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Telling Life, Writing War. The Diary of Maria Bruss

We know only a few details of Maria Bruss's life. In her diary, which she began in the 1940s and in which she recounts the story of her life since the October Revolution in 1917, many key dates are not recorded: Bruss does not mention, for example, when and where she was born, nor why her family moved to Kazakhstan.

Radio "Azattyk", the Kazakh service of Radio "Free Europe"/Radio "Liberty", was the first to publish an article about Bruss's diary, including extracts. According to the article edited by Radio "Azattyk", Bruss's family was originally from Poltava, where her grandmother was said to have been sold in exchange for a dog. Maria's diary mentions nothing of this possible history of serfdom, although she refers to her family's poverty and lower-class background as a way of identifying her place in the social order. Maria thus begins her report in a manner typical of autobiographical writing in the Soviet Union. However, her diary is unusual in a number of ways. For one thing, it is the report of a woman living in one of the pe-

ripheral Soviet republics, and autobiographical texts from these regions have seldom been preserved and have received little attention from scholars or the public. In addition, Maria began to write at a time when fear of persecution had already caused many to fall silent. To be sure, in the early days of the Soviet Union the memories of individuals from the lower classes were still greeted with much enthusiasm, as seen in such initiatives as the *History of the Factories* (see Gelis 1925: 197-212; Rozhkova 1932: 140-143; Zhuravlev 1997; Aris 2005). Marxist historians and journalists encouraged the collection and publication of autobiographical texts by peasants and workers, pointing to the gaps in the tsarist archives and the inadequacy of the material contained therein. This attitude was a continuation of a belief that started with the abolition of serfdom in 1861 – a belief which not only sought a supposedly genuine 'voice from below' in such texts but also saw them as evidence of the possibility of a better and more just society (Herzberg 2013: 21-64). In the

1930s and after, however, authors of autobiographical texts were increasingly accused of 'subjectivism' and even began to fear their texts being read outside of the family circle. As a consequence, a great many diaries were broken off in the years of collectivization and the purges.

Maria Bruss, however, did not start writing until the Second World War. Her diary begins with a reflection on her childhood during the period after the October Revolution in 1917. She describes her father as an active fighter against the Whites. But instead of portraying her life after the October Revolution and the Bolshevik victory as a transition from darkness into light, as was usual in official testimonies, she focused on the suffering of the early 1920s. The family was plagued by harvest failures and her father and older brothers left for Akbulak and Moscow in search of a livelihood. Her mother stayed behind and was forced to beg for food for herself and her remaining children. The absence of male family members is a central theme throughout the diary; indeed, their absence is described as endangering the family's very survival during the period of the Second World War.

The character of Maria's diary changes with her description of the year 1928, when family structure ceases to play a primary role and is replaced in importance by her relationships with men: she has her first "beau!" (marked page 14). The prominent exclamation mark indicates that she felt this was an event of great significance in her life, even if Vania was more interested in Maria than she was in him: "Naturally I cannot describe how much incomprehensible joy there was, since Vania's joy was greater" (marked page 15). Events such as her joining the *kolkhoz* and Komsomol, by contrast, are mentioned only in passing and are neither described in detail nor evaluated. Maria's frequent moves from one dairy farm to another are only mentioned in relation to the different men she met there. Maria reports that she received several marriage proposals, but typically refused them. Persuasion and compulsion usually feature at the beginning of her relationships, and she describes physical intimacy as unwelcome and unpleasant.

Ultimately, Maria leaves Petia, whom she describes as being "abhorrent" to her from the beginning of their relationship (marked page 25). She ignores his warning that she will be giv-

ing up her chances of happiness by leaving him and instead marries Ivan Kolosov, a man 17 years her elder. Her hope of finding real love at last, however, is not fulfilled. Her husband proves to be a violent drunk who concealed the fact that he had been married once before. After four years, writes Maria, her patience reached an end and she began to respond to Kolosov's rough behaviour with harsh words. Finally she threw him out of the house. After a short period of reconciliation, she left him for good in 1939. In addition to her marriage problems, Maria also frequently describes conflicts at work. For example, she describes how rivals attempted to drive her from the workplace by accusing her of being a 'wrecker'. The outbreak of the Second World War changes the character Maria's diary once again. Men are conscripted and Maria's brothers are sent to the front. The stories of her difficult relationships disappear from her diary and a central role is assumed instead by problems of supply shortages during the war and conflicts at the factory. In particular, much space is dedicated to descriptions of the hard work involved in procuring ice during the winter for cooling butter in the summer. Her diary shows that she was accused of not ac-

complishing enough. She repeatedly defends herself in her diary: "I have always given great effort on my own account, and for the production, in order to make quality products available during the season" (marked page 58).

Maria's life takes a turn for the worse when she is arrested on charges of stealing butter. She subsequently loses her job and then her apartment. "I can't bear it. If things continue like this, I will be forced to poison my elderly mother and my seven-year-old daughter so that they do not have to suffer any longer, and to kill myself with them, for I am not strong enough for this life" (page not marked). Eventually she is rehabilitated and gets her job back, enabling her to earn her living once again.

During this difficult period Maria uses her diary to portray herself as a zealous fighter on the 'home front'. She describes in detail why she cannot be held responsible for the poor ice stores since she did not receive any support from others in the factory. It is difficult to say whether these passages of self-defence, which take up many pages, are only part of an inner debate. However, it is clear that Maria was afraid of her diary being read by people outside the family, for numerous pages have

been removed from the notebook. Furthermore, one cropped page contains the laconic remark that “many pages have been destroyed and will remain a secret preserved in my soul” (Note in margin). The end of the war on 9 May 1945 finally puts an end to Maria’s worries and grief about family members wounded and killed in the conflict. She eagerly awaits the return of her brother to share what she has suffered with him. With his arrival, which ends the war as a chapter in Maria’s family life, the diary also ends.

Little is known of Maria Bruss’s fate in the years that followed. According to Radio “Azattyk”, Maria Bruss gave her diary to her granddaughter Marina Kolosova before her death. Her granddaughter later gave the journal to the radio station, which published excerpts from it. The editors’ choice of excerpts is telling, and it shows how diaries, as sources of supposedly authentic testimony, continue to be used today to perpetuate particular ideas about the past, present and future. The published excerpts highlight events during the war that demonstrate patriotism and willingness to make sacrifices for the cause. The editors omitted passages that tell of Maria’s doubts and weariness and the

accusations at the factory that threatened her livelihood, as well as those relating to the period of unemployment and imprisonment which were so humiliating for Maria. Her relationships with men and her difficult marriage also remain ‘discreetly’ unmentioned (Kasenova 2010).

The way in which the diary is presented in the Radio “Azattyk” article suggests that a substantial shift has taken place during the last twenty years in attitudes to autobiographical texts from the former Soviet republics. During *perestroika* and in the period after the collapse of the Soviet Union, autobiographical texts were seen primarily as important evidence of the crimes and flaws of the Stalin era; the focus of the edited version of Maria’s diary, however, is on a positive evocation of victory in the Second World War. Although Bruss’s diary describes in detail such matters as domestic violence, intrigues, lies and alienation, a reader of the abridged transcripts provided on Radio “Azzatyk”’s website is likely to see Maria’s diary as a portrayal of a life free of the cynicism and immorality felt to dominate contemporary life (Ivi).

For historians, the diary offers other insights. First, it offers a

rare glimpse into the transition from childhood to adulthood of a woman from the lower classes. It reveals, for example, how heterosexual relationships were initiated, rejected and ended, since Maria Bruss saw her choice of partner as a key decision that would determine her future and one function of her diary was to explain her choice of partner and the failure of her marriage.

Second, the diary offers insight into autobiographical writing on the periphery. Autobiographical texts from the Soviet republics seldom ended up in state archives. Campaigns encouraging people to write about their lives, and efforts to collect such writing, like those that took place in the European part of the Soviet Union, were less frequent in these peripheral regions (Herzberg 2013: 21-64, 195-316; Zhuravlev 1997; Clark 2004: 251-278). It is not surprising, therefore, that autobiographical texts from the periphery have not yet become a subject of systematic study, even though biographies of individuals during the tsarist period have received considerable attention for some time.

Furthermore, the text sheds light on the experiences of civilian women on the periphery during the Second World War – a topic that is still marginalized today. While autobiographical

texts by women from the war zone or from besieged cities such as Stalingrad and Leningrad have become a subject of interest, everyday experiences from regions where there was no active fighting during the Second World War continue to be largely ignored. And yet, as Bruss's diary shows, the war was acutely felt as a major rift in the lives of people in these regions. Maria's diary also makes it clear that the war did not bring an increase in freedom. In spite of an increase in political willingness to integrate all members of society into a collective defence effort, her diary shows that the onset of war did not bring an end to much of the notorious and feared behaviour of the 1930s. Denunciation and exclusion remained part of everyday life, and this in turn influenced how the diary was written. The omissions, empty spaces, removed pages and recurrent mentions of fear make the diary an important source of information about life under Stalinism during the Second World War.

Third, the diary provokes the question of whether autobiographical writing by women is different from that by men and whether there are gender-specific motivations, modes of writing and archival conditions

of transmission. Bruss began her diary during the Second World War, which shows that the war was a noteworthy occurrence for women as much as for men. The departure of Maria's brothers to the front was probably an impulse for her starting the diary. For women of the lower classes, the absence of male family members often encouraged the keeping of a diary, which had traditionally been the responsibility of the male head of the family. When he was no longer there to carry out this task, women began to write their histories as family histories. Another factor that may have encouraged Maria Bruss's autobiographical writing was that during the early Soviet period women from the lower classes were called upon to give their accounts as witnesses of the revolution in 1917. As 'voices from below' they took, for the first time, the place that had been occupied by male peasants and workers during the late tsarist period. This can be seen, for example, in the efforts of the «Krest'ianskaia gazeta», which used autobiographical texts as evidence for the creation of official remembrances in the 1920s (Fitzpatrick 1997: 215-237; Koznova 2000). The editors actively solicited autobiographical texts from peasant women in order,

so they hoped, to provide solid support for official accounts of the dark tsarist period and of the light allegedly brought by the October Revolution. The effectiveness of these campaigns and of the established biographical narratives can be seen in the beginning of Maria Bruss's diary, which starts with the October Revolution. Bruss's understanding of her diary as a chronicle of an exceptional time can also be seen in the fact that it breaks off at the end of the war. However, the characteristics of Stalinist self-fashioning which Jochen Hellbeck has identified in diaries of the Stalin era are only marginally applicable to her diary. It was not her primary intention to weave her subjective voice into the collective project of building a socialist society. Bruss seems to have used her diary only during moments where she felt excluded, as a way of constructing and reshaping herself according to the framings and norms of the socialist order (Hellbeck 2006). The diary seems primarily to have been a place for her to file away experiences and events that could not be shared interpersonally – probably due to the lack of a trusted conversation partner.

At the same time, Bruss's diary shows how much the transmission of autobiographical texts

from the lower classes is dependent on chance. Shortly before her death, Maria Bruss gave the diary to her granddaughter, Marina Kolosova. According to the Radio "Azattyk" article about the diary, Marina was accused of being a witch who used her grandmother's journal for practicing black magic. In order to eliminate the source of suspicion, she handed over the diary to Kunduz Kasenova, a journalist at Radio "Azattyk". The author of the Radio "Azattyk" article, Kunduz Kasenova, then gave the diary to a US historian, Sarah Cameron, who had read the article and expressed an interest in reading the diary. Cameron then donated the diary to Manuscripts and Archives at Yale University. The diary's path illustrates the lack of archives for preserving the writings of the lower classes in the former Soviet republics. Private accounts seldom find their way to officially organized government archives. In addition, institutions such as the Narodnyi arkhiv in Moscow, which once offered 'ordinary' citizens a place to store autobiographical writings from the Soviet period, have since been closed¹. These diffi-

culties in archival transmission indicate which people are considered to be historically significant and which people are not so regarded. The private memoirs of women from the lower classes or from the periphery have seldom been considered a part of the past worth preserving.

¹ In 2006 the collections of the Narodnyi Arkhiv were incorporated into the Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (Ilizarov 1998).

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