

Screenplay for the film "1946 — Anna Akhmatova. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze" written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI. Screenplay Summary:

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The text paints a broad picture of the Soviet Union in 1945–1946 through the life of Anna Akhmatova, showing how the euphoric expectation of change after victory over Nazi Germany quickly collapses. During the war, writers and ordinary people nourish illusions: once fascism is defeated, the regime will surely soften, people will no longer starve, and literature will be allowed to speak freely. The war has awakened individual dignity and a sense of citizenship, brought together peasants, workers and intellectuals at the front, exposed the truth about famine, the collective farms and the camps, and confronted millions of Soviet soldiers with a different European way of life – a huge shock that gives them the ability, at last, to compare.

Yet peace brings not liberation but a new struggle for survival: unemployment or work far below one's skills, a catastrophic housing shortage, illness, and two million disabled veterans whom enterprises refuse to hire and whose pensions are impossible to live on. Former soldiers, humiliated beggars in stations and markets, cling to the last remnants of wartime solidarity in shabby beer halls nicknamed "The Blue Danube", where they talk, remember and feel briefly free.

Meanwhile, Stalin's popularity peaks. Many veterans, dazzled by victory, forgive him collectivization, the Great Terror and military disasters. The regime, terrified by any independent cohesion of the front generation, bans even official veterans' associations, fearing a repeat of the Decembrist uprising that followed officers' exposure to Europe in 1815.

Akhmatova's biography runs through this landscape. A central figure of the pre-revolutionary Silver Age, she has long been reduced to poverty: banned from publication for sixteen years, selling herrings to buy tea, walking in rags, living in a cramped, overpopulated apartment in the Fountain House. Her first husband, the poet Nikolai Gumilyov, is executed in 1921; their son Lev grows up in the provinces and later in Leningrad, proud, abrasive, and vulnerable to arrest. Both he and Akhmatova's partner, art historian Nikolai Punin, are arrested in 1935; a personal appeal to Stalin and the intercession of prominent writers win their release – a "royal pardon" for which she pays with the loss of her small pension and renewed dependence.

*Lev is arrested again in 1938, tortured into statements implicating his mother. Out of the prison queues and long months of waiting is born Requiem, one of the strongest works of Russian civic poetry, a mother's curse on Stalinism that circulates only in samizdat and memory. At the same time, the regime plays a sophisticated game: allowing Akhmatova into the Writers' Union, publishing *From Six Books*, then having Zhdanov denounce the book as "fornication with prayer in praise of God" and withdrawing it.*

The war years bring a brief elevation: Akhmatova is evacuated, rescued from besieged Leningrad on Stalin's orders, published in Pravda, and in 1946 holds triumphant readings in Moscow and Leningrad. Her collected poems appear in large print runs, she finally earns money, which she habitually gives away to needy friends. Yet against this stands the onset of the Cold War: Churchill's "iron curtain" speech, Stalin's angry response, intensified suspicion of Western

contacts. In 1945, Isaiah Berlin visits Akhmatova in Leningrad; she reads him *Requiem* and speaks of the Terror. The visit immediately becomes an object of NKVD scrutiny and later interrogation material for Lev in prison.

The decisive turn comes with the Central Committee's 1946 resolution on the journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*. Stalin personally edits the text, in which Zoshchenko and Akhmatova are labelled "non-Soviet writers", "vulgar and scum of literature". Expelled from the Writers' Union, stripped of ration cards, abandoned by Punin's relatives, sustained only by a clandestine fund, Akhmatova falls into extreme precarity. Her son is thrown out of graduate school, forced to work as a librarian in a mental hospital, and later arrested again; Punin dies in a labor camp. In panic for Lev, she even writes adulatory verses to Stalin, which do not help.

After Stalin's death, she will receive an honorary doctorate at Oxford and meet her old love Boris Anrep in Paris. But in 1946 her bitter question to actress Faina Ranevskaya captures the essence: why does a great victorious country, with all its mighty technology, need to roll all its tanks over the chest of one sick old woman? The answer lies in the logic of the regime: fear of any independent authority, any memory that cannot be controlled, and any poetic voice capable of bearing witness to terror.

Screenplay:

1946 – Anna Akhmatova

The year 1946. We are the victors. The country has won the war. The war was terrifying, and precisely for that reason everyone is expecting incredible changes for the better.

It must be said that illusions about the post-war life had appeared already at the very beginning of the war. Conversations about the future start right in the trains going to evacuation. Soviet writers, loyal to the regime, become so frank in those eastbound trains that they frighten the relatives travelling with them. From NKVD reports:

"Iosif Utkin, poet, says: 'We have just as terrible a regime as in Germany. Everything and everyone is crushed. We must defeat German fascism, and then defeat ourselves.'"

Fedin, writer: "Now a new age must come, when the people will no longer starve, will no longer strip everything off their backs so that some little bunch of Bolsheviks can prosper. I'm afraid that after the war all our Soviet literature will simply be crossed out. They've broken us of the habit of thinking."

Pogodin, playwright: "Things cannot go on like this, we cannot live like this any longer, or we will not survive."

Even Alexei Tolstoy says: "When the people come back from the war, they will be afraid of nothing."

“Extraordinary days are ahead of us,” Anna Akhmatova keeps repeating while in evacuation in Tashkent. “You’ll see, we’ll write what we consider necessary. It’s quite possible that in a couple of years I’ll be appointed editor of *Zvezda* in Leningrad. I won’t refuse!”

Anna Andreevna Akhmatova can in no way be suspected of serving the authorities. She stands apart. That is why her illusions are especially bitter. Her prediction will come true in only one respect: Akhmatova’s name will indeed be tightly tied, in Soviet history, to the Leningrad journal *Zvezda*. And that will happen, as she herself said, in a couple of years – in 1946.

There exists a list of her public readings, drawn up by Akhmatova herself. There are thirty-one for her entire life. Twelve of them fall in the first half of 1946. She reads in Leningrad and in Moscow. The events are triumphant. On April 3, 1946, the famous evening of Moscow and Leningrad poets is held in the Columned Hall of the House of Trade Unions. From the memoirs of the theatre historian Vilenkin: “What a celebration it was! How many young soldiers and students came that evening, how all the entrances to the hall were jammed, how the galleries and boxes groaned under the pressure of this crowd of boys and girls with burning eyes. What unity breathed in the hall, begging Akhmatova for more, more and still more poems.”

From the recollections of Lyubimova, an acquaintance of Akhmatova: “When she began to read, everyone in the hall stood up and listened to her standing, right to the end.”

From the memoirs of Ehrenburg, whom Akhmatova visited two days later: “When I mentioned the evening, she shook her head: ‘I don’t like that. And above all, they don’t like that here.’” Yet in those same April days Akhmatova speaks at Moscow University, at the Actors’ House, at the Central Officers’ House of Airmen. She sits for the painter Saryan in six sessions.

During the war, everyone dreamt of surviving and seeing what life would be like. Before the war, the state had for many years suppressed the human personality. The country was catastrophically unprepared for war. That is why the war made incredibly high demands on each person. The war revealed personality and allowed everyone to feel like a citizen. Later, the writer Vyacheslav Kondratyev will put these words into the mouth of his hero: “At the front I was necessary all the way to necessity itself. It felt as if you alone held the fate of Russia in your hands.”

Moreover, the war gave people a mass of information. First of all, about their own country. At the front, people from different social strata met who would never have crossed paths in peacetime. Many city-dwellers learned for the first time at the front, from peasants, the truth about famine in the countryside, about what collective farm life was really like. Together with mobilized prisoners came information from the camps. The generalized mistrust that had been so typical of the Stalinist pre-war years existed at the front too, and yet, as veterans recall, conversations were still fairly frank. When the army crossed the USSR border and entered Europe, millions of people, without preparation, found themselves face to face with an entirely different, unknown way of life and culture. It was a psychological shock. Soviet people suddenly had the possibility of comparing. But they would have neither the time nor the strength to live through and comprehend the experience they had gained at the front. Post-war life becomes a new struggle for survival. At the front it had seemed that after the last shot there would come happiness.

The veterans look for work, but often they cannot find it in their pre-war speciality. Those who went to the front straight from school know absolutely nothing but war. Housing is a disaster. Illnesses descend on them. In the Red Army – the only army among the belligerents – soldiers were not given

leave. Only if they were wounded. The extreme physical and mental exhaustion makes itself felt immediately after the war.

After the war there are two million disabled veterans. Factory directors and heads of institutions as a rule refuse to hire them. It is impossible to live on the pension due to a disabled frontline soldier. These men, who saved the Motherland, beg in railway stations, in markets, outside churches.

Contacts between veterans, now bound also by post-war problems, are in 1946 a matter of survival. To this extraordinarily complex social question a simple answer is found: the "Blue Danube". This is the popular name given to the poor beer halls and snack bars opened after the war, where the veterans gather in the evenings, where they can pour their hearts out, where they are simply among their own, all with a shared past. The "Blue Danube" is the last refuge of that particular freedom people had felt at the front.

From the diary of the writer Emmanuil Kazakevich: "I went into a beer hall. Two disabled men and a pipe-fitter were drinking beer and reminiscing about the war. One of them cried, then said: 'If there's another war, I'll go again.'" Of these people, of the millions who came back to a hard, impoverished post-war life, the great writer and veteran Viktor Astafyev will say: "At the end of your days you suddenly discover that whatever in your life there was to be proud of or to grieve over – that was it, the war."

For another part of those who passed through the front, life will not be exhausted by the war. These are the ones who are lucky with their work, who manage to recover psychologically and find their place in the new life. Above all, they are those who, returning straight from the front still in their soldier's tunic, go to institutes and universities and start studying. Later, these two halves of the front generation will have difficulty understanding each other.

But in 1946 the authorities fear any independent cohesion of the men coming back from the war. The state even bans official veterans' organizations. It prohibits them immediately after victory. In May 1945 the head of the Sovinformbureau, Lozinsky, approaches Molotov with the proposal to create for the veterans a "Council of Marshals" and a "Society of Heroes of the Soviet Union". The proposal is rejected.

The authorities' fear of the threat of a new Decembrist movement is extraordinarily strong. The Decembrist uprising in Russia in 1825 was a consequence of the liberation campaign in Europe at the end of the war against Napoleon. In 1945 and 1946, the victors in the war against fascism, returning from Europe, must be dispersed, diluted in the general mass. In reality, there is no question at all of a new Decembrism. "We couldn't even imagine any other system," says the writer and veteran Vyacheslav Kondratyev.

The writer and veteran Viktor Nekrasov writes: "Alas, we forgave Stalin everything! The collectivization, the year thirty-seven, the days of military defeats." A career officer and future dissident, Petr Grigorenko, says: "The doubts that had knocked at the door of my soul on the eve of the war disappeared. For me, Stalin was again the 'great, infallible leader' and 'brilliant commander'. Such is the spell of victory that you take this nonsense for revelation. Nothing could have disturbed me."

The years 1945 and 1946 mark the peak of Stalin's popularity. From the memoirs of the war correspondent Alexander Avdeenko. He comes to the Victory Parade with his little son. He takes the boy in his arms. The child sees Stalin. It is raining that day. The boy asks: "Won't Stalin get wet?"

— “No, hardened steel is not afraid of rain.” — “Daddy, why didn’t Stalin order God to give us good weather?”

War is an extraordinarily powerful collective experience. The war was so terrible that it distorted the memory of what preceded it. If, after all the irreparable losses, you had asked people how they wanted to live after the war, they would honestly have answered: like before the war. The war left in memory only what was good in pre-war life, and erased everything else. This was the gift war made to Stalin.

The poet Margarita Aliger writes: “In the spring of 1946, Akhmatova was vigorous and calm. People asked her for poems, they printed them, they paid her. ‘Yes, yes, money,’ said Anna Andreevna. ‘Money is good. People need it so much.’ She needed money in order to give it away to acquaintances in need.”

Akhmatova knows the value of having no money. She was not published for sixteen consecutive years – from 1924 to 1940. In 1924, on Nevsky Prospect, she meets the Party writer Marietta Shaginyan, who says to her: “So that’s what you look like, such an important person. There was a Central Committee resolution about you: don’t arrest her, but don’t publish her either.”

Before the ban on her publications, Akhmatova used to say, in her characteristic way, that she did not like seeing her poems in print: it was like forgetting “a stocking or a brassiere on the table”. But poetry is also the only form of income available to a poet. The authorities take that away from her.

From the diary of the writer Konstantin Fedin: “19 August 1929. I was at Akhmatova’s. There is in her something childishly pitiful, very unhappy, and at the same time unapproachable.”

By this time, Akhmatova’s extreme poverty is already obvious. Whatever the weather, she wears an old hat and a light coat. Only when a friend of hers dies does Akhmatova receive, as a bequest, an old fur coat, which she wears right up until the war.

From the former appearance of one of the brightest stars of Russia’s Silver Age poetry, all that is left is the famous fringe on her forehead and her thinness. Even in the old life she would boast: “They used to pour a full glass of champagne into the hollow at the base of my neck.” And Osip Mandelstam, before the revolution, would joke: “Your neck was made for the guillotine.”

In 1929, Konstantin Fedin, head of the Writers’ Publishing House in Leningrad, makes a desperate attempt to publish a two-volume edition of Akhmatova’s work. He talks for an hour and a half with the chief censor, Lebedev-Poliansky.

Fedin will write in his diary: “It is impossible to appoint to a censor’s post people who belong in an asylum for idiots.” Akhmatova’s poems do not see the light; they are not to be published.

With such a past, the spring of 1946 seems fantastic. It seems as though the war really has changed something in Soviet life. On March 8, in *Leningradskaya Pravda*, under the heading “Outstanding Women of Our Country”, a photo of Akhmatova is published.

In March 1946, her book *Poems of Anna Akhmatova, 1909–1945* is sent to press. The print run is ten thousand copies. Akhmatova is already holding the advance copy in her hands. A messenger from the State Publishing House brings it to the Fountain House. A reporter from the newspaper *Vecherny Leningrad* comes along and interviews her.

In 1946, besides her unexpectedly successful literary life, Akhmatova is happy in her private life as well. In 1946, her whole personal life is in her son. He has returned from the front and is now with her. Her son is also the son of the poet Nikolai Gumilyov, shot in 1921.

She met the schoolboy Nikolai Gumilyov at fifteen, on Christmas Eve, in Tsarskoe Selo. Gumilyov proposed to her five times, and twice tried to commit suicide because of her. When she finally agreed to marry him, Akhmatova told him: "I don't love you, but I consider you an outstanding man."

They went to Paris for their honeymoon. She was very beautiful. She wore a white dress and a broad-brimmed straw hat with a large white ostrich feather.

That feather, this romantic and seeker of adventure Gumilyov had brought from Abyssinia. Spring 1910. On Montparnasse, in the bohemian café *La Rotonde*, Akhmatova meets Amedeo Modigliani. Or he meets her. Gumilyov looks at them in despair. He knows that she will do whatever she wants. In 1910, Akhmatova and Modigliani meet several times; in winter he writes her letters. In 1911 they meet in Paris again. They sit in the Luxembourg Gardens. Not on the paid chairs, as is customary, but on a bench. He is poor and unrecognized. Akhmatova writes: "He took me to see old Paris behind the Panthéon, at night in the moonlight. It was he who showed me the real Paris." She would come to his studio with scarlet roses. If he wasn't there, she would throw the flowers in through the window. Modigliani drew Akhmatova. He gave her the drawings. She says: "They perished in the house at Tsarskoe Selo in the first years of the revolution." One drawing survived. Modigliani will die a year before Gumilyov is shot.

Akhmatova will recall Gumilyov eagerly, although everyday married life was unbearable for two God-given poets.

When someone praised Akhmatova's poems, Gumilyov would say: "You like them? I am very glad. And my wife also does charming needlework on canvas." "Every talented person has to be an egoist," says Akhmatova. "I know no exceptions. Talent has to protect itself somehow." Yet it is she who, coming to him with the words "Nikolai, we have to have it out," flies into wild fits of jealousy, while he is deliberately open. Akhmatova will recall: "I ask him, 'Where are you going?' — 'To meet a woman.' — 'Will you be back late?' — 'Maybe I won't come back at all.' — I stopped asking."

"She is so beautiful. She walks in a black sealskin coat, slender, tall, with a proud turn of her small head. A nose with a hump, dark hair cut into a short fringe over her forehead, gathered at the back in a high Spanish comb. Her eyes are stern." This is how she appears, according to memories, in 1915, when she goes to visit Gumilyov, who has been awarded the Cross of St. George, in the hospital.

By then their marriage no longer exists. Even their son has not brought them closer.

Gumilyov says: "We quarrelled because of him. Levushka — he was about four — Mandelstam taught him a stupid phrase: 'My father is a poet and my mother is hysterical.' And one day, when a company of poets had gathered in the drawing room at Tsarskoe Selo, Levushka walked in and rang out this memorized phrase. I got angry, and Anna Andreevna was delighted and began to kiss him: 'Well done, Levushka. You're right. Your mama is hysterical.'"

At that time she did not know, could not know, what kind of century would replace the Silver Age.

Akhmatova's son is taken in by Gumilyov's mother.

Until 1929 he will live in the back of beyond, near the former Gumilyov estate in Tver province. Lev Gumilyov will come to Leningrad eight years after his father's execution. All the while, Akhmatova is in Leningrad. She has lived three years in a dormitory for scholars in a wing of the Marble Palace. She is married to Vladimir Shileiko, a fantastic scholar, master of 52 languages, a specialist in ancient Assyria. Shileiko is a friend of Gumilyov.

Gumilyov says: "I'm a bad husband. But Shileiko is a catastrophe, not a husband."

In 1919, in disintegrating boots, Akhmatova can barely drag a sack of potatoes on her shoulder. She stops to catch her breath. A woman gives her alms: "Take it, for Christ's sake!"

Akhmatova sold rusty herring that was issued to writers for food. The poet Vladislav Khodasevich saw her doing it. With the herring money she bought tea and tobacco, without which Shileiko could not live.

Of herself she said: "Soon I'll be on all fours or drop from exhaustion."

In the spring of 1921 she came to the publishing house "World Literature" to receive her membership card for the Union of Poets. The chairman of the Union of Poets is Gumilyov. He is busy. He is speaking with Blok. When he is free, he apologizes to Akhmatova for making her wait. She replies: "It's nothing, I'm used to waiting." — "For me?" asks Gumilyov in surprise. — "No, in queues."

Gumilyov asks why she rarely reads her poems in public. She tells the truth: Shileiko forbids it. Gumilyov does not believe it: he is convinced no one can forbid anything to Akhmatova.

She learns of Gumilyov's arrest at Blok's funeral. And by then she has already left Shileiko. Shileiko is extremely jealous. He is jealous of other men, and of her poems. He uses the manuscript of the collection *The Plantain* to light the samovar, forbids her to read in public, forbids her to write. She later dedicates poems to him about this. At the end of her life she will recall her marriage with Shileiko almost cheerfully and with gratitude. Akhmatova leaves Shileiko for a young composer, Arthur Lourié.

Lourié flaunts his closeness to Akhmatova. They live on the Fontanka, the two of them together with Olga Sudeikina, a famous dancer, actress and painter.

In 1922, Lourié quits his job as deputy head of a department in the Commissariat for Education and leaves the country by ship. He begs Akhmatova to join him. "I'll come. I'll come," she answers, "on the next ship." Akhmatova said that it was Lourié who found the title of her fifth book, which she could not come up with. They were walking down the street and on the façade of one house the words *ANNO DOMINI* were carved. Lourié said: "There's your title." The collection of poems by Akhmatova will indeed bear that title.

The first poem in it is "Petrograd, 1919". It contains the lines: "No one would help us / For having chosen to stay at home."

Pasternak saw Akhmatova when she was seeing Lourié off at the pier. At that time, the window from Russia to Europe is still slightly open. Akhmatova does not go anywhere.

There is a letter from Marina Tsvetaeva to Anna Akhmatova, dated November 1926, from France: "I am writing to you for the joyful reason of your coming. I want to know whether you are coming

alone or with your family (mother, son). But however you come, alone or with your family, come without fear. Write to me at once: when – alone or with your family – a decision or a dream.”

As for herself, Akhmatova certainly had no dream of leaving. And the decision never came either.

She did not send her son anywhere. In 1929, her son Lev Gumilyov comes from the provinces to Leningrad, to the apartment in the Fountain House where Akhmatova lives with her husband, the art historian Punin. Strictly speaking, this is not entirely accurate, for in fact the whole extended Punin family lives there.

The Punin family consists of his former wife, Anna Evgenyevna Arens, their daughter Irina, Punin’s stepmother Elizaveta Antonovna, the maid Annushka and her son Zhenya. In addition, Anna Evgenyevna eventually brings her father, Evgeny Ivanovich Arens, to live with her. From time to time, Punin’s brother Alexander also lives there, with his wife and daughter. From 1935, Anna Evgenyevna’s nephew Igor lives in the flat as well. When Punin’s daughter marries, her husband also moves into the apartment. Their daughter will be born there. In some years, Anna Evgenyevna’s sister, Zoya Evgenyevna, also lives there with her daughter, as does the homeless widow of the artist Lvov, Augusta Ivanovna, with her daughter Irina and her grandson Alyosha.

At the beginning of the 1930s, the maid Annushka’s son, Zhenya, marries and brings his wife, Tatyana Ivanovna, there. The first thing she does is send her mother-in-law to a poorhouse. Soon she and Zhenya have two sons, Valya and Vova. Tatyana Ivanovna considers herself the ruling class and occupies the former dining room. It is in this environment that Akhmatova and her son live. Tatyana Ivanovna often plants herself in front of Anna Andreevna, hands on hips, and says: “I could go and denounce you to the Big House.” The “Big House” is the Leningrad headquarters of the NKVD.

Money is catastrophically short in the Punin household. Akhmatova is not being published, and she is forced to live at the expense of Punin and his ex-wife. Akhmatova has only occasional odd jobs. She translates Rubens’s letters. She becomes a professional Pushkin researcher.

In 1930 she applies for a pension. By “pension” one should understand a small, conditional allowance.

Punin bears the lack of money badly. He becomes pathologically stingy.

He shouts in the corridor: “Too many people are eating at our table.” Akhmatova will recall: “Once at table Punin said: ‘Butter is only for Ira.’ That is, for his daughter. This happened in front of my Levushka. The boy didn’t know where to look.”

After finishing school, Akhmatova and Gumilyov’s son is not admitted to university. He takes a job as a labourer in a scientific expedition. Later, as a worker, he is admitted to the history faculty. From the reminiscences of Emma Gerstein, a good friend of Akhmatova, about Lev Gumilyov in 1935: “He was standing in the corridor in an impossible jacket and trousers with huge patches at the knees. He had grown a moustache – Tatar, thin, hanging down at the corners of his mouth. He loves to argue in the tram so that the last word is his. In his crumpled cap he looked like a former officer. People hated him, but were afraid of him because of his insolence.”

At the end of October 1935, Akhmatova arrives in Moscow at Emma Gerstein’s. Anna Andreevna sits on a small sofa, with her battered suitcase, and says: “They’ve been arrested. Nikolai and Lev.”

Her husband, Nikolai Punin, and her son, Lev Gumilyov, were arrested in the Fountain House on October 22, 1935.

Emma Gerstein continues: “She spent the night at my place. I watched her heavy sleep. Her eyes had sunk in, and near the bridge of her nose two little triangles appeared. They never went away again. She changed before my eyes.”

In the morning they went out and took a taxi. The driver asked where to go. Akhmatova did not hear. Finally she said: “To Seifullina’s, of course.” Lydia Seifullina is a Soviet writer. When the driver asked for the address, Akhmatova suddenly cried out: “What, you don’t know where Seifullina lives?” Before that, probably no one had ever heard Akhmatova shout. Somehow they worked out where to go. All the way, Akhmatova kept crying out: “Kolia, Kolia. Blood.” She was delirious. Many years later, Akhmatova would write: “For the lily-of-the-valley May / Of my blood-stained Moscow / I would give the shining and the glory / Of all the flocks of stars.”

Only one quatrain of this poem was published. Instead of “my blood-stained Moscow”, the printed version had “my many-domed Moscow”. Akhmatova composed this poem in the taxi on the way to Seifullina’s. In 1935, Lydia Seifullina had connections in the Party leadership. Anna Andreevna writes a letter to Stalin. Pasternak also writes to Stalin on her behalf. The writer Boris Pilnyak takes Akhmatova to the Kremlin commandant’s office. It is already known who will pass the letter to Stalin. And – a miracle! – a few days later, Nikolai Punin and Lev Gumilyov are freed. Everyone congratulates Akhmatova on the “royal pardon”. Soon afterwards, however, her meagre pension is discontinued. In March 1938 her son is arrested again.

Once more, Akhmatova writes to Stalin. This time the letter does not reach him. Lev Gumilyov is merciless towards his mother. He writes to her: “Everyone spits on me as if from the top of a tower.”

Lev Gumilyov cannot withstand the beatings during interrogations. After physical torture, he says in his deposition: “Mother has repeatedly told me that if I want to be her son to the end, I must above all be my father’s son.” In other words, under torture, Lev Gumilyov declares that his mother called him to open struggle against the regime.

Akhmatova goes to the prison with parcels, as if wound up like a clockwork toy. “I spent seventeen months in prison queues in Leningrad,” she will later write. “Once, someone ‘recognized’ me. Then the woman behind me, with bluish lips, who had certainly never heard my name in her life, came to, and whispered in my ear (everyone there spoke in a whisper): ‘And this – can you describe it?’” And Anna Andreevna replied: “I can.”

These are the words that open the preface to *Requiem*.

Akhmatova’s *Requiem* is one of the most powerful achievements of Russian civic lyric poetry – and simply a mother’s curse on Stalinism.

Requiem will only become known at the beginning of the 1960s, and it will not be published in the USSR. It will circulate in samizdat, not in the carefully filtered and semi-authorized anti-Stalin literature. Akhmatova’s hatred of Stalin is special. Her hatred is always mixed with contempt. In 1962, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Solzhenitsyn is brought to her still as a typescript. She says: “To like it or not like it – these are not the right words: two hundred million people have to read this.” She meets Solzhenitsyn. She tells him: “You will become world-famous very soon. It

is a heavy burden. I woke up more than once in the morning to find myself famous; I know what it is.”

In the early 1960s, under Khrushchev, Stalinist repressions are officially described by the neutral formula “the cult of personality”. Informally, in everyday speech, they are simply called “the year ’37”. Akhmatova characterizes the period of Stalin’s rule clearly: terror.

Akhmatova says: “Dostoevsky thought that if you killed a man, you became Raskolnikov. Today we know you can kill fifty, a hundred people – and go to the theatre in the evening.”

The Stalinist regime behaves with extreme sophistication. The sentence against Akhmatova’s son, Lev Gumilyov, is passed in August 1939. And in September, quite unexpectedly, Akhmatova is allowed to submit an application to join the Union of Writers. She is admitted. In May 1940, after a sixteen-year ban, Akhmatova’s collection *From Six Books* is published. People start saying that her son will soon be released. According to one legend, Stalin’s daughter, Svetlana, loved Akhmatova. At a meeting of the literature section of the Stalin Prize Committee, Alexei Tolstoy proposes that Akhmatova’s book be nominated for a Stalin Prize. The proposal is supported by the members of the section.

Instead of the prize, however, a memo appears, sent by the head of the Administrative Department of the Central Committee, Krupin, to the secretary of the Central Committee, Zhdanov. Krupin writes: “There are no poems about socialist people in the collection. The publishers did not understand Akhmatova’s poems, although she herself has given the following judgement on her work: ‘If you only knew what filth / The poems grow from, without a trace of shame.’”

On the first page of the memo, Zhdanov writes a resolution: “It is an utter disgrace to let such so-called collections see the light. How could this Akhmatova ‘fornication with prayer in praise of God’ have been published?”

After this follows a resolution of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the VKP(b), “On the collection of poems by A. A. Akhmatova”. The leading officials responsible for the publication receive reprimands. The collection is withdrawn. The son is not released. And yet a year later, at the very beginning of the blockade, Akhmatova is evacuated from Leningrad among a small group of writers on Stalin’s personal orders.

In 1942, her famous poem “Courage” is published in *Pravda*. In 1943, in Tashkent, where she is in evacuation, her collection *Selected Poems* appears. In 1944, her son finishes his prison term. He goes to the front as a volunteer. In 1943 and 1944, despite the war, Dovzhenko, Zoshchenko, Fedin, Aseev and Selvinsky are subjected to ideological “smash-ups”. Akhmatova is left alone. She returns to Leningrad. Her son reaches Berlin and returns alive. In 1946, after the ten-thousand print run, another collection is sent to press – this time one hundred thousand copies.

Akhmatova does not subscribe to newspapers. She has no radio. On August 20, 1946, she goes out of her house for some reason. Everywhere, near fences, in front of shop windows, people are huddled together, reading over each other’s shoulders the freshly pasted-up newspapers. Akhmatova says: “I thought something had happened. I stood on tiptoe and suddenly, over people’s backs and heads, I saw my own name.” The newspapers carry the text of the Central Committee’s Organizational Bureau resolution “On the journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*”. At the centre of the resolution are two names – Zoshchenko and Akhmatova. Stalin personally edited the text. The

words “vulgar and scum of literature” are Stalin’s own coarse expression. It is he who calls Zoshchenko and Akhmatova “non-Soviet writers”.

The great actress Faina Ranevskaya, a long-standing friend of Anna Akhmatova, recalls: “I remember how I rushed to her after the ‘resolution’. The house was empty. Punin’s relatives had fled. She was silent, and I didn’t know what to say either. She lay there with her eyes closed. Her lips turned now blue, now white. Her face became purple-red and then immediately white again. I wanted to feed her. There was nothing to eat in the house. I rushed to the shop, bought something. She refused to eat. We both stayed silent.”

The presidium of the Writers’ Union promptly expels Akhmatova and Zoshchenko from its ranks. They are stripped of their food ration cards. Akhmatova’s friends secretly organize a fund to help her. In those times that is an act of heroism. New Year’s Eve 1947, Akhmatova spends at the home of her friend Olga Berggolts. It seems that all the toasts to Akhmatova’s health have already been said. But the writer Yuri German demands that everyone fill their glasses again. Everyone stands up.

“Dear Anna Andreevna,” says German, “we love you very much and we want you to hear it again and again. For us you have always been, and will forever remain, a great Russian poet. In Russian poetry there were Pushkin and Lermontov. You are the rightful heir to their glory.”

After the resolution, Akhmatova asks Ranevskaya: “Tell me, why did a Great Country which drove out Hitler, with all its powerful technology, need to roll all its tanks over the chest of one sick old woman?”

This question of Akhmatova has a concrete answer.

The first half of 1946 is a time of active struggle between the Beria–Malenkov group and Zhdanov. Beria and Malenkov, who had risen extraordinarily high in the apparatus hierarchy during the war, lose their positions at the beginning of 1946. Beria is removed from his post as head of the NKVD. Malenkov loses his position as Central Committee secretary for cadres.

Zhdanov is the second man in the Party. In Malenkov’s place comes Kuznetsov, a man belonging to Zhdanov’s circle. In this situation, Malenkov’s side, through the head of the Agitation and Propaganda Department, Aleksandrov, makes a move. Accusations are put forward of failure in ideological work in the Leningrad journals. Leningrad is traditionally regarded as Zhdanov’s fiefdom. Stalin likes to watch apparatus infighting. Akhmatova and Zoshchenko become hostages to this bureaucratic game. But not only that.

The 1946 resolution accuses *Zvezda* and *Leningrad* of “cultivating an attitude of grovelling, alien to Soviet people, before contemporary bourgeois culture of the West”. This is a clear echo of the emerging Cold War.

On March 5, 1946, in the gymnasium of Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, former British prime minister Winston Churchill has already delivered his famous speech.

Churchill said: “Men must be protected from two giant marauders, war and tyranny. From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the continent.” This is the first time Churchill uses the words “iron curtain”. “The old states of Central and Eastern Europe,” Churchill says, “are under the control of Moscow. I do not believe that Russia desires war. What they desire is the fruits of war and the indefinite expansion of their power and doctrines. The Western democracies must stand together. If we are divided, we shall be in peril.” Churchill

specifies which liberties and rights he believes must be defended from Stalin: genuinely free, unfalsified elections, freedom of speech, courts independent of the executive power. Churchill says: “These are the rights which ought to be known in every home. Stalin does not wish them to be known.”

The former British prime minister Winston Churchill is an admirer of Akhmatova’s poetry.

A week after Churchill’s speech, Stalin gives an interview to *Pravda*. Stalin says: “Mr. Churchill now adopts the position of the warmongers. The nations have poured out their blood in a war lasting five years for the freedom of their countries, and not in order to exchange Hitler’s rule for Churchill’s rule. Mr. Churchill’s policy is a call to war with the USSR. Mr. Churchill slanders roughly and ruthlessly both Moscow and the neighbouring states of the USSR. The Soviet Union lost about seven million people in the war.”

Stalin says we lost about seven million. Later they will say twenty million. Now the figure has passed thirty million.

In late November 1945, Oxford professor and scholar of philosophy and literature Sir Isaiah Berlin arrives in Leningrad.

In the Soviet Union he is the representative of the British Foreign Office. He last saw this city in 1919.

In 1945, he accidentally learns Akhmatova’s address and simply comes to see her at the Fountain House. They talk about Gumilyov, about his execution, about Mandelstam’s death. Their conversation is interrupted by the sudden appearance, in the courtyard, of Winston Churchill’s son Randolph. He has come to Leningrad as a journalist. He is looking for Sir Berlin. Sir Berlin takes his leave of Akhmatova and returns again that same evening. According to NKVD reports, they talk from ten in the evening until seven in the morning. Akhmatova reads *Requiem* to him. She speaks about 1937–1938, about the prison queues with parcels. During the night, Lev Gumilyov comes in. Sir Berlin says to Akhmatova: “I have come to Leningrad to greet you, the one and only remaining poet, not only in my own name, but in the name of all old English culture. At Oxford you are considered the most legendary of women. In England you are translated with extraordinary respect.”

Akhmatova would tell those close to her: “From that day on, not once did I go out of the Fountain House without a man getting up from the steps leading down to the river and following me.” Someone asked her: “How did you know he was following you – did you turn around?” She replied: “When they follow you, you won’t be mistaken.”

After the resolution, in 1947 and 1948, Akhmatova writes no poems. The deputy secretary of the Writers’ Union, Soviet playwright Vsevolod Vishnevsky, is indignant: “What surprises me is that Akhmatova is keeping silent now. Why does she not respond to the opinion of the people, to the opinion of the Party? She is behaving incorrectly, in a deeply individualistic, hostile manner.” After the resolution, Akhmatova’s son is expelled from the postgraduate programme at the Institute of Oriental Studies. He goes to work as a librarian in a mental hospital on the 5th Line of Vasilievsky Island. There he obtains a reference that will allow him to defend his dissertation. Akhmatova lives in constant fear of her son’s arrest. In August 1949, in the Fountain House, Nikolai Punin is arrested once more. Nikolai Nikolaevich Punin will die in a labour camp.

Akhmatova takes a step that is unimaginable for her. In fear for her son, she writes poems dedicated to Stalin:

And from his grateful people
The Leader hears the voice: "We have come
To say: where Stalin is, there is freedom,
Peace, and the greatness of the earth!"

The poems do not save him.

Lev Gumilyov is arrested. He will leave the camp in 1956. He will recall how he was interrogated about Berlin's visit to his mother in 1945. He will talk about how, in Lefortovo prison, the investigator grabbed him by the hair and banged his head against the wall, demanding that he confess to Akhmatova's spying for England. Lev Gumilyov will say that in his life he has served time for his father, for himself and for his mother. Later, he will say to casual acquaintances: "Mama didn't love papa, and her lack of love passed on to me." It will remain unbearable for him that his mother could not save him. From the camp he wrote to friends: "Let my fate be lousy, as long as Mama is good – that's better than the other way round." And Anna Andreevna, in complete loneliness, wrote to the only person in the world related to her by blood, in the camp: "Have pity on me, you at least."

After Stalin's death, after the 20th Party Congress, in 1965, Akhmatova will go to England, where, at Oxford, she will be invested with the robe of Doctor of Letters *honoris causa*.

From London she will go to Paris, where she will meet, at the Hôtel Napoléon, the addressee of many of her poems, another very old love, the artist Boris Anrep. Almost forty of her poems are dedicated to him. They have not seen each other since 1917, since the February Revolution. Boris Anrep is the author of a large mosaic in the vestibule of London's National Gallery. For the figure of "Compassion" he chose Akhmatova as the model.

And in 1946, after the crushing resolution, Akhmatova came to the art historian Hardzhiev and said: "They're abusing me so terribly! Calling me the vilest names..." And he replied: "That's what glory is! Didn't you know?"

In reality, for millions and millions of Soviet people, there was no time for resolutions and no time for Akhmatova. Reports from the provinces: "In the Belebeyev district of the Bashkir ASSR, the head of the maternity hospital does not own a single dress; she puts her coat on her naked body and goes about in bark shoes." Secretaries of several regional Party committees send a unique request to the Central Committee of the VKP(b): to be allowed not to hold the workers' parade on 7 November 1946, due to the lack of clothing among the population.