

ARTICLE

“This Is Not Art but the Most Real Life”: Ideology, Literature, and Self-creation in a Soviet Teenager’s Diary (1937–1941)

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Abstract

This article closely examines the diary of Ivan Khripunov (1923–1942?), a peasant teenager from the south of Russia. I argue that in his diary, Ivan did not narrate his self with the use of Soviet language but rather aspired to develop as a narrator, learning how to write according to Soviet guidelines to then pursue a writing career. I rely on Iurii Lotman’s theory of communication, which allows me to regard the diary simultaneously as a “message” (representation of the diarist’s experiences) and a “code” (the diarist’s self-instructions on how to make sense of those experiences). The article is divided into three parts: in the first section, I discuss Ivan’s claim that his diary was a chronicle and explore how Socialist realist categories shaped his writing. In the second section, I analyze his autobiography written as one long diary entry and modelled after Maksim Gor’kii’s autobiographical novel *My Childhood* (1914). I show that Ivan intended to assemble his future writer’s reputation on Gor’kii’s example. Lastly, I look into a fictional story *The Death of Vasilii Rebrov*, also incorporated into the diary to solidify the creation of Ivan’s narrator-self.

“My life now is so boring, sad and sleepy, so reeks of *oblomovshchina* that I was about to give up on my diary. Won’t I get tired of writing the same thing: disappointment, sadness, and passivity? But when I am sad and idle in reality, I live my full life in my diary.”¹ So wrote an 18-year-old Soviet peasant boy, Ivan Khripunov, in August 1941. How should we think about this statement? Approaches to Soviet selfhood developed in recent scholarship might prompt us to ask where such self-understanding put Ivan in relation to the state power: did he see himself oppressed or liberated? Did he feel frustrated that he did not comply with the official images of enthusiastic and energetic Stalinist youth, or did he challenge them, escaping into his inner world? If we keep reading Ivan’s diary, we have to admit that it was none of the above. Ivan was an active Komsomol member and an editor of a school newspaper, but he hardly ever used relevant ideological language and even admitted that he did not know what the key Soviet concepts of criticism and self-criticism (*kritika i samokritika*) meant.² He was a diligent student, dreaming of acquiring an urban profession, but never denounced his parents as “backward” or lacking Bolshevik consciousness. In his diary, he openly wrote about the famine of 1932–33, the dekulakization of his family, and

¹ Ivan Khripunov, *Dnevniki 1937–1941 godov* (Ekaterinburg, 2021), 327. Hereinafter the diary is cited from this publication in my translation.

² Khripunov, *Dnevniki*, 175.

his father's exile to Siberia, but did not express any opinions that could qualify as political dissent. How do we then explain his conflicted emotional state, which is coded with Soviet vocabulary (*oblomovshchina*, passivity) but is not perceived, let alone condemned as anti-Soviet within the Stalinist ideological framework?³ Ivan did engage with some state-promoted practices of self, but his engagement was neither consistent nor straightforward; so, rather than attempting to distill the workings of ideology in his writing, I suggest focusing on the writing itself—in other words, not on the content of the diary but on its form. A more productive question to ask then would be: why did Ivan call his diary “his full life”?

Approaching the diary as a complex practice of developing the self in time through iterative acts of writing, I argue that Ivan Khripunov neither avoided nor fully embraced relevant Soviet concepts but rather transformed, combined, and misinterpreted them in pursuit of a comprehensive life story, told in socially acceptable and culturally recognisable forms.⁴ I seek to demonstrate how Ivan explored socialist realist discursive patterns to develop his narrative voice and ensure that his self-writing could have a place in the Stalinist cultural space.

In this approach, I follow Irina Paperno, who in the aptly titled article “What Can Be Done with Diaries?” urged historians to “ask not what can be learned from the text of the diary, but what can be learned from the individual diarist's work of his/her life, in private, on a continuous basis within a calendar grid.”⁵ She points out that the diary is a practice mediating the private and the public, which “externalizes and objectifies the inner, socializes and historicizes the intimate, essentially working as the archive of the intimate.”⁶ An adolescent's diary, I suggest, can serve as a particularly illustrative case for this methodological premise. For young people like Ivan, who were born in the late 1910s and early 1920s and had no pre-revolutionary experience, Soviet social and symbolic structures were part of the adult world they needed to master to grow up successfully.⁷ During the 1930s, an increasing number of teenagers were engaged in continuous schooling, and consequently, were subject to consistent indoctrination through state-curated educational programs while also almost being indiscriminately accepted to Pioneer and Komsomol organizations, which ensured that various Soviet concepts were sewn into their socialization and individuation.⁸ Scholars

³ The term *oblomovshchina*, coined by the Russian literary critic Nikolai Dobroliubov in 1859, was instrumentalized in official Stalinist literary studies and school induction. See: Kirill Zubkov, “Lakuny uchebnika: Roman ‘Oblomov’ v srednei shkole,” *Russkaia literatura*, no. 2 (April 2012): 39–50; and Olga Malinovskaya, “Teaching Russian Classics in Secondary School Under Stalin (1936–1941),” (PhD diss., Oxford University, 2015), 129–30, 237–38.

⁴ On such understanding of the diary, see: K. Eckhard Kuhn-Osius, “Making Loose Ends Meet: Private Journals in the Public Realm,” *The German Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (March 1981): 166–76; Rachel Cottam, “Diaries and Journals: General Survey,” in Margaretta Jolly, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms, Volume 1 A–K* (London, 2001), 267–69; and Philippe Lejeune, “Continuous and Discontinuous,” in Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak, eds., *On Diary* (Honolulu, 2009), 175–86.

⁵ Irina Paperno, “What Can Be Done with Diaries?” *The Russian Review* 63, no. 4 (October 2004): 573.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 572.

⁷ Examples of such analysis that bridges the quest for shaping adolescent identity and the broader political and ideological environment can be found in: E. Thomas Ewing, “‘Life Is a Succession of Disappointments’: A Soviet Girl Contends with the Stalinist Dictatorship,” in Jennifer Helgren, and Colleen A. Vasconcellos eds., *Girlhood: A Global History* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2010), 142–61; Irina Savkina, “‘Ia kruchus’ mezhdru dvukh pristanei’: Modeli zhenstvennosti v dnevnike Niny Lugovskoi,” in Veronika Borisovna Zusevoi-Ozkan, ed., *Zhenshchina moderna: Gender v russkoi kul'ture 1890–1930-kh godov* (Moscow, 2022), 540–51; Irina Savkina, “Dnevnik sovetskoi devushki (1968–1970): Privatnoe i ideologicheskoe,” *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 50, no. 1 (March 2009): 153–68; and Artem Kravchenko, “‘Bol'she pisat' ne hochetsia’: Bol'shoi terror i deti repressirovannykh. Opyt rassmotreniia dnevnikov dvukh iunykh Komsomol'tsev,” *Laboratorium: Zhurnal Sotsial'nykh Issledovaniï* 7, no. 1 (2015): 122–35.

⁸ See: Anna Krylova, “Soviet Modernity in Life and Fiction: The Generation of the ‘New Soviet Person’ in the 1930s,” (PhD diss., The John Hopkins University, 2000), 12–23, 69; and Larry E. Holmes, “School and Schooling Under Stalin, 1931–1953,” in Ben Eklof, Larry E. Holmes and Vera Kaplan, eds., *Educational Reform in Post-Soviet Russia: Legacies and Prospects* (London, 2005), 56–101.

argue that for young people, diaries can become safe spaces where they practice different methods of self-presentation without being censored or sanctioned.⁹ This was especially relevant for Soviet teenagers in the 1930s since society set high stakes for them but offered insufficient guidance. They were, on the one hand, praised as “new people” and expected to become builders of the future, but on the other hand, provided with rather vague images of said future, which exacerbated their anxiety and self-doubt.¹⁰ Therefore, keeping a diary could help them establish a coherent understanding of their self, assembled from a range of different, sometimes controversial emotional and behavior patterns.

Moreover, in the context of pre-war Stalinism, writing was not only a way to process frustration and work out an individual strategy for becoming an adult. It was also a potential part of that very strategy. Soviet official culture of the 1930s offered a range of heroic role models, such as pilots or polar explorers, which in reality implied a combination of talents, physical abilities, and prolonged educational tracks few young people could realistically attain.¹¹ There was, however, one choice of profession that seemed more feasible: to become a Soviet writer. Its appeal was enhanced by the school curriculum, which put heavy emphasis on studying literature, as well as by the ubiquitous promotion of reading as the most suitable leisure activity, which instilled in young people the idea of the high educational and moral significance of literature.¹² In the late 1930s, many of them, including Ivan, dreamt of becoming writers, experimented with poetry and prose, and framed their day-to-day accounts as “writers’ diaries.”¹³ As research into Stalinist cultural policies suggests, such deep investment in a writing career was initially promoted by the state in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Il’ia Kalinin even identifies the Soviet writer as a prototypical mould for the Soviet person in general who was to be culturally liberated and simultaneously ideologically “normalized” through the mastering of literary discourse. However, the “call to literature,” aimed at creating a new cohort of politically loyal and aesthetically compliant proletarian writers had expired with the formation of the Writers’ Union and the establishment of the socialist realism doctrine in 1934, which set the rules of admittance to the literary elite.¹⁴ Accordingly, as the image of the Soviet writer shifted away from a

⁹ See: Barbara Crowther, “Writing as Performance: Young Girls’ Diaries,” in Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich, eds., *The Narrative Study of Lives, Vol. 6: Making Meaning of Narratives* (Newbury Park, 1999), 138–53; Irina Savkina, “IA, TY, MY: O nekotorykh formakh adresovannosti v dnevnikh obychnykh sovetskikh liudei,” *Avtobiografiia* 8 (December 2019): 149–76; and Irina Sakina, “Dnevnik i zapiski 1930-kh–1940-kh godov,” in Naum L. Leiderman, Mark N. Lipovetsky, and M.A. Litovskaia, eds., *Russkaia literatura XX veka: 1930-e-seredina 1950-kh godov. Uchebnoe posobie v 2-kh tomakh. Vol. 1* (Moscow, 2014), 412–37.

¹⁰ See: Krylova, “Soviet Modernity in Life and Fiction,” 41–114; and Matthias Neumann, “‘Youth, It’s Your Turn!’: Generations and the Fate of the Russian Revolution (1917–1932),” in *Journal of Social History* 46, no. 2 (December 2012): 273–304.

¹¹ On these (predominantly masculine) role models, see: Jay Bergman, “Valerii Chkalov: Soviet Pilot as New Soviet Man,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 33, no. 1 (January 1998): 135–52; Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous: Comrades Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington, 2000), 46–84; Catriona Kelly, “Riding the Magic Carpet: Children and Leader Cult in the Stalin Era,” *The Slavic and East European Journal* 49, no. 2 (July 2005): 199–224; and David Brandenberger, *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927–1941* (New Haven, 2011), 67–97.

¹² See: Holmes, “School and Schooling Under Stalin,” 62; Malinovskaya, “Teaching Russian Classics in Secondary School Under Stalin,” 68–142; Catriona Kelly, *Children’s World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890–1991* (New Haven, 2007), 534–41; and Evgenii Ponomarev, “Literatura v sovetskoi shkole kak ideologiia povsednevnosti,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 145, no. 3 (June 2017): 120–38.

¹³ Other diarists I considered are David Samoilov, Mikhail Kul’chitskii, Vasilii Trushkin, Andrei Batiuto, Il’ia Kuznetsov, Il’ia Gorman, and Evgenii Davydov. Their digital versions can all be found in the “Prozhito” archive: “Lichnye istorii v elektronnom korpus dnevnikov i vospominanii,” *Prozhito*, at corpus.prozhito.org/ (accessed on February 26, 2025).

¹⁴ See: Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Writer: Social and Aesthetic Origins of Soviet Literary Culture* (Stanford, 2001), 180–242; and Il’ia Kalinin, “‘Ugnetennye dolzhny govorit’: massovyi prizyv v literaturu i

man of the people, freed “from historical muteness” by the power of the written word, to a skilled professional, learning the literary craft was no longer the driving force of the state-endorsed model of subjectivity.¹⁵ Thus, if Ivan and his peers still found self-fashioning as writers appealing, their understanding of the subjectivity behind it must have diverged from state guidelines.

Therefore, an analysis of Ivan’s diary—and, subsequently, other similar teenagers’ diaries—as a project of self-building, embedded in the Soviet context but not fully defined by it, may offer a new perspective within scholarly discussions of Soviet subjectivity, which remain largely focused on adults and, despite the diary’s epistemological “involvement with subjectivity,” seem not to use its potential to the full.¹⁶ Although Soviet diaries have been intensely studied for almost three decades now, the only approach that offers a comprehensive perspective on the role of the diary in building the self is Jochen Hellbeck’s work on the Stalinist subject.¹⁷ Hellbeck regards the diary as a laboratory where “ideology is unpacked and personalized” to create “a subject with distinct and meaningful biographical features.”¹⁸ Self-writing, therefore, functions as a tool that many Soviet citizens used to ideologize their lives, aligning them with “the Bolsheviks’ endeavor to remake mankind.”¹⁹ Hellbeck’s concept sparked heated debate in the early 2000s, with the main strand of criticism being that he attributed too much power to ideological language, almost depriving diarists of their agency and glossing over the specifics of their Soviet selves. As Eric Naiman pointedly asks, “Why should Soviet subjects be delimited by one type of utterance? Mustn’t they have sought to write themselves into divergent narratives?”²⁰ Marina Mogil’ner, Sergei Glebov, and Aleksandr Semenov note that due to Hellbeck’s limited selection of diaries whose authors were specifically preoccupied with their Soviet personas, such narratives were left beyond the scope of his analysis.²¹ On the contrary, Oleg Leibovich and Mark

formirovanie sovetskogo sub’ekta, 1920-e–nachalo 1930-kh godov,” in Aleksandr Etkind, Dirk Uffel’mann, Il’ia Kukulin, eds., *Tam, vnutri: Praktiki vnutrennei kolonizatsii v kul’turnoi istorii Rossii: Sb. statei* (Moscow, 2012), 587–663.

¹⁵ Kalinin, “Ugnetennye dolzhny govorit,” 603.

¹⁶ Irina Paperno, “What Can Be Done with Diaries?,” 571. See a thorough account of the development of American Sovietology in: Stephen Cohen, “Scholarly Missions: Sovietology as a Vocation,” in *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History Since 1917* (New York, 1986), 3–35. On the history of different concepts of the Soviet subject, see: Choi Chatterjee, and Karen Petrone, “Models of Selfhood and Subjectivity: The Soviet Case in Historical Perspective,” *Slavic Review* 67, no. 4 (December 2008): 967–86; and Krylova, “Soviet Modernity in Life and Fiction,” 1–40.

¹⁷ The surge of interest in personal documents was a scholarly reaction to the opening of archives after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. See: Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Impact of the Opening of Soviet Archives on Western Scholarship on Soviet Social History,” *The Russian Review* 74, no. 3 (July 2015): 377–400. On the Stalinist subject, see: Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006); Jochen Hellbeck, “The Stalin-Era Diary,” in Batsheva Ben-Amos and Dan Ben-Amos, eds., *The Diary: The Epic of Everyday Life* (Bloomington, 2020), 348–63; Jochen Hellbeck, “Self-Realization in the Stalinist System: Two Soviet Diaries of the 1930s,” in D.L. Hoffmann and Y. Kotsonis, eds., *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge and Practices, 1800–1950* (London, 2000), 221–42; and Jochen Hellbeck, “Working, Struggling, Becoming: Stalin-Era Autobiographical Texts,” *The Russian Review* 60, no. 3 (July 2001): 340–59.

¹⁸ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*, 12–13.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁰ Eric Naiman, “On Soviet Subjects and the Scholars Who Make Them,” *The Russian Review* 60, no. 3 (July 2001): 312. For a critique of Hellbeck’s (and Igal Halfin’s) version of Soviet subjectivity, see also Svetlana Boym, “Kak sdelana sovetskaia sub’ektivnost’?” *Ab Imperio*, no. 3 (2002): 285–96; Ronald Grigor Suny, “On Ideology, Subjectivity, and Modernity: Disparate Thoughts about Doing Soviet History,” in *Russian History* 35, no. 1–2 (January 2008): 251–58; and Aleksandr Etkind, “Soviet Subjectivity: Torture for the Sake of Salvation?” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 171–86.

²¹ See: Sergei Glebov, Marina Mogil’ner, and Aleksandr Semenov, “The Story of Us: Proshloe i perspektivy modernizatsii gumanitarnogo znaniia glazami istorikov,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 59, no. 1 (2003): 190–210, at magazines.gorky.media/nlo/2003/1/the-story-of-us-proshloe-i-perspektivy-modernizaczi-gumanitarnogo-znaniya-glazami-istorikov.html (accessed February 27, 2025).

Lipovetsky suggest in their respective articles that the diaries Hellbeck chose presented a far wider range of templates for self-presentation but interpreted them more like public identities, not addressing their function in intimate self-writing.²²

Examining a large selection of diaries written during the siege of Leningrad, Alexis Peri offers a practical realization of these critical stances, arguing that Soviet individuals “conceptualized themselves in a variety of ways, ways that were as contingent on their particular historical moment as on Soviet ideology.”²³ Peri emphasizes the extreme everydayness of the blockade that forced many diarists to reassemble their understanding of self “with but not solely within Soviet ideological concepts” and prompted them to search for different narrative techniques, including the combination of documentary writing and fiction, to establish control over their unstable and hostile reality.²⁴ I believe, however, that not only trauma-inducing historical circumstances can create such complex diary discourses, merging ideological and literary conceptualization. Ivan’s diary demonstrates that the in-between state of teenagerhood with the increasingly pressing need to integrate into Stalinist society could be similarly processed through experimental diary writing. Peri claims that her goal is not to offer a new model of Soviet subjectivity, and I think her work showcases that it is indeed more productive *not* to build any single coherent model but rather to acknowledge the plurality of ideological templates for self-construction as well as individual ways of using them. I contend that teenagers’ diaries are among the most insightful sources to explore this flexible and multilayered nature of Soviet subjectivity as the process of growing up enhanced both the importance of internalizing ideological frameworks to receive social acceptance and professional opportunities and the individual’s desire to establish the uniqueness of one’s personality and life experiences.

The understanding of the diary as a site of conversion between individual consciousness and cultural systems of meaning highlights its inherent dialogical nature. Despite the persisting commonplace perception of the diary as a solitary type of writing which is primarily, if not exclusively, addressed to its author, many scholars have shown that diaries have a variety of designated addressees, both real-life and imaginary, ranging from descendants, future readers, and even researchers to an implicit sympathetic interlocutor (“dear diary”), an authority figure, or an expert group whose opinions and values the diarist seeks to internalize.²⁵ At the same time, the diary is always aimed at the diarist him- or herself, as the act of writing inevitably splits the first person into the one that writes and the one that is being written about.²⁶

²² See: Mark Lipovetsky, “Trikster i ‘zakrytoe’ obshchestvo,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 100, no. 6 (December 2009): 224–45, available at magazines.gorky.media/nlo/2009/6/trikster-i-zakrytoe-obshchestvo.html (accessed February 27, 2025); and Oleg Leibovich, “‘Nedurno by poluchit’ skol’ko-nibud’ premii’ Sovetskii rabochii naedine c dnevnikom (1941–1955),” *Shagi/Steps* 3, no. 1 (2017): 120.

²³ Alexis Peri, *The War Within: Diaries From the Siege of Leningrad* (Cambridge, Mass., 2017), 11.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 10, 67–88.

²⁵ On different types of the diary’s addressees, see: Jean Rousset, “Le journal intime, texte sans destinataire?” *Poétique: Revue de Théorie et d’Analyse Littéraires* 14, no. 56 (November 1983): 435–43; Andrew Hassam, “Reading Other People’s Diaries,” *University of Toronto Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (Spring 1987): 435–42; Savkina, “IA, TY, MY,” 149–76; Savkina, “Dnevnik sovetskoi devushki,” 153–68; Anna Zalizniak, “Dnevnik: K opredeleniiu zhanra,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 106, no. 6 (December 2010): 162–80; Rozaliia Cherepanova, “Zhizn’ kak roman. Publichnoe ‘privatnoe’ i fenomen ‘samosochineniia’ v traditsii russkoi intelligentsii (na primere dnevnika Nikolaia V.),” *Dialog so vremenem*, no. 61 (2017): 119–38; and Rozaliia Cherepanova, “Lichnyi dnevnik: Urovni privatnogo i diskursy publichnogo (na primere neskol’kikh dnevnikov sovetskoi epokhi),” *Vestnik IUURGU. Seriya: Sotsial’no-gumanitarnye nauki* 18, no. 2 (2018): 49–54.

²⁶ See: Konstantin Pigrov, “Dnevnik: obshchenie s samim soboi v prostranstve total’noi kommunikatsii,” in *Problemy obshcheniia v prostranstve total’noi kommunikatsii* (St. Petersburg, 1998), 200–219; Kuhn-Osius, “Making Loose Ends Meet: Private Journals in the Public Realm,” 166–76; and Béatrice Didier, *Le Journal Intime* (Paris, 1976), 116–37.

To keep this double purpose of the diaristic discourse in focus, I will be using the semiotic theory proposed by Iurii Lotman. In his book *Universe of Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, Lotman identifies two types of communication: the “I–s/he” channel, or hetero-communication, and the “I–I” channel, or autocommunication. The first type covers all communicative situations in which the addresser is different from the addressee, and the message is sent to transfer a piece of information from the former to the latter. Conversely, the second type encompasses the instances in which the addresser is the addressee, and the message does not contain any new information but “is reformulated and acquires new meaning during the communication process.”²⁷ Autocommunication is focused on creating a symbolic system to interpret existing information or, in Lotman’s terms, a “code.” Lotman acknowledges that most verbal utterances unavoidably combine elements of hetero- and autocommunication so that “the addressee ...has to decide whether the text is code or message.”²⁸ In this respect, the diary can be simultaneously regarded, both by its author as its primary, and sometimes only reader, and by scholars like myself, as a “message” about the diarist’s life or a “code”—the diarist’s guideline on how to make sense of his or her experiences and present them in writing. One can also use the diary to interact with other texts in their “code” capacity; Lotman points out that fiction has an especially high potential for being approached in the autocommunicative mode.²⁹ Diarists can engage with literary characters, plots, and motifs to frame their thoughts and feelings in a consistent way. I argue, moreover, that Ivan used literature not only to scrutinize and reassemble his narrated self but also to develop his *narrating* self. This was with the ambition of transforming his diary from an “I–I” message (a self-instruction on how to write) into an “I–s/he message” (a product for an external reader): to eventually “socialize the intimate” and become a Soviet writer. In other words, Ivan’s diary did not only serve to narrate the self but, more importantly, helped him build his self as a narrator.

As I show below, Ivan’s diaristic discourse developed in the alternation between these two communicative modes, with increasingly complex “messages” and “codes.” He began his diary with brief notes about everyday life (simple message) but fashioned it over time as a family chronicle (code). This eventually led to a coherent account of his life in the form of an autobiography he wrote directly in his diary in September 1941 (new, more complex message). Finally, based on his understanding of his personality and life trajectory, Ivan wrote a fictional story, *The Death of Vasilii Rebrov*, which was also composed as an integral part of the diary (new code). I further discuss these three steps in the development of what I call Ivan’s “narrator-self” and his narration. First, I examine his claim that his diary was a chronicle and the intricate relations between reality and literature it entailed. Specifically, I consider the Stalinist literary categories, *pravdivost’* in particular, that informed Ivan’s criteria for good writing. Secondly, I analyze his autobiography, which accumulated the writing techniques Ivan had been practising in his diary in previous years and drew on canonized literary models. Lastly, I look into *The Death of Vasilii Rebrov*, which Ivan used to process his past and fathom his future on the verge of adult life.

The Diary of Ivan Khripunov

Born in 1923, Ivan was the fourth child in a peasant family from the south of Russia. His father Ivan Efimovich served as a military signaller in Persia in 1913–18 and joined the Red Army during the Civil War. In the mid-1920s, he returned to farming and became a moderately wealthy landowner at Prishib *khutor* (small rural settlement) in the Stalingrad region.

²⁷ Yuri Lotman, *Universe of Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, trans. Ann Shukman (London, 2001), 22.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 30–32.

The Khripunovs led a prosperous life until 1933 when Ivan Efimovich was arrested and exiled to Siberia for not surrendering the requested amount of grain during the famine. He was labelled a “kulak,” a class enemy within the peasantry, with all his property confiscated. In addition to the risk of starvation, the rest of his family had to endure social ostracizing as *raskulachennye* (dekulakized) at the khutor. After over a year, Ivan Efimovich reunited with his family and attempted to rebuild his household, but had everything requisitioned again.

In 1935, the family moved from Prishib to Sovkhoz no. 79 in the same area and then to Verbovka and Chernyshkovo, other khutors nearby. In 1939, they decided to go to the Krasnodar region, attracted by its alleged prosperity, and settled in *stanitsa* (village, originally Cossack settlement) Dinskaia. A year later, however, disappointed to encounter the same shortages and hardship, they moved again, to a small dwelling called Razvil’naia in the Rostov oblast. Despite these frequent moves, Ivan completed nine grades of school and was in his final tenth grade when he was mobilized, first to the labor front and then to the army, in November 1941. He was reported missing twice, in March and July 1942, so the exact date of his death is unknown.

The diary as a chronicle

Ivan kept his diary for five years, starting in January 1937 at the age of fourteen, and abandoned writing shortly before he departed for war. Spanning five years, it comprises two thick notebooks filled vertically with close handwriting and amounts to more than 450 pages in the printed version, with entries increasing in length and detail over the years.³⁰ In 1938, Ivan started to frame his diary as a chronicle of his family’s life. He introduced his decision to do so in an entry in December 1938, claiming that it had been his intention from the start, retrospectively conceptualizing his diary as a consistent piece of writing with an overarching goal: “As, since 1937, I have been describing all details of my life, there is nothing I can do but describe [it].”³¹ In his 1941 autobiography, he confirmed such a vision, this time acknowledging that it took shape over time: “When I started my diary, I didn’t expect that my *Diary* ... would turn into a big chronological everyday [*bytovoe*] work.”³² Notably, Ivan used the word *proisvedenie* (work), which in Russian usually implies “literary work.” In early November 1941, Ivan mentioned his dreams about an autobiographical magnum opus, apparently based on his diary, which he also called a *proisvedenie*: “I think about my future big literary work in which I will show my life and give a full description of contemporary society.”³³

While the future “big work” was likely meant for publication, Ivan never expressed any wish to publish his diary or even leave it to his heirs as a family relic, which points to the fact that he viewed his chronicle not as an “I—s/he” message for future generations or broader readership but as an “I—I” channel to learn how to construct such messages, or rather, how to become someone who constructs them—a narrator. Ivan specifically focused on the qualities this narrator-self had to possess. He had to be a meticulous and attentive observer who did not shy away from writing about any unpleasant events. For instance, in October 1938, Ivan started an entry with a self-disciplining statement: “And I don’t want to describe such scary and dangerous stories. But I will have to describe it as it is relevant to

³⁰ The first amateur publication of the diary was prepared in 2013 by his nephews, sons of his elder brother Pavel Khripunov, who are currently in possession of Ivan Khripunov’s archive; in 2021, an annotated edition was published in Ekaterinburg through the efforts of historian Svetlana Bykova. For the additional context of his life, see: Svetlana Bykova, “Sovetskii shkol’nik kak chitatel’ zarubezhnoi literatury (po stranitsam dnevnika Ivana Khripunova 1937–1941 gg.),” *ROSSICA Literary contacts & Connections* 4 (2023): 223–44.

³¹ Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 69.

³² *Ibid.*, 382.

³³ *Ibid.*, 461.

our life.”³⁴ The dangerous story in question was an accident with his elder brother Pavel who had run over a girl in their father’s car. In a later entry, once again describing Pavel’s unbecoming behavior, Ivan admitted that “it is a little awkward to write about it. But I write the truth, and I can’t avoid his bad traits.”³⁵ In the December entry cited above, Ivan forced himself to write down a story that deeply embarrassed him: someone told his father in his presence about a boy who read too many books and went mad, clearly targeting Ivan’s own passion for reading.³⁶

This narrative struggle correlated to a real-life one: on multiple occasions, Ivan lamented that he was aloof and avoided conflict. For example, in August 1940, he described himself as having a weak character and being “skittish as a hare”; he later reiterated this characteristic in his autobiography: “I was timid, modest, and shy.”³⁷ In both cases, he maintained that he had tried to mitigate his negative traits, and other entries corroborate those ongoing efforts to make friends, seek out jobs, and take part in Komsomol activities. In this vein, the diary itself can be seen not only as a means to document his achievements and setbacks but also as a low-stake discursive equivalent of “forging” his character through writing about scary or conflict-generating situations.

In 1939, Ivan gradually gained more self-confidence as he became the editor and designer of the school newspaper and got his first summer job. This development was reflected in his approach to the diary: having established *who* he had to become to be able to write, Ivan grew increasingly preoccupied with *how* to write. The properties of his chronicle had to be isomorphic to the image of the chronicler, demonstrating consistency and objectivity. This meant that lived time was to be promptly converted into narrated time to exert control over the former. In one entry in February 1939, Ivan even used a substandard expression “to write time” [*vremia shlo, no ia ne pisal ego*], which seems to emphasise his intention to appropriate his life with the use of the diary:

But time passed, although I did not write it in my diary. And that is why I have to, willingly or against my will, make up for the lost time.³⁸

...

However hard I try to fill in my diary every day and not to write afterwards when a lot is forgotten, I can’t do it because I don’t have enough time, which flies by with extraordinary speed. Well, I have to restore the past in my memory and briefly write it down in this diary.³⁹

In turn, the task of narrativization served as a rigorous self-disciplining exercise that helped Ivan uphold his narrator-self even when the conditions for writing became adverse, as described in an entry in December 1940:

Ten in the evening. I am sitting alone in the back room. Everyone has already gone to sleep...

But I have to fill in my diary—I haven’t done this for a whole month. But the ink is bad, it blurs on paper, and the quill scratches the paper like a good plough: it is used up, ground off into a needle, and there have been no quills in stores for half a year. Everything hinders my work of filling in the diary, ferociously whispers from

³⁴ Ibid., 51.

³⁵ Ibid., 52.

³⁶ Ibid., 69.

³⁷ Ibid., 256, 372.

³⁸ Ibid., 188.

³⁹ Ibid., 192.

every corner: “Stop writing. Better go to bed, don’t torture yourself and don’t burn the kerosene.” But I have to fill in the diary, whatever it takes.⁴⁰

The most immediate explanation for such extensive effort to establish a solid habit of writing would be that Ivan found a way to fight the dullness of his day-to-day existence, engaging in meaningful activity. Analyzing French teenagers’ diaries from the second half of the nineteenth century, Marilyn Himmesoëte remarks that they “reveal a search for free space where the control of time symbolizes a desire for illusory emancipation.”⁴¹ A more acute awareness of the time passing made them focus on what Himmesoëte calls “the present of writing.”⁴² Much like his French counterparts, Ivan left numerous meta-descriptions of him filling in the pages of his diary, such as: “Eight in the morning. I am filling in my diary, sitting at the table in front of the icons, and looking out the window.”⁴³ Sometimes, these self-observations were conflated with re-establishing his writing duty, like in the December entry mentioned above or in a later entry in August 1941: “Five-forty. I am sitting alone in the room and writing in my diary. I have already written a page but still haven’t described many events.... But I have to describe all the events before evening comes (and it gets dark around eight).”⁴⁴

The present of writing itself grew to be a mediating zone between lived and narrated time that allowed Ivan to experience his individual existence as a coherent and manageable continuum. Carving out his personal temporality could also be an act of quiet defiance of his dire circumstances in general, which left little room for self-exploration, and his parents in particular, who disapproved of his reading and writing. From their perspective, burning kerosene late at night to fill in the diary would not only be an unnecessary “torture” but also a sign of a reproachable spendthrift attitude. In an act of separation, Ivan insisted on “wasting” time and energy on writing. As Himmesoëte concludes, “in a society full of rules and conventions, the diary opened a small window for teenagers’ self-expression.”⁴⁵ Although the nineteenth-century bourgeois milieu was vastly different from the Soviet rural environment of the 1930s, and the guidelines for constructing the self were culturally specific to respective historical periods, the role of a diary in the teenager’s quest for autonomy appears to be very similar.

I also offer another interpretation, however, revealing the specifically Soviet provenance of Ivan’s writing practice and emphasizing the role of chronicling. I maintain that Ivan internalized the key tenets of socialist realist doctrine, repurposing them to his goal of individuation. It is important to note that his understanding of socialist realism was inevitably second-hand, as the rural schools he attended hardly had teachers skilled enough to explain doctrinal intricacies, and Ivan’s diary, providing information on his opinions on books, does not indicate that he was familiar with any critical works. Still, the school program, with articulated criteria for identifying good literature and the reading of acclaimed authors such as Maksim Gor’kii, Aleksandr Serafimovich, Mikhail Sholokhov, and others mentioned in his diary, likely provided Ivan with basic comprehension.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Ibid., 290.

⁴¹ Marilyn Himmesoëte, “Writing and Measuring Time: Nineteenth-Century Teenagers’ Diaries,” in Arianne Baggerman, Rudolf M. Dekker, and Michael James Mascuch, eds., *Controlling Time and Shaping the Self: Developments in Autobiographical Writing since the Sixteenth Century* (Leiden, 2011), 148.

⁴² Ibid., 152.

⁴³ Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 195.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 330.

⁴⁵ Himmesoëte, “Writing and Measuring Time,” 166.

⁴⁶ See: Mikhail Pavlovets, “Shkol’nyi kanon kak pole bitvy. Chast’ pervaya: Istoricheskaya rekonstruktsiia,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 106, no. 2 (April 2016): 73–91.

The first socialist realist principle in question was the requirement for a writer to demonstrate *znanie zhizni* (knowledge of life).⁴⁷ Classic Russian authors and contemporary Soviet writers included in the Stalinist literary pantheon were praised for possessing different acceptable versions of such “knowledge,” be it in the form of a heroic past in the case of Aleksandr Fadeev or Nikolai Ostrovskii, or in the form of versatile life experience which gave authors like Lev Tolstoi or Gor’kii exceptional insight into human psyche and society.⁴⁸ By the end of the 1930s, *znanie zhizni* as an essential attribute of a good writer was featured not only in official criticism but also in writers’ biographies in school textbooks.⁴⁹ However, it was not limited to “raw material,” allowing writers to produce verisimilar stories, infused with the charisma of their personas. Indeed, focusing on oneself could prompt the author to succumb to the sins of “naturalism” (literal reproduction of individual life experience, including corporeal details), “psychologism” (detrimental reflexivity), or “*literaturshchina*” (overreliance on literary templates), thus failing to serve socialist society by presenting its achievements.⁵⁰ Therefore, big literary forms, primarily epic novels and poems as the most suitable genres able to accommodate a wide-angle vision, came to the forefront of official literature.⁵¹

The ambition to demonstrate authentic *znanie zhizni* within a literary genre that avoided the pitfalls of solipsism shaped Ivan’s intention to document the life of his family and neighbors (rather than his own) as a monumental *bol’shoe proizvedenie* (big work), elevating the observations of his immediate social circle to “a full description of modern society.” To achieve this, Ivan had to align his first-hand knowledge of peasant life with its “objective” official version: “I dream of becoming a writer. I read books, gather materials, gather folklore, study everything to be able to write anything.”⁵² To become usable as source material for a literary work, rural culture had to be presented as a result of ethnographic (“gather materials”) and specifically folklorist (“gather folklore”) inquiries, which purportedly revealed the truth about peasant customs and character.⁵³

Truthfulness was one of Ivan’s main concerns as he repeatedly denied that any of his writing could be considered fictional. For instance, in March 1940, when he finished the notebook in which he started his diary, he emphasized that it contained “the most accurate facts” about his and his family’s life: “This is not art but the most real life.”⁵⁴ As Ivan’s diary was not construed as a work of fiction in the first place, this claim to documentary

⁴⁷ The knowledge of life was discussed in the official literary criticism of the early 1930s as a prerequisite for a worker-writer and solidified as a socialist realist concept at the First Congress of Soviet Writers: Andrei A. Zhdanov, “Rech’ sekretaria TsK VKP(b) A. A. Zhdanova,” in *S’ezd pisatelei SSSR, Pervyi Vsesoiuznyi s’ezd sovetskikh pisatelei: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1934), 4. Also see: Dobrenko, *Making of the State Writer*, 314–17.

⁴⁸ Dobrenko, *Making of the State Writer*, 349–406.

⁴⁹ See: Russian S.F.S.R., *Programmy srednei shkoly: Literatura VIII–X klassy* (Moscow, 1939), 15. On the use of biographies in teaching literature, see: Malinovskaya, “Teaching Russian Classics in Secondary School Under Stalin,” 92, 99–102, 133–42; and Evgenii Ponomarev, “Chemu učit učebnik?” *Neva: Organ Soiuz sovetskikh pisatelei SSSR*, no. 1 (January 2010): 208–20.

⁵⁰ See: Gregory Carleton, “Na pokhronakh zhivyykh: Teoriia ‘zhivogo cheloveka’ i formirovanie geroia v rannem sotsializme,” in Hans Günther and Evgenii Dobrenko, eds., *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon* (St. Petersburg, 2000), 339–51; and Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton, 1992), 50–56.

⁵¹ See Hans Günther, “Totalitarnoe gosudarstvo kak sintez iskusstv,” in Günther, and Dobrenko, eds., *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon*, 11–12; and Galina Belaia, “Sovetskii roman-epopeia,” in Günther, and Dobrenko, eds., *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon*, 853–65.

⁵² Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 266.

⁵³ On the role of folklore in socialist realist doctrine, see: Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago, 1981), 47–152; Régis Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford, 1992), 51–55; and Ursula Justus, “Vozvrashchenie v rai: Sotsrealizm i fol’klor,” in Günther, and Dobrenko, eds., *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon*, 70–86.

⁵⁴ Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 206.

realism might seem to be unrelated to the socialist realist virtue of *pravdivost'*. If we take a closer look at how Ivan presented “the most accurate facts,” however, we discover that in many instances he wrote about events he did not and could not witness, adding details he imagined or inferred, like in the following fragment from December 1939:

Kat'ka, who had not enrolled in school in Temriuk because she had arrived late, came back home today. The journey was hard because there were many people. Dirt everywhere. The crowd darts from one end of the station to the other, not knowing where the boarding will take place. The crowd that rushed through the doors trapped Kat'ka and her friend.... They climbed up to the deck. A joyful landscape lay in front of them. Brown from clay and silt, the water ran rampantly in the riverbed of the not very wide but winding Kuban'.⁵⁵

Yet, such reconstructions did not undermine Ivan's claim to accuracy. Rather, they supported it, upheld by another aspect of *pravdivost'*. The mastery of the Soviet writer was premised on *ucbeba u klassikov* (learning from the classics)—the use of traditional literary devices aimed at enhancing the verisimilitude of narration by relying on the reader's familiarity with realist literature.⁵⁶ As Viktoria Faibysenko puts it, “such craftsmanship is ... a specific kind of mimesis. It imitates not ‘nature’ but the mimesis of ‘classic art’ to distil its pure mimetic capacity.”⁵⁷

Given that Ivan did not mean his exercises in such mimesis to be read as *real* published prose, we can interpret them as “I–I” messages on how to produce truthful accounts of events that extended beyond his individual experience. Such truthfulness stemmed from the ability to capture the general essence of a described phenomenon, both grounded in particular verifiable details and framed by the author's vision. Considered from this angle, Ivan's *pravdivost'* aligned with the guidelines offered to aspiring worker-writers: “In the process of his life activities, based on his life experience, the writer gathers observations, impressions, and thoughts. Based on his ideological [*ideinyi*] and cultural level, he selects the most significant and interesting, generalizes and singles out the facts he wants to present to the reader.”⁵⁸ The increasing “fictionalization” of the diary chronicle laid the foundation for its transformation from an “I–I” channel for self-instruction on writing into an “I–s/he” message—a coherent retrospective narration.

There was yet another, less direct way in which *pravdivost'* was meant to solidify Ivan's individuation as a narrator. Here I suggest returning to the quotation with which I began this essay, and looking at the whole passage, which presents us with two ostensibly contradictory statements: “But when I am sad and idle in reality, I live a full life in my diary. Line after line, my entry fills the diary, and line after line, I pour down my grievances and scarce joys—all that swarms in my brain day and night and doesn't give me a moment of peace. Writing a diary is my intellectual, spiritual life. It serves as a mirror to my everyday real life. And I can't lose it.”⁵⁹

On the one hand, the diary, according to its chronicling purpose, mirrored everyday life, yet on the other, Ivan called it his “intellectual and spiritual life,” which contrasted with the uneventful daily grind. Therefore, the diary served as an individuating performance, which not only accommodated Ivan's self-realization when reality did not allow him to express

⁵⁵ Ibid., 170.

⁵⁶ Dobrenko, *Making of the State Writer*, 308–31.

⁵⁷ Viktoria Faibysenko, “Ot inzhenera dushi k inzheneram dush: Istoriia odnogo proizvodstva,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 152, no. 4 (August 2018): 131–45, at www.nlobooks.ru/magazines/novoe_literaturnoe_obozrenie/152/article/20026/ (last accessed April 23, 2025).

⁵⁸ Leonid Timofeev, *Stikh i proza: Teoriia literatury dlia nachinaiushchego pisatel'ia* (Moscow, 1935), 10.

⁵⁹ Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 327.

and act on everything that “swarmed in his brain” but also put a socialist realist mirror in front of this reality, revealing its hidden potential. *Pravdivost'* as the presentation of the *most real* in a work of literature had a crucial didactic role of instilling socialist realist sensitivity in its readers.⁶⁰ At the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, Andrei Zhdanov proclaimed that truthful reflection of life had to “be coupled with the task of ideological transformation [*ideinaia peredelka*] and education of working people in the spirit of socialism.”⁶¹ Yet to educate the reader, the writer had to engage in constant self-perfection and keep up with the ever-developing socialist reality. As Faibysenko formulates it, “the Soviet writer as well as the Soviet person in general, was engaged in constant ‘work on oneself,’ which was aimed at disidentification with the ‘former self’ by...objective introspection.”⁶²

Ivan acknowledged that consistent and supposedly objective self-writing is what helped him “live a full life” as a narrator-self, mitigating the negative effects of sadness and passivity his “real” self experienced. Unlike Hellbeck’s diarists, however, he did not explicitly address the ideological characteristics of such an emotional state that could hamper his Sovietization. Nor did he explicitly attempt that Sovietization. Consequently, he was not concerned with the disciplining effect his writing could and should have on him and his potential future readers. What he did consider was the capacity of the Socialist realist mode of writing to help a person take control over their life and ascribe meaning to it. Such writing’s *pravdivost'*, which went beyond mere registration of facts and captured “intellectual and spiritual life,” aimed to ensure the conversion of Ivan’s present into a comprehensive story. In March 1940, Ivan formulated this idea twice at the end of the first notebook and the start of a new one:

Much effort and time were sacrificed for this, perhaps, fruitless labour. Well, I will console myself with the thought that sometime I might flip through this diary and read about the past days of my life, which may be erased by time.

...

I have finished one diary which contains a description of three years of my life. But I don’t intend to leave the account of my life *whose truthfulness can’t be doubted...* Although I have to spend a lot of effort and time, I console myself with the thought that one day, I will be able to read about my past life and the lives of people around me.⁶³

The act of re-reading is important here. Many scholars point out that it is a crucial aspect of diary keeping—Philippe Lejeune even argues that “you don’t imagine it [the diary] finished; rather, you see it reread (by yourself) or read (by another).”⁶⁴ Patrizia Deotto suggests that re-reading allows the diarist to find “the integrity that existence itself lacks,” “a factor which ensures the continuity, subjective and literary, beyond heterogeneous everydayness.”⁶⁵ This aligns with Ivan’s understanding of his diary: he anticipated that his

⁶⁰ Faibysenko, “Ot inzhenera dushi k inzheneram dush.”

⁶¹ Zhdanov, “Rech’ sekretaria TsK VKP(b) A. A. Zhdanova,” 4.

⁶² Faibysenko, “Ot inzhenera dushi k inzheneram dush.”

⁶³ Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 206, 207. [emphasis added]

⁶⁴ Philippe Lejeune, and Victoria Lodewick, “How Do Diaries End?” *Biography* 24, no. 1 (January 2001): 102. On re-reading, also see: Philippe Lejeune, “Rereading Your Diary” in Jeremy D. Popkin, and Julie Rak, eds., *On Diary*, 324–28; Philippe Lejeune, “Continuous and Discontinuous,” in Jeremy D. Popkin and Julie Rak, eds., *On Diary*, 175–86; Wendy J. Wiener, George C. Rosenwald, “A Moment’s Monument: The Psychology of Keeping a Diary,” in Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich, eds., *The Narrative Study of Lives*, Vol. 1 (Newbury Park, 1993), 30–58; and Konstantin Pigrov, “Dnevnik: Obshchenie s samim soboi v prostranstve total’noi kommunikatsii,” 200–19.

⁶⁵ Patrizia Deotto, “Dnevnik kak pogranichnyi zhanr,” *Avtobiografi: Rivista di studi sulla scrittura e sulla rappresentazione del sé nella cultura russa*, no. 8 (2019): 12.

time-consuming toil of writing would be rewarded by the retrospective victory of the narrative over time. It was an “I–I” message on the nature of the diary, programming its own transformation into an “I–s/he” message a coherent overview of his and his family’s life, which indeed would subsequently appear in the form of his autobiography.

From diary to autobiography

Ivan wrote his autobiography as one long entry in the early autumn of 1941. Diaries and autobiographies are often seen as two opposite modes of presenting the self; however, as Philippe Lejeune argues, real examples of self-writing usually oscillate between the two, and diaries often incorporate elements of the autobiography as diarists, anticipating their future, might summarize and evaluate their previous life.⁶⁶ This was precisely Ivan’s intention as he prepared for the military draft, which he regarded as crossing the threshold of adulthood: “A new life begins. That is why I have written my autobiography.... The war makes everyone into adults. I thought I was a boy, but now I am being drafted like an adult.”⁶⁷ He focused principally on family history and his early years, intending to fill gaps in the existing writing and overview his life before its next stage began.⁶⁸ This joint account (diary and autobiography) was designed to simultaneously “seal” Ivan’s past as a truthful (and therefore, valuable) story and, incorporating the time of writing, “open the text up to the virtual dimension of a future without end.”⁶⁹

The autobiography is structured as a novel, divided into chapters with titles, suggesting a three-step coming-of-age sequence of early childhood, formative school years, and the pre-adult present: Ch. 1. “Prishib (1923–1936)”; Ch. 2. “At School Again”; and Ch. 3. “On the Eve of a New Life.” On a smaller scale, it echoed canonised autobiographical trilogies *Childhood*, *Boyhood*, and *Youth* (1852–1857) by Lev Tolstoi and *My Childhood*, *In the World*, *My Universities* (1914–1923) by Maksim Gor’kii, which Ivan listed among the books he had read.⁷⁰

The first part of the autobiography traced Ivan’s parents’ lives before and after marriage in the literary forms previously practised throughout the diary, switching between first-person perspective and omniscient third person, allowing the reader to access the inner world of “the characters” as this excerpt on his mother’s marriage exemplifies:

Oksana didn’t want, really didn’t want to lose her freedom. She was used to playing with dolls, herding sheep with her friends, enjoying nature and the sun. She even considered herself too young to go out, and suddenly How early it was! She hadn’t had the chance to enjoy her youth, and this youth was being taken away from her, and she was made to perform the difficult duties of a wife.... All in all, her mother decided to marry Oksana off. Her grandmother said: “You, devil’s daughter, you sing and dance but do not think about how Oksana is going to live. You will drink away her happiness, her freedom. She will blame you for this forever.” And her grandmother decided to save Oksana.⁷¹

⁶⁶ See: Lejeune, and Lodewick, “How Do Diaries End?,” 103.

⁶⁷ Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 365, 391.

⁶⁸ He skips over events that are mentioned in the diary—presumably, in part because he wants to save time but also because he believes that the diary already presents a comprehensive truthful account of his teenage years, especially from 1939: “But we can’t stay in one place, and in March 1939, we move to Dinskaia where we lived for 1 year and 4 months (IV/1939—VIII/1940) of a worse, half-starved life. It is depicted very well in the diary, and I won’t talk about it much.... Then we move to Razvil’naia. A new stage of my life began. I won’t examine this life in much detail, either.” In: Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 385.

⁶⁹ Lejeune, and Lodewick, “How Do Diaries End?,” 103.

⁷⁰ Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 386–89.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 367–68.

As a Komsomol member since 1939, Ivan was familiar with the requirements for an official autobiography, which included a brief overview of one's parents' background and occupation as proof of the candidate's inherent political reliability, yet he chose a completely different template, focusing on intragenerational conflict and individual struggles.⁷² His family history appears to be overtly following its literary prototype: Gor'kii's *My Childhood* (1914). For example, Ivan explicitly compared his paternal grandfather Okhrim, who had died before he was born, to Kashirin, the grandfather of Gor'kii's autobiographical protagonist Aliosha. They are both introduced as the key figures in family strife revolving around money and have a similar cool temper: "And it seems to me that my father grew up not in grandfather Okhrim's house but in grandfather Kashirin's house. And I imagine Okhrim as a short old man with a red beard, and a rooster-like voice, exclaiming, 'Shame on you!'"⁷³

My Childhood not only provided examples for the literary presentation of difficult family relations but also explicitly set the principle of narrative Ivan had been following in his chronicle. At the beginning of Ch. 2, Gor'kii's narrator contraposes his initial emotional urge to deny or conceal certain facts of his life and his duty to stay truthful:

Now, in recalling the past, I myself find it difficult to believe, at this distance of time, that things really were as they were, and I have longed to dispute or reject the facts—the cruelty of the drab existence of an unwelcome relation is too painful to contemplate. *But truth is stronger than pity*, and besides, I am writing not about myself but about that narrow, stifling environment of unpleasant impressions in which lived—aye, and to this day lives—the average Russian of this class.⁷⁴

Ivan echoed this rationale, admitting that he felt awkward discussing his parents' private life but put accuracy, which led to literary value, above family decorum: "To be honest, it is improper to talk about one's parents in such a manner, but for the sake of accurate and right description, I wrote in this insolent way."⁷⁵

Establishing *pravda zhizni* (truth of life) as the core characteristic of his narrative, Ivan went as far as to openly talk about his family surviving the famine of 1932–33, his father's exile, and his mother and elder sisters suffering from the public humiliation of dekulakization—topics that could not be featured in any public autobiography of the time. He even directly pointed to the state-induced nature of the famine and mentioned that his family collected wheat heads, which was criminalized by the infamous "Law of Three Spikelets":⁷⁶

The famine broke out not because of a bad harvest but because all crops were taken away. *Kulaks* were exiled to Solovki. Many innocent people suffered. For not giving up the grain, which was taken away from us, our father was sent to Siberia ...

⁷² In his diary, Ivan pays special attention to this aspect of a Komsomol self-presentation, although he never explicitly discusses the political implications of his family's status as dekulakized: "When accepting [to Komsomol], they asked my father's biography (my own is not significant enough yet): where he was born, what he did before and after the revolution, whether he fought for the Whites or the Reds, if there are any dekulakized or emigrants.... The Komsomol meeting was today in the evening as well. As others were being accepted, my soul ached—how would I answer the questions? But it turned out to be easy: I only told them the biography." In: Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 78–79.

⁷³ Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 366–67. Cf.: Maxim Gorky, *My Childhood* (London, 1915), 22–26.

⁷⁴ Gorky, *My Childhood*, 22. [emphasis added]

⁷⁵ Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 367.

⁷⁶ The resolution of TsIK and SNK "Ob okhrane imushchestva gosudarstvennykh predpriatii, kolkhozov i kooperatsii i ukreplenii obshchestvennoi (sotsialisticheskoi) sobstvennosti" of August 7th, 1932 introduced the legal concept of "theft of socialist property" and provided severe punishment for those who gleaned the grains, potatoes, and other crops left behind in the fields after the harvest was officially collected.

Without bread ... and our father, we were famished. We started going out to the field and luring out gophers to eat them; we collected spikes (it was forbidden to collect spikes, and many times, the overseers took the spikes and our bags); we brought home the chaff and made cakes from it.⁷⁷

Ivan “learnt from the classics” quite literally, relying on their narrative templates and attempting to assemble his reputation as a writer on Gor’kii’s example. Yet, some elements of Gor’kii’s recipe for success were already unavailable for replication in the late 1930s. Ivan attempted to present his family’s hardship, largely caused by the Soviet regime, as structurally equal to the legitimized and glorified experiences of those oppressed by the morally corrupted pre-revolutionary society described by Gor’kii, which had contributed to his status as the socialist realist author. The hunger, ostracism, and political repressions Ivan and his family had undergone were meant to constitute his symbolic capital as a future author of a “big work,” as if it had been acquired before the proclaimed achievement of socialism. It was an “I–I” message (how to become a great writer like Gor’kii), which could not be adequately translated into an “I–s/he message” (presentation of one’s life in Stalinist literary terms), and the error in coding occurred because Ivan’s project was missing a crucial element that could render his diary potentially convertible into the socialist realist writer’s asset—class consciousness. If we revisit the quote from the aspiring writer’s guidebook, it posits Gor’kii as an ultimate role model because he studied “the life of various social strata” and continuously participated in the “revolutionary movement.”⁷⁸ As is well-documented, real socialist *pravdivost’* was a creative double vision allowing one to understand the class dynamics underpinning social relations and thus be able to demonstrate their “revolutionary development.”⁷⁹ It was both a skill necessary to document the unfolding history and be a part of it, proving one’s compatibility with the socialist order. For Ivan, the Soviet reality was not the world of big history, but the world of adults; therefore, the development of a narrator’s self was not as much an ideological quest but a coming-of-age journey to autonomy.

As in its literary prototypes, the backbone of Ivan’s narrative was his gradual move towards consciousness, to which he directly points at the end of the entry: “I have tried to briefly describe my life path and the development of [my] thoughts and views.”⁸⁰ This development is in line with Soviet guidelines for overcoming peasant backwardness, namely, to abandon religious “superstitions” and engage with the world beyond one’s limited daily life by acquiring erudition in literature, art, world history, and basic scientific facts.⁸¹ Ivan ironically mentions that in his early childhood, he believed in God, feared the Final Judgment and had little knowledge of either history or nature, unaware that “people lived before our era” and convinced that stars came to the sky every night and then flew back to the abyss.⁸² He then talks at length about his school achievements and active self-education, praising himself for developing a consistent reading habit and engaging in thorough self-analysis. Igal Halfin, who described such a structure of a Soviet autobiography as “a voyage

⁷⁷ Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 369.

⁷⁸ Timofeev, *Stikh i proza*, 7.

⁷⁹ On real complexity of *pravdivost’* and its connection to other aesthetic concepts of socialist realism, see: Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, 191–216, 245–96; Leonid Heller, “A World of Prettiness: Socialist Realism and Its Aesthetic Categories,” in Thomas Lahusen, and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Socialist Realism Without Shores* (Durham, 1997), 51–75; and Dobrenko, *Making of the State Writer*, 358–65.

⁸⁰ Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 365, 391.

⁸¹ On peasant backwardness and the means of “acculturating,” see: Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, 1992), 218, 234–36; and David Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941* (Ithaca, 2003), 15–56.

⁸² Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 373.

to the Light,”⁸³ argues that by the 1930s, this transformation narrative fell out of fashion and was superseded by static portraits of good communists.⁸⁴ It was still relevant for Ivan, however, as he interpreted consciousness not as a class category—a politically correct Bolshevik worldview—but as a constellation of qualities ascribed to an idealized Soviet adult, promoted within the *kul’turnost’* campaign: sociable, skilled, and well-read.⁸⁵ Thus, the autobiography provided a recap of the development of these qualities, summarizing Ivan’s “intellectual and spiritual life.” Ivan planned to finish his diary when he received a draft card but had to wait for the results of his medical commission and continued writing until early November 1941. If he had departed sooner, the autobiography as the last entry would have definitively marked his transformation from the author of the diary to its future reader—and from a teenager to an adult.

The most accurate fiction

Having established his narrator-self and learnt the appropriate narrative techniques, Ivan had to practice using them to convey his value system via writing. In October 1941, he wrote a short story entitled *The Death of Vasilii Rebrov*, which was inserted directly into his diary, with several of its chapters dated like regular entries. It served a purpose similar to that of his autobiography, as it overviewed his past and pre-empted the future but with one crucial difference: the protagonist was presented as Ivan’s polar opposite. Ivan endowed Rebrov with reversed characteristics: he was “brave and lucky” while Ivan often complained about his cowardness and indecisiveness in the diary; Rebrov only had five grades of school education, liked telling dirty jokes, and “had much success with girls,” whereas Ivan was industrious and reserved, experiencing many difficulties in establishing friendly and romantic relationships. Ivan did not simply make Vasilii everything he himself was not but created a distorted mirror reflecting all the traits he despised. For instance, Rebrov loved reading adventure novels, which Ivan also enjoyed in 1938 but later considered to be “a sign of ... childish views and interests”; Rebrov wanted to be “in the midst of people, in an environment of crude *kolkhoz* youth,” which Ivan deemed cynical and insolent.⁸⁶ Rebrov’s social sympathies served to highlight not only his intellectual but also moral underdevelopment: working a summer job on an elevator (where he made his protagonist work as well), Ivan was unpleasantly surprised by young *kolkhozniks’* unhealthy obsession with sex, which transgressed Stalinist taboos on explicit sexuality and corporeality more broadly.⁸⁷ Conversely, Ivan’s diary suggests that he followed the prescriptions of chastity

⁸³ Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), 43–95.

⁸⁴ See: *Ibid.*, 262–73.

⁸⁵ On *kul’turnost’* see: Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Front*, 216–37; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union 1921–1934* (Cambridge, Eng., 1979), 249–54; Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995), 181–92; Catriona Kelly, and Vadim Volkov, “Directed Desires: Kul’turnost’ and Consumption,” in Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd, eds., *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution 1881–1940* (Oxford, 1998), 291–313; and Vadim Volkov, “Kontseptsiiia kul’turnosti, 1935–1938 gody: Sovetskaia civilizatsiia i povsednevnost’ stalinskogo vremeni,” *Sotsiologicheskii zhurnal*, no. 1–2 (January 1996): 194–213.

⁸⁶ Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 382, 398, 399.

⁸⁷ “I was surprised by the *kolkhozniks’* cynicism.... All the time, they talk about who had sexual intercourse with whom and how many times; what their male and female organs look like, and who is good to have intercourse with; who has venereal diseases, etc.” In: Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 252, 321–22. On the guidelines on romance and sex for Stalinist youth, see: Catriona Kelly, “‘V nashem velikom sovetskom soiuze tovarishch—sviashchennoie slovo.’ Emotsional’nye otnosheniia mezhdu det’mi v sovetskoi kul’ture,” *Detskie chteniia* 3, no. 1 (November 2013): 38–67; Catriona Kelly, “‘Menia sama zhizn’ k zhizni podgotovila’: Podrostkovyi vozrast v stalinskoi kul’ture,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 119, no. (February 2013): 67–83.

and restraint imposed on adolescents as he often criticized other boys' and girls' flirtatious behavior and overt bodily contact and expressed lofty views on romantic love.⁸⁸ In sum, Rebrov embodied what Ivan believed to be the greatest obstacle to success in adult life—unculturedness. It is logical that this unworthy “mirror self” was discarded through the character's death. Like Ivan, Rebrov received a draft card and went to the recruitment office in Rostov. Yet what was a rather anticlimactic “trial” encounter with the realities of war for Ivan turned into a tragic collision for his character: riding a train home, Rebrov first got injured by a shell fragment and then died when a bomb hit his carriage. Such rapid narrative escalation may have helped Ivan to manage his fears, placing—and, thus, symbolically “locking”—the possibility of death in a fictional narrative, allowing his own story to have a different ending.

The story developed an unexpected subplot, however: before going to Rostov, Vasilii wooed his co-worker Iulia in a very impertinent manner and even tried to sexually assault her, but later grew to appreciate her personality and felt that he might be in love with her. Commenting on his story, Ivan remarked that he had wanted to “describe V. Rebrov's dissolute and uncultured life” and had not known what role Iulia would play but “accidentally gave her the role of introducing Vasilii to conscious human life.”⁸⁹ Iulia, characterized as “soft and quiet,” embodied what Ivan considered his own key virtues: erudition, love for serious reading, modesty, and integrity; she even scolded Vasilii for not having read the classics that helped one to “know life”: “To not know the works of Walter Scott, Dumas, Mark Twain, Stendhal, Hugo, Jules Verne, Balzac, London, and Tolstoi means to live in the dark and not see anything. I can't even imagine what it's like to live without books!”⁹⁰

Although she appears to be Ivan's female alter-ego, Iulia is described as “other” not only for low-cultured Rebrov but for the peasant environment in general—she is Jewish. Ivan's xenophobia, also expressed in several other entries, pours into his description of Iulia, yet is immediately counterbalanced to present her as an exemplary Soviet person: “By nationality, she was a Jew but, *unlike other Jews*, she was hardworking”; “She talked *just like a Russian* but with a specific nasal pronunciation.”⁹¹ Perhaps, Iulia's supposed ethnic inferiority helped contrast her self-aculturating efforts with Rebrov's ignorance even more starkly. The respect for culture that she instilled in Rebrov prompted him not only to reconsider his licentious behavior but also truly feel the horror of war while he had previously remained indifferent to the news from the front and even the testimonies of his acquaintance who returned home heavily mutilated: “Airplanes were soaring in the sky, and bombs exploded on huge houses, lifting clouds of dust and a rain of stones; houses were burning. *Vasilii thought that it was culture being destroyed in front of his eyes, which Iulia talked about with such passion.... He got scared.*”⁹² “Not like other Jews,” Iulia fit into the narrative function of a socialist realist plot of “re-education” in which a more conscious character motivates a less conscious but potentially redeemable protagonist to engage in self-improvement.⁹³

⁸⁸ See: Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 128, 132, 173, 179, 190–92, 198, 219–20, 257–59, 390.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 433.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 420.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 401, 418. For instance, Ivan made derogative comments on the appearance and behaviour of Romani people or mocked the speech of his maths teacher, who was “either Jewish or Armenian.” See in: Khripunov, *Dnevnik*, 98–99, 202–3, 281. [emphasis added]

⁹² *Ibid.*, 431–32. [emphasis added]

⁹³ Marina Balina points out that while in the “adult” production novel, men and women both could be the “educator,” in texts about schoolchildren, the girl was always more emotionally and intellectually mature. She suggests that this understanding of the female “civilizing” role could be traced to Tolstoi's interpretation of Anton Chekhov's “The Darling” as a character who represents the ultimate woman's goal—to help the man discover his best side. Marina Balina, “Vospitanie chuvstv à la soviétique: Povesti o pervoi liubvi,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* 58, no. 2 (April 2008): 154–65. There is no mention in Ivan's diary that he read either any contemporary children's

The consciousness in question, however, much like in Ivan's autobiography, did not encompass class sensibilities but implied understanding and appreciation of culture in its modern urban incarnation.⁹⁴ Yet for Rebrov, destined to be destroyed as Ivan's antipode, this *Bildung* journey remained only an unrealized possibility while reinforcing Ivan's own commitment to this life trajectory.

Thus, in his story, Ivan identified neither with the protagonist nor with the *raisonneur* character but with the narrator who "coded" socialist morality into a certain plot. This time, Ivan did not impose the framework of the journey "from darkness to light" onto his life but rearranged and altered the facts to *create* a story that reflected his ultimate truth. Fitting into a recognized literary pattern, it simultaneously upheld Ivan's worldview and proved his competence as a Soviet author. *The Death of Vasilii Rebrov* finalized the transition of Ivan's diary from the "I-I" channel (this is how to write) to the "I-s/he" channel (this is how I write).

Over the years, Ivan's self-writing developed a complicated structure that swung between the "I-I" channel in which the *practice* of diary keeping was used to master "codes" for creating coherent life stories and the "I-s/he" channel with the diary as a *product*, conceived and constructed as a "message" for himself when he would already be a grown-up. Had Ivan's "magnum opus" been written, his diary would have ossified as an "I-s/he" communicative act: a writer's diary, a necessary but already completed step in becoming a Soviet writer and, through that, a full-fledged Soviet adult. It would have served as historical evidence that, in turn, would have helped Ivan to leave a trace in history. In the end, his diary did become historical evidence, and he did leave a trace in history, but in a way he could not have imagined.

The examination of Ivan's writing allows us to trace how Soviet cultural patterns could be used selectively and repurposed to scaffold the individual process of coming of age. Socialist realist concepts helped "externalize and objectify the inner, socialize and historicize the intimate" in Ivan's diary, yet not by providing him with certain vocabulary or syntax for Sovietization but by offering him tools to render his life and the life of his family visible, and therefore, meaningful in the Stalinist literary space.⁹⁵ Ivan's misidentification of the preferable template (Gor'kii's pre-revolutionary novel) for self-presentation points to the importance of school literary induction centered around Soviet interpretation of classical literature, which could create opportunities for alternative life writing, facilitated by the ideological machinery but not fully incorporated into it. In particular, the choice of literary rather than ideological narrative structures in Ivan's autobiography opened up the possibility of including an account of dekulakization, one of the most taboo topics in Stalinist discourse, into an otherwise conforming story of self-development following kul'-turnost' guidelines. Similarly, using the socialist realist plot in *The Death of Vasilii Rebrov* to interrogate his life choices and affirm his system of values, Ivan inadvertently challenged its boundaries, creating a deeply flawed title character whose moral deviation exceeded the limit of weaknesses permissible for a Stalinist protagonist, a female mentor whose Soviet culturedness overcompensated for her alleged ethnic deficiency, and reverting from the awakening of class consciousness to a more traditional *Bildung* story of a boy-to-man transformation, which, however, remained unfinished in the narrated world as it had to be

literature or "The Darling," yet he correctly identified the gender archetypes preferable for the plot he chose for his short story.

⁹⁴ It aligns with the shift in Stalinist youth politics that prioritized individual loyalty to the state over class consciousness and promoted culture as the cornerstone of the young generation's self-positioning. See: Seth Bernstein, *Raised under Stalin: Young Communists and the Defense of Socialism* (Ithaca, 2017), 40–95; Anna Krylova, "Identity, Agency, and the 'First Soviet Generation,'" in Stephen Lovell, ed., *Generations in Twentieth-Century Europe* (London, 2007), 101–11; and Krylova, "Soviet Modernity in Life and Fiction," 44–53.

⁹⁵ Paperno, "What Can Be Done with Diaries?," 572.

completed in the life of its narrator. Ivan's writing practice demonstrates that Stalinist subjects developed their sense of agency and found life meaning not only by voluntarily fitting into the state-provided moulds, as Hellbeck's work suggests, but also by carving their own space at the intersection of various self-fashioning models, combining and even distorting their elements to accommodate their needs, in this case, that of teenage individuation.

If we are to return to Irina Paperno's question—"what can be learned from the individual diarist's work of his/her life, in private, on a continuous basis within a calendar grid?"—the answer is that we can learn how self-writing was used not only to cast one's complex experiences of teenagerhood into legitimized literary forms but also to develop a narrative voice to convert these experiences into an asset in desired future professionalization as a writer.

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