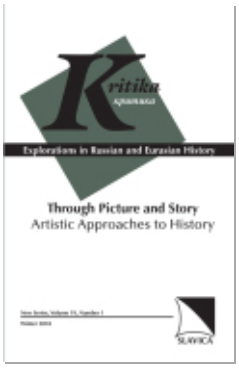
The Art of Revision: How Vera Inber Scripted the Siege and Her Self during World War II



Alexis Peri

Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History, Volume 19, Number 1, Winter 2018, pp. 143-174 (Article)

Published by Slavica Publishers
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2018.0006*

The Art of Revision

How Vera Inber Scripted the Siege and Her Self during World War II

Alexis Peri

"Today marks the completion of the most important year of my life," Vera Mikhailovna Inber wrote in her diary on 24 August 1942.[1] For 12 months, the poet had endured severe hunger, cold, and bombardment in blockaded Leningrad, home to one of the longest and deadliest sieges in modern history. Between September 1941 and January 1944, German and Finnish troops encircled Leningrad, cut it off from supply lines, and attempted to bombard and starve its residents into surrender. As many as 700,000 civilians perished from the starvation and hypothermia they suffered during the 1941–42 winter, when most received little more than 125 grams of bread a day. Although rations and evacuations increased in the spring of 1942, malnutrition and enemy fire persisted, and the blockade took over a million lives before it was lifted in 1944.[2] Inber was undernourished and exhausted, and her husband near death. Yet, as she went on to explain in that August entry, 1941–42 was also an important year because it catapulted her career as a writer. "My dreams have come true!" she exclaimed.[3] However, when Inber prepared her

Thanks to Serguei Oushakine, Katharine Hodgson, Emily Van Buskirk, Victoria Frede, and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on early versions of this article.

[1] Otdel rukopisei Rossiiskoi natsional′noi biblioteki (OR RNB) f. 312, no. 45, entry for 24 August 1942, 46.

[2] Estimated deaths caused by the first winter are from Richard Bidlack and Nikita Lomagin, *The Leningrad Blockade, 1941–1944: A New Documentary History from the Soviet Archives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 273. The total death toll is estimated in Bidlack and Lomagin, *Leningrad Blockade*, 1–2; David M. Glantz, *The Siege of Leningrad, 1941–1944: 900 Days of Terror* (London: Cassell, 2001), 230–31; and Leon Goure, *The Siege of Leningrad* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1962), 218.

[3] OR RNB f. 312, no. 45, entry for 24 August 1942, 46.

diary for publication in 1944, she reduced this jubilant entry to a one-line observation: "I have been here for a year."[4]

Professionally at least, Inber was in the right place at the right time inside besieged Leningrad. For the first time in her career, the 51-year-old achieved tremendous acclaim from readers, colleagues, and party leaders. Although she questioned whether she and her husband could survive a second siege winter, Inber refused to evacuate. "How strange it sounds, but things are good for me in Leningrad," she wrote in May 1942.[5] She reaffirmed her decision not to leave that autumn: "for me, this would be complicated and even more simply—bad."[6] She also cut these statements from the published diary. For her to have admitted that "Leningrad is good for me" when millions were suffering would have been an act of sacrilege against the hallowed myth of the blockade, a narrative she helped create.[7]

Through her wartime compositions, Inber became a principal author of what the historian Lisa Kirschenbaum called the myth of the siege of Leningrad.[8] This narrative frames the blockade primarily as an epic battle between the barbaric fascists and the steadfast defenders of Soviet civilization who withstood the enemy's assault by virtue of their heroic sacrifices, inspirational leaders, and commitment to socialism. Kirschenbaum's pioneering research identifies the major tropes and phases that came to define this myth or masterplot.[9] Below, I offer a detailed examination of the personal, literary, and political forces driving Inber's contribution to it. By comparing published and unpublished editions of her principal wartime works, the

[4] Ibid., entry for 1 May 1942, 29 ob.; Vera Inber, *Pochti tri goda* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel′, 1947), 33. This text was restored to editions published in 1964 and later. The major editions are: "Pochti tri goda," *Znamia*, no. 1 (1945): 65–181; *Pochti tri goda* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel′, 1946 and 1947); "Pochti tri goda," *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1958), 3:247–460; *Za mnogo let* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel′, 1964), 326–436; "Pochti tri goda," *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965), 3:129–392; *Stranitsy dnei perebiraia: Iz dnevnikov i zapisnykh knizhek* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel′, 1967), 57–232; and *Pochti tri goda* (Moscow: Sovetskaia Rossiia, 1968).

[5] OR RNB f. 312, no. 45, entry for 23 May 1942, 30. This is not in the 1947 or 1958 editions but is alluded to in Inber, *Pochti tri goda* (1968), entry for 15 May 1942, 111.

[6] OR RNB f. 312, no. 45, entry for 18 September 1942, 56.

[7] Ibid., entry for 1 May 1942, 29 ob.

[8] Lisa Kirschenbaum, *The Legacy of the Siege of Leningrad, 1941–1995: Myths, Memories, and Monuments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

[9] Ibid., 41–46, 56–68; Dieter de Bruyn and Michel de Dobbeleer, "Mastering the Siege: Ideology and the Plot of the Leningrad Blockade and the Warsaw Uprising in Adamovich and Granin, and Białoszewski," *Ljubljana* 32, 2 (2009): 53–76; Tat′iana Voronina, "Sotsialisticheskii istorizm: Obrazy leningradskoi blokady v sovetskoi istoricheskoi nauke," *Zhurnal′nyi zal*, http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2013/1/v15.html. The seminal work on the masterplot of Socialist Realism, including its wartime iterations, is Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3rd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 159, 160–62.

poem *Pulkovo Meridian* (Pulkovskii meridian) and the diary *Almost Three Years* (Pochti tri goda), I trace how her articulation of the siege story evolved in response to shifting personal, political, and aesthetic circumstances.[10] Inber was both a creator and a captive of the blockade myth. I argue that the critical framework for understanding the twists and turns of her wartime writings, of her literary career, and of the siege masterplot more generally is revision.

Inber's writings on the siege were guided by both internal and external factors. First and foremost were her own creativity, ambition, and fear. However, cues from editors, readers, and policy makers as well as the evolving conditions of the blockade also shaped her writings. These elements are deeply interwoven on the pages of her diary and difficult to disentangle. Inber wrote and rewrote *Pulkovo Meridian* between October 1941 and November 1943, during which time the accepted themes of the blockade myth changed significantly. Drafts of *Pulkovo Meridian*, along with critiques and edits of it, are preserved in the notebooks of Inber's unpublished diary.[11] As she crafted the poem and tried to get it published, she uncovered tacit guidelines on how to present the siege and herself to readers. In 1944, she revised her diary based on then current parameters of the siege master-narrative. The realm of acceptability was a moving target, and Inber reworked her poem and diary accordingly.

In revising these texts, Inber also reconfigured her literary persona, transforming her public image from a marginal Moscow writer into a celebrated "voice of Leningrad." Both *Pulkovo Meridian* and *Almost Three Years* are autobiographical texts, acts of literary witness. Their success was contingent upon Inber's presentation of herself as an authoritative spokesperson for the *blokadniki* (people of the blockade). As Inber learned to write herself into the siege story, she became an acclaimed Leningrad writer, then a party member, and finally a laureate of the Stalin Prize. My aim is to demonstrate how this happened, how the blockade master-narrative and this Soviet writer were created simultaneously.

This article has three parts. After briefly introducing Inber, I trace the genesis of *Pulkovo Meridian* between October 1941 and November 1943. Next I illustrate how Inber applied the lessons she learned from that process to the revision of her diary in 1944. Finally, I chart how the poem and diary

[10] Major editions include "Pulkovskii meridian," *O Leningrade: Poema i stikhi* (Leningrad: Goslitizdat, 1943), 3–48; *Pulkovskii meridian: Poema* (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1944); *Pulkovskii meridian: Poema* (Moscow: Pravda, 1946); "Pulkovskii meridian," *Stikhi i poemy* (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1957); "Pulkovskii meridian," *Izbrannye proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1958), 3:365–94.

[11] OR RNB f. 312, dd. 44–49; Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstva (RGALI) f. 1072, op. 3, dd. 3 and 32.

underwent subsequent editing after World War II in response to further changes in the political climate and in Inber's professional stature.

Beyond the blockade myth, Inber's revisions shed light on larger issues of authorship and subjectivity during the Stalin era. Her draft compositions and diary notebooks illuminate how Soviet writers struggled to produce work that granted them both creative satisfaction and official approval.[12] As a fellow traveler who fell under suspicion for her "decadent" style and association with Lev Trotskii, Inber provides an extreme, instructive case of a writer who tried to maintain sincerity while presenting the siege and herself in ever-evolving politically correct terms. The poet Evgenii Evtushenko remembered her as a woman "scared to death" and living in "daily horror" of the "all-seeing eye [that] might find her guilty."[13] Inber's anxiety is palpable in her wartime diary, which she began shortly after the worst persecution of Soviet writers had occurred in the late 1930s. However, the journal also expresses Inber's determination to capture the siege in a manner true to her experiences. She was under frequent pressure to revise, but this does not prove that she invented the events and emotions relayed in her work solely for their political expediency. Her intentions, the diary suggests, were multiple and malleable.

Such questions about authorial intent and self-presentation among Soviet writers have become bound up with ongoing scholarly debates about subjectivity. It is well known that a foundational aim of Soviet ideology was to transform its citizens into New People who embodied Soviet values and would build an ideal socialist future. During the Leninist and Stalinist eras in particular, individuals were called to monitor and narrate their personal and political growth in autobiographical narratives ranging from memoirs and party applications to confessions and court testimonies. A key point of contention has been whether such narratives can be considered authentic. Some researchers have treated them as genuine expressions of an author's inner self, whereas others consider them displays of a usable self, crafted for strategic purposes.[14] The terms of this debate have fostered, as the literary

[12] Boris Wolfson, "Escape from Literature: Constructing the Soviet Self in Yuri Olesha's Diary of the 1930s," *Russian Review* 63, 4 (2004): 609–20; Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the Soviet Writer*, trans. Jesse M. Savage (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001); Anatoly Pinsky, "The Diaristic Form and Subjectivity under Khrushchev," *Slavic Review* 73, 4 (2014): 805–27.

[13] Iz antologii Evgeniia Evtushenko, "Desiat´ vekov russkoi poezii," http://www.newizv.ru/culture/2008-05-16/90082-stalinskaja-laureatka-i-rodstvennica-trockogo.html.

[14] Arguments for the former are in Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006); and Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999). Arguments for the latter appear in Fitzpatrick, *Tear*

scholar Evgeny Dobrenko observed, a tendency to view Stalin-era writers and texts in binary terms as either authentic or inauthentic, pro- or anti-Soviet.[15] Inber's diary notebooks, by contrast, demonstrate how the autobiographical, the aesthetic, and the tactical intermingled, sometimes inseparably.

I do not attempt to solve the riddle of Inber's selfhood or her sincerity. My interest is in the historical evolution of her literary works and persona, how they developed in response to changes in the sociopolitical environment, in her personal circumstances, and in her creative vision.[16] Instead of parsing their authenticity, I do not privilege any one of Inber's self-representations or drafts over the others. I do not assume that a final edition supersedes earlier drafts or—conversely—that an original draft was the genuine article. "From a historical point of view," the scholar of editorial studies Hans Zeller contends, "the different versions are in theory of equal value. Each represents a semiotic system which was valid at a specific time … alterations mean an adaptation of the work to suit the altered circumstances, ideas, and purposes of the author."[17] This lack of narrative permanence and consistency is particularly evident in diaries, where each entry provides an opportunity for the author to reinterpret past events or reformulate the self. Diaries, the literary scholar Irina Paperno argues, "allow for a continual report on a shifting self, and for perusal of such a report by the author or another in later reading."[18] *Almost Three Years* and *Pulkovo Meridian*, which Inber first envisioned as a diary, contain several, often conflicting presentations of self.

I analyze *Pulkovo Meridian* and *Almost Three Years* under the premise that no single model of selfhood or strategy of self-representation held sway throughout Inber's life. This is true of all individuals, I suspect, but especially pronounced in those who lived during the Stalin era, when self-transformation was an ideological imperative. It also became an imperative

Off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); and Golfo Alexopoulos, "Portrait of a Con Artist as a Soviet Man," *Slavic Review* 57, 4 (1998): 774–90.

[15] Dobrenko, *Making of the Soviet Writer,* xii–xiii, 279.

[16] I draw on scholars in editorial studies, who focus on historical change over authorial intent: Hans Zeller, "Record and Interpretation: Analysis of Documentation as Goal and Method of Editing," in *Contemporary German Editorial Theory,* ed. Hans Walter Gabler et al. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 17–58; and Gabler, "The Synchrony and Diachrony of Texts: Practice and Theory of the Critical Edition of James Joyce's *Ulysses,*" *Transactions of the Society for Textual Scholarship for 1981*, ed. D. C. Greetham and W. Speedhill (New York: AMS Press, 1984), 305–26.

[17] Hans Zeller, "A New Approach to the Critical Constitution of Literary Texts," *Studies in Bibliography* 28 (1975): 245.

[18] Irina Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), xiii.

of survival during World War II. The war created an enormous rupture in the lives and the life stories of Soviet people. It assaulted old and birthed new notions of identity. During the blockade, Inber not only reconfigured herself in pursuit of her professional goals but was remolded by hunger and trauma. Her revisions, therefore, not only speak to the complexities of being a Soviet writer but also tell a story of wartime adaptation and survival. My aim is not to harp on inconsistencies in how Inber presented the blockade and herself but to lay bare the historicity of both.

Writer on the Margins

Inber is a well-known but seldom studied Soviet writer. As Mary Douglas explained, Inber "is considered one of the 'classics' of Soviet literature" but is "read relatively little" and receives "somewhat qualified admiration."[19] This may have to do with what critics consider her middling level of literary skill or the fact that she is remembered as a party writer, even a mouthpiece of the regime. Ironically, Inber's blighted background made her an unlikely candidate for such a strong association with the Party.

Inber's efforts at self-invention began well before World War II, because—as she herself put it—"I was unlucky in my biography."[20] She was born Vera Moiseevna Shpenster in 1890 to a Jewish family in Odessa. Her mother was headmistress at a state-sponsored school for Jewish girls. Her father managed the academic publishing house Mathesis. Like many Soviet authors, Inber later took pains to repudiate her intelligentsia and Jewish background, insisting that her parents were "democratic in spirit."[21] Inber had other troublesome associates, including her first husband, Nathan Inber, who defected after the Civil War, and her cousin Lev Trotskii, the most notorious "enemy of the people" after 1927. Trotskii lived with the Shpensters between 1889 and 1895 and helped young Inber learn how to read. Early in her career, Inber wrote admiringly of Trotskii, and these compositions later returned to haunt her.[22] While living abroad with her first husband between 1910 and 1914, Inber published her first poetry collections, *Melancholy Wine* and another, *Bitter Delight*, in 1917. These lyrical works bore traces of Symbolism and were pronounced decadent by Bolshevik critics. Inber later avoided discussing them, stating sheepishly: "the titles of these books were so characteristic that

[19] Mary Douglas, "Vera Inber," in *Russian Women Writers*, ed. Christine D. Tomei, 2 vols. (New York: Routledge: 1999), 1:979. The only book-length study of Inber is I. L. Grinberg, *Vera Inber: Kritiko-biograficheskii ocherk* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel′, 1961).

[20] Inber, "Eti piatnadtsat′ let," *Za mnogo let*, 15.

[21] Vera Inber, "Kratkaia avtobiografiia," *Stikhi i poemy*, 6.

[22] Joshua Rubenstein, *Leon Trotsky: A Revolutionary's Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 5–6.

they save me from needing to talk about my work during those years."[23] Her "real" biography as a writer did not start until 1922, after she and her daughter Zhanna moved to Moscow.[24]

In Moscow, Inber tried to assimilate into the Bolshevik literati and "write in a new way."[25] She joined a group of literary Constructivists in 1924, but her fellow traveler status kept things precarious. Her early autobiographical writings, including the novella *A Place in the Sun*, voice regret that she did not participate fully in the revolution and parade her Soviet allegiances.[26] An early benchmark of Inber's literary assimilation came in 1932 when she joined the brigade of 120 writers, led by Maksim Gor´kii, who crafted the triumphant account of the White Sea Canal's construction. This work celebrates Soviet efforts to rehabilitate prisoners through backbreaking labor, which claimed thousands of lives. Inber also achieved modest acclaim for her 1939 *Travel Diary*, a poem chronicling her impressions of Georgia.

These modest successes were hampered by the purges of 1936–39. As Trotskii's relation, Inber came to the Central Committee's attention as a possible associate of the "Trotskii-Zinov´ev terrorist group."[27] To display her allegiance, Inber stridently criticized other writers, including P. N. Vasil´ev, L. L. Averbakh, and V. M. Kirshon before the Union of Soviet Writers. But, as a Central Committee report notes, she later "admitted that her speech at the meeting had been bad and said that she was Trotskii's relative and so ought to have come out especially decisively in demanding the execution of the counterrevolutionary assassins."[28] In 1938, Secret Police Chief Lavrentii Beria removed Inber from a list of candidates for a state prize because of her association with Trotskii.[29]

Eager for a fresh start, Inber departed for Leningrad in August 1941, leaving her daughter Zhanna and grandson Misha behind. Inber made the journey with her third husband, Doctor Il´ia Davidovich Strashun, who was given the option of running a hospital in Arkhangel´sk or Leningrad for his wartime service. The couple chose Leningrad because they longed to be near

---

[23] Inber, "Kratkaia avtobiografiia," 7.
[24] Douglas, "Vera Inber," 981–83.
[25] Inber, "Kratkaia avtobiografiia," 8.
[26] Douglas, "Vera Inber," 984–87; Anna Krylova, "In Their Own Words? Soviet Women Writers and the Search for Self," in *A History of Women's Writings in Russia*, ed. Adele Marie Barker and Jehanne M. Gheith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 243–63.
[27] D. L. Babichenko, ed., *Literaturnyi front: Istoriia politicheskoi tsenzury, 1932–1946. Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow: Entsiklopediia rossiiskikh dereven´, 1994), 18.
[28] Andrei Artizov and Oleg Naumov, eds., *Soviet Culture and Power: A History in Documents, 1917–1953* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 317.
[29] Babichenko, *Literaturnyi front,* 39.

the front and "at the center of events."[30] Moreover, "the heroic page" that Inber yearned to write in her autobiography "had to be lived and suffered through," and blockaded Leningrad proved an ideal place for this.[31] Strashun became the director of Erisman Hospital, while Inber produced materials for Leningrad's Soviet Information Bureau, radio station, and TASS, the News and Telegraph Agency.

During the siege, Inber and Strashun were hungry. They suffered from malnutrition, numerous ailments, and from the extreme cold and darkness. Still, as members of the elite, they enjoyed many dispensations, including extra food. Inber also traveled to meetings and events in areas where food was more plentiful. She was hungry but significantly privileged. Aware of her advantaged position, Inber removed evidence of it when preparing her journal for publication. In fact, nearly all the passages from her diary quoted below were omitted from the first publication of *Almost Three Years* in 1945.

Inber's path to becoming a "voice of Leningrad" was short but rocky. Early diary entries express her anxiety about the prospect of assimilating into Leningrad's literary community. Inber's relationships with coworkers like Vera Ketlinskaia, a writer and the secretary of Leningrad's Writers' Union, and with her fellow poet and radio announcer Ol´ga Berggol´ts appear to have been cool.[32] Moreover, Inber's initial broadcasts underscore her status as an outsider, a Muscovite. In a transmission from August 1941, Inber conveyed her "greetings from Moscow, from the city, which in these terrible days is as firm and courageous as your Leningrad.… Moscow and Leningrad, as brother and sister, stretch out their arms to each other, saying 'We will be victorious.' "[33] The diary also records her initial struggles to publish. Each rejection pained her. "I was distressed that we 'mortals' are not printed in *LenPravda*," Inber scoffed after the newspaper declined one poem, "but they are right."[34] This reaction was typical of those recorded in her diary: Inber was quick to attribute snubs to her low standing but also to internalize criticisms and take them to heart.

---

[30] RGALI f. 2816, op. 1, d. 53, l. 3.

[31] Krylova, "In Their Own Words?," 249.

[32] Ketlinskaia seemed cordial, not close, with Inber (RGALI f. 2816, op. 1, d. 216, l. 2). Berggol´ts expressed disdain for her; see Ol´ga Berggol´ts, *Blokadnyi dnevnik (1941–1945)* (St. Petersburg: Vita Nova, 2015), 324, 345, 348. Inber rarely mentioned Ketlinskaia or Berggol´ts in her diary.

[33] Inber, *Pochti tri goda* (1947), 2. I modified the translation in Vera Inber, *Leningrad Diary*, trans. Serge M. Wolff and Rachel Grieve (New York: St. Martin's, 1971), 12. Inber had 3 pieces in *Leningradskaia pravda* (*LP*) in 1941 but 14 in 1942.

[34] Inber, *Pochti tri goda* (1947), entry for 4 January 1942, 33–34.

Despite these initial challenges, World War II created conditions conducive to Inber's success. First, the lyric quality and intimate, prosaic themes of her prewar poetry found new receptivity with readers and publishers. Between the 1941 invasion and 1943 victory at Stalingrad, Soviet literary conventions relaxed. Writers were at greater liberty to thematize emotions, suffering, and everyday life, now bound up with the struggle for survival.[35] The winter of 1941, Katharine Hodgson argues, saw a revival of lyric poetry in particular.[36] In addition, during World War II Soviet newspapers printed literary works—in verse and prose—more frequently than before, blurring the line between journalism and literature. This gave poets like Inber access to a much wider readership. Most of her poems, including individual chapters of *Pulkovo Meridian*, appeared in *Pravda* before they were published as books or in collections.

Another factor in Inber's wartime rise was the inspiration she drew from besieged Leningrad. She was driven to write by the harrowing devastation around her and the opportunity to bear witness to it. Dozens of entries describing her writing process suggest that Inber's unflagging productivity sprung from a blend of inspiration and aspiration. In the deadliest months of the siege, from the autumn of 1941 to the spring of 1942, she enjoyed an abundance of energy and ideas. The crossed-out text below appears in her notebook but was removed for the 1945 publication.

> Despite the daily dangers, despite the fact that I do not know if I will see Zhanna and the boy [Misha], despite illness, I have not felt such mental health, such a desire to work for a long time. ~~My poems in *Lengr. Pravda* are good. The last two are really good. The main thing is that I now know how I must write about the war. Sometimes at night I do not sleep because of poems. This has not happened to me in a long time, and~~, now I can do a great deal. And I will do it so long as a bomb does not fall any closer than it did last night.[37]

The published version indicates how the exhilaration of creativity trumped Inber's hunger pangs, illness, and anxiety. So too, the excised lines reveal,

[35] Evgeny Dobrenko, "Literary Criticism and the Institution of Literature," in *A History of Russian Literary Theory and Criticism: The Soviet Age and Beyond*, ed. Dobrenko and Galin Tihanov (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 163–65; Catriona Kelly, *A History of Russian Women's Writing, 1820–1992* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 254–55.

[36] Katharine Hodgson, *Written with the Bayonet: Soviet Russian Poetry of World War II* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996), 51, 72–73, 78.

[37] OR RNB f. 312, no. 44, entry for 6 November 1941, 21; Inber, *Pochti tri goda* (1968), 36. The poems in question are probably "Zhenshchine" and "Edinyi put′," published respectively in *LP* on 10 September 1941, no. 242, 3; and 5 November 1941, no. 264, 3.

could professional success. They document Inber's delight at having learned "how I must write" in order to reach her aesthetic and publishing goals. Inber dubbed the force driving her to compose her "demons of ambition" (*besenok chestoliubiia*). The phrase appears repeatedly in her notebooks but not in any published edition of the diary.[38]

The diarist wrote at length about this compulsion to write. Sometimes she distinguished between shameful demons that fueled her desire for public recognition and more honorable ones that sparked her creativity, such as in this (excised) entry from January 1942:

> Yesterday I felt my body and was stunned. Even my skin has changed.… If only I could survive all this. Sometimes there appears before me a fleeting picture of how I have grown so thin. I am sitting somewhere in a dark city, for example, Tashkent. I am sitting at a presidium and everyone welcomes me because I am from Leningrad. That, as they say, is the pettiest of my demons of ambition about which one must not talk seriously. A more cadaverous demon of ambition is sketching a collection of Leningrad poems for me. That is not shameful. Sometimes (like last night, in the dark), there flashes before my eyes that horrible corpse in the washroom of [Erisman Hospital's] emergency room … as well as the thought: what if I or I[l′ia]. D[avidovich]—will we also end up lying there like that? Save us and have pity![39]

This blend of themes is typical of Inber's unpublished entries: sandwiched between apprehensions about hunger and death are concerns about personal image. Inber monitored her reputation just as she monitored her physical deterioration. Here she imagined how her emaciated figure would garner respect from well-known writers who had evacuated from Leningrad as well as pictured herself as a forgotten, emaciated corpse crumpled in a bathtub. The two pleas, for acclaim and for rescue, underscore Inber's ambivalent view of hunger. It was a source of misery, inspiration, and valorization—all of which drove her to write.

Scripting the Siege Story: *Pulkovo Meridian*

The first lines of *Pulkovo Meridian* appear in Inber's diary notebook amid her regular entries. Initially, the two projects dovetailed in feel and focus. Until around March 1942, Inber titled the poem *Travel Diary, Part 2*, a continuation of the journal in verse she published in the 1930s.[40] Both the

[38] OR RNB f. 312, no. 44, entry for 5 January 1942, 39 ob. References to how her artistic, not professional, ambitions conquered hunger are in Inber, *Pochti tri goda* (1968), 69, 136.
[39] OR RNB f. 312, no. 44, entry for 8 January 1942, 39 ob.
[40] This title is used in ibid., no. 18, and no. 44, entry for 24 January 1942, 45 ob.

diary and the poem are structured chronologically, and initially they were composed close together in time, about three months apart. The first stanzas, which described the summer of 1941, were penned between entries from October and November. Substantively, the first sections of *Pulkovo Meridian* and diary also overlap. Both exhibit the key tropes and periodization that Kirschenbaum associates with the blockade myth. Inber began to sketch these core themes—in entries and in poems—early on and based on her own experiences. At the same time, editors and colleagues encouraged Inber to spotlight particular themes. Thus *Pulkovo Meridian* emerged dynamically from the interactions between readers and writers, personal experiences and professional guidelines.[41]

Chapter 1 of the poem is structured around what would be considered the first stage of the blockade, the intense bombardment and shelling of the autumn of 1941.[42] Initially titled "Is There a Hospital Here?," the chapter focuses on the wounded and dead whom Inber observed in Erisman Hospital. It sets the German aerial assault in a Leningrad rich in imperial architecture, intellectual heritage, autumnal foliage, and bird life, all of which the fascists aimed to obliterate. "For the German, what is the peaceful Russian dale / the Norwegian village / what are fruit trees to him, the river wharf, the ocean pier? / They are just aerial targets / they are mere objects of destruction."[43] The narrator bemoans the very invention of flight by the Wright brothers, then admonishes herself: this was a time to fight, not ruminate.[44] Unlike the fascists, Leningraders honored the sacredness of life, beauty, and creation, and this compelled them to fight, to defend their culture, and "to rid our planet of this plague / this is humanism and we are humanists."[45] This juxtaposition of German barbarism and Soviet civilization was, according to Kirschenbaum, a definitive trope of the masterplot.[46] Chapter 1 ends with the image of a Soviet flag flying atop the Pulkovo Heights, which ultimately lent the poem its name. The Pulkovo region was south of Leningrad and studded by formidable hills, which helped protect the city from invaders in 1917, 1919, and 1941. Pulkovo later became a key site in the 1944 offensive that liberated Leningrad.

Early drafts of chapter 1 mention humanism, but Inber's decision to concentrate on this theme arose in part from the advice of Nikolai

[41] Evgeny Dobrenko argues that this is true of all Soviet literature (*Making of the Soviet Writer*, 303).
[42] Kirschenbaum, *Legacy of the Siege,* 47–68.
[43] *Pulkovskii meridian* (1944), 4, chap. 1, stanza 6.
[44] Ibid., 5, chap. 1, stanza 9.
[45] Ibid., 8, chap. 1, stanza 22.
[46] Kirschenbaum, *Legacy of the Siege,* 56–57.

Lesiuchevskii, then an editor at *Zvezda*. "At first I did not understand who ~~Lesiuvskii~~ was," the diarist reflected, misspelling his name several times and then correcting the error. "Then it all became clear. Lesiuchevskii is courtesy himself. He liked my poems. Only he was opposed to the placement of humanism in the poem. He assured me, however, that of course 'we' would come to an agreement. Whatever happens, I am terribly pleased. The book will be published. This is amazing."[47] Inber expressed both delight with Lesiuchevskii and resignation toward his edits. However, she quickly embraced them, describing them as "clever, wise," and "mostly regarding 'humanism.' I agreed with all of them one by one. In general, it is evident that *Pulkovo Meridian* will be a grand and important work and no kind of political uncertainty or inaccuracies are acceptable." Inber did not specify what inaccuracies lurked in her draft. Instead, she basked in Lesiuchevskii's praise: "although not a fan of compliments, he recognized that it has been a long time since he has encountered such a concept and such a work and that the book will be printed immediately after it is corrected. From there it will enter into immortality!"[48] Following his advice, Inber moved her discussion of humanism from stanza 3 to 17 and retitled the chapter "We Are Humanists."

Lesiuchevskii also praised chapter 2, "Light and Warmth," which Inber began crafting in January 1942.[49] Of the six chapters, it is the most personal and most like her diary. It brings the reader inside her frost-covered apartment and presents Inber's struggle to survive the brutal winter of 1941–42 in intimate detail. Specific images—the sharpened birdlike features of the dead, the beards that grew on corpses, the cut on her hand that would not heal—were drawn from entries penned a few months earlier. Some of Inber's readers noticed the chapter's diary-like features, which they interpreted as a mark of its authenticity. After quoting chapter 2, the diarist Georgii Lebedev proclaimed: "it is magnificent in its truthfulness to life. Each line is like a page from a personal diary."[50] "Light and Warmth" also conveys Inber's personal heartaches; it describes a mother too starved to nurse her child, a strong evocation of Zhanna. Inber drafted this section a few weeks before Misha died. Although he was in Chistopol, not Leningrad, Inber considered Misha a victim of the blockade: if it had not been for the siege and the opportunities it presented, she would have stayed in Moscow

[47] OR RNB f. 312, no. 44, entry for 9 January 1942, 39 ob. Revised excerpt from chap. 1 is in *LP,* 7 June 1942, no. 134, 2.
[48] OR RNB f. 312, no. 44, entry for 15 January 1942, 40.
[49] Ibid., 40 ob.–46, and no. 45, 1–10 ob., entries for 14 January–February 1942.
[50] "Iz dnevnik G. E. Lebedeva," in *Russkii muzei—evakuatsiia, blokada, vosstanovlenie (iz vospominanii museinogo rabotnika*), ed. P. K. Baltun (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1981), 122.

and helped Zhanna. "The thought that I had paid for all this with the life of a tiny child never left me," the diarist despaired.[51]

Even so, "Light and Warmth" differs significantly from the diary by downplaying two of its prominent themes: criminal activity and literary productivity.[52] Inber avoided mentioning the citywide increase in theft, murder, and cannibalism or describing her "demons of ambition," which she exorcised through intense nocturnal writing sessions. The 1945 edition of the journal contains comparatively little discussion of her writing process except for a few passages like this one:

> During the past few days I have ~~hurried to~~ corrected and revised the first chapter ~~(it will be called: Is there a hospital here?), which turned out very well.~~ Now passages that seemed powerful to me at the time have to be moved to another place because new stanzas weaken them. I have rewritten the passages on humanism~~—in a word, terrific.~~ Never ~~(even during Chapter I)~~ have I worked with such passion and ~~then it was good, but there was no feeling like that of [uncovering] an important topic.~~ Even at night, lying down, I cannot stop. I am dying of fatigue, and still my brain goes on, and everything is vital.[53]

The diarist's creative exuberance comes across clearly in the edited text, but the omissions minimize her preoccupation with reputation and success.

Inber read drafts of her first two chapters to friends, colleagues, and patients at Erisman Hospital during the spring of 1942. Her entries from that period oscillate between delight and dejection, depending on her listeners' reactions. By contrast, fluctuations between good and bad news from the front did not elicit as much discussion. Inber was elated when her drafts were well received at a Baltic writers' conference and by leaders of Leningrad's military soviet, who hinted that she deserved a Stalin Prize. This praise "clearly embarrassed Vishnevskii. It has thrown me into a fever!"[54] Inber increasingly attended such gatherings as a representative of Leningrad, even when they were held in Moscow. In fact, she claimed that she now "found it difficult to write about Moscow; it is so different from Leningrad."[55] By mid-March, newspapers in both cities were printing

[51] OR RNB f. 312, no. 44, entry for 20 January 1942, 10, and no. 45, entry for 10 March 1942, 11–11 ob. This event is mentioned in the 1964 and subsequent editions of Inber's diary.
[52] Ibid., no. 44, entries for 3–4 January 1942, 31 ob., 33, and no. 45, entry for 30 January 1942, 47.
[53] Ibid., no. 44, entry for 20 January 1942, 43–44; Inber, *Pochti tri goda* (1947), 16.
[54] OR RNB f. 312, no. 45, entry for 9 February 1942, 7 ob. Berggol´ts suspected Inber might (undeservedly, in her view) win the Stalin Prize in 1942 and 1943 (entries for 23 December 1942 and 15, 21 March 1943 in *Blokadnyi dnevnik,* 324, 345, 348).
[55] OR RNB f. 312, no. 45, entry for 7 April 1942, 21 ob.

her poems and chapters of *Pulkovo Meridian*.[56] "This is not how it was [before]," Inber observed, "I wrote *Travel Diary* in the shadows, in oblivion [illegible] due to an ill-fated relative," but seven months into the siege Inber's connection to Trotskii no longer inhibited her success.[57] At the same time, criticisms and publication delays shook her confidence. For instance, parodying the Soviet Information Bureau's updates on the war news, Inber wrote: "No significant changes on the *Pravda* front. This secretly torments me … Can it really be that now the promised land of *Pravda* is hidden from me? And most important, after it (seemingly) had opened up in front of me!"[58] Professional uncertainty often eclipses the uncertainty of survival in her journal.[59]

The spring of 1942 marked a turning point for Inber's career and for the emerging masterplot of the siege. Although she proclaimed "I now know precisely how to write [about the siege] for the newspapers. I can do it with relative ease," springtime speeches, slogans, and policies signaled that the sanctioned narrative of the blockade was shifting.[60] With winter over, motifs of death and sorrow gave way to recovery, active resistance, and heroic labor. Local leaders like Petr Popkov and Andrei Zhdanov not only declared that "all the worst is behind us" but also closed medical clinics, increased labor quotas, and heightened punishments for shirking in order to make Leningraders productive again.[61] Recovery became a motif of the masterplot well before public health actually recovered.[62]

Although these changes in policy and narrative expectations did not alter the substance or tone of Inber's journal, they affected subsequent installments of *Pulkovo Meridian*. Colleagues and friends encouraged her to choose patriotic and ideological themes for chapter 3, and Inber toyed with the idea of titling it "Finland Station" in evocation of the 1917 revolution.[63] One of the loudest voices urging this course was Vishnevskii's. His reaction to chapter

[56] Ibid., entries for 10, 12, 24 March 1942, 11–13, and 2 April 1942, 18 ob.–19.
[57] Ibid., entry for 4 April 1942, 19 ob.
[58] Ibid., entry for 27 March 1942, 13. Part of this text was restored to the 1964 and later editions.
[59] Ibid., entry for 31 March 1942, 17 ob.–18.
[60] Ibid., entry for 7 April 1942, 21 ob. Part of this entry was later published and dated 9 April 1942 in Inber, *Pochti tri goda* (1968), 102.
[61] This is Popov's speech of 13 January 1942. On the closure of clinics and restricted diagnoses of *distrofiia*, see Christopher Burton, "Medical Welfare during Late Stalinism: A Study of Doctors and the Soviet Health System, 1945–1953" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2000), 270–74; N. A. Manakov, *V kol´tse blokady: Khoziaistvo i byt osazhdennogo goroda* (Leningrad: Lenizdat, 1961), 108.
[62] Kirschenbaum, *Legacy of the Siege*, 68–73.
[63] OR RNB f. 312, no. 45, entry for 16 February 1942, 9.

3, recorded in his own wartime diary, underscores how tacit guidelines for writing about the blockade had shifted.

> I listened to her read for the third time—the atmosphere has changed, attitudes toward things have changed. The first chapter—with complaints on the bombing of the hospital—is a petty concern. The current war rises above these "Hague-like complaints." … The "total" approach of the fascists cannot be destroyed with complaints…. In general, this flimsy approach is not suited to the grandiose machine of war.
>
> In Inber there is still an unresolved political, historical theme … matters proceed according to subjective means, everyday lyricism. But events draw an author somewhere beyond, higher…. Inber is searching, straying, afraid of something. She does not speak about the essence of the war, she does not touch on the subject of Russia or Slavdom … after a brief debate, I expressed my concerns.[64]

Now that "the atmosphere ha[d] changed," Inber's focus on personal suffering seemed self-indulgent and politically insignificant next to the national struggle to vanquish fascism. Inber responded to this new imperative in her next installments of *Pulkovo Meridian*. As she explained in an interview with *Leningradskaia pravda:* "My poem is linked to Leningrad but not only to it." "I try to illustrate several important stages of humanity's great liberation struggle against fascism."[65] With this broader political scope, the diary and the poem began to diverge. Inber transferred fewer images from her diary to her poem. And while her entries from the spring and summer of 1942 continued to emphasize intimacy and everyday life, her verse stressed heroism, sacrifice, and solidarity. Inber even started drafting *Pulkovo Meridian* in a separate notebook.

Eventually titled "Fire," chapter 3 describes the enemy bombardment of Leningrad during the spring of 1942. Instead of occupying themselves with securing food and warmth—concerns that absorbed Inber's diary entries from this period—Leningraders emerge as citizen-soldiers embroiled in battle: "All of our thoughts and feelings are about one thing: / striking the enemy directly, with flanking / and with frontal fire / so that in that hotbed of evil and despair / the curse of Hitlerism will burn to ash."[66] While chapter 1's discussion of bombardment sparks references to da Vinci and the Wright brothers, chapter

[64] Vsevolod Vishnevskii, *Leningrad: Dnevniki voennykh let* (Moscow: Voenizdat, 2002), 1:140. This entry (for 20 April 1942) is not in Vishnevskii, *Dnevniki voennykh let*, vol. 4 (Moscow: Goslitizdat, 1958).

[65] *LP*, 3 April 42, no. 78, 2.

[66] Stanza 21 in *LP*, 29 June 42, no. 151, 2. It appears as *Pulkovskii meridian* (1944), 23, chap. 3, stanza 28.

3 features allusions to Napoleon, Lenin, and Stalin. One-fourth of the chapter is devoted to Stalin's speeches.[67] Moreover, Inber's discussions of personal anguish are drastically diminished, save for three stanzas that mourn Misha. However, the narrator presents him as a casualty of battle, not a victim of the author's ambition. "Let our sorrows and woes be the source of victory," the narrator proclaims.[68]

Chapters 4–6 maintain this broader military scope, so it is easy to see why Vishnevskii considered the poem's later sections much improved.[69] These remaining chapters of *Pulkovo Meridian*, and Inber's edits to them, also highlight what became the accepted periodization of the blockade. After trying a few different configurations and titles, Inber settled upon ones that stressed seasonal shifts and temporal benchmarks, which suggested that conditions in Leningrad were steadily improving. Chapter 4, "Year," celebrates the one-year anniversary of the blockade by honoring Leningraders' grim determination to survive the second siege winter. Unlike "Light and Warmth," "Year" reverberates with hopeful imagery: a firefly pierces the darkness; notes of Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony elevate morale; a muse wards off the cold and melancholy, whispering to the *blokadnik:* "friend, / Do not be afraid, I will be with you during the winter."[70]

By contrast, Inber's notebooks suggest a circularity or even deterioration of conditions over time. The diarist declared that her insomnia and fear in the summer of 1942 were worse than that of the summer of 1941; her tremors, heart palpitations, and fatigue during the winter of 1942–43 surpassed those she experienced the previous winter. "Can it be, can it really be that everything is starting over again from the beginning? The cycle of winter horrors ended, and the cycle of springtime repeats autumn horrors. Oh, how this time has ruined my nerves. How it tortures me."[71] Inber's distress was aggravated by the forces of inspiration and aspiration that haunted her: "There remains some kind of prick of ambition that sometimes is ignited and that I need to take 'in hand' or rather 'by the teeth.' Now it threatens: Why is there not enough applause in the Writers' Union after chapter 4? Why did they not invite me to Smolny for a creative reception, why did they not give me an order? … honestly, this is all just nonsense. It just brushes the surface, the covering of my heart, whereas deep inside there is an endless thirst to work, to write."[72]

[67] *Pulkovskii meridian* (1944), 18–19, chap. 3, stanzas 7–13, 19.
[68] Ibid., 23, chap. 3, stanza 27.
[69] Vishnevskii, *Leningrad*, 1:302; see also 275.
[70] *Pulkovskii meridian* (1944), 28, chap. 4, stanza 18.
[71] OR RNB f. 312, no. 45, entry for 29 March 1942, 15. See also the entries for 31 March and 10 April 1942, 16 ob., 18.
[72] Ibid., entry for 8 November 1942, 15–16.

Indeed, Inber wrote chapter 5 at a feverish pace in November and December 1942. "I will not hold back—I am giving it all my strength (alas, not much of it is left with me) and I will write! God help me!"[73] Inber had been musing about the subject of this chapter since the spring. Stirred by a conversation she had with her husband on dialectics, she was "tempted" to tackle a philosophical topic, one presented as a journey through the lands of ancient Greece "home to all philosophers and philos. [sic] systems. It would be great to write about that."[74] Inber dedicated "A Star over the World," as she titled chapter 5, to Strashun. It begins with the narrator and "her lifelong companion" standing in Leningrad's Botanical Garden amid 200-year-old African palms. Below the couple and the war-damaged fronds "passes the Pulkovo Meridian." The pair follow the meridian, walking along the edge of the globe. They first stop at Inber's native Odessa—the "suffering city" ravaged by war. Next they visit Cyprus, Rhodes, the Mediterranean, and finally North Africa. All along the way, the poem celebrates each region's philosophers, scholars, and explorers, the great civilizations that fascism aimed to destroy. Then, while standing in a thicket of African palms, the narrator suddenly recognizes them as part of Leningrad's Botanical Garden. In a flash, she realizes the journey has been entirely one of the mind.[75] Such meridians, the poem concludes, stretch along the earth "like strings of a lyre" and they "sing praises to man / they glorify Intelligence, Creativity, and Labor / and the palm, the emblem of peace / will give dignity to the trembling world!"[76]

"A Star over the World" was the final installment in the version of *Pulkovo Meridian* submitted for publication in December 1942. Galleys were printed and lightly corrected by Inber and the editor, B. Pankovskii, but the volume was never released.[77] Inber did not detail why in her notebooks, but she intimated that the problem was the concluding chapter. "I am worried about chapter 5; people neither like it nor understand it. That means I have not said what I wanted to say." She panicked when *Pravda* refused it. "All day I feel like crying … *Pravda* did not understand chapter 5 and is afraid to publish it. Can it really be that I 'rushed to write [*potoropisat´sia*]' the poem, as Vishnevskii put it, and spoiled it with an unsuccessful ending?"[78] The chapter's lyrical mode and relatively obscure themes are likely to have contributed to its rejection. So too did the shifting circumstances of the

[73] Ibid., entry for 1 November 1942, 11–11 ob.
[74] Ibid., entry for 9 April 1942, 23.
[75] Ibid., no. 20, ll. 40–48.
[76] Ibid., l. 49.
[77] Ibid., ll. 1–25.
[78] Ibid., no. 46, entry for 1 January 1943, 36 ob. Parts of this entry were restored to the 1964 and later editions, but dated 2 January 1943 (Inber, "Pochti tri goda" [1964], 392).

blockade. In January 1943, just as the proofs were finalized, Soviet soldiers on the Leningrad and Volkhov fronts united and broke open a channel in the German lines. City leaders and residents greeted this major breakthrough as a sign that victory was imminent. Such auspicious circumstances warranted a more triumphant conclusion.

It proved to be the hardest section for Inber to compose. Although she drafted the first five chapters between October 1941 and December 1942, it took her another full year to rewrite chapter 5. Throughout that time, the diarist ruminated over her failing eyesight, respiratory problems, toothaches, neuralgia, scurvy, and periodic loss of control over her legs and hands—devastating for a writer. Chronic malnutrition was taking its toll. The diarist diagnosed herself with ailments ranging from tuberculosis to breast cancer, yet she toiled away, making huge rewrites.[79] At one point, she divided chapter 5 into two chapters and then into three. In April 1943, she held firm to a "trip around the meridian," as the chapter's core idea. But this time "the meridian is not [about] politics but culture. This is no longer 'dangerous.' And it is important to me." Because this journey celebrated Soviet culture, Inber planned an additional chapter honoring Soviet troops: "Chapter 6 (military). That is what was missing in the poem … I really want to write about the Baltic navy. But [in a way that is] not as incendiary or laudatory as Vishnevskii did. But heroic. Tragic … and through that I will show the military conditions of Leningrad."[80] Soon, however, Inber became frustrated with this plan, with her "poverty of ideas," and with the chilly response to her new drafts. She blamed all manner of problems on the troublesome chapter. "It really seems that all of my misfortune began with chapter 5. And there too my lack of success with the [Stalin] Prize, my illness, etc., [my] bitterness," Inber speculated.[81] Her entries from the summer of 1943 report that writers like Nikolai Tikhonov and Vsevolod Vishnevskii critiqued the text as "lyrical." Others, including Pankovskii, considered it "lacking a sense of the people [*narodnost'*]" and showing "political illiteracy."[82]

By July 1943, Inber abandoned the idea of a journey around the meridian. The fifth chapter that materialized from her labors was just eight stanzas long and titled "Summer Again," upholding the seasonal framework. While "A Star over the World" is set in the winter of 1942, "Summer Again" covers June and July 1942. So, instead of lingering over wintertime hardships, it privileges themes of hope and rebirth. Twittering birds and blossoming

[79] Ibid., no. 45, entry for 19 October 1942, 56, and no. 46, entry for 8 February 1943, 46 ob.
[80] Ibid., no. 46, entry for 14 April 1943, 53 ob.–55 ob.
[81] Ibid., entry for 28 May 1943, 70 ob.
[82] Ibid., entries for 7 June and 7 July 1943, 76, 95 ob.

flowers "enchant us with their revival!"; the nightingale's song drowns out the motors of German tanks and planes. Leningraders are likened to fledglings about to take wing. "How many birds and small children again chirp in the nests of Leningrad! … / after two winters of our blockade / Enchant us with your resurrection!"[83] This imagery reached a crescendo in the new chapter 6, "Recovery." Although the siege had not yet been lifted, the chapter proclaims victory: " 'The Enemy retreats!' / And we listen to the orders of the leader, / with fluttering pride and happiness … / Long live the great Russian city / of unprecedented energy! / Long live the energy that / compacted tens of thousands of wills! / And eternally, now and forever, / Long live the Soviet people!"[84] This ending, replete with slogans, underscores how extensively official discourse saturated the latter sections of the poem. As victory drew near, the siege masterplot coalesced even more tightly around themes of heroism, resistance, and patriotism. So too did *Pulkovo Meridian*.[85]

Pulkovo Meridian was published as a freestanding volume in 1943, with subsequent editions in 1944 and 1946. Despite Inber's trepidation, it was received as a triumph. "Ten thousand copies of the little book were printed in Leningrad and were sold out in two days," the war correspondent Alexander Werth noted, "after which the 'black market' price of Inber's poem ranged between 400 and 500 grams of bread—or nearly a whole day's ration.… What poem anywhere outside Russia in recent years has sold 10,000 copies in two days?"[86] The poem not only made Inber professionally; it remade her politically. Within a month of the poem's full publication, she was accepted into the Communist Party. In the testimonial composed for her party application, Inber crafted another, less fraught account of how she became a *blokadnitsa* and Leningrad writer.[87] Like her other wartime narratives, it was revised several times.

---

[83] *Pulkovskii meridian* (1944), 32, 33, chap. 5, stanzas 3, 8.

[84] Ibid., 40, chap. 6, stanza 25. "Retreat" may refer to Stalingrad.

[85] On the narrowing possibilities for narrating World War II in late 1943, see Dobrenko, "Literary Criticism," 166–67; Hodgson, *Written with the Bayonet*, 58, 108; and David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931–1956* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 115–16, 128–32.

[86] Alexander Werth, *Leningrad, 1943: Inside a City under Siege* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 139. Praise for Inber's *Pulkovo Meridian* and other poems are in the following siege diaries: "Iz dnevnika Gal´ko Leonida Pavlovicha," in *Oborona Leningrada, 1941–1944: Vospominaniia i dnevniki uchastnikov*, ed. E. G. Dagin (Leningrad: Nauka, 1996), 537–38; Tsentral´nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv istoriko-politicheskikh dokumentov (TsGAIPD) f. 4000, op. 11, d. 39, l. 6 ob.; and f. 4000, op. 11, d. 15, l. 27 ob.

[87] OR RNB f. 312, d. 1, l. 5. Edits and cross-outs suggest that Inber was still unsure how to present her parentage, notorious cousin, first marriage, and early writings.

All the versions stress the blockade's transformative effect on Inber and her writing, making both worthy of party recognition. But each one makes that case through a different strategy of self-representation. In the first iteration, Inber demonstrated her worthiness by citing accolades and how much she produced, especially for US, Swedish, and other foreign newspapers.[88] However, she eventually removed this material and instead stressed how the blockade raised her consciousness, not her productivity. Under siege, Inber claimed, she experienced a "second birth as a writer," which sharpened her creative and political insight. Petty concerns "receded into the background, giving a place for describing the heroic and terrible events of 1941–42 in the city of Lenin." Here Inber echoed the advice she received to cut personal and prosaic details from *Pulkovo Meridian*. "My old, immature, but instinctively correct judgment of Soviet power became, over time, the thoughtful and heartfelt attitude of a Bolshevik who was not a party member. My ardent desire is to become a party member. I believe that, in this new role, I can be of even greater use for the final victory of our motherland over Hitlerism."[89] A third version of the testimonial elaborates on this transformation by breaking it into distinct, progressive stages: "The first part [of my life] ended with the transformation of a petit-bourgeois *intelligentka* into a Soviet writer. The second part, it seems to me, ought to show how a Soviet writer became a party writer."[90] This emphasis on stages and turning points also suggests a parallel between her professional trajectory and that of the siege as presented by *Pulkovo Meridian*. For Inber, the tasks of writing the siege and the self remained intimately bound together. The revisions she made to both laid the groundwork for her next project, a published diary of the blockade.

The Diary of a Party Writer

In May 1943, as Inber decided to publish her diary, Leningrad's regional and city party organizations were taking unprecedented control over the siege narrative. That April, they established a commission "For the Collection of Materials and for the Preparation of a Chronicle on 'Leningrad and the Leningrad Region in the Patriotic War against the German-Fascist Invaders.'" Prior to this, several district party committees and organizations had been working independently to collect documents, diaries, and reminiscences of the siege.[91] The new commission placed these efforts under the jurisdiction

[88] Ibid., 1–1 ob.
[89] Ibid., 2 ob.–3.
[90] Ibid., 4–5.
[91] A. R. Dzeniskevich, "O sozdanii obshchegorodskoi komissii po sboru materialov dlia istorii oborony Leningrada," in *Leningradskaia nauka v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voiny*, ed. V. A.

of the Party, and it charged the Historical Institute of the All-Union Communist Party (Istpart) with gathering and processing the materials. In a 1943 memorandum, Istpart compiled a list of the essential themes that all collected materials, especially diaries and reminiscences, should document. The master-narrative was broken down into an itemized list. The main items were: the announcement of war and Stalin's speeches in the summer of 1941; the mobilization of the population to defend the city and perform "heroic labor" in the fall of 1941; the hunger and cold of the winter of 1941–42; the evacuations, improved conditions, and restoration efforts of the spring of 1942; Leningraders' participation in the labor and military fronts during the summer of 1942; the role of socialist ideology and leadership in motivating city workers; and the breaking of the siege in January 1943.[92] Like *Pulkovo Meridian*, this list emphasizes seasonal shifts and the steady improvements. Similarly, it deemphasizes the persistence of hunger after the spring of 1942, scarcely mentioning the winter of 1942–43. Thus the narrative elements that—through personal initiative and external prompting—Inber incorporated into her wartime poetry now were explicit criteria for personal narratives of the blockade. *Almost Three Years* was not published as part of this commission, but it privileged the same plotlines. As one of the first and most influential published diaries, it both reflected and contributed to this master-narrative.[93]

Inber seemed pleasantly surprised that she had to "invent" very little to prepare her journal for publication. Rereading it in the spring of 1944, she discovered "to [her] great happiness" that the diary was

> a book, a readymade book! I just need to cut out some things (about Zhanna, about *Pravda*, and some other places). What is missing: the case of a tram. Our trip to the defensive work of my trip to the front and … breaking of the blockade, and recent events: the liberation of Leningrad. And I have all that. … Most important: I do not need to invent, and it [the diary] is well written. I just need to tweak it slightly.[94]

Although committed to the diary's original material and genre, Inber anticipated making some modifications to its form and content. She would incorporate "memories and supplement with splashes from the newspaper." Also, perhaps mindful of Vishnevskii's criticisms, she would "finally give up writing about minor things and get to the big ones."[95] However, her

Shishkin (St. Petersburg: Rossiiskaia akademiia nauk, 1995), 129–39.

92 TsGAIPD f. 4000, op. 1, d. 194, ll. 4–7 ob.

93 Berggol′ts derided "Verochka Inber's truly terrible 'Leningrad Diary' " and claimed Inber stole the diary's title from her (*Blokadnyi dnevnik*, entry for 3 December 1945, 364).

94 OR RNB f. 312, no. 49, entry for 29 February 1944, 28.

95 Ibid., 27 ob.–28.

notebooks, comprised more than 400 pages devoted to intimate concerns, confessions, and the minutiae of everyday life, just as most diaries do.

The handwriting of the marginalia and edits in Inber's notebooks reveal that she did the initial revisions herself.[96] These revisions were of two major kinds. First, she made stylistic edits to streamline, condense, and add structural coherence to her entries. Most of these changes were deletions, which reduced her eight notebooks to the 60 typed pages of the 1945 edition. Indeed, Inber did not invent so much as cut, but in doing so, she changed the focus and feel of the diary dramatically. She divided long entries into shorter ones spread across several days. This created the impression that she wrote almost daily and in relatively consistent amounts. In addition, she tightened the structure by adding sectional headings, reducing repetition, and ironing out the circularity that is typical of diaries but tiresome for readers. She also inserted dialogue and quoted from letters, lectures, and documents, which broke up her long, meandering monologues. Strashun, for instance, expresses many of the views that she articulated in her notebooks. A few of these were controversial statements, but most were not. It seems likely that Inber allocated some of her views to other speakers more to vary her prose than to lend them social legitimacy. These changes fostered very different impressions of the diarist and diary. In print, Inber appeared a methodical record keeper who wrote daily and diligently recorded the thoughts of others. The notebooks' meandering reflections and gaps between entries suggest different habits of journaling. The edits make the journal appear like a prototypical—although not actually like a typical—diary.

Second, Inber reduced all the narrative threads running through her journal except for that of the blockade. She had kept her diary for a variety of purposes—organizational, personal, creative, and confessional. By drastically reducing this material, she effectively amplified her comments about the war. Inber also added in military and citywide events that anchored her personal experiences to the collective story. They include Molotov's radio address announcing Germany's invasion, the seizure of Mga, the burning of the Badaevskii warehouses, ration reductions, and Stalin's speeches.[97] In instances when Inber had commented on these events after the fact, she moved her remarks to the "correct" dates and amended any details about them that

[96] Inber used blue X's and pencil checkmarks (not always consistently) to designate text to include in the 1945 version.

[97] Inber, *Pochti tri goda* (1968), entries for 7, 10 November 1941, 36–37. Kirschenbaum, citing Ales′ Adamovich and Daniil Granin, notes that such events appear more in memoirs and interviews than in diaries (*Legacy of the Siege*, 57).

turned out to be faulty.[98] Despite her doubts about the veracity of official sources of information—expressed through off-handed remarks like "if one believes the Informbiuro"—Inber brought in statistics, dates, or quotations from *Pravda* to supplement her entries.[99] These events infuse the journal with a sense of temporal progression while widening its scope to encompass the front. Thus *Almost Three Years* follows *Pulkovo Meridian* by propounding the accepted timeline and core tropes of the siege master-narrative.

Inber also inserted personal moments to delineate phases of the blockade. One example appears in her entry for 13 January 1942, shortly after Petr Popkov, chairman of the city executive committee, announced that the new ice road across Lake Ladoga would reconnect Leningrad by rail to the "mainland" and alleviate hunger. In her notebooks, Inber questioned Popkov's assurance, but in the publication, she substantiated and personalized his claim by describing the thrill of hearing the first train whistle ring out over Leningrad.[100]

> I must write down what I have heard with my own ears. The whistle of a railway engine. One weak whistle, but clear and distinctive. The first whistle during the whole time of the Blockade. We all ran out into the courtyard to check if it were true … we looked at each other. Yes, they were really train whistles. We had been told about the ice track across Lake Ladoga. So it is true, it has begun to work! And later on trains will carry food supplies from Ladoga to the city. It is our lifeline, perhaps our salvation.[101]

Although Inber did not mention it in her notebook, this incident was not necessarily fabricated. It could have come from an unrecorded memory. Still, by including such episodes, Inber created the impression that she had the foresight to recognize distinct turning points in the blockade as it unfolded. Her manuscript entries, by contrast, spotlight the uncertainty and circularity that pervaded the blockade experience.[102]

As Inber added these temporal markers and public events, she also configured herself into a spokesperson for the *blokadniki*. While Inber

[98] Entries for 7 November 1941, 21 January 1942, and 29 March 1942 in *Pochti tri goda* (1947, 1968).

[99] OR RNB f. 312, no. 44, entry for 19 September 1941, 13, and no. 49, entry for 29 February 1944, 27 ob. References to specific *Pravda* articles in RGALI f. 1072, op. 1, d. 32, l. 90.

[100] OR RNB f. 312, no. 44, entry for 13 January 1942, 40–40 ob.

[101] Inber, *Pochti tri goda* (1947), entry for 13 January 1942, 15.

[102] Alexis Peri, *The War Within: Diaries from the Siege of Leningrad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

generally used "we" to refer to herself and her husband in her notebooks, in the published diary, "we" refers to a wider circle of Leningraders on whose behalf she claimed to be writing. In a 1945 draft introduction to *Almost Three Years*, Inber explained that readers would discover "not so much the personal fate of the author as the truthful narration of a great Soviet city, which for almost three years amazed the world with its ordinary, everyday heroism in the fight against the dark forces of fascism."[103] This collective reach and voice served to displace Inber from the journal. The diary published in 1945 does contain selective moments of intimacy, ones that were ubiquitous to the siege experience. Inber's agonizing worries about her husband, daughter, and grandson, for instance, were so widespread that they only marked her as an everywoman of the blockade. Beth Holmgren observed that casting oneself as a "female mourner" and "bereft mother" helped many female writers gain popularity in the postwar period, especially those who, like Inber, had "politically suspect biographies."[104]

Inber also removed markers of privilege that made her less representative of the besieged community. She excised passages about her comfortably furnished apartment, meals and hot showers at Smolnyi, and extra rations.[105] "If people only knew how Leningrad is suffering," she wrote in January 1942, "~~I have a tiny wound on my hand that has not healed in more than a month. This is [happening to] me, who sometimes is completely or almost full. To me, who has meat and sugar.~~"[106] Or, compare her two accounts of the 1943 New Year's holiday. In her notebook, Inber described decadent plates of caviar and cheese sandwiches, whereas the publication describes a modest meal: "coffee with dulcitol (something like saccharin but tastier) and slices of black bread, sprinkled with glucose. I'd say it's delicious."[107]

Perhaps to protect her privacy or present herself as a stoic *blokadnitsa*, Inber also omitted some expressions of jealousy, guilt, despair, and suicidal thoughts, which presumably were not or could not be shared.[108] Similarly, she removed politically controversial statements, such as her criticisms of the local party leaders, comments that the coveted medal "For the Defense

[103] RGALI f. 1072, op. 1, d. 32, l. 2.

[104] Beth Holmgren, "Writing the Female Body Politic (1945–1985)," in *History of Women's Writings in Russia*, 228. See also Anna Krylova, "'Healers of Wounded Souls': The Crisis of Private Life in Soviet Literature," *Journal of Modern History* 73, 2 (2001): 314–16.

[105] OR RNB f. 312, no. 45, entry for 16 September 1942, 50–50 ob., and no. 46, 12 March 1942, 11 ob.

[106] Ibid., entry for 3–4 January 1942, 31 ob., 33.

[107] Compare OR RNB f. 312, no. 46, entry for 6 January 1943, 37, with Inber, *Pochti tri goda* (1947), 40.

[108] OR RNB f. 312, no. 46, entry for 8 February 1943, 46 ob.

of Leningrad" was ugly, and concerns about her husband's brush with the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD).[109] In a series of terrified entries, blacked out with a marker, Inber relayed how the secret police interrogated Strashun about the high mortality rate and appalling conditions at Erisman Hospital. Although Leningrad's medical community had minimal resources with which to handle the public health crisis, they were blamed for the rising tide of death in the city.[110] On 3 February 1942, "the police came and saw the mountains (in the full sense of the word) of corpses, the piles of filth over the whole area of the hospital, the disassembled fences, and declared that all of this (especially the corpses) was counterrevolutionary and ordered an investigation." Although the district party secretary "knew perfectly well the state of affairs at the hospital and [medical] institute," he stood by silently while this "Bolshevik fire" ignited the tempers of the NKVD investigators. "I was beside myself," Inber exclaimed. "Who knows how this will all end? It depends on the direction in which it will head. Here there is less than one step between unpleasantness and catastrophe … what will happen to me without I.D.? What will happen to him without me?" This prospect terrified her more than the horrors of war: "To perish not from a bomb, not from fire, and not even from hunger, but from the cold cogwheels of the administrative machine, what could be more frightening than that? Never have things been as hard for me in Leningrad as they are now."[111] For the published diary, Inber maintained this anxious tone but transmuted her concerns about Strashun's arrest into worries about his health. Physical threats were less morally opaque or damaging to Inber's image as a *blokadnitsa* than political dangers were.[112]

Inber completed her revisions in late 1944 and brought her diary to Vishnevskii, then the editor of *Znamia*. "I read through it, edited it," he remarked in his diary. Vishnevskii found Inber's journal "accurate and interesting" but suspected that she had "constructed [*sdelannyi*]" it somewhat

[109] Ibid., no. 44, entries for 2, 20, and 25 January 1942, 43–43 ob., 25 ob.–26, 46 ob.; no. 45, entries for 5 February, 10 and 15 April, and 8 July 1942, 6 ob., 24–26, 33–34; no. 46, entry for 3 June 1943, 73 ob.

[110] Nadezhda Cherepenina, "Assessing the Scale of Famine and Death in the Besieged City," in *Life and Death in Besieged Leningrad, 1941–44*, ed. John Barber and Andrei Dzeniskevich (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 51.

[111] OR RNB f. 312, no. 45, entry for 3 February 1942, 49–49 ob.

[112] Ibid., entries for 5 and 12 February 1942, 6 ob.–8 ob.; *Pochti tri goda* (1968), 73–74. Lidiia Ginzburg, who had known Inber since their days at Theater Krot in Odessa and worked with her at Leningrad's radio, considered Inber talented but disapproved of how she valorized collective heroism while suppressing personal, painful, moral complexities of the siege. See Lidiia Ginzburg, *Zapisnye knizhki: Vospominaniia. Esse* (St. Petersburg: Iskusstvo, 2002), 74; and Emily van Buskirk, "Recovering the Past for the Future: Guilt, Memory, and Lidiia Ginzburg's *Notes of a Blockade Person*," *Slavic Review* 69, 2 (2010): 282.

artificially for foreign readers. Compared to her 1928 autobiographical novella *A Place in the Sun*, he considered the diary "more disciplined … the author has matured, changed, and learned a lot. But there is still that prior feeling of 'I, a *fragile woman,* am contemplating the world.'" Moreover, despite her edits, Vishnevskii repeated his earlier charge that Inber overemphasized personal distress and understated the war's military and political importance. "The text needs to be improved. In addition to suffering and contemplative Leningrad, there was fighting [*boevoi*] Leningrad, Bolshevik in the highest sense of the word. There is less of this."[113] The writer and secretary of Leningrad's Writers' Union Vera Ketlinskaia echoed Vishnevskii's observation about scope, commenting that Inber's voice and story were "smaller" in the diary than in the poem. To this charge, Inber apparently replied: "Well, of course, that is how I am. But in *Pulkovo*, the times and events forced me to stand on my tiptoes."[114] Inber explained the diary's modest tone as a function of her personality, but there are literary reasons as well. Diaries typically spotlight the personal, everyday, and mundane. This is especially pronounced in chronicles of survival, where quotidian tasks like finding food assume enormous importance and self-absorption becomes tied to self-preservation. So, Vishnevskii's and Ketlinskaia's objections notwithstanding, could one expect Inber's diary to be otherwise?

The Postwar Lives of Inber's Siege Writings

Despite his misgivings, Vishnevskii oversaw the diary's publication in *Znamia* in 1945. The next year, Inber received the Stalin Prize for both *Almost Three Years* and *Pulkovo Meridian,* an implicit recognition that they were halves of the same evolving narrative. Also a bestseller, the diary appeared as a freestanding volume in 1946 and 1947 and was translated into Ukrainian, Lithuanian, Swedish, and Finnish. Initially 30,000 copies were printed, but 100,000 were quickly added and another 100,000 by 1948.[115] Praise also arrived by post. Inber received hundreds of letters from Soviet readers. One note, sent by the evacuated *blokadnik* Aleksandr Chaklin from a hospital in Crimea, declared simply: "your diary is my diary."[116]

In a more unusual display of praise, the humorist A. Flit released a parody of *Almost Three Years*, poking fun at Inber's now privileged status, sentimentality,

[113] Vishnevskii, *Dnevniki voennykh let*, 696. This passage is not in the 2002 edition of his diary.
[114] RGALI f. 2816, op. 1, d. 53, l. 5.
[115] Leon Goure, "Review of *Leningrad Diary* by Vera Inber," *Slavic Review* 32, 2 (1973): 391. This review is based on the 1971 English translation of the 1947 edition.
[116] RGALI f. 1072, op. 2, d. 359, l. 6.

Illustration of Vera Inber by B. Leo, which accompanied Flit's parody

and proclivity for bird metaphors—there are at least twelve in *Pulkovo Meridian*. "For the first time," one mock entry begins, "I put on lipstick and powdered my nose. I wept with emotion. On our roof two swallows are twittering. I wrote an essay about swallows for South Africa."[117] Inber's elite status is conveyed both in the text, which mentions illustrious speaking engagements and writing commissions, and in a sketch of her decked out in fur and high heels. Although a light form of ridicule, the parody was a clear sign of Inber's success. By 1945, her work, style, and methods of self-representation were recognizable enough to become cliché.

While Inber was garnering recognition, a new phase in the regulation of the siege story unfurled. This time, direct attacks on Leningrad authors, journals, and publishers began to multiply, culminating in the notorious Leningrad Affair. The affair was caused by several factors, including international tensions and political infighting.[118] One of its purposes was to reassert authority over the city of Leningrad, which had acquired concerning amounts of autonomy and acclaim, at least from the Kremlin's perspective. Members of the Central Committee—including Georgii Malenkov, Viacheslav Molotov, and Andrei Zhdanov—unleashed a spree of attacks on local writers for depicting Leningraders as unique in their suffering and in their isolation and independence from Moscow. The fear was that the siege myth could give rise to a kind of "Leningrad patriotism," which might prompt the *blokadniki* to demand greater autonomy from the Kremlin. Moreover, in light of the recent victory, Leningrad authors like Vishnevskii, Ketlinskaia, Berggol′ts, and Inber were criticized for belaboring motifs of suffering, death, and a sense of doom. In an effort to regain control of the siege narrative, Leningrad's censorship bureau removed 5,000 books and journals from local libraries and

[117] A. Flit, "Vera Inber, Moi dnevniki," *Leningrad*, nos. 13–14 (1945): 32.

[118] David Brandenberger, "Stalin, the Leningrad Affair, and the Limits of Postwar Russocentrism," *Russian Review* 63, 2 (2004): 241–55; Richard Bidlack, "Ideological or Political Origins of the Leningrad Affair? A Response to David Brandenberger," *Russian Review* 64, 1 (2005): 90–95; A. A. Danilov and A. V. Pyzhikov, *Rozhdenie sverkhderzhavy: SSSR v pervye poslevoennye gody* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2001), 8, 44–45; Yoram Gorlizki and Oleg V. Khlevniuk, *Cold Peace: Stalin and the Soviet Ruling Circle, 1945–1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3–6, 44, 69.

bookstores. Several of the collections to which Inber had contributed were taken out of circulation.[119]

In this tense environment, *Almost Three Years* came under fire. Objections that Vishnevskii had once raised reverberated in fresh attacks from Pavel Gromov and Dmitrii Polikarpov. The diary, they claimed, failed to provide a "panoramic, generalizing picture of the whole" or a "feeling of the heroic atmosphere," as Gromov put it.[120] Too much of the text, Polikarpov complained, described mundane activities like cooking, cleaning, and running errands. "The editors of the journal *Znamia* do a disservice to Vera Inber by publishing her diary, where the intimate, personal, narrowly literary details have overshadowed the major theme. The reader fell in love with Vera Inber for her *Pulkovo Meridian*, that poem where the atmosphere of besieged Leningrad was conveyed in an extremely concise and precise form," but the diary was "petty," "narcissistic," "vulgar," "superficial," and "cursory," in Polikarpov's estimation.[121] Thus, despite her edits to depersonalize the diary by cutting comments about chores and writing, Inber had not gone far enough. Her diary remained too focused on subjective, everyday affairs for some post-1945 critics. Polikarpov managed temporarily to dissuade *Soviet Writer* from publishing *Almost Three Years* as a freestanding volume.[122]

Criticisms of Inber's work may have changed little since 1942, but the same cannot be said of Inber. She was not as vulnerable as she had been before the war. The critic A. Tarasenkov sent batches of Inber's fan mail to Polikarpov to prove that *Almost Three Years* indeed resonated with readers.[123] Moreover, Polikarpov's apparent "rudeness" and aggression won him few allies, and he lost his position as senior secretary of the Writers' Union in 1946.[124] *Soviet Writer* did publish the diary, and in several editions.[125] Subsequent efforts to ban it also failed.[126]

Why did Inber survive relatively unscathed when other authors of the masterplot did not? Perhaps the edits Inber made to the second half of *Pulkovo*

[119] Arlen Blium, *Kak eto delalos´ v Leningrade: Tsenzura v gody ottepeli, zastoia i perestroiki 1953–1991* (St. Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2005), 163–65. A partial list of banned books about the siege is in Blium, ed., *Tsenzura v Sovetskom Soiuze 1917–1991: Dokumenty* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2004), 361.

[120] "Iz vystupleniia P. Gromova," *Leningrad*, nos. 7–8 (1945): 27.

[121] Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial´no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI) f. 17, op. 125, d. 459, l. 3.

[122] Ibid., l. 9.

[123] RGALI f. 1072, op. 1, d. 237, ll. 116–30. Inber received one letter echoing Gromov and Polikarpov from a reader, M. P. Dmitrieva (op. 2, d. 359, ll. 10–11).

[124] Ibid., op. 1, d. 237, ll. 116–41.

[125] Babichenko, *Literaturnyi front,* 154–55, 185, 187–88.

[126] Blium, *Kak eto delalos´ v Leningrade*, 161–63.

Meridian and to *Almost Three Years* sufficiently downplayed intimate suffering and stressed heroic patriotism to pass muster with less extreme critics. Or perhaps Inber had garnered enough acclaim, including the Stalin Prize, to shield her from persecution. This point came up when the journal *Leningrad* was censured for publishing Flit's parody of her.[127] Vishnevskii, who once praised the "witty parody," helped lodge this complaint against *Leningrad*'s editor B. M. Likharev at a hearing before the Orgburo.[128] "When Vera Inber came out with her Diary, what did you do? You put out a parody of Vera Inber, a person who stood with you throughout the blockade, but you struck her so hard she could barely keep her feet. Now she has a prize, now no one is going to criticize her."[129] Flit's parody, the commission concluded, was just one of *Leningrad*'s many ideological deviations. The journal's staff was among dozens of writers and editors who lost their positions during the Leningrad Affair.

Inber left Leningrad in 1944, but controversy followed her to her next project. She wrote about the Nazis' extermination of Jews in Odessa for Il´ia Ehrenburg and Vasilii Grossman's *Black Book of Russian Jewry*, a project that did not survive the anticosmopolitanism and antisemitism of the late Stalin years. Still, Inber survived. Back in Moscow, she remained relatively quiet, publishing a few poems and stories, preparing anthologies of her work, writing about her creative process, and serving on editorial boards.[130] Still anxious about her status, Inber continued to participate in campaigns against Soviet writers, including Boris Pasternak. In the end, Inber remained a fixture of the Soviet literary community. However, she never published another work as popular as *Pulkovo Meridian* or *Almost Three Years*.

Revisions to both works continued when state-sanctioned narratives of World War II changed after Stalin's death. In light of new geopolitical tensions and postwar settlement, uses of the word "German" in *Pulkovo Meridian* were replaced with the more temporally specific "fascist." Moreover, in the wake of Khrushchev's Secret Speech, Stalin disappeared from *Pulkovo Meridian* and *Almost Three Years*.[131] For instance, one entry discussing Stalin's speech on the 1941 anniversary of the October Revolution was changed in the 1964 edition

[127] Artizov and Naumov, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 406.

[128] RGALI f. 1038 op. 2, d. 580, l. 3.

[129] Realizing that nobody should be impeachable, Vishnevskii added: "This too is wrong." Stalin, presiding over the hearing, rejoined, "Right" (Babichenko, *Literaturnyi front,* 206; translation from Artizov and Naumov, *Soviet Culture and Power*, 414).

[130] Inber, *Vdokhnovenie i masterstvo* (Mosow: Sovetskii pisatel´, 1961).

[131] On the replacement of "German," compare chap. 1, stanzas 3, 6, 20; on Stalin's removal, compare chap. 3, stanzas 4–13 and 19 of *Pulkovskii meridian* (1944) with "Pulkovskii meridian" (1957).

to read: "We listened to it as we stared at the fire ~~and everything merged for us as one great shining consolation~~."[132] Stalin was also removed from Inber's description of a celebratory dinner between military personnel and writers in the 1958 edition: "Before all other toasts, we toasted ~~Stalin, for his order of the day, calling for victory. The second toast to~~ the liberation of Leningrad."[133] Zhdanov, who participated in the Leningrad Affair, also vanished.[134] As these political figures faded from the text, Inber's stature as a writer became more prominent. Much of the material in her notebooks about her creative process was restored to the 1964, 1967, and 1968 publications of the diary. Moreover, her blockade poems were inserted between entries for these reprints. Such additions projected Inber's status as a well-established writer back in time, veiling the creative and professional hurdles she recounted at length in her notebooks.

It is unclear if Inber made these postwar revisions herself and, if so, if she undertook them voluntarily or under pressure. The handwriting of the markup to her notebooks indicates that she participated to some degree.[135] The letters she received from readers also suggest this. There are more than 100 readers' letters, posted between the mid-1940s and 1950s, in the archives. They provide strong evidence that the Soviet public accepted the triumphant myth of the blockade and praised the revival of Russian nationalism during World War II. There are only four criticisms of *Pulkovo Meridian* and none of *Almost Three Years* in these letters. One reader objected to Inber's mention of US lend-lease goods, insisting (erroneously) that the United States provided no such aid. He also refuted Inber's (correct) declaration that the Wright brothers invented the airplane, insisting that it was a Soviet innovation. Other readers disputed Inber's classification of Soviet anti-aircraft searchlights as "weak" or took offense that she described how Leningraders' (not Germans') teeth chattered during the brutal winter of 1941–42.[136] Although there is no proof that Inber responded directly to these complaints with her postwar edits, it seems more than coincidental that the 1964 edition of *Pulkovo*

[132] Compare the entry for 7 November 1941 in *Pochti tri goda* (1968), 36; *Pochti tri goda* (1958), 273; and *Pochti tri goda* (1947), 9.
[133] Compare the entry for 27 February 1942 in *Pochti tri goda* (1968), 86; *Pochti tri goda* (1958), 314; and *Pochti tri goda* (1947), 22.
[134] On Zhdanov, compare the entries for 23 May 1942 and 9 November 1942 in *Pochti tri goda* (1947), 27, 38; and *Pochti tri goda* (1958), 332.
[135] Inber put brackets in gray pencil around previously cut text that was restored to the 1964 edition.
[136] RGALI f. 1072, op. 2, d. 359, l. 1; op. 1, d. 236, l. 95.

Meridian remedied two of the four.[137] It is likely that, 20 years later, Inber continued to revise the siege story in response to the same forces: changes in her status, the evolving political climate, and the reactions of readers—no matter how misinformed they were.

Pulkovo Meridian and *Almost Three Years* remain mainstays of the blockade canon today. A new edition of *Almost Three Years,* based on the 1968 iteration, appeared as recently as 2015.[138] Contemporary readers consider themselves to be quite familiar with these classics, unaware of how substantially they were rewritten between the 1940s and the 1960s. I have traced how these texts emerged from the dynamic interactions among personal, political, and literary circumstances. The many versions of the poem and the diary give a detailed picture of how the masterplot of the siege emerged and influenced the life and career of one of its core authors. Even through small edits like word substitution and retitling, *Pulkovo Meridian* and *Almost Three Years* showcase how accepted norms and standards for presenting the blockade evolved during and after the war. At times, Inber contributed to these terms herself; at times she followed recommendations suggested by policies, critics, and general readers. In any case, *Pulkovo Meridian* and *Almost Three Years* affirm that the siege master-narrative arose not just from official cues and pressures but from individual writers' attempts to position themselves as leading voices in the struggle against fascism.

In the process of reworking her compositions, Inber reconfigured herself into a *blokadnitsa* and an authoritative "voice of Leningrad." This successful reinvention of her image allowed her to gain a foothold in the world of Soviet letters, one she never lost. For Inber, the stakes of assimilation were especially high because of her marginal status and blighted revolutionary credentials. "To understand how to live in the epoch of terror," Evgenii Evtushenko wrote of Inber, "one must imagine oneself in the skin of those who were afraid not only for themselves but also for their loved ones."[139] Both the purges of the late 1930s and the war tested Inber's ability to adapt. The brutality of World War II assaulted Soviet citizens, body and mind, but it also allowed new military, political, and cultural leaders to emerge. Among them were previously marginalized individuals who managed to obtain clout in Soviet

[137] Compare chap. 2, stanza 7 (on US aid); chap. 1, stanza 9 (on the Wright brothers); and chap. 3, stanzas 7–14, 19 (on Stalin) in *Pulkovskii meridian* (1944), 10, 5, 18–21; and "Pulkovskii meridian" (1957), 367, 371–72, 378–81.

[138] Vera Inber, *Pochti tri goda* (Moscow: RIPOL klassik, 2015).

[139] Iz antologii Evgeniia Evtushenko, "Desiat´ vekov russkoi poezii."

society by virtue of their wartime service.[140] Inber's rise to fame can also be read as part of that story. Her revisions to *Pulkovo Meridian* and *Almost Three Years* offer a new vantage point on the individual's struggle to adapt and survive, first within the Stalinist literary landscape and then during World War II.

For all of her concealment, Inber preserved her revisions for future readers. Two months before she died in 1972, she gave her wartime diaries to Leningrad's central library with their many layers, contradictions, and inconsistencies clearly visible.[141] Perhaps this was a final attempt to exorcise her demons of ambition. Together, the drafts and edits showcase the forces of inspiration and aspiration that haunted Inber and drove her to rework, again and again, her narratives of the siege and the self.

Dept. of History
Boston University
226 Bay State Rd.
Boston, MA 02215 USA
alexisp4@bu.edu

[140] Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001); E. S. Seniavskaia, *1941–1945: Frontovoe pokolenie. Istoriko-psikhologicheskoe issledovanie* (Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 1995); Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941–1991* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[141] See the note on the inside cover of OR RNB f. 312, d. 44.