

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE SOVIET PAST BY CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN  
WRITERS

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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The Soviet Union had existed for 70 years and was labeled as an “evil empire”. Its technological achievements and geographical discoveries are amazing. However, its dark aspects such as censorship, “purges”, and freedom restrictions are shocking as well. The effects of its collapse in 1991 were felt throughout the world in many aspects of peoples’ day-to-day lives. Nowadays, many average Russians feel tenderness and nostalgia for what they had back then.

This thesis addresses the perception of the Soviet past by two contemporary Russian writers, Elena Chizhova and Elena Katishonok. Despite the common tendency to idealize the Soviet epoch, the authors represent it as a period that is not worthy of nostalgia. The thesis explores the world picture created in both novels by means of the analysis of such themes as the space structure, death, and memory that recur and function on different levels of the target texts.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The contradictory Soviet period, with its advantages and disadvantages, is one of the most frequently discussed topics in contemporary Russia. People still cannot decide how to treat it. The Soviet Union collapsed not long time ago, therefore there is always the temptation to compare the present life in Russia with what people used to have twenty years ago. Nina Sadur, a Russian writer, metaphorically describes the collapse of the Soviet Union, focusing on how confused people became right after it:

*Это было как сад. Как опадающий сад. Образ государства нашего тоталитарного, империи. Люди все, знаете, как жили? Вот как они жили. Открылась клетка, птички все выскочили, но еще не знают, что летать не умеют.*

It was like a garden. Like a deciduous garden. It is the image of our totalitarian state, the Empire. Do you know how all the people lived at that time? That's how they lived. The cage was opened, all the birds flew out / jumped out, but they do not know yet that they cannot fly<sup>1</sup>. (Odinnadtsat besed o sovremennoi russkoi proze 82)

Probably, this is why, according to different sources, these days, the main emotion people feel about the Soviet period is nostalgia. As a well-known in Russia journalist, Leonid Parfyonov, said: *“The Soviet Union has not gone away – it’s the matrix for our present civilization.”* (Nikitin 19)

According to various psychological and sociological polls, the main reasons for nostalgia are looking for comfort and pride and a defensive emotional response to all the numerous changes. As Vadim Nikitin, a journalist and Russian analyst, states that *“the*

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<sup>1</sup> This and all the subsequent translations from Russian are mine, unless otherwise is indicated.

*first post-Communist decade had left Russia in ruins. Economic shock therapy, hyperinflation and the disintegration of the welfare state, including the collapse of the health system contributed to precipitous fall in living standards and life itself.*" (19) One more reason is the influence of the Soviet Person archetype, which is treated in two opposite ways. On the one hand, it is viewed as a perpetual adolescent: a person who is dependent on the state, passive, who has a dream-like belief that things will somehow get better, who blames his predicament on the government, the boss, the West, anyone but himself. On the other hand, the soviet person is viewed as trusting, communal, idealistic. His essential traits are collectivism, internationalism, and awareness. (20)

This is what average Russians are nostalgic for. It is not the Soviet system that they liked, but the people who lived in it, the sense of something genuine and real that they had back then. Sociologist Alexei Yurchak writes: *"An undeniable constitutive part of today's phenomenon of post-Soviet nostalgia is the longing for the very real human values, ethics, friendships, and creative possibilities."* (Nikitin 20) Nor is it only the older generation feels this way; many young Russians "miss" the USSR, even though they never experienced it. (21) The Soviet era is seen by them as an antidote to the consumerism, anomie and lack of spirituality.

Such feelings for the Soviet past are addressed in contemporary Russian literature as well, though to a different extent, depending on the author. For example, Evgenii Grishkovets never mentions even the phrase "Soviet Union" in his works, and does not have any problems accepting his past: *"Я просто никогда нигде не говорю про «Советский Союз»; ни в одном моём тексте такого словосочетания нет [...] Я не расстаюсь с прошлым и мои герои не расстаются с прошлым"* ("I just never talk

about the Soviet Union. None of my texts has such a phrase [...] I do not part with my past and my heroes do not with their past either.”) (Odinnadtsat besed o sovremennoi russkoi literature 34)

The transformation of the Soviet Union into contemporary Russia is one of the main themes discussed by Victor Pelevin in his works. Talking about the novel *Generation P*, Pelevin specifies that he has this feeling of nostalgia but for the time of his youth not for the social system: “*Это не ностальгия по социальной системе, а ностальгия по юности*” (“It is not the nostalgia for the frame of society but it is the nostalgia for youth”). (Odinnadtsat besed o sovremennoi russkoi proze 64 ) Mikhail Shishkin states that he and his characters from the novel *The capture of Izmail* are ready to accept their monster-like motherland, but they do not know how:

*Та страна и была нашим миром. Столкнувшись с её реальностью, с её прошлым, понимаешь, что ты любишь вот это монструозное отечество, и ты должен принять эту русскую жизнь, как она есть. Но как принять её, как взять эту крепость – роман об этом.*

That country used to be our world. Having faced with its reality, its past, you understand that you love this monster-like motherland, and you have to accept this Russian life the way it is. However, how to accept it, how to take this fortress – this is what this novel is about. (137)

Such writers as Ludmila Ulitskaya and Ludmila Petrushevskaya are more categorical on this issue. Petrushevskaya writes:

*Я росла среди страшных текстов, абсолютно мне не понятных и не вызывающих ни малейшего умственного напряжения [...] И они (библиотекари) воспитали из меня пылкого, честного, принципиального и несгибаемого врага этой литературы и этого строя.*

I grew up amidst terrible texts that were totally unclear to me and did not evoke thinking process at all [...] And they (librarians) brought me up as a passionate,

honest, principled, staunch enemy of this literature and this system. (Odinnadtsat besed o sovremennoi russkoi proze 75)

Ulitskaya views the Soviet system as amoral and does not see any reason for being nostalgic. The main characters in her works are usually marginal elements that never existed in the Soviet literature before – homosexuals, disabled people, the mentally retarded, beggars:

*Это те, которым нечего терять, - нищие и инвалиды – не боятся советской власти, потому что все уже потеряли. Это особое мужество отверженных. И я их не ищу – ими полна наша жизнь.*

They are the ones who have nothing to lose – the poor and the disabled – are not afraid of the Soviet regime because they have already lost everything. This is a special kind of courage – the one that only outcast can have. I am not looking for such characters – our life is full of them. (Odinnadtsat besed o sovremennoi russkoi proze 121)

The main theme in her works is the opposition between an individual and the system.

The Soviet past has been also broadly discussed in the works by Elena Chizhova and Elena Katishonok. Chizhova has established herself as one of Russia's leading modern writers. Her novel *Time of Women* was recognized and awarded the prestigious Russian Booker Prize in 2009. The novel written by Elena Katishonok, *Once There Lived an Old Man and His Wife*, was also included in the short-list of Russian Booker. It tells the story about life in all its manifestations: from the beginning till the very end. In her article "*Uznavaemost pravdy: o romane Eleny Katishonok*" ("Truth Recognition: About the Novel by Elena Katishonok"), Marina Kulgavchuck notes that this novel is about the people that did not very much from life but life, that epoch wanted too much from them.

(2)

The thesis focuses on the analysis of Chizhova's work mostly. In Chapter I, the functioning of the themes and motifs of death, doubleness, memory, and space organization in *Time of Women* are explored. I believe that the exploitation of such a set of themes and motifs displays the author's vision of the Soviet past in the most vivid way. In Chapter II, which is a relatively short one, I am going to compare *Time of Women* to the novel *Once There Lived an Old Man and His Wife* on the same parameters because the latter raises and investigates similar questions in terms of the Soviet era depiction. Such a comparison will help to highlight the peculiarities of the target novel (*Time of Women*) and demonstrate the general tendencies in the representation of the Soviet period.

CHAPTER II  
*TIME OF WOMEN*

The Organization of Space and its Role in the Soviet Past Representation

In this chapter, I will take a close look at how Chizhova depicts and represents the Soviet past. The key idea is that the author is not nostalgic for that period at all. This becomes clear from the choice of themes and motifs she addresses in the novel and the way she works with them.

The action in the novel *Time of Women* takes place in Leningrad of 1960s. Leningrad serves as a setting for the novel *The Time of Women*. Officially the action takes place in the city described in the works of Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, and many other Russian authors. However, due to the epoch depicted in the novel, the City of Leningrad appears to be a slightly different formation than Pushkin's or Gogol's Saint-Petersburg. It is a hybrid compilation of the features of all its predecessors – Saint-Petersburg, Petersburg, Petrograd, and Peter. In *Leningradskii Peterburg v Russkoi Poezii i Proze*, Boris Filippov traces the changes in the image of the city analyzing Russian masterpieces. As many other specialists in Russian literature, he begins with an analysis of *The Bronze Horseman* written by Pushkin. Filippov points out the role that the state plays in city life in general and in the life of its citizens in particular: “Символ тотальной мощи государства – Медный Всадник – трагическая судьба России” (“The symbol of total power of the state – The Bronze Horseman – is the tragic fate of Russia”). (14) Then he adds that Pushkin is the first writer who predicts and presents

ambiguous evaluation of the city and its founder: “*Чувство и мысль, оценка Петра и его Города, и его дела – дwoятся мучительно, но и поэтически*” (“Heart and reason, the assessment of Peter, his City, and his life’s work – become painfully and poetically double”). (14)

The common atmosphere of great deception and delusion distinguishes Gogol’s Petersburg: “*все дышит обманом*” (“everything is deception”). (Filippov 16) Gogol is quite categorical in his assessment of the state that *обесчеловечивает человека, дробит его душевную и физическую личность* (it dehumanizes a man, and crushes his spiritual and physical identity). (17) Dostoevsky gets the reader acquainted with the new look of the city, and consequently with new characters:

*Теперь Петербург уже не город стремительно летящих вдаль проспектов, стройный, несколько сухопарый, закованный в гранит красавец. Город дворцов и парков остается где-то по ту сторону желтых невских туманов, а вперед выступают с обвалившейся штукатуркой многоквартирные дома облезлых переулков, осклизлые, провонявшие кошками и разлитым супом из дешевых кухмистерских черные лестницы, покрытые плесенью, с отстающими обоями комнатенки городской бедноты*

Now St. Petersburg is not the city of rapidly flying away prospectuses, a slender, somewhat lean, handsome man clad in granite. The city of palaces and parks is left somewhere on the other side of the Neva yellow fogs, and forward act with crumbling stucco apartment buildings mangy lanes, slimy, stinking cats and spilled soup of cheap pastry cook black stairs, covered with mold, tiny room wallpapered with lagging urban poor. (19)

According to Bely, “*Петербург – аномалия. Петербург, нацело оторвавшийся от нравственной и физической природы всей коренной России, - мираж [...]*” (“Petersburg is an anomaly. Petersburg entirely cut out of the moral and



physical nature of all native Russian is a mirage [...]”). (Filippov, 26). Thus, Filippov approaches to the description of Leningradskii Petersburg:

*Итак, диктатура. Итак – никакой свободы, тем более творческой: ведь все должно быть подчинено одной цели: построению коммунизма по ленинско-марксову образу*

So, dictatorship. So, no freedom, especially creative one: after all, everything should be subjugated to one goal: the construction of communism of Lenin and Marx's model (37).

*И создается **новый строй**, и создается **новый быт**<sup>2</sup>, создается и **новый Город** – уже Ленинград, в котором*

So, a new system has been created, and a new life has been built, and as a consequence a new City has been created, which is Leningrad now where

*... по засадам*

*ополоумев от вытья,*

***огромный дом**, виляя задом,*

*летит в пространство бытия!*

*а там – **молчанья** грозный сон,*

*нагие полчища **заводов**,*

*и над становьями народов –*

*труда и творчества закон.*

Half-witted from bellowing,

The huge house, shaking its buttocks,

Flies into existence's void.

While out there is the threatening sleep of silence,

The graying legions of factories,

And above the encampments of nations –

The law of labor and creative work

(Zabolotskii translated by an unknown author)

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<sup>2</sup> Here and hereinafter, the emphasis is added by me

Zabalotskii's poem highlights new features and landmarks of Leningrad reality: factories, silence, apartment buildings, and the dictatorship of the government.

Chizhova's Leningrad contains all the above mentioned features of the city accentuated by Russian writers at different times and belongs to the corpus of the Petersburg texts along with other well-known works.

In *The Petersburg Text of Russian Culture*, Vladimir Toporov states that Pushkin and Gogol are the founders of the Petersburg text tradition, whereas Akhmatova and Mandelstam finalize this tradition. (25) Therefore, according to Toporov, Chizhova's novel cannot be treated as a representative of the Petersburg text. First of all, this work does not meet formal criteria such as *the inner state of a person*, due to which it would be possible to recognize a bearer of the corpus. In Toporov's work, it is described in extreme terms: one can be either irritable, depressive, suffering, or suddenly released, dreaming, cheerful, and merry. (60) Among other criteria are *the words that define the modality of the text*, for example, suddenly, at this very moment, unexpectedly, and etc. The discourse of *Time of Women* cannot be characterized by the frequent use of these lexemes. As well as it does not have the description and evaluation of the weather conditions in Leningrad or any references that this city is founded on a swamp. (61) As for the description of the city itself, according to Toporov, it always looks very similar in the texts of the same or different writers included in the corpus of the Saint-Petersburg text. (25) It is noteworthy that Chizhova does not describe the city. Moreover, she names it Leningrad only one time throughout the whole novel.

Presumably, such a dissimilitude can be explained by the complex narrative structure of the Chizhova's text and the realistic mode it is written in. The author gives

voice to the grandmothers, to the small girl Suzanna, her mother Antonina, and Suzanna's stepfather Nikolai. The speaking voice transfers from one character to another. The narration is always presented in the form of a stream of consciousness: the characters ponder their everyday life mixing their thoughts with recalled memories from the past. Therefore, the form of narration does not imply the use of the dramatic vocabulary mentioned above. On the contrary, the characters use a quite casual language to speak about the most tragic events in their lives. Moreover, the types of characters presented in the novel differ from their counterparts acknowledged as classical ones from Pushkin's, Gogol's, and Dostoevsky's works. The latter share such features as madness, dual personality, mismatch of ambition and competence, the desire to get into the high society and an overall failure to get there (Shmidt 9).

In the article *Chto Takoye Peterburgskii Text?* (What is the Petersburg text?), Shmidt points out that one of the motifs linking the texts of the 1830s and the 1840s is “*вмешательство тайных, демонических и дьявольских сил.*” (“the interference of covert, demonic, and diabolic forces.”) (12) In this sense, *Time of Women* cannot be considered a typical Petersburg text. The plot is not intricate: “Antonina, a factory worker and single mother, gets a room in a communal apartment that she and her little girl share with three elderly women, all of whom have lost their families and become the “*grannies*” to little Suzanna.” (Chizhova, eBook) Each of them has a life story to be told, because they came through all hard times of the first half of the century, such as the Revolution, the early days of the Soviet Union, the blockade and starvation of World War II. The grannies tell their stories to the little girl, a future artist, during everyday talks, and confidential conversations at home. Suzanna responds to their stories by means of

drawing beautiful pictures but she remains mute. When Antonina falls desperately ill, the grannies are faced with the reality of losing the little girl they love – unless a stepfather can be found before it is too late. Antonina gets married though she is dying.

The synopsis of the electronic version of *Time of Women* argues that all the characters represent “*a collage of Soviet society, which only seems to be equal and to treat all its citizens alike: the former aristocracy, the intelligentsia, villagers secretly mocking communist ideals while hoping only for God’s help, low-level party officials, trade union members, factory workers just starting to believe in the benefits of Soviet society and hoping that one day it will actually be possible to have a washing machine at home.*” (Chizhova, eBook)

In the article, Schmidt claims that the ontological ambivalence that characterizes Petersburg narratives is supported by such devices as an unreliable narrator and shifting of the point of view to the characters’ pole. (10) From this perspective, in Chizhova’s novel the narrator indeed can be considered unreliable, since it is difficult sometimes to figure out which character is speaking. The novel is divided into parts titled *Mother, Daughter, Glikeria, Stepfather, Evdokiia*, etc. On the one hand, it is clear which character is speaking from the title of each part. However, on the other hand, it might be confusing to detect who exactly set the narrative structure: either a little girl who grew up and now is telling the story of her family, what she managed to remember, or the real author herself who notes: “*In some sense, I write about my childhood. I did not attend kindergarten; my mother and grandmother always talked about the siege as they experienced it, and how my grandfather and grandmother died. This was the background of my childhood, and I can’t say it shocked me. I felt that it was the norm.*” (Chizhova, 2)

This vague floating perspective of the speaking voice brings the novel *Time of Women* closer to the Petersburg text.

According to Toporov,

*Петербургский текст включает в себя в качестве субстратных элементов и другие особенности города, относящиеся уже к материально – культурной среде, - планировка, характер застройки, дома, улицы [...] в описании города используются общие категории: просторность – обзримость, пустота, разъятость частей, ровность и т.п., что не исключает и противоположных характеристик – теснота, скученность [...]*

The Petersburg text includes other features of the city as substrate elements that belong to the material-cultural environment, such as a lay-out, the nature of development, a house, and a street [...] the general categories are used in the city description: spaciousness – observableness, emptiness, dismemberment of parts, evenness, and etc. It does not exclude the opposite characteristics – overcrowding and congestion [...] (30)

Toporov states that these features may be used by writers in the Petersburg text for conveying some metaphysical realities. (30) In *Time of Women*, these substrate elements can also be found: some layouts of apartments, streets, certain landmarks are mentioned. However, in comparison to classical texts, the physical space of Leningrad gets reevaluated by the characters. For example, when Antonina moves into a communal apartment, she says: “А нынче – *вольно* [...] Девять с половиной метров – *сама себе барыня*” (“And now it feels so free and spacious [...] Nine and a half meters – I am my own boss right now.”) (9) She always compares the city to the village she is originally from. The text contains a dichotomy of a city and village: one is perceived through the contrast with another. Moreover, Antonina identifies other people on the basis of the place they live in: “*Выражался он чудно – по-городскому*” (“he used to express himself in

an interesting way – in a city like manner.”) (10) Talking about her daughter she says: “*Девка умная - городская*” (“she is smart, she is a big city girl.”) (14) Having had a romantic affair with a city man, Antonina starts idealizing the space of the city and attributes the positive human qualities and features as beauty, intellect, and wealth, to it. Due to such juxtapositions as “*умный - городской*” (smart – city like), “*чудной - городской*” (interesting – city like), the image of the city receives additional positive connotations.

Toporov indicates the distinction between the discourse that praises and glorifies Saint-Petersburg (“положительный” Санкт-Петербург a positive image of Saint-Petersburg) and the discourse that curses the city (“отрицательный” Санкт-Петербург – a negative image of Saint-Petersburg) (9). In this sense, Antonina’s perception of Leningrad contributes to the “positive” image of the city. For Antonina, it is the place where she hopes she can hide from other people’s eyes. She counts on getting lost in a crowd of people:

*Думала, хорошо, что город. Вон их – ходят по улицам. Тыщи и тыщи. Не то что деревня. Там бы прознали – все мужики наперечет [...]*

I was thinking that I was very fortunate that everything happened in the city. Look how many of them are walking down the streets. Thousands and thousands. Unlike in the village. They would figure everything out just at that very moment – there are not that many men there (Chizhova 10)

Eventually, the city gets depersonalized because it cannot provide the needed information about close people: “*А так – чего скажешь? Только имя и знаю. Ни адреса, ни фамилии [...]*” (“Well, what could I say? I know his name only. No address, no last name [...]) (10). It appears as the city without its own face: “*Много домов, как запомнить?*” (“So many buildings! How could one remember all of them?”) (76)

## The Theme of Doubleness

The theme of doubleness is considered typical in the classical Petersburg texts:

*“Нарративы Пушкина, Гоголя, Лермонтова и молодого Достоевского, т.е. авторов классического Петербургского текста, разделяют определенные характерные темы и сюжеты – сумасшествие, **раздвоение личности**, несовпадение амбиции и компетентности, **двойничество**, борьба постороннего человека за свое место в некоем высшем свете и крушение таких намерений.”*

(“The narratives by Pushkin, Gogol, Lermontov, and young Dostoyevsky, the writers of the classical Petersburg text, have certain themes and plots in common, such as madness, the split personality, the mismatch of ambitions and competence, doubleness, the fight of an outsider for a position in a high society and the collapse of such intentions.”) (Shmidt 9) However, in this case the city itself has a double. In the novel, the theme of doubleness is introduced by the grannies. To indicate “our” Leningrad, the grannies use the names of streets that they used to have before the Revolution of 1917. Thus, they are referring not to the big Soviet city but to the pre-revolutionary Saint-Petersburg:

- *Вчера, на **Офицерской**, гляжу, опять копают <...>*
- *На Офицерской-то где?*
- *Да, тут за углом. Как она у них? **Декабристов**.*
  
- Yesterday I saw them doing some construction work on Ofiterskaya street
- Where exactly on Ofiterskaya?
- Here, around the corner. How do they call it? On Decembrists street (Chizhova 22)

As well as Antonina, the grannies do not view the city as an integral, unbroken place, for it has at least two faces. The Leningrad of the grannies is a bounded space, since they have a very specific route for walking. For example, giving directions to the girl, they emphasize: *“Перед домом сквер. За ним памятник [...] От него за угол свернём – вон они, купола. Сперва в церковь [...] по каналу кружок сделаем и – домой.”* (“There is a small park in front of the house. There is a monument behind it. There we will turn the corner – here are they, the domes. First, we go to the church [...] we will go around the canal, and then we will head to home.”) (24).

It is noteworthy, that the Soviet city (Leningrad) is described by means of rather unusual realias: domes and churches that refer to the world picture of the tsarist Petersburg. Therefore, it is not without a reason that the grannies have been constantly reproached for not belonging to the Soviet regime. It concerns even the places of interests they pick to visit. For example, they do not allow Antonina to take Sofia to the New Year’s party for children organized by the factory, where Antonina works, because, in their opinion, the girl should go to another theatre – Mariinsky, rather than to go to a theatre at the factory: *“А она не пойдёт. Ей в другой – в Мариинский.”* (“She is not going. She is going to another theatre – to Mariinsky.”) (16) The choice of language constructions highlights the apparent tension and contradiction between two images of the city, i.e. between two modes of life.

Moreover, the grannies associate the Bolsheviks’ Leningrad with demonic power. They attribute infernal imaginary to it:

*Софью веду, батюшки, нечистая сила: из-под земли-то голоса. Кто ж это там – в кипятке? [...] Бесы, прости Господи! Роят, роят. Скоро насквозь*



*расковыряют. Не сидится им на земле [...] Опять церкви рушат. Неймется им аспидам.*

I was with Sofia, and then, oh my Goodness, the devil: I heard the voices from underground. Who could be there – in boiling water? [...] Demons, God forgive me! They are digging and digging! They will soon pick open all through. They cannot stay in one place [...] They demolish churches again. They are itching to do it, asps (25)

Thus, the fantastic plan of the narration becomes presented in the novel. According to Schmidt, such a fluctuation between realistic and fantastic reasoning is considered to be a common structural property of the Petersburg texts (10). It turns out that the image of the city is presented from two more perspectives: it exists not only on an axis to “the grannies – Bolsheviks”, but it is endowed with the features of both the conventional reality and the fantastic world of fairy-tales. The mystical plot is brought out in the form of dreams and different fairy-tales told by the grannies and Antonina to Suzanna. They constitute a parallel level of narration that is intricately often interwoven with the main plot line. For example, Suzanna has a dream:

*А та Воронов Вороновичей запрягла, по улицам едет: мимо церкви, вдоль канала, к самому черному дому .... Большевики на них глядят, радуются. Пустыми пальцами шевелят*

She harnessed Voron Voronoviches and is riding it down the streets passing by churches, along the canal, towards the blackest house ... Bolsheviks look at them and feel very happy. They are moving their empty fingers. (34)

Suzanna mixes her own perception of the city, namely a certain building she used to pass by every day with the impressions she gets listening to the grannies. Thus, two modes of narration are intertwined here: the first one is given from the perspective of the

grannies and the girl's mother, whereas, the second one is presented in the fairy-tale form by the girl.

It must be also mentioned that the grannies have their own picture of the world that combines ontological features of the city and the countryside. For example, they have a special sense of time that is different from the one that the younger generation has. "*Тут время не суетилось: подчинялось годовому кругу – по-деревенски.*" ("Here time is not fussed: it was a subject to the annual circle.") (17) The concept of time is quite flexible: it can flow in a different way – city-like or village-like. The city landmarks are inscribed in such a time cycle – the rhythm of life that is more typical for the countryside, since it is very slow and regular: "*В скверик у Львиного мостика ходили по весне [...] К Никольскому – осенью.*" ("We went to the small park nearby the Lion Bridge [...] To Nikolsky's – in fall.") (17) Thus, as well as the city space, the time structure is also doubled in the novel: it may appear as a "secular" one or may simultaneously go according to the church calendar (the grannies' calendar). It turns out that people may exist in two parallel universes: with different time and space organizations that very often overlap due to the category of memory possessed by characters, by the grannies in particular.

Among other characteristics of Soviet reality, paradoxicality and ambiguity are also present. On the one hand, Leningrad is such a big city where people may not see each other for many years. For example, Glikeria and her longtime admirer, the doctor Solomon have not met for ten years though they have lived all these years very close to each other: "*Вот ведь как бывает [...] сколько лет рядом жили – не встретились. А ведь мимо дома его ходили.*" ("That's how it is [...] how many years we have lived

next to each other but we have never met. Though we have been passing by his house every day.”) (139)

On the other hand, one can get an impression that people lack their personal space. They have to share it with other people and live so close to each other that such circumstances eventually cause hatred and hostility among them. People long to escape this density.

As it is mentioned above, the city of Leningrad acquires new elements that were not typical in the classical Petersburg texts: a factory and a dormitory. Space-wise, they are associated with overall discomfort, and unnatural physical closeness. However, despite the fact that people have to share apartments with each other, they have no guarantees that they really own this property: “*Потом-то приехала, а комната занята. Там ведь как: сосед в комнате поселился, себе захватил.*” (“Then she returned home but her room was already occupied. There is how life is going there: her roommate moved in and made that apartment his own.”) (124)

This is a classical notion of claustrophobia: it squeezes and provokes conflicts. For example, though World War II occurred long time ago, people still live in the situation of war against each other, and with the system in general: “*И не знаешь, где люди, где звери. Будто в лесу живём.*” (“You never know who is trustworthy, who is not. We live as if in a wood.”) (147)

The space of the city is narrowed to the space of a shared apartment. It seems that dwelling space is a big deal for everybody because it influences the way people feel, and perceive the world and other people around. As it turns out, to have one’s own apartment equates to living in paradise. One of the secondary female characters exclaims: “*Одни*

*теперь живём. А внутри-то щемит, щемит: господи, думаю, вот же он – рай [...]* (“Now we live alone. But it is aching inside over and over again: Oh, my Lord, here it is – Paradise.”) (43)

Those who control the distribution of living space have the power to interfere in the private life of other people. Nikolai, Antonina’s potential fiancé in the eyes of their co-workers, is forced to marry her. They threaten to remove Nikolai from the queue for a separate room if he does not make the decision they want him to make. Even the grannies, trying to save their little girl, offer Nikolai a deal, according to which he will get nine and a half meters after Antonina’s death and Ariadna’s jewelry in addition, if he marries dying Antonina and lets the grannies take care of her daughter. They call such circumstances a miracle. As mentioned above, square meters turn out to be a determinative factor in people’s relationship.

Dreams and concerns about having a living space are a recurring motif of the novel. In the last part titled *Внучка* (Granddaughter), Evdokia, half-mad already, gets very excited thinking that Suzanna managed to outwit everybody, and now has the right to move into a communal apartment along with the family of her stepfather. Even though this is not true, the fact itself is a marker of the epoch, if an old lady is worried and preoccupied with such thoughts at the end of her life. It turns out that the housing problem becomes the engine of the plot: the novel begins with Antonina and Suzanna’s moving into a shared apartment, the “love” line is triggered by means of blackmail based on manipulations with housing, and it is the main reason for arguments. It might seem that such living conditions directly correspond to the Soviet slogan about equality and brotherhood. Indeed, people have not only to coexist in the same limited territory but also

to share their private life with each other, which eventually goes beyond any measures. The words uttered by Zoia Ivanovna, the trade union leader, to Antonina underscore the absurdity of the whole message: “*И помни: ребёночек наш, заводской. Значит, общий. Для власти падчериц нету.*” (“Just remember: your baby is ours, it is a factory baby. So, she is a common kid. There are no stepdaughters for the state.”) (9) Such forced closeness eventually causes aversion. Some characters, such as the grannies, reject it due to their life experience, the other characters, such as Antonina, avoid being involved in such relationships due to their intuition, their inner voice. Antonina is always accused of being mysterious: “*а вот таишься зря.*” (“it’s not good that you are hiding from us.”) (9) She is even attributed a spatial adjective that describes her in one word: “[...] *посторонняя ты. Мы-то все в одном котле, в коллективе, а ты в сторонке будто.*” (“You are an outsider. We are all mingled in the same pot, in our work collective, but you stand as if aside.”) (113) “Посторонний” can be translated in various ways, such as “foreign”, “strange”, “outside”. In fact, this novel depicts such “outsides”, which equals “wrong”, people: the grannies, Antonina, and, eventually, little Suzanna.

In that regard, Suzanna plays a very important role. Due to certain circumstances, Suzanna was born to become a true outsider: she never attends a kindergarten or communicates with other children of her age. Like her mother, Suzanna does not belong to any group. It is symbolic, that the little girl has a double name: Suzanna – for people in the real life, and Sophia – a secret one, which represents a link to eternity and spirituality. Being scared to lose the girl, Evdokia instructs her:

*Ты случись чего, дак имя своё помни. Не это – Сюзанна. Это для людей. А для Бога имя тебе – София. Она и заступница небесная. Дева белоснежная, Божья слава. Самая премудрая – мудрее и нет на свете*

If anything happens, do not forget your name. Not this one – Suzanna. That is for other people. For God, your name is Sofia. She is a heavenly intercessor. A snow-white virgin, God’s glory. She is the wisest – no one could be wiser than her (149).

It is not Suzanna who introduces the sacral plan of the narration, but it is her with whom the development of the dual reality theme is associated, especially the aforementioned fantastic dimension of the narration. Suzanna represents the motif of the mirror. Listening to the grannies, talking about her and her fatherless situation, Suzanna does not link these talks to herself but to an imaginary girl she sees every time when she opens a wardrobe with a mirror:

*Это же про ту девочку. Которая в шкафу живёт. Створку распахнёшь – является: стоит, смотрит. У нас и платья одинаковые [...] И комната на нашу похожа [...] Только кровать одна – другой нету. Зато дверь у них. А еще лесенка. Отец ее по лесенке возвращается, из-за двери смотрит. Полюбуется на нее и снова уходит [...]*

This is all about that girl. The one who lives in the wardrobe. One will open wide the door: she is there looking at you. We have the same dresses [...] And her room looks like ours [...] The only difference is that they have one bed only – there is no the second one. But they have a door, and a flight of stairs. Her father is coming back coming down these stairs and looking out of the door. Feast his eyes on her and leaves again [...] (36)

The motif of mirror has a long tradition in Russian literature. For example, in Symbolist literature, mirrored images are frequently found connected with the themes of ubermensch, insanity, and doom (Maslenikov 46). For example, in Bely’s works, the mirror’s depths conceal “special worlds”, each one of which is endowed with a unique, tangible existence of its own (47). The Romantics and the Modernists endowed reflection with some mysterious power, frequently possessing magic significance: the looking glass

and the mirroring waters are portrayed as reflecting not the outward reality, but an inner truth. In *Time of Women*, on the one hand, the creation of a fictional world reflected in the looking glass can be certainly explained as a fantasy typical for a seven year old child. On the other hand, it depicts neither an inner truth nor outward reality. The reality Suzanna sees in the looking glass belongs to the world of perfect images and ideas. However, as a rule, mirrors in literature represent images in reverse (269). Therefore, it might be argued that the actual reality leaves much to be desired in terms of its proximity to the ideal. Thus, by means of looking in the mirror and imagining the ideal world on that side, Suzanna suggests her way to escape the present reality.

The fictional, mirror world, Suzanna creates for herself in her imagination, has everything she lacks in the real world. For example, when the grannies tell her what she is going to inherit from them after their death, Suzanna thinks of her imaginary counterpart from the mirror, who will be living with her grannies when they die:

*Умрут, к той девочке отправятся, с ней будут жить. Девочка их встретит, обрадуется. Только комнатка у неё маленькая – жить тесно. Пусть и комнаты их умрут – чтобы всем разместиться [...] где ж им на том свете обедать? Надо, чтобы и кухня умерла*

When they die, they will visit that girl again and stay with her. The girl will get very excited meeting them. But her room is too small – they will feel very cramped. Their rooms should die too in order to have enough living space for everyone [...] Where are they going to have lunch in the other world? Their kitchen should die too in this case (40).

This mirror reality is harmonic, because, first, it has enough room for a comfortable existence and, second, it has a full family consisting of at least three members – a mother, a little girl, and a father. Compared to this perfect picture, the

present reality is lesser, since it is a “hero-less” space, in the first place. It lacks a hero, a man, which is stated in the strongest position of the novel – in its title *Time of Women*. Indeed, Suzanna does not have a father; correspondingly Antonina does not have a husband. Nikolai cannot be counted on because, first, he becomes a fake husband when gets married to dying Antonina, and, second, he turns out to be a fake stepfather because he is not able to protect Suzanna from his second wife Zina and cannot help her to settle down. Each of the grannies has lost a husband, children and grandchildren. Only one of them, Glikeria, still has a friend, Solomon, a doctor, who used to be her admirer during the World War II, and who eventually helps the grannies with the girl when Antonina falls very badly ill. But anyway Glikeria has lived her life alone without him and his support. Thus, present reality appears twisted, as all the problems are to be solved by women. It is directly stated by the trade union leader, Zoia Ivanovna, in a very proud manner at the very beginning: “У нас ведь как? **Мать всему голова: и напоит, и накормит. Ну и что – без мужа?**” (“How do we live here? Mother is the main figure in the family: she will give you water, and feed. So what that you are without a husband?!”) (9) Women and men switched their roles, and very often men do not play any role at all. Nikolai is the only man in the novel who has a speaking note. In the part *Отчим* (Stepdad), he appears as someone, who gets very confused and is not able to handle the current situation. Nikolai lets other people, co-workers at the factory, decide his fate for him: he is inferior to the scenario according to which he turns into a father of a non-existent child and has now to get married to Antonina because of that. Even knowing that it is not true, as a result, Nikolai does exactly what they want him to do. Not for nothing, Solomon admits that Nikolai is kind but weak.



Thus, this world order gets broken, whereas, its mirror counterpart reflects an absolutely different world picture. It should be mentioned that the mirror fictional world becomes partly real when, on New Year's eve, Suzanna gets a toy apartment given by her mother. In fact, she gets a small material version of her imaginary reality: *“Это такая квартирка: всё в ней имеется – и комнатки, и кухня, и люди. Только вырезать надо и склеить. [...] Там ведь семья целая.”* (“This is an apartment that has everything in it – rooms, a kitchen, and people. You just need to cut it and glue.”) (75)

By the end of the novel, Suzanna's dream about a complete family and a sufficient amount of square meters gradually comes almost true. In the part *Внучка* (Granddaughter), she appears as an adult telling the second part of her story, in which she manages to buy a big apartment:

*Иногда я стелю камчатную скатерть с розами и представляю, как мы садимся вокруг стола – и отец, и мама, и бабушки. Это я для них купила такую большую квартиру. Чтобы у них был дом, в котором больше не страшно, потому что это – наши комнаты, и их никто не отнимет.*

Sometimes I lay a tablecloth with roses and imagine how we sit around the table – the father, mom, and the grannies. I got such a big apartment for them so that they had a house where it would not be scary anymore to live because these are our rooms, and no one could take them from us. (190)

The only difference from the dream is that the time of women has not finished for her – Suzanna lives alone in this big apartment with the man she presumably loves abroad. It is noteworthy that her ex-boyfriend's name is Grigorii, the same name as her real father whom she never knew. Suzanna partly repeats the destiny of her mother, who was lonely all her life.

It should be noted that Suzanna is not the only dreamer or, in other words, not the only one who brings a parallel dimension to the narration. Her mother projects her nightmares onto real life. They often seem more real and colorful than present reality. Her nightmares are intertwined with the real life in a very interesting way. While dreaming, she finally meets with the love of her life, Suzanna's father, whom she has not seen for a very long time. They meet twice in a cabin somewhere in the forest of the countryside. According to all the signs, Grigorii is dead. The first time, they meet, he appears as a bear, the second time he meets Antonina with his fellows as a gangster. According to Russian superstitions, it is a very bad sign to meet deceased people in a dream, talk to them, and agree to take food from them. Antonina goes even further: she closes a deal with Grigorii. She promises to be Grigorii's fiancée and puts her ring-finger in pledge of that (then in real life, she injures this very finger). Thus, in a mysterious way, Antonina earns the right for her daughter to be able to talk: right after her death, Suzanna starts talking. Being already hopelessly sick, Antonina sees in her dreams her wedding with Grigorii that feels more real than her actual wedding with Nikolai: *“Из машины выбралась – Николай навстречу. Под руку меня взял. Иду, а сама думаю: неправда это. Свадьба-то моя в другой стороне.”* (“I got out of the car – Nikolai is going to meet me. He took my arm. I am following him but thinking at the same time: it is not true. My wedding is in another place”) (180) As it turns out, the other world is much more attractive. Antonina admits: *“А смерть-то веселее жизни...”* (“Death is better than life ...”) (179). This is her way of escaping from the suffocating Soviet reality. In such a way, the depiction of a double reality gets closely connected with the theme of death.

## The Theme of Death

The theme of death functions on four different levels: 1) on the level of everyday talks – it penetrates the speech of almost all the characters that use death imaginary to discuss casual things; 2) on the factual level – all grannies lost their families. Besides, from time to time, they tell different stories related to death that happened to other people; 3) on the supernatural level – in fairytales, dreams, and scary tales; 4) it serves as one of the means for the Soviet reality description.

The theme is introduced with the description of Antonina's beloved during their last meeting: *“Глаза мутные – не мертвые, не живые”* (“Eyes are dull – not dead, not alive.”) (12). Characters often use expressions referring to the death to describe themselves, their inner state or just to talk about things not related to the theme of death at all. For instance, Antonina says about herself: *“Последнее время совсем будто мертвая. Хожу, делаю, а внутри пусто”* (“I have been as if dead recently”) (42) or *“Пока всех перемоешь – ни жива, ни мертва сделаешься”* (“Until I wash everyone, I will become neither alive, nor dead”) (62).

Glikeriia describing herself and her admirer calls herself and him the living dead: *“Что он, что я – живые покойники”* (“He and I are just living dead”) (49) Choosing a New Year tree, Evdokiia mutters discontentedly: *“Ёлки-то мертвые ...”* (“Christmas trees are dead”) (50) To describe the highest extent of her delight with the fabric for a dress, Glikeriia exclaims: *“Ох, - вздыхает, - красота неопишемая – хоть сейчас помирай”* (“Oh, - she sighs - it is such an indescribable beauty – so that you can die right now”) (60)

On the one hand, such usage of the “death” lexis indirectly characterizes real life and gives it quite dark, apocalyptic connotations. On the other hand, the fact that people incorporate this vocabulary so freely in their everyday conversations indicates that this topic has become quite casual for them; they are very accustomed to it.

There are at least two reasons for that. First of all, due to certain historical events, people actually lost someone among their families and friends. The novel is full of such examples recalled by the grannies. Their personal life stories are quite illustrative as well, since some of their relatives, faithful communists, were repressed, some of them were killed during all the wars and revolutions. The second reason for treating this topic without reverence can be explained by Orthodox Church and folk traditions. For instance, there are customs to commemorate the dead. In order to observe such customs, special food must be cooked, such as pancakes. Therefore, the latter are always strongly associated with the commemoration custom in everyday life. When Nikolai comes to visit Antonina and meet her family for the very first time, they, talking about nothing, touch on this topic: “*В наших краях на обед не пекут. Глупый народ, суеверный – блины, говорят на поминки [...] В деревне-то [...] конечно. У нас тоже – на поминки. В городе – другое дело. Обычаи не соблюдают.*” (“In our area, we do not bake pancakes for dinner. Stupid people, superstitious – they say that pancakes are for funeral banquets. In the countryside [...] of course. We have pancakes for funeral repasts as well. It is different in city though. They do not observe customs there”) (107)

Also there is an unwritten, informal custom observed by old people mostly, when they prepare the clothes they want to be buried in long in advance. Glikeriia asks Antonina to buy fabric for two dresses. Antonina gets two pieces of the same fabric

without knowing that the dress, Glikeriia is going to sew for herself, is the one that is supposed to be her “funeral” dress. When Antonina learns that one of two identical dresses is going to be made for this particular reason, she seems to be slightly puzzled: “[...] *как же я платье это надену? [...] А то будто и мне – в гроб*” (“How will I wear that dress? [...] As if it is me who is going to die”) (61). Ironically, it is Antonina who prepares the dress, as it turns out, for her own funeral in advance. Again, according to the tone in these two conversations, the death is taken as something casual, inevitable, as an essential part of life.

Due to its mysterious and unknown nature, death exists not in a real life only. It is a recurring theme in the imaginary world as well – the world of dreams, fairy and scary tales. For example, one of the fairy-tales that Suzanna always keeps in her mind is about Sleeping Beauty. According to the plot, the princess gets her finger pricked because of the paternoster of the wicked witch and falls asleep for a hundred years. In fact, this fairy-tale represents Suzanna’s perception of real life. In her imagination, real events get intertwined with well-known plots of fairy-tales, so that it is possible to draw parallels between them. For instance, a New Year’s scene is given from the little girl’s perspective. Observing her grannies and mom, she notes: “*Мама веселая. За столом сидит, про злую фею не помнит.*” (“Mom is happy. She is sitting at the table and seems not to remember about the wicked witch.”) (74) So, Suzanna thinks that the wicked witch is after her mother and starts crying because of her upcoming loss. It is interesting that this happens before Antonina learns about her disease and agrees to have surgery. It can be interpreted in different ways: 1) the girl intuitively foresees the future events, she is able to feel it, or 2) the author points out how thin is the border between

explainable and unexplained, rational and irrational. As it was mentioned above, after this episode in one of her nightmares, Antonina sees how she lets Suzanna's father cut off her finger, which actually hurts, so that he could help Suzanna start talking in a real life. However, before that happens, Antonina hears Evdokiia telling Suzanna another fairy-tale about two brothers, one of which kills the other brother at the end and cuts off his finger. This motif of a cut off finger is rooted in folklore art (ancient Russian fairy-tale traditions). It refers to one of the ways of a hero creation. The point of this is that an adult creates a child by cutting off a part of his or her body. (Krayushkina, 3) Thus, Antonina recreates her daughter, gives her a chance for a new better life but at the cost of her own – she dies from cancer. The only difference between a fairy-tale and real life is that, in the former, the princess does not die – she just falls asleep: *“Уколется, упадёт замертво, но сама не умрёт – только заснёт надолго. А как пробьёт её час, глаза и откроются. Тут она навек проснется... .”* (“She will prick herself and drop dead but she will not die – she will just fall asleep for a while. When her time comes, she will open her eyes. And she will be awake forever ...”) (32) From Suzanna's perspective, death is a deep sleep, it is not scary, just a transformation into a different state. According to her, dead people are going to keep on living but in a different dimension.

The idea that death is a transitive moment is shared by the grannies too. Moreover, they repeatedly point out that the real life is often much harder and joyless than the life in the other world. For example, Glikeriia says about disabled veterans, one of whom Suzanna happens to see: *“Это – инвалид. Таким с войны пришёл. [...] Теперь один остался: другие-то поумирали, должно. Отмучились, голуби. Отдыхают на том свете”* (“It is an invalid. He came from the war like this. He is

alone now: others died I think. They, doves, will not suffer anymore. Finally, they can relax and have some rest in the other world.”) (38) This quote might be a reference to widespread rumors of the 1960-s and to the established fact of current days – about the way disabled veterans were treated in the Soviet Union after World War II. According to these rumors, there was created a special camp for disabled veterans located on the Valaam Island, the northern part of the Lake Ladoga, to where they were transported in 1950 - 1984. This camp resembled one of the multiple concentration camps of that time in the USSR, since veterans were treated as prisoners there. As they say, the main reason for sending veterans to such a remote part of the country was the desire to get rid of cripples who, for obvious reasons, would turn into beggars. (Tainy SSSR: Valaam lager dlya veteranov-frontovikov – USSR Secrets: Valaam – the camp for the World War II veterans)

Anyway, just out of pity for veterans, or knowing something more about their possible destiny, Evdokiia acknowledges that death is the best way out for such people. Glikeriia echoes her, when saying in the middle of their everyday small arguments: “*А я вот, может, и радуюсь, что нет у меня детей. Чего на смерть рожать?*” (“I am maybe happy that I don’t have any children. What’s the point to give them birth if they are going die soon anyway?”) (57)

Her words directly refer to the historical situation in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the USSR but they also indirectly give an idea of the Soviet reality being potentially “lifeless”, since there is no desire to give a birth to a new generation because they are going to die soon anyway. Talking about some repair work on the Leningrad streets, Glikeriia and Evdokiia again switch the topic to the fatality of the Soviet world:

*“Народу больно много. Одни роют, другие в землю ложатся. – Как бы так [...] Думают, другим вырыли. А потом, глядь, выходит – себе”* (“There were too many people. Some of them are digging, others lie in the ground. – Like this [...] They think they dug graves for others. But then it turns out that no – for themselves.”) (23)

Noteworthy, that Antonina dies from the uterine cancer. It also indirectly points at potential mortality, a non-reproductive nature of the Soviet life.

The Soviet world seems to be doomed, it is fatal. Getting back to the space structure in the novel, Saint –Petersburg shares the same characteristics as the aforementioned ones that were acquired by the Soviets as well. As Toporov states, *“Петербург – бездна, «иное» царство, смерть, но Петербург и то место, где национальное самосознание и самопознание достигло того предела, за которым открываются новые горизонты жизни [...]”* (“Saint-Petersburg is an abyss, the “other” kingdom, and death. But Saint-Petersburg is also a place where national consciousness and self-knowledge reach that limit, beyond which new horizons are open up in life [...]”) (8) In other words, Saint-Petersburg (and then Leningrad) embodies the synthesis of the creation myth and the eschatological myth. Speaking about the last one, Evdokia shares her own vision about the possible reason for the ruin of the Russian nation: *“А наша все больше – от себя. Воистину сами себе – первый враг. Чужие только задумать успеют, а мы уж, глядь, и сделали.”* (“We suffer from ourselves mostly. Indeed, we are our own first enemy. Strangers just have an intention of doing something but, look at us, we have it done already”) (49) According to her, the Russian people have a tendency or desire for self-destruction. At the same time, Evdokia quite accurately predicts the end of the Bolshevik era: *“Бабушка как говорила? Через*



*двадцать лет кончится. Проснусь, а ничего нету*” (“What did your grandma used to say? It’ll be over in twenty years. I will wake up some day, and everything will have been gone by that time.”) (55)

Paradoxically, death may be considered as the measure of the quality of life in the USSR. As mentioned above, real life in its Soviet coordinates did not probably have any value for disabled veterans. Therefore, compared to them, the life of the grannies, according to Evdokiia, is relatively happy and quiet, which makes it worthy being thankful for: *“Напечем, в церковь с тобой ходим: надо и нищих угостить. Не все такие счастливые, чтобы умереть в спокое.”* (“We will make pancakes and go to church: we need to treat all the beggars there. Not everyone is as fortunate as us to be able to die in piece.”) (25) It is a vivid indicator of the declared equality in the Soviet society being just a myth.

### The Theme of Memory

In one way or another, the theme of death is strongly connected with the theme of memory. To get back to the example with the commemoration custom, its name relates to such words as “remember”, “memory”. According to *Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language by V. Dal*, the word “поминки” is derived from the verbs “помнить” (to remember), “хранить в памяти прошлое” (to keep the past in your memory), “сказывать минувшее” (to talk about the past), “думать либо говорить о ком-то” (think or talk about someone).

Indeed, the question of memory, of how important it is to be able to remember things, is one of the main ones raised in the novel. It can be traced on the “byt” (factual) level. For example, embroidering a tapestry, which she is going to give Suzanna, Glikeriia says: “*А когда я умру, память моя останется.*” (“When I die, you will remember me.”) (40) Ariadna, a former aristocrat, promises that Suzanna will get her old earrings after her death, saying: “*Сережки старинные, бриллиантовые. Родительская память. [...] Вырастешь, в зеркало посмотришь, меня и вспомнишь.*” (“These are vintage diamond earrings. It’s my parents’ gift, so that I would always remember them [...] When you grow up, you will look in the mirror and, thus, you will remember me.”) (40). Thus, evoking memories, the earrings link at least three generations together.

Similarly as in the previous example, the author underscores throughout the whole novel how much attention the grannies pay to minor, seemingly unimportant details, things that turn out to be directly related to major determinant events in their lives. For example, Evdokiia still keeps a baptismal shirt of her son, which then becomes her grandson’s. She pulls it out of the closet for Suzanna’s christening. Just one look at this shirt is enough for Evdokiia to recall the circumstances under which her son, who was a devoted Bolshevik, and all his family perished: Stalin’s repressions and World War II. Thus, one’s personal tragedy reflects the tragedy of the whole nation. In other words, due to the work of memory mechanisms, history on the national level gets some personal, individual features, and turns from something abstract into something more meaningful and concrete.

Similarly, the space of the city gets associated with some personal stories, thus acquiring individual features. For example, Ariadna, looking at the lions on the Petersburg quay, recalls one of her grandsons, who passed away long time ago. She speaks about him as if he were still alive:

*Львы добрые, смирные. Сидят, караулят. Внук мой Алёшенька тоже их любил. Николенька младший не запомнил. А старший должен помнить. Мы с ним часто ходили, как с тобой. Он все про нас помнит. Вот вырастешь, тоже про него вспомни. Я умру, никого у него не останется: только ты одна.*

The lions are kind and quiet. They are sitting here and watching. My grandson Alyoshenka liked them too. Nikholenka, the youngest, did not remember. But the oldest should remember. He and I used to come here as often as you and I come here now. He remembers everything about us. When you grow up, recall him once in a while. I will die soon. He will have no one but you. (36)

According to her, the mechanisms of recalling and remembering prolong one's life in a certain sense: the connection with the people who passed away keeps existing but on some mental level.

Thus, memory functions as a linking means between generations and times, thereby creating History in its global sense. In order to know the history, one needs to remember it or people who make it. Therefore, the motif of unknown soldiers and other victims of war, buried no one knows where, emerges from time to time throughout the novel. It is raised by the grannies who seem to take responsibility for honoring their memory. Mentioning them in their everyday conversations, the grannies do not let these people be completely forgotten.

The significance of the ability to remember can be traced even on the level of sayings and traditional signs. For example, Antonina says to her daughter: “*В коротких-*

*то ничего нету – ни памяти, ни силы. Раньше ведь как говорили: короткий волос – короткая память. А зачем тебе короткая? У тебя до-олгая будет[...]* (“There is no memory, no strength in short hair. What they used to say in old days: short hair means short memory. You don’t need short memory, right?! You will have a long one [...]”) (63)

Being able to remember means being strong and unique. In this sense, the story of Suzanna as an adult is quite illustrative. As a student at an art school, she has a hard time following canons – the perspective was not used in all her works because Suzanna has her own vision of space. She divides the space strictly into two halves – top and bottom:

*То, что внизу, должно оставаться мелким: для этого и нужна перспектива, чтобы оно уходило вдаль. Но там, наверху, все поворачивается, подступает ближе, чтобы мы видели, как оно всплывает обратно – из глубины. Если нарисовать по правилам, так, как полагается, все важное станет плоским – уйдет в землю.*

Everything on the bottom should remain small. Actually, this is what the perspective is needed for – all small things should go into the distance. However, up there on the top, it flips and comes closer, so that we could see how it emerges again from the depth. If I follow the rules and draw, as I am supposed to do, everything important will become flat and be hidden in the ground. (70)

In order to be accepted in a specialized college, Suzanna has to relearn how to draw. In other words, she has to change herself dramatically and follow the rules. To fit into the society, Suzanna literally is not allowed to have her own point of view, because what she sees and feels is located in some other dimension – the top half, which is usually ignored in Soviet reality. Indeed, Suzanna’s idea of space is unique: according to her, the truth – something essential in this life, the source of inspiration, - is located somewhere high above and, at the same time, deep. Suzanna mentions the word “depth” –

“глубина”, which in Russian is usually associated with such set expressions as “глубина знания” or “глубина веков”. Knowledge about such “depth” can be transferred only from generation to generation. Most likely, Suzanna is able to come up with such an unusual notion, atypical for the Soviet period because of her upbringing by the grannies. However, in the framework of the Soviet world picture, the upper part of the space is not considered at all. This world is organized by other principles that do not involve any deviations or uncertainty: everything is simple and flat like the skyline. Suzanna explains her dislike of canons: “[...] и я пыталась объяснить, почему канон не имеет отношения к моей жизни – мне **трудно следовать традициям, в которых нет ничего личного.**” (“[...] and I was trying to explain why the canon had nothing to do with my life – it was difficult for me to follow the traditions, in which there was nothing personal.”) (71)

Making traditions personal can be compared with the process of making national history personal - the same mechanisms of memory get involved. One of the ways to make something personal is to have memories about it. It turns out that Soviet reality rejects the memories taken from unknown depths. It denies any recollections as such.

It is interesting that the novel literally begins with the word “recollection”: “*Моё первое воспоминание: снег [...]*” (“My first recollection was snow [...]”) (7) This is the dedication written on behalf of Suzanna. She writes that she remembers nothing from the period when she was mute. It lasted her first seven years until her mother’s death. Later Suzanna states a hypothesis, according to which the cause of her oblivion is in her inability to speak. It must be stated that Suzanna is not the only one who cannot verbally express herself. Actually, the phenomenon of muteness informs the whole novel. The plot

itself is built around the situation, in which Antonina cannot talk about her daughter and has to hide her from co-workers because she thinks if they find out about Suzanna's muteness, they will take her away from her. With the help of the grannies, Antonina learns how to be silent, how to lie and keep secrets: *“старухи наставляют: там, на работе-то – молчи. Спросят, отвечай: хорошо всё. У людей языки длинные, дурные. Все беды от языков”* (“the grannies instruct me: keep silent at work. If they ask, you should answer that everything is alright. People have tongues without bones sometimes – they talk a lot having bad intentions. Talking causes all the troubles.”) (15)

Talking about girl's problem, the grannies generalize it and view muteness as such from a slightly different perspective – as a means to save one's life and live in peace: *“Уж и не знаю, что и лучше. При нашей-то жизни: языкастой или уж так, молчком.”* (“I even don't know what is better in our life: being able to talk or being like this – mute.”) (185)

The same idea is expressed in one of Antonina's nightmares: she gets surprised that the gangsters she is talking to are neither dead nor alive. Trying to explain her surprise, Grigorii says: *“Откуда ж ей знать, она ведь оттуда с воли.”* (“How could she know?! She came from there, from the land of freedom.”) (88) Having said this phrase, he causes a loud laughter shared by everyone in the room: *“С воли! Ну ты и скажешь – с воли!”* (“From the land of freedom! Are you kidding me! From the land of freedom!”) (88) It should be mentioned that the concept of “воля” is unique in Russian culture. Depending on the context, it can be translated by various English lexemes, such as “will”, “freedom”, “wish”, “independence”, “emancipation”, and it compiles all the connotations conveyed by them. It turns out that Soviet reality lacks the aforementioned

characteristics. It is explicitly defined here as the space of “неволи”. Further, Antonina asks the gangsters to help her daughter start talking. Her request is met with a bitter smile:

Не пойму я что-то. Разве другие-то ваши – разговорчивые? *Все, которые разговорчивые, давно здесь у нас* [...] Глупая ты баба! Счастья своего не понимаешь. *Как бы нам-то немymi родиться, разве гнили б теперь?*

I can't get it. As if the rest of you guys are quite talkative? Everyone, who used to talk much, is here now [...] You are a stupid woman! You can't realize how happy you are! If we had been born deaf and dumb, would we have rotted here?  
(89)

On the one hand, it is a direct reference to repressions against political prisoners in the USSR. On the other hand, more broadly, overall muteness is represented as the sign of the whole epoch. In the Soviet world, it is better to keep silent: no sound – no problem. However, according to Suzanna, inability to speak causes the inability to remember. As a consequence, the loss of memory leads to an insuperable gap between generations. Eventually, it causes the breaking with the world history.

Thus, Soviet reality represents the world of inverted values. This state is a new formation, not burdened with the traditions and principles of its predecessors. It rejects a universal spiritual experience common to all mankind and its own cultural and intellectual heritage. In this regard, little Suzanna can be viewed as the most appropriate symbol of that period: she is an orphan, and has been mute since birth. Being voluntarily isolated from her roots, the Soviet world offers new faith, new morality, a new archetype of a Soviet person, and a new future – communism. Before her death, Antonina confesses:

*Я вот, Гликерия Егоровна, в коммунизме мечтала б пожить [...] Счастливые, кто доживёт [...] Все, говорят, по-другому будет [...] Всё, обещали свободно давать будут [...] У них всё по-иному планируется. Я вот, - шепчет, - и думаю: заранее в телевизоре показывают [...] Я уж гляжу – не налюбуюсь: не такие как мы. На производство придут – все у них хорошо. И дома по-людски [...] я и думаю: такой он и есть – рай. Как там в телевизоре. Раньше-то не верила. А теперь, думаю, есть. Вот бы попасть туда, мечтаю...*

Glikeriia Ivanovna, my dream is to live under communism at least a little bit[...] Those will be happy who will live that long [...] They say everything will be different [...] They promised that everything will be free [...] They are planning everything in a different way. I am – she is whispering – thinking: they show it on television long in advance [...] I am looking at them right now and it's a pleasure for my eyes: they are not like us. They are doing well at work. Everything is alright at home [...] I think now that this must be Paradise. As it is shown on TV. I did not believe before. But now I think it exists. I wish I could get there, I dream about it ... (172)

The Soviet universe creates one more double – a totally Utopian, ephemeral, perfect version of itself. Its function is to substitute for actual reality, to convince people that this mirage is real and true, and get imprinted it on the mind of Soviet people. One of the strategies used for the creation of such an illusion is building the image of an enemy that is common for everyone and exists somewhere far away. The country that represents the enemy is America. Antonina appeals to this image more than anyone else in the novel. She takes on trust any tales about America, such as: “в Америке таких, как ты, - поганой метлой. Там с такими матерями не цацкаются”(95), “не знаю, может, конечно, и не звери, но о трудящихся своих не заботятся”(96), “все не по-людски. Будто в Америке живет”(103). (“Such people like you are swept out from the



society in America. They don't care about such mothers as you are", "I don't know, maybe they are not complete brutes, but they don't care about their working class", "everything is wrong, as if we live in America.") In contrast with America, life in the USSR does not seem that gloomy.

This new ideology of the bright future and relatively bearable present spreads by means of one of the technological miracles – television. It shows sporting events, parades, meetings of workers at factories with smiling, friendly, and glad people. However, these programs do not reflect actual reality: these are either some old videos of the Civil War time or footage from working meetings, in which everything and everyone looks so unrealistically well that real workers, such as Antonina, cannot recognize themselves. In fact, it is an artificially created world that gives vain hopes. For example, Ariadna watches every single parade from past years hoping to see her sons with their families alive, marching in the crowd: “*Как подумаю, что мои там идут. Живые ...*” (“I just think that my folks are marching there alive, as it gets really bad.”) (92)

Antonina believes that everything she is watching with such a delight, is going to happen in the nearest future. However, the imaginary world of television has nothing to do with the real one. And it is little Suzanna, who clearly specifies its true nature:

*Мертвые – весёлые. По улице идут – смеются ... Улицы у них широкие, праздничные. Поперек гирлянды висят. Машины ездят. И дети их умерли. Вон они: гуляют под музыку – тоже не разговаривают ...*

Dead people are cheerful. They are going down the streets and laughing... The streets are broad and look very festive. Multiple decorations are hanging here and there. Cars are going. Their children died too. Here are they: they are walking to this music and not talking as well. (101)

The key word of this quote is “мертвые” that gives a connotation of a lifeless reality: there is nothing behind it but a beautiful festive façade.

Thus, Chizhova’s depiction of the Soviet past can be classified as a non-nostalgic one. According to her, Soviet reality has always been somewhat superficial and artificial. It has never had its own roots, therefore, cultural and spiritual depth has never been available to it. It turns out that the real life and all its projections, such as a mirror world, fairy-tale reality, nightmare life, can be considered as nonviable, unproductive, since they are closely related to the theme of death. These are closed, discrete models of the world. The system might be viable only if the mechanism of memory has been launched because it helps to see and accept the truth.

### CHAPTER III

#### *ONCE THERE LIVED AN OLD MAN AND HIS WIFE*

*Zhili-byli Starik So Starukhoi* (Once There Lived an Old Man and His Wife) is written by Elena Katishonok in 2009, at the same time when *Time of Women* was released. The title is a quote from Pushkin's fairy-tale "The fisherman and the golden fish", which introduces folkloric motives in the novel. *Once There Lived an Old Man and His Wife* tells the story of a couple from the moment of their wedding till their death. Structurally, it is very different from Chizhova's *Time of Women*: if the latter has a complex narrative structure the speaking voice transferring from one character to another, *Once There Lived an Old Man and His Wife* has a traditional structure of an epic novel; it is a saga about one family – the Ivanovs. The main characters are put through the same hard times as the grannies in the *Time of Women*: World War I, the revolution, World War II, and the period of stagnation.

Katishonok's approach to Soviet reality depiction is notable since she refers to literally almost all the realia and events that used to be considered "anti-Soviet". First of all, *Once There Lived an Old Man and His Wife* depicts a family of Old Believers. The old man and the old lady are the descendants of the people who dared to engage in open and principle disagreement with the official authorities. Moreover, their ancestors were Roma and Cossacks. In World Literature, Roma has always been associated with a romantic image of freedom-loving people, wandering from place to place. In Pushkin's poem *The Gypsies*, the old gypsy defines the nature of his people as:

*Мы дики; нет у нас законов,*

*Мы не терзаем, не казим –*

***Не нужно крови нам и стонов –***

*Но жить с убийцей не хотим...*

***Ты не рожден для дикой доли,***

*Ты для себя лишь хочешь воли;*

*Ужасен нам твой будет глас:*

***Мы робки и добры душою [...]***

We are savage, and we do not have laws,

But we do not torture, and we do not kill.

We have no need of blood or groans

But to live with a murderer we have no wish.

Your lot was not cast to be born free,

You wish freedom for yourself only.

Your voice will be forever ghastly to us,

We are gentle and kind by nature

(Pushkin translated by an unknown author)

Roma are people with their own mores, principles, and the system of values. They have their unique inner core, and it is almost impossible to change their nature.

According to the definition given in Dal's dictionary, the word "Cossack" originates from the verb "скитаться" (skitatsya – to wander, stray), "бродить" (brodit – to roam). Cossacks, being semi-military and semi-naval communities, show the same love for freedom and independence. Thus, by definition, the old man and the old lady are destined to be in opposition to any official ideology – a liturgical reform, adopted throughout the country, imperial authorities, or Bolshevik authority, - it does not really matter. However, their disagreement and voluntary solitude are not out of stupid stubbornness or "senseless riot". (Pushkin. *The Captain's Daughter*, 8) Being in the opposition to official authorities was a deliberate and thoughtful step undertaken by their predecessors. However, the old man and the old lady do not take any active actions, do

not rebel. They keep the traditions of their ancestors and know where they come from. Therefore, they do not fight with their past, on the contrary, they accept and respect it. Katishonok underscores how different the old man and the old lady are from Russians at the very beginning:

*[...] первыми перебрались в Остзейский край, к гостеприимному синему-серому морю, где **трезвых и работающих** их единоверцев встречали приветливо [...] поселились в так называемом Московском форштадте, где уже больше двух веков прочно жили русские староверы, отторгнутые родной землей за экономию букв в имени Господа*

They were among the first ones who moved to the Baltic region, towards the hospitable blue-grey sea, where sober and hardworking Old Believers had always been greeted warmly [...] They settled down in Moscow Vorstadt, where Old Believers had been living for more than two centuries being rejected by their Motherland because of the different amount of letters in the name of God (Katishonok 12)

The quote above is one of the numerous examples of the author's unobtrusive manner of pointing at truly absurd situations happening in life in general, and in the Soviet one in particular. As a rule, Katishonok makes the old man and the old lady discuss such situations and each time ask perplexedly each other one and the same simple question: "На кой?" It means "why? What for?" asked in a very colloquial and informal manner. For example, when the World War II has begun, the old man tries to grasp the meaning of what is happening: "*[...] на кой?! На кой немцам (опять немцам ...) Польша? И сам себе отвечал, если это можно считать ответом: а на кой им тогда была Сербия?*" ("What the hell! Why on hell do Germans (again Germans) need Poland? And he responds on this questions himself, if it could be considered a response: Why on hell did they need Serbia?") (42) This is a very simple form question, which

nevertheless asks about the main problem. Its apparent simplicity enhances the effect of not knowing an answer to it: *“Разговор с учёными зятьями помог немного, а правду сказать, так и совсем не помог [...] На кой? Ждать немцев? Зятья помалкивали уклончиво, вынимали папироски, и потрясённый старик понял: не знают, даром что учёные”* (“The conversation with well-educated sons-in-law did not help a lot. Honestly speaking, it did not help at all [...] What for? Waiting for Nazis? Sons-in-law were keeping silence acting very evasively. They took their cigarettes out, and a shocked old man got it: despite their good education, they just had no idea as well.”) (42)

In order to underscore the “otherness” of the Ivanovs, Katishonok chooses the Baltic (Остзейский край) as the place where most of the depicted events are happening. This territory has always been different from other places in Russia in many aspects such as culture, the class system, the land tenure, and civil legislation. Thus, the Ivanovs, the same as Chizhova’s characters from *Time of Women*, can be considered as “outsiders” in relation to the Soviet reality. The “outsider” status lets the old man and the old lady take a detached look at everything going on in the country, which implies a certain extent of objectivity in their assessment of the events.

It is noteworthy that Katishonok exploits similar means for Soviet reality description. For example, to show the huge changes that World War I and the Revolution of 1917 bring, Katishonok refers to the theme of space: she describes how the perception of the space by the characters has changed after these events: *“Бредовые годы эвакуации обозначались неохотным и неопределённым «тогда в Ростове», причем для обоих давний, безмятежный Ростов их юности и Ростов тифозный были точно разными городами. Да и только ли для них?...”* (“The delusional years in

evacuation were marked with a loath and indefinite “back then in Rostov” The old, quiet Rostov of their youth and this new typhus Rostov became two different cities for them. But was it like this for only them?” (32)

Katishonok also underlines that, despite all the wars and revolutions, the old man and the old woman have not ceased to be old believers. No matter what happens, religion has always been a part of their lives – a true spiritual support and moral navigator. Religious beliefs are the foundation of their life philosophy. Therefore, certain events depicted in the novel are highlighted in an unusual way, different from their traditional interpretation. The most illustrative example is the discussion of World War II. Neither the old man nor his older sons kill anybody during the war because for them it is impossible to break the commandment “*Не убий!*” (“Thou shalt not kill!”) Thus, the war, one of the cornerstones of the Russian national history, is presented as an absurdity, a tragedy that does not cause pathetic feelings or pride. On the contrary, it raises the same question: “*На кой?*” (Why on hell?) In other words, what did all these people die for? In one of the episodes, the old man brings his younger son to his level, who, being totally drunk, is boasting that he shed another’s blood: “*Ты чужую кровь проливал, что ж ты фордыбачишь? А кто свою пролил, тот не вернулся.*” (“You shed someone else’s blood. So why are you posing right now as a hero? Who shed his own blood did not return home.”) (78)

However, it should be mentioned that Katishonok does not treat only World War II this way. Any war is viewed as something truly absurd. It is not about heroism anymore but about suffering, pain, injustice, loss, and mourning:

*Непонятно было всё, куда ни оборотись. Царь, который клялся на иконе и на святом Евангелии воевать до последнего, был где-то безнадёжно далеко,*

*а кто поговаривал, что его уж и совсем не было. Наверное, поэтому воевали теперь не только с немцами, а с кем попадя, и даже друг с другом, отчего, должно быть, часто менялась власть. Она врывалась в город одинаково бесцветными шинелями, но была диковинным образом окрашена в цвет своих знамён, точно солдаты сговорились играть в неизвестную игру, где все воевали против всех [...]*

Everything was unclear, no matter where you look. Tsar that swore on the icon and on the holy Gospel to fight to the last moment was somewhere very far away. Though some people said that he is not in this world anymore. Maybe because of that they fought not against Germans only but against everyone including each other. That probably led to a quick change of the government. It rushed into the city wearing equally colorless overcoats but it strangely acquired the colors of its banners, as if its soldiers conspired to play a weird game, in which all were fighting against all [...] (24)

The quote above illustrates that the author does not give any evaluations to the listed historical events, though very important ones, such as World War I, the overthrow of Emperor Nikolai II, and the Civil War, are mentioned. According to Katishonok, any war and any regime, monarchy or socialism, are considered equally horrible and irrational if they cause such chaos. The old lady's son-in law, an excellent dentist, works for both Soviet and fascist authorities during the World War II. He is shown as the head and real support for the whole family and not condemned for his job at all. Katishonok does not make any evaluations showing who is "good" and who is "bad"; the war, as a phenomenon, is evil in general.

Such objectivity from the author is created by means of the neutral and unhurried manner of narration. If Chizhova gives the speaking voice to different characters, which results in somewhat sharp and intermittent narrative structure, Katishonok tells her story from the third person singular in the past tense form, which forms her calm and



meaningful narrative style. The time structure is organized in a similar way. The main characters live according to the Church calendar, the same as Chizhova's grannies. The time is circular: from one traditional holiday to another: *“Так неделя, другая проходили, и жизнь старика и старухи текла, как хорошо выученный урок: посты да праздники, которые теперь, при их скудном достатке, так походили друг на друга, что немудрено было и ошибиться.”* (“Thus one week flew after another and the life of the old man and his old lady went as usual, as a well-learned lesson: fasts and holydays that now resemble each other so much, considering the scanty income of the old lady and the old man, that one could confuse them easily.”) (70) The first phrase in the quote is a direct allusion to Pushkin's fairy-tale, which plot is partly conveyed in the novel: it has an imperious the old woman, who likes jewellery and scolds everything and everyone, and her submissive husband, who likes fishing. However, this is a quite superficial characterization of the main characters. In fact, they are endowed with good intuition and a special inner knowledge that allows them to identify what is “right” and what is “wrong”: *“[...] настойчивое «на кой», несмотря на несколько выпитых рюмок, вертелось в голове, [...]: он то знал, что должно быть только наоборот: слюбится – терпится, а все остальное – от лукавого.”* (“The obsessive thought “why on hell, what for” was on his mind despite several shots of vodka [...]: he knew for sure that it should have been the other way: love grows and time passes; all the rest is from the Evil One.”) (40)

This question “на кой” emerges often throughout the novel and serves as the sign of sane people who are trying to understand what is happening; of people whose mind is not burdened with book knowledge or ideology of any color. The source of their wisdom

is in the traditions, which they follow strictly. However, their view of a situation is not defined by traditional ideas only. The old man and the old lady seem to be open for the universal truths. In order to demonstrate this, Katishonok incorporates the elements of the fantastic, surreal dimension in the narration: the old man and the old lady see prophetic dreams; besides that, the old man manages to talk to his oldest son, who died in the war and came to him as a vision.

Therefore, it is they, who take the responsibility for bringing up of their grand-granddaughter, the same as the grannies from *Time of Women*. Thus, Katishonok touches upon the question of discontinuity between generations too. Despite all the official explanation of such a situation, it might be assumed that the authors do not trust the parenting of the generation born and raised in the Soviet Union.

It is noteworthy that the old man and the old lady call the time before the Revolution as “the peaceful time” and feel nostalgic for it throughout the whole book. Thus Katishonok redirects the feeling of nostalgia emphasizing that the Soviet reality is not worthy of nostalgia. This question can be considered as a refrain of the novel which indicates the absurdity and paradoxicality of the Soviet period.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSION

In this work, two novels written in 2008 – 2009 by contemporary Russian writers, Elena Chizhova and Elena Katishonok, were analyzed in attempt to retrieve from them and then formulate common characteristics and tendencies in the Soviet past representation. Both authors depict the Soviet state as a potentially lifeless and temporary formation.

On the one hand, this idea is supported by well-known, from the historical point of view, facts occurred in everyday life of average Soviet citizens reflected in both works such as extremely difficult and uncomfortable housing situations (for example, living in a communal apartment), endless lines at stores, food and consumer goods shortages, and small salaries. The list can be easily continued. On the other hand, the recurring themes and motifs exploited in the novels also indicate mostly negative perception and understanding of that period.

In this sense, the organization of space can be considered the most representative and prominent one. Leningrad from *Time of Women* is depicted as a hybrid that inherited the general characteristics of its predecessor, Saint – Petersburg – the city from the classical literary works that form the corpus of the Petersburg text. However, though Chizhova's Leningrad acquires infernal dual nature, this city, the symbol of the Soviet state (it is named after the inspirer of the Soviet ideology, Vladimir Lenin), can be considered only a weak copy of Saint-Petersburg. The latter is strongly associated with the cultural heritage of the country and constantly emerges through a thin layer of the

Soviet reality. It means that the Soviet system, as just a double is quite vulnerable and ephemeral, which is directly pointed out by the grannies. They are the only characters in the novel who are able to foresee the most likely scenario of life existed in the Soviet coordinates. The grannies know and recall the life before the Soviet period. This ability to remember evolves specific sensitivity to the ongoing events. The Soviet “machine” is designed in such a way that it eliminates all the memories that existed before and rewrites the history in order to replace it with a brand-new memory by means of propaganda.

Moreover, the novel is permeated with the theme of death, which can be treated as a marker of the Soviet system. In a figurative meaning, it is a “lifeless” territory. Antonina, one of the main characters in the novel, can be considered the symbol of “sterility” of the Soviet time. Ironically, Antonina is the only one who believes in communism with all her heart and made it her religion, however, she dies from the uterine cancer (her disease is symbolic too). According to Chizhova, the Soviet system is not capable to create anything. It is *flat* by nature as well as some of Suzanna drawings that became acknowledged as the “right” ones by the institute committee because they could meet all the *standard* requirements.

Elena Katishonok emphasized importance of the category of memory too by making old people with rich life experience the main heroes and role models in her novel *Once There Lived an Old Man and His Wife*. It illustrates the history of the whole country by the example of one big family that seems not to view the Soviet system as a big part of their lives. Their world picture is very traditional, and the Soviet period is considered just one of the stages of it. In their eyes, the Soviet era is very controversial and very often absurd and unreasonable. The old man and the old lady are the holders of

fundamental values, which are always a priority for them because viewed as something timeless and trustworthy unlike the Soviet postulates.

In the conclusion, all the observations indicate that both writers do not feel nostalgia for the Soviet period. On the contrary, the Soviet past receives a quite negative evaluation as a period full of hardship, when the state machine could smash anyone without any reason and neutralize all the differences of people from each other turning them into mediocrity. Chizhova and Katishonok expose the Soviet regime though doing it in their own ways. It goes without saying that these two novels require further study and comparison with the works of other contemporary Russian writers mentioned in the introduction because in this case the theme of the Soviet past representation would be introduced to the full extent.

## APPENDIX

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