

Review / Reseña

Echavarren, Roberto, *Russian Nights. Autocracy and Testimony*. Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2023, 388 pp.

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Testimonial literature on violence and intolerance holds a rich tradition in Latin America. Works such as *Naufragios* (1542) by Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Autobiografía* (1835) by Francisco Manzano, *Operación masacre* (1957) by Rodolfo Walsh, *La noche de Tlatelolco* (1971) by Elena Poniatowska, *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú* (1983) by Elisabeth Burgos, and *Antes que anochezca* (1992) by Reinaldo Arenas, represent powerful first-person narratives where the voices of the oppressed resonate with compelling urgency.

In recent times, a wave of testimonial novels has emerged, including *Amuleto* (1999) by Roberto Bolaño, *El testigo* (2004) by Juan Villoro, *Insensatez* (2004) by Horacio Castellanos Moya, *Fiesta en la Madriguera* (2010) by Juan Pablo Villalobos, *El ruido de las cosas al caer* (2012) by Juan Gabriel Vásquez, and *Los sordos* (2012) by Rodrigo Rey Rosa. These works highlight the “re-representation” (Molloy) of the “I” in the text, serving as the stage where crises unfold. The dual presence of the “I” as both witness and writer enriches the testimonies, deepening the impact of the narratives.

Following this tendency and providing insights that might be useful to ponder in the Latin American case, Roberto Echavarren delivers a gripping account of life in

Russia under the control of Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin, extending his analysis to the post-Perestroika era marked by Vladimir Putin's authoritative rule. Through engaging prose, Echavarren explores various facets of Russian life, tracing the nation's transformation from the Russian Empire to a socialist state. He provides keen insights, blending historical context with firsthand testimonies of those who endured repression and torture. The book offers a broad and incisive view on power and submission, which frames the chilling chronicles of voices never heard before. These narratives unveil a different Russia—one marred by the tragic destinies of countless lives sacrificed or ruined by the Communist regime. However, quoting Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “[it] would have been difficult to design a path out of communism worse than the one that has been followed” (Pierce), in view of the ominous country's shift toward military autocracy in the XXI century, which now threatens global stability.

Echavarren divides the book into fourteen parts and twenty-six chapters covering the period 1917-1956. He gathers a wide range of testimonies that provide a unique perspective on the Soviet era. These testimonies are frail and at risk of disappearing from History, as he emphasizes in the Prologue, “[they] are not journalism; they are not literature, although they partake of both. They are fragile, in great danger of being erased or lost” (xvi). Between 2001 and 2005 the author conducted interviews with survivors in Petersburg and Moscow, compiling their stories, which resonate with contemporary struggles of people under autocratic rule wishing to escape, regardless of the government's ideology. Consequently, massive displacements and migrations to other countries, on a scale not seen since World War II, have fostered a culture of fear marked by racism, xenophobia, and resentment. People have been uprooted from their homelands, and placed in nations where they face suspicion or outright rejection. As Putin's war against Ukraine attests, nearly 6 million refugees fleeing Ukraine are recorded across Europe, while an estimated 8 million others had been displaced within the country, however, there is not a foreseeable end to the war.

Russian Nights sheds light on the power dynamics of the Soviet era, where a relentless suppression of freedom enslaved the population and hindered the country's progress. During the period of Stalin's collectivization of agriculture from 1932 to 1933, millions in Ukraine and areas of Great Russia perished due to the great famine, in which between six and ten million people died. However, then as now, Russians refrained from dissent, fearing persecution or disappearance. This culture of silence has deeply penetrated Russian society, and those who dared to speak out faced severe consequences. The accounts break this silence, offering invaluable stories of a pervasive

and enduring grip on people's lives and their dreams of a democratic future, in a nation where human and individual rights are virtually nonexistent. As Yegor points out in Part One when referring to the GULAG, "[it] was a *regime*, not a democracy, not a system that assured the rights of people" (6). Here the reader will find moving accounts of death and survival and will be faced with the particulars of the interrogation system, which condemned the victims without trial or proof to forced labor in remote areas where many of them would perish. In the words of Mikhail Vorontsov, "[once] arrested, a person was already guilty. The investigation was no more than a formality" (27).

In Parts Two and Three, we delve into the stories of ordinary citizens and farmers who endured severe hardships, whether in overcrowded urban areas or the famine-stricken countryside, where deliberate measures were taken to push for land collectivization and starve the population. Through the accounts of individuals like Masha, Anastasya, and Armen, we gain insight into their remarkable resilience and the challenges they faced in cities like Moscow, Kiev, and Petersburg. During the rule of Lenin and Stalin, daily life was marked by a grim reality. Rationing, speculation, baseless accusations, the acceptance of arbitrary violence, and the creation of a submissive society became the norm. Stalin intensified the brutality initiated by Lenin, aiming not just for submission but active collaboration, as Armen points out. Furthermore, Lyudmila shares a disturbing narrative of her family losing their farm, the killing of loved ones, the confiscation of farm equipment and grain, the violation of graves in search of precious metals to trade for food, and the agonizing death of their neighbors. Another victim, known as Volodya, *The Kid*, was sent to a kolkhoz as a child. He recounts how he and other children managed to survive by resorting to eating cats, crows, and sunflower seeds, all the while bearing witness to never-ending horrors. Eventually, he was relocated to a factory in Gorky, where life did not offer much respite. However, in the end, he secured a job as a schoolteacher in Leningrad, opening a window of hope and opportunity for those who were able to stay alive throughout one of the worst periods in Russian history.

In Part Four, the author delves into military actions and provides testimonies from individuals who suffered retaliation during the Great Purge, a period during which approximately one million people lost their lives. This dark chapter in History severely impacted the Soviet Army, resulting in the slaughter or relocation to remote regions of thousands of Red Army officers and a significant erosion of soldiers' morale. One striking account is General Sheretenko's testimony. Upon returning from his service in

the Spanish Civil War, he was shocked to discover that many of his fellow comrades had been shot or had disappeared. This revelation led to him being interrogated and accused of treason by fellow Army officers. Remarkably, he managed to survive these dire circumstances and went on to share with Echavarren his harrowing story.

Part Five takes issue with the Spanish Civil War in the testimonies of Liliana and Vicente. Liliana, one of the children evacuated from the Basque Country remembers her ordeal during the war and the prohibition to return to Spain afterwards. In Liliana's account most of the children were deported after the war from Leningrad to the rural areas where they perished of illnesses and starvation. Those who survived were traumatized by rape, and physical and mental violence, becoming gang members or underage prostitutes. Liliana was one of the fortunate ones who eventually returned to Leningrad, where she pursued her education at the University of Moscow and went on to become a Spanish professor. Vicente, Liliana's late husband and a cadet pilot from Spain, left behind a dossier detailing his journey to the Soviet Union for pilot training. However, he found himself sentenced to hard labor in the Arctic region when he refused to collaborate as a Soviet agent. His salvation came through an unexpected twist of fate, when a female doctor who was also a prisoner intervened and helped him. Later, he secured a job in a factory, where he endured unimaginably harsh conditions but managed to survive. In 1946 Vicente met a young Spanish prisoner recently arrived, who became his companion:

The day I met him, he was turning eighteen, the same age I was when I left Spain as an airplane pilot for useless training. In Francisco, I saw a mirror of myself, what I had been, the youth they had snatched from me. And I found him to be inconceivably handsome. We both felt an immense mutual attraction and the joy of understanding each other (148).

Parts Six through Eight delve into the early stages of World War II, including the initial defeats and the shift to guerrilla warfare following Germany's breach of the non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union. General Shulgin, who had been given orders to mine and destroy Kiev if it fell under German occupation, provides a detailed account of the battle for control of the city. He also highlights Stalin's ill-fated decisions that prevented the Army from executing a strategic retreat that might have outsmarted the Germans. Notably, the blame for the losses fell on the officers who, despite their courage, were later executed. Shulgin, unlike many others, survived but, like numerous war veterans, was living in poverty at the time of Echavarren's interview. Another

witness, the poet Naum Grebnev, shares his experiences during the fighting around Kharkov. He describes how, after his regiment's commander and other officials disappeared following a defeat, the Army retreated without clear leadership. As a Jewish individual, he was determined not to surrender and, after many troubles, successfully reunited with the rest of the Army. He later participated in the defense of Stalingrad, where he sustained severe wounds. Grebnev reflects on his enduring physical suffering, noting in his account that "[t]he War never really ended for me, either. Ever since my injury, I've been chronically ill. I cannot recall even a single moment without physical pain" (180).

Echavarren also transcribed photocopies of the notebooks that Veniamin, a Ukrainian farmer, gave to her granddaughter. In these notebooks, Veniamin penned a detailed account of the defense of Odessa against the Romanian Army. He also recounted a striking incident where he firmly stood up to an official who insisted he continue driving an ammunition truck, even after six days without sleep. Within Veniamin's memories, readers discover compelling stories of courage in the face of adversity. During his journey through a village, he bore witness to the tragic plight of women, children, and the elderly. These innocent civilians had been confined to a shed by the enemy and then subjected to a devastating fire before the enemy retreated, nevertheless, they were helping each other to keep going and move on. Veniamin married a teacher, who had been jailed because of two student's complains, and returned to Ukraine in 1958.

The section on guerrilla warfare includes testimonies from Galya Vasilyevna and Volodya. Galya, a teacher, was the sole woman among a group of guerrilla fighters during the German occupation of Belarus. She carried out various successful missions, such as sabotaging trains, seizing food and supplies, and eliminating nine Belarussian anti-Soviet nationalists with a single burst from her machine gun. After the Red Army regained control of Belarus, she returned to her parents' home. At the time of Echavarren's interview, Galya was volunteering at a veterans' club, despite the less than adequate building facilities, to provide support to other veterans. On the other hand, Volodya, a Polish Jew, joined a Soviet guerrilla unit after miraculously surviving the mass slaughter of thousands of Jews in a single night at the hands of the German Army in Rovno, western Ukraine. He showcased his unwavering determination through his active participation in the continuous struggle to liberate the region. While still in his teenage years, he joined a group of partisans, one of whom cunningly obtained German documents and posed as an official. With this subterfuge he brought Volodya into

Rovno, securing him a job within the Wehrmacht offices. In the tales of his experiences, readers will discover the ingenious methods of resistance employed to undermine the Germans, including forging identity papers, stealing documents, and even capturing the General in charge of the anti-guerrilla forces in Ukraine, who was then executed.

In Parts Nine and Ten, the focus shifts to the battle around Leningrad and Stalingrad. Yevgenia, Valentina, Liubov, and Nina provide terrifying testimonies of their experiences during the Leningrad Siege. Yevgenia, who worked in a weapons factory in the city, vividly recalls the horrifying reality of people resorting to cannibalism to survive. She remembers that “[s]ome people ate other people. I knew they were selling human meat. Some were stopped and shot for that. When I walked along the street, I didn’t look right or left. I didn’t want to see” (262). In turn Valentina, serving as a nurse in a hotel converted into a hospital, describes the grim conditions. Some rooms were filled with corpses, while others were overflowing with excrement and trash. The hospital lacked basic necessities like running water and electricity, and the constant explosions from nearby missiles resulted in the deaths of nurses, patients, and doctors. Valentina herself was injured in one such explosion, leading to the amputation of her leg. Despite these hardships, she eventually married a disabled soldier and managed to rebuild her life after the war.

By the same token, Liubov recounts the traumatic experiences of searching for food and fuel to heat their family's apartment during the deadly winter. She highlights how the simplest discoveries became crucial for survival, with the difference between life and death often hinging on finding even the smallest resources. A piece of metal transformed into a small stove became their lifeline during the freezing winter, and a bit of earth combined with molasses served as a makeshift syrup to sustain them when they teetered on the brink of starvation. Nina, on her part, shared a poignant story about the loss of both her and her mother’s rationing cards during the Siege. She revealed that their survival was, in part, thanks to her brother who was serving in the Army. He had a mission to capture a German prisoner alive, but unfortunately, after accomplishing this task, he got wounded and succumbed to septicemia. In his arms, he held a large loaf of bread that his comrades later delivered to Nina and her mother after his passing. Nina’s fortunes took a turn for the better when she was assigned to work on a steamboat that plied the waters of the Neva River, running between Leningrad and Lake Ladoga to the east of the city. Although the boat frequently endured bombings, it miraculously never sank. During her time on the steamboat, she found

opportunities to eat while actively involved in the mission of recovering lost food and wood from shipwrecks.

The Battle of Stalingrad takes on new significance when viewed through the wartime experiences of Jacob Mavrinski, a Jewish man originally from Lutsk, a town in western Ukraine. Prior to the war, he pursued a medical education, but once the conflict began, he served as a *feldsher* (paramedic, nurse, and stretcher-bearer,) within a Soviet artillery regiment. Following a severe injury, he received treatment at a hospital in Kharkov, and upon his recovery, he resumed his duties. Despite enduring numerous trials, he eventually reached Stalingrad, where he was promoted to the position of a first-aid doctor. During the battle, Mavrinski bore witness to some of its most gruesome aspects and contemplated its toll during the interview with Echavarren. He recounted: “The city was covered with frozen corpses. I saw a soldier standing like a caryatid, his head gray-violet, fastened by the ice to a fragment of wall that held him up. Who could determine the cost of this battle? Who would count the dead civilians as well as combatants?” (306).

Part Eleven reflects upon the situation on the European fronts in the words of Anna Kuznetsova, General Gennady Kochkov and Yelena Yurevna. Anna, a civil engineer, was tasked with the crucial mission of repairing and improving vital roads for the Red Army. Her time in Murmansk, situated in the far North of the White Sea, was marked by relentless bombardments and a near-death experience. In 1943, she was transferred to Budapest, where she fell in love with a Jewish man. Her account sheds light on the deportations and murders of Hungarian Jews, as well as their confinement to ghettos before being sent to extermination camps. Marriage between Soviet citizens and foreigners had been banned within the army, since “Stalin was afraid that we would appreciate the superior quality of life, the incredible variety of consumer goods and the different life-style options in the countries that we occupied” (325). Afterwards, Anna was transferred to Vienna, where she worked in an office responsible for processing the forced repatriations of people of Russian origin in Europe, even though nobody wanted to return to the grim prospects of labor camps or execution. Upon her return to Russia, she resumed her career as an engineer. She took charge of a prisoner-of-war camp and eventually married a fellow Russian, settling in Petersburg.

General Kochkov reviews the campaign in Eastern Europe and Poland, remembering the Soviet taking over of Warsaw to refrain the Allies from making it a free city in a free country. In his words:

Clearly, the patriots didn't want a Soviet Poland. If they had managed to liberate the capital, if they had gotten rid of the Germans themselves, Poland would have been theirs, and not the Soviets'. This didn't suit Stalin, who was planning to turn the country into a satellite State, as in fact happened. For this reason, he allowed the combat force of the resistance to be annihilated, thus avoiding a problem later (336).

Yelena Yurevna recounts disturbing stories of abuse suffered by young men in the Russian Army, where military service is mandatory. She describes an ominous pattern of humiliation, torture, and physical violence, which has led to serious injuries and even fatalities. The overall morale within the Army is low, with meager salaries exacerbating the problem. Tragically, some soldiers resort to suicide, which raises concerns about the willingness of many young recruits to serve in the current Ukrainian war.

In Part Twelve, we delve into General Gennady Kochkov's perspective on the fall of Berlin. He emphasizes the soldiers' unwavering fanaticism and their readiness to sacrifice themselves, even when the war was clearly lost, and Hitler had taken his own life. The Russian Army's takeover of the Reichstag, though achieved at heavy losses on the German side, is portrayed as a seemingly futile sacrifice, as General Kochkov attests, "[l]ater we learned that those fanatics, who had offered up their lives, were Hitler's personal guard. Why would they send the SS guards, their last reserve, to their deaths like that, to a useless sacrifice?" (350).

In Part Thirteen, Pyotr Nikitin recounts the history of the Russian Liberation Army under the leadership of General Andrei Andreievich Vlasov. Nikitin provides an in-depth perspective on Vlasov's life, highlighting his strong aversion to constant supervision during his military career. This position allowed Vlasov to diminish the influence of political commissars, granting military commanders greater freedom to make decisions within their areas of expertise. Nikitin further narrates Vlasov's military campaigns, including his defense of Moscow against the German Army. As the story unfolds, Vlasov's growing disillusionment with Stalin's policies became evident as the war progressed. In response, he co-wrote a pamphlet advocating for the liberation of Russia from Stalin's rule. However, the regime responded ruthlessly, with the killing of his wife and with his own execution after the war.

Nikitin's poignant final words, "[w]e fought for a free Russia. That could never be" (375), resonate once more with the authoritative rule of Putin and the ongoing Ukrainian war, at a time of significant global unrest, with the Israel-Hamas conflict

serving as a notable example, much like the Ukraine-Russia confrontation, both seemingly lacking a foreseeable end.

The book concludes in Part Fourteen with the author's visit to Victory Square on his final morning in Petersburg. The description of the sculpted images on the Monument to the Heroic Defenders of Leningrad mirrors Echavarren's perception of the enduring nature of the city and underscores the significance of memory. In this sculptural space and within the silent, frozen Square, the past seems to come alive, making us contemplate a more expansive sense of the present. This notion is accurately enclosed in the following passage: "The past became present in this sculptural space, in this mute, frozen Square that made one think of a vaster present" (380).

In summary, *Russian Nights* brings to the forefront the voices that have long been silenced, shedding light on the experiences of the powerless while examining one of the most traumatic chapters in Russian history, which is a part of that vaster present, as indicated by Echavarren in his conclusion. This continuum is characterized by a global division, echoing the concept presented by Étienne Balibar, who describes it as a division into "*life zones* and *death zones*" (Balibar) due to extreme violence. I would add that this division is exacerbated by extreme polarization, leading to an unyielding and intolerant perspective on global issues with little room for negotiation and compromise. The XXI century, since the events of 9/11, has been marked by confrontation and destruction, and *Russian Nights* serves as a stark reminder that the worst is yet to come.

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