would go unanswered and Bulgakov would live out the rest of his life in a state of constant struggle and uncertainty, never knowing the future acclaim his works, published in his lifetime or otherwise, would go on to achieve.

Foreign Connections

Margarita was standing at a great height, and a vast carpeted staircase descended beneath her feet. Down at the bottom, so far away that Margarita felt she was gazing through the wrong end of binoculars, she could see an enormous foyer with a fireplace so huge that a five-ton truck could drive into its cold, black maw.
- *Master and Margarita*, 225

So describes Bulgakov the beginning of Satan's Grand Ball in his magnum opus, *The Master and Margarita*, published posthumously in 1967 thanks to his third wife and widow, Yelena Bulgakova. It has long been understood that this description is based on Spaso House, the official residence of the U.S. ambassador to the Soviet Union/Russia since 1933, when the

United States officially recognized the Soviet Union. More specifically, Satan's Grand Ball seems to be based on one particularly extravagant event, the 1935 Spring Ball, held by Ambassador William Bullitt and attended by notable Party members and artists, including Bulgakov. Several notable attendees, such as Nikolai Bukharin and Karl Radek, would soon find their demise at Stalin's hands during the Great Terror, which would begin less than a year after the celebration.

The ball was among the first major events hosted by the American Embassy/Ambassador since the United States first recognized the Soviet Union towards the end of the 1933. In some ways, it was intended as the American Embassy's coming out party, which would set the precedent for their status and esteem in the Soviet Union. Yelena Bulgakov's description of the celebration, in line with other contemporaneous accounts of the night, paint a portrait of an indulgent, elegant evening, which is later reflected in Bulgakov's description in *The Master and Margarita*, albeit with many fantastical elements added in.

Never in my life have I seen such a ball. The Ambassador stood at the top of the stairs to greet his guests. They were all wearing tails, and there were only a few jackets and smoking-jackets... There were people dancing in a hall with columns, floodlights shining down from the gallery, and behind a net which separated off the orchestra there were live pheasants and birds. We had supper at separate tables in an enormous dining-room with live bear cubs in one corner, kid goats, and cockerels in cages. There were accordion-players during supper. The supper was in a hall where the table laden with food had been covered with a transparent green fabric and lit up from inside. There were masses of tulips and roses. Of course there was an exceptional abundance of food and of champagne. On the top floor (it's an enormous and luxurious house) they had fixed up a *shashlik* [kebab] stand, and there were people performing dances from the Caucasus (*Manuscripts* 198).

The jungle-like aspect of Satan's Ball, with wild beasts and masses of flowers abundant, was apparently not entirely an invention of Bulgakov's.

As a matter of diplomacy, one may easily understand why these political figures were invited to such a grand event; Stalin himself was invited but did not attend. Bulgakov's invitation, however, can be seen as an extension of the numerous social calls he had with members of the American diplomatic corps. Beginning in 1935, Yelena Bulgakova mentions meetings with diplomats, including Bullitt and future ambassador Charles Bohlen, both on embassy grounds as well as in their own home. Likely as a matter of precaution, Bulgakova does not include the exact content of their conversations but her descriptions imply that they discussed world literature and, to some extent, the trials facing Bulgakov as he attempted to make his way as a writer and support his family under a less-than-supportive regime. We get slightly more detail about the nature of their visits and their conversations in Bohlen's memoir, *Witnessing History*: "[Bulgakov] once told me he would never put a Communist in any of his plays, since he considered them to be nothing but two-dimensional figures" (21). We can only speculate on whether or not they had any in-depth conversations about Bulgakov's desire to emigrate, as neither the Yelena's diary nor Bohlen's memoir allude to any such discussion. However, at this point, Bulgakov's desperation to leave the country was well known to acquaintances and the government, though his obvious preference was to leave for Europe rather than the United States, likely due to proximity and his familial ties. While the Bulgakovs expressed some desire to visit the United States someday, there is nothing to suggest that they would have considered emigrating there.

At the time of the Spring Ball, there was obviously not such a taboo about associating with foreigners in place that would prevent artists like Bulgakov or members of the government from attending an event at Spaso House with American diplomats, although it would not have been encouraged. Less than a year after the ball, Stalin began arresting and executing

inconvenient members of the government under the pretense of foreign espionage. While this a superfluous charge in almost every case (little if any evidence of espionage or foreign collusion was presented at the show trials), we must consider that foreign connections were already something that Stalin considered potentially threatening, or at least suspicious, at the time of the ball. The fact that both Bukharin and Radek, among others who attended, were arrested shortly thereafter on accusations of treason and collaboration with foreign enemies speaks to the fact that attendance at such events and even the most casual associations with foreigners could be used as evidence against Stalin's enemies if it was politically expedient for them to disappear.

In his memoir, Charles Bohlen notes that he received advice from fellow diplomats that it would be dangerous to reach out to their former Russian friends and colleagues. At this point, several of them had already been arrested, never to be heard from again (Bohlen 44). However, Yelena Bulgakova mentions receiving continued invitations to embassy events as late as 1938, albeit more infrequently than before. Bohlen makes no further mention of Bulgakov in his memoir and is not mentioned by name in Yelena Bulgakova's diary, but we must wonder, then, why diplomats would continue extending invitations and why the Bulgakov's would continue entertaining them if both parties knew that such action could prove dangerous for Russian citizens. It should be noted that foreign espionage was both a legitimate fear for Party leadership and also the catch-all accusation assigned to oppositional political entities as excuse for their arrest, detention, and murder. Bohlen goes on to explain how several individuals connected with the Embassy, and even his own personal house staff, disappeared upon his return to Moscow after briefly being assigned to a position in Washington, DC. By 1937, it was apparent that the purges were in full swing and who was behind them; there had been some doubt immediately following the assassination of Kirov as to who was behind the avalanche of arrests that came

about and are now understood to be the early stages of the Terror. Somewhat puzzlingly, Bohlen suggests that the purges ended in 1938 and, while perhaps the flurry of political arrests and executions had slowed by this point, Soviet citizens and particularly those in the arts continued to be targeted until at least 1940 and arguably even beyond (Bohlen 57). Certainly, the Bulgakovs and their friends continued to live in fear and anticipation of further violence. In fact, Bulgakov's former co-director of the Moscow Art Theater, Vsevolod Meyerhold, and his wife, Zinaida Reich, were both gruesomely executed and murdered, respectively, in 1940, just a month before Bulgakov's own death.

One consideration we must take into account is the fact that Bulgakov primarily associated with American and French citizens living in Moscow. Given the political tensions with Germany by the mid- to late-1930s, we can suppose that Stalin was more concerned with German agents and interference than with the U.S. or France. According to Hiroaki Kuromiya, "all foreign connections were suspect in the 1930s, but some were more suspect than others. German, Latvian and Romanian connections were amongst the most suspect" (142). Stalin was primarily concerned with countries on the border of the Soviet Union and those allied with fascist Nazi Germany, ostensibly an ally but also a major threat to Soviet hegemony in Central and Eastern Europe. As such, countries like the United States and France, while undeniably still on Stalin's radar as potential threats, were not of the utmost concern. It has been suggested that these tensions with Germany contributed to the arrest and subsequent murder of Isaac Babel, in 1939 and 1940 respectively. Of course, Babel was also Jewish, an ethnic group which was violently antagonized by the Soviet state. These factors combined, along with his brutal and graphic depictions of the Red Army in *Red Cavalry*, spelled doom for Babel.

Though the Soviet Union and Germany indeed began interacting and collaborating more towards the end of the 1930s, enduring tensions related to ideological differences continued to mar their relationship. Hitler continued to view “pan-Slavism” as a threat to Fascist control of Europe and ethnic Germans, along with other minorities tied to neighboring borderlands, continued to be targeted in the purges. The initial impetus for the states to fraternize was economic, but cultural and political strains continued to affect their interactions. By the end of the 1930s, the obvious benefits of a non-aggression pact were apparent and culminated in the signing of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939. However, Germany and the Soviet Union remained staunchly ideologically opposed and both sides continued to be suspicious of the other’s intentions. For Stalin’s interests, one of the primary appeals of the alliance was the protection and control of the countries on the outskirts of and bordering the Soviet Union, where he was concerned that Soviet citizens with ties to bordering countries would be able to facilitate an invasion. Despite military and political collaboration, these intense ethnic and cultural tensions persisted and manifested in suspicion of those who had familial or otherwise personal connections with the countries bordering the Soviet Union, but with Germany in particular, as it was regaining its footing in Europe under Hitler and following World War I. While Stalin’s belief in the threat of espionage was exaggerated, it had very real, devastating effects on anyone with actual or supposed ties to Germany, despite the ostensible alliance formed between the two countries. Of course, we now know that the promises Hitler made regarding Soviet rights in borderland regions were not upheld and the territories were eventually invaded. Stalin’s error in assuming that Germany entered the pact in good faith is difficult to understand even now, given the deep-rooted mistrust that existed between the two powers.

Here it is also important to note that Bulgakov was in regular contact with family members abroad (his brothers Nikolai and Ivan) as well as translators and theater producers who hoped to adapt and stage his plays. In fact, several of his plays, including *The Days of the Turbins* and *Zoya's Apartment* (*Зойкина квартира*), were successfully and popularly produced in France. *The Days of the Turbins* also received some notable success in the United States, as *New York Times* reviewer Charles Morgan wrote:

They sing songs when they ought to be organizing their forces; they are blown to and fro by every emotional puff of romanticism and sentiment. Among them is a young officer who is a very peacock in his boasting, his vanity, his glib, absurd lies; another is, quite plainly, a drunkard; a third, a boy student, hurries about with earnest inconsequence, vaguely making love, vaguely reciting poetry.

But what a relief they are from the stern frown of supermen which nowadays suppresses the individuality of man throughout Europe and Asia! How delightful it is to laugh again and to know that once there were people who lived in the sparkling moment and did not plod forever in battalions down the dreary avenue of a Five-Year Plan. Even in this play there is some solemn fighting. Shots are fired; the feet of infantry tramp in the distance; the best of the officers are killed. But the essence of the play is in its supper parties, its love making, its casual songs, its innumerable absurdities. Everyone fiddles while Rome burns. How anti-social, but how charming! (Proffer 222)

However, Bulgakov was apparently afraid of how his work was being represented abroad and insisted on approving any translations himself or, if he was unable to have translations and legal documents sent to Moscow, would have his brother authorize translations and other production rights in his place. By this point, Nikolai had taken charge of his brother's overseas business and the two were in consistent communication both about Mikhail's unstable life in the Soviet Union and the production of his work abroad. In one particularly disturbing instance, Bulgakov learned that the names of some unflattering characters in *Zoya's Apartment* had been changed to "Lenin" and "Stalin." Upon learning this information, Bulgakov was horrified and

insisted in letters to Nikolai that any mention of a member of the Soviet leadership be removed from the play entirely before it be produced (*Manuscripts* 245). This occurred 1937, when the Stalin's Purge was already in full swing and Yelena Bulgakov's diary entries were already full of references to arrests and disappearances. The Bulgakovs were, at that point, living in fear for themselves and the safety of their friends and colleagues. The prospect that such a direct insult to Soviet leaders could be traced back to him in any way only contributed to their fears that Bulgakov may be called in for more than an interrogation one day. Eventually the performance did go forward without the inclusion of either Stalin's or Lenin's names and continued to run successfully, along with several of his other plays, abroad.

In her memoir, *Hope Against Hope*, Nadezhda Mandelstam contends that "an accused person's class nature was fully revealed by his ambition to go to Paris, and in our classless society, account must always be taken of one's class allegiance" (81). This is, of course, slightly hyperbolic, but Bulgakov had gone much farther than simply suggesting he may want to emigrate abroad, specifically to Paris. His class allegiance was not in question and was constantly used as a weapon against him. His familiarity with foreign diplomats further solidified this, though it was seemingly never brought up in attacks against him; he does not seem to have been called in for interrogation by the secret police after 1930, even as he continued to keep in contact with his family abroad and foreigners within the USSR.

Bulgakov's connections abroad could certainly have been used as ammunition against him and as justification for his arrest, at the very least. It is somewhat puzzling, therefore, that little, if any, complaint seems to have been brought against him specifically for his foreign associations, even as he continued to pursue personal and professional relationships with foreigners, within and without the Soviet Union. In theory, this could have posed serious dangers

to his wellbeing as well as that of his family. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that he associated with the “right” kind of foreigners (i.e., Americans) who, at the time, did not pose the same international security concerns to Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe as some other groups may have. However, it requires no stretch of the imagination to see how these connections could have been the last straw for an already subversive writer. Stalin may have seen Bulgakov as a “threat” that had already been neutralized or may have been concerned about the attention that he would have drawn by having Bulgakov, by this point well known to the U.S. diplomatic corps. and fairly famous abroad, arrested. This is one element of Bulgakov’s story that we will likely never fully understand, but that remains a fascinating and bewildering element of his contentious relationship with the Soviet government.

Conclusion

Mikhail Bulgakov should not only be remembered as one of the greatest Soviet writers of the 20th century, but also as a unique and compelling case study of what it was like to live under Stalin’s purges as writer and artist. His situation was undeniably atypical and therefore some elements of it cannot be extrapolated to apply to other fellow traveler writers of the period, many of whom suffered fates more violent than his own. However, through the study of these elements of Bulgakov’s life, we can come to understand this particularly violent period of Soviet and Russian history. Furthermore, several of these elements actually can be examined in the context of other writers’ lives and existences under Stalin in the 1930s. The specific targets of his satire, the deference and respect he paid to Stalin as a leader with absolute control, his status as a political outsider (and therefore not a threat), and his connections with foreign citizens through both his personal and professional lives are all elements that may have influenced his ability to

exist in the Soviet Union, albeit uncomfortably, and may explain why he was not seen by Stalin as a greater threat warranting arrest. We must also take into account the mercurial nature of dictatorial whims and accept that there are certain elements of the Great Terror cannot be entirely accounted for.

Bulgakov and his family lived a torturous existence during Stalin's purges in that they suffered financially from his inability to write and make a living and were forced to watch silently as their friends, colleagues, and neighbors were arrested and executed, along with every other the citizen of the Soviet Union who lost someone during this dark decade. It is fair to suggest that every single person in the USSR was touched, in some way, by the terror that unfolded throughout the 1930s. However, unlike so many others, Bulgakov occupied the role of spectator rather than victim and subsequently used the injustices and cruelties that he witnessed in his work. Though there may be a lack of first-hand, primary accounts of the Great Terror due to the secretive nature of the era, Bulgakov's work provides a glimpse into his life and experiences, providing modern readers and scholars with a better understanding of life under Stalin. We also owe a debt, of course, to Yelena Bulgakova, whose efforts ensured the publication of Bulgakov's work after his death and whose frequent diary entries give us insight into the mindset of a struggling writer, trapped in an environment hostile to his values and oeuvre.

While Bulgakov may be considered lucky to have avoided the GULAG and the executioner's bullet, his actions and choices regarding his life and works also display an awareness of the peril he faced and an ability to adapt to his surroundings, however malevolent they may be. He was trusted among his fellow dissident writers and admired even by those with whom he disagreed on all things political. Despite frequent calls for the banning of his work and

the punishment for his counter-revolutionary tendencies, Bulgakov endured, and, because of his perseverance, we are left with some of the finest examples of writing and satire of the last century.

Bibliography

- Berlin, Isaiah, et al. *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture under Communism*. Brookings classic ed., Brookings Institution Press, 2016.
- Birt, Raymond. "Personality and Foreign Policy: The Case of Stalin." *Political Psychology*, vol. 14, no. 4, 1993, pp. 607–625.
- Bohlen, Charles E. *Witness to History, 1929-1969*. W.W. Norton & Co., 1973. New York
- Bulgakov, Mikhail. *A Country Doctor's Notebook*. Translated by Michael Glenny. The Harvill Press, 1995. London.
- Bulgakov, Mikhail. *Diaries and Selected Letters*. Translated by Roger Cockerell. Alma Classics, 2016. Surrey, UK.
- Bulgakov, Mikhail. *Heart of a Dog*. Translated by Mirra Ginsburg. Grove Press, 1968. New York.
- Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The White Guard*. Translated by Michael Glenny. Vintage Press, 2006. London.
- Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The Fatal Eggs*. Translated by Michael Karpelson. Translit Publishing, 2010.
- Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The Master and Margarita*. Translated by Diana Burgin and Katherine Tiernan O'Connor. Vintage International, 1995. New York.
- Bulgakov, Mikhail. *Dni Turbinykh. The Turbins, a Play. [P'esa v Chetyrekh Deistviakh]*. Prideaux Press, 1970.
- Chudakova, Marietta. *Mikhail Bulgakov: The Life and Times*. Translated by Huw Davies. Glagoslav Publications, 2019.
- Chudakova, M. *Zhizneopisanie Mikhaila Bulgakova*. "Книга"; "Книга", 1988.
- Clark, Katerina., et al. *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917-1953*. Yale University Press, 2007.
- Curtis, J. A. E. *Bulgakov's Last Decade: the Writer as Hero*. Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Curtis, J. A. E. *Manuscripts Don't Burn: Mikhail Bulgakov, a Life in Letters and Diaries*. Ardis, 2012. New York.
- Curtis, J. A. E. *Mikhail Bulgakov*. Reaktion Books Ltd, 2017.
- Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Enemies of the People: The Destruction of Soviet Literary, Theater, and*

- Film Arts in the 1930s*. Northwestern University Press, 2002.
- Figes, Orlando. *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*. 1st ed., Metropolitan Books, 2007.
- Kuromiya, Hiroaki. *The Voices of the Dead: Stalin's Great Terror in the 1930s*. Yale University Press, 2007.
- Mandel'shtam, Nadezhda, and Hayward, Max. *Hope against Hope: A Memoir*. Modern Library, 1999.
- Milne, Lesley. "Mikhail Bulgakov: Private Thoughts of the Master." *Index on Censorship*, vol. 20, no. 8, 1991, pp. 6–7.
- Patenaude, Bertrand M. *Trotsky: Downfall of a Revolutionary*. 1st ed., Harper, 2010.
- Proffer, Ellendea. *Bulgakov: Life and Work*. Ardis, 1984. Ann Arbor, Michigan.
- Rappaport, Helen. *Joseph Stalin: A Biographical Companion*. ABC-CLIO, 1999.
- Rauschning, Hermann. *Hitler Speaks: A Series of Political Conversations with Adolf Hitler on His Real Aims*. University Microfilms International, 1979.
- Shearer, David R., and Khaustov, V. N. *Stalin and the Lubianka: A Documentary History of the Political Police and Security Organs in the Soviet Union, 1922-1953*. Yale University Press, 2015.
- Shentalinsky, Vitaly. *Arrested Voices: Resurrecting the Disappeared Writers of the Soviet Regime*. Martin Kessler Books, Free Press, 1996.
- Shulman, Marshall D. *Stalin's Foreign Policy Reappraised*. Harvard University Press, 1963.