**Book review: I Want To Live: The Diary of a Young Girl in Stalin's Russia**

By Nina Lugovskaya, published by Doubleday.

OF COURSE, EVERY TOM, Dick and Harry will compare her to Anne Frank. What else do you do with a teenage girl like this - eloquent, uncompromising and open-eyed - keeping a diary through the times of Great Terror? What other words are there to describe her? So here she is in every conceivable review and article - Nina Lugovskaya, daughter of the Soviet counter-revolutionary, innocent victim of Stalin's repressions, "Russia's Anne Frank".

This may be a good strategy for endearing (read: selling) Nina to Western readers, but it also mutes everything that is singular, unlike anyone else, about Lugovskaya and her diaries.

And there is plenty there that is unlike anything else. In 1932, when Nina started writing her diary, she was a 13-year-old Moscow schoolgirl with a father who was rarely out of jail or exile and a mother ground into the dust by daily strife.

Nina's slightly older twin sisters, preoccupied with their friends and artistic pursuits, seemed blissfully oblivious to all those things that made their younger sister sick with rage and despair - Communists, conformity, thoughtless obedience, school, human condition and the meaninglessness of it all. Nina's school friends were two years younger than her - this and the fact that she was cross-eyed made Lugovskaya, in her own pitiless estimate, a monstrous, ugly freak.

Nina was 18 when her diary was confiscated by the NKVD (the proud forerunner of the KGB). She was accused of plotting to assassinate Stalin - the proof, after all, was all there in her inflammatory, raging diary entries. The NKVD combed through them with the utmost care, underlining countless incriminating passages, particularly Lugovskaya's vitriols against the "band of villains" that was the Communist Party and her clearly expressed hatred for "a dictator, a villain and bastard" that was the Father of Nations, Joseph Stalin.

None of her criminal thoughts was left without due attention. The attentive readers from the NKVD marked all entries that testified to her distaste and despair for Russian people, who, in her eyes, knew only how to "baah-baah" when led to slaughter. Her depressive and suicidal passages were singled out as well - they were considered acts of treason against the state - alongside entries describing Nina's persistent fantasies of killing "the vile Georgian who is crippling Russia".

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All underlined passages are faithfully reproduced in a darker font in this edition of Lugovskaya’s diary and, as such, they let us go gently into the mind of an NKVD operative on heat and of the whole machinery of secret police behind him - after all, in terms of incriminating evidence, the diary was pure gold.

It was not, of course, a primarily political document - the diary was filled with boys, wild mood swings, morbid introspection as well as blow-by-blow accounts of daily events and conversations.

Yet when Nina shifted her attention away from herself and onto the world that surrounded her, she was unstoppable. Her steadfast resistance to idol-worshipping was remarkable for a teenage girl growing up in a country in the grips of one of the 20th century's most potent and tragic personality cults.

In March 1933, her father was refused a residency permit and had to leave Moscow, and his family, within 10 days. "I clenched my fists tight in my fury. He must be killed (illegible) as soon as possible! I must avenge myself and my father."

And, yes, the object of her rage is Stalin. To write this in the '30s - even to think that, or think of thinking that - was like signing your own death warrant.

Lugovskaya hated Stalin and felt no awe for Lenin either. The statue of Lenin in the town of Mozhaisk, where her father then lived for a while, looked to her like a deliberate caricature. On the pedestal stood "a little dwarf of a man with inordinately short legs and a big, bald head".

"This is the rule of the Inquisition, not socialism," she wrote of the Soviet regime. Was she crazy?

NINA was, remarkably and fiercely, her own person. Her analysis of explosive events such as the famine in Ukraine or the assassination of Sergei Kirov, which precipitated the Great Purge, was profoundly astute and completely free of brainwashing.

And so was her take on her Soviet school as a microcosm of the Communist state, with informers, threats, its own fabricated counter-revolutionaries, interrogations, complicity and a principal as a localised dictator. Millions of men and women around her, to say nothing of her school friends, were brainwashed, frightened, silenced, or made complicit. Yet Nina Lugovskaya was like a fortress that could not be taken.

Interestingly, her handwriting, reproduced a few times in the book, does not look at all like a schoolgirl's diligent hand (calligraphy was a big deal in Soviet schools). It is spiky, messy but also assured and direct. It is the handwriting of someone who would not be trained, whose hand could not be straightened out. And this is the thing about Nina - she was made out of material naturally and fatally resistant to bending.
Worn out by the brutality and hopelessness of interrogations, Nina Lugovskaya accepted the NKVD charges of, among other things, conspiring to assassinate Stalin. It was 1937, so her family's fate was predetermined - the Gulag.

She and her sisters survived years at Kolyma and Nina ended up marrying a fellow inmate, becoming a painter and living long enough to see the Soviet Union collapse. Her diary was discovered accidentally in the NKVD archives in the case-file of her father, Sergey Rubin.

She was a wild-eyed child trapped in a world not fit for a stray dog, but somehow transcending her wretched life, a lonely speck of light in the darkest of nights.

Nina Lugovskaya was uncompromising, irrepressible, grim, terminally self-obsessed. She was more adept at flirting with a lethal dose of opium than with the boys she needed desperately to fall for her and had a tongue as sharp as a razor and a temperament to drive her family insane.

She was a beautiful writer but also an unreformed snob and a banal anti-Semite. Angry as hell and moody as hell. Not Russia's Anne Frank, but Russia's Nina Lugovskaya.

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