Children's Literature in Education
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10583-023-09553-9

ORIGINAL PAPER

Postmemory of Stalinist Repressions and the Siege of Leningrad in Olga Lavrentieva's Graphic Novel *Survilo* (2019)

Sylwia Kamińska-Maciąg[1]

Accepted: 31 August 2023

Abstract

Olga Lavrentieva's graphic novel *Survilo*, published in Russia in 2019, and since then translated into a few languages, is one of the recent examples of harnessing the comic form to overcome historical taboo in contemporary children's and young adult literature. The polemic around accounts of the Stalinist repressions in the 1930s and the period of the Leningrad siege that arose a few years ago in Russia's cultural space shows that the quest for the truth about the past continues to haunt successive generations of Russian authors. Lavrentieva spins a narrative based on the history of her own family and, specifically, on the life of her grandmother, Valentina Survilo, whose childhood overlapped with the Great Terror with its atrocities and her adolescence with the blockade of Leningrad. The author of this article argues that although she writes about Stalinist atrocities, in her fragmented biographical graphic novel, Lavrentieva does not deconstruct the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War but weaves a narrative based on a particular version of postmemory. The author uses the framework of memory studies and focuses predominately on the textual layer of Survilo; however, the black-and-white vignettes composed by Lavrentieva add up to a formally and thematically thought-provoking book.

Keywords Graphic novel · Russia · Siege of Leningrad · Young adult literature · Postmemory · Memory studies

In the Russian mnemonic discourse, there are considerable differences in relating the events of the Great Terror and the siege of Leningrad (or, for that matter, the whole of the Great Patriotic War as part of the Second World War between 22 and 1941 and 9

✉ Sylwia Kamińska-Maciąg
sylwia.kaminska-maciag@uwr.edu.pl

[1] Institute of Slavic Studies, University of Wrocław, Ul. Pocztowa 9, Wrocław 53-313, Poland

Published online: 18 October 2023

May 1945). Until the 1990s, the Stalin-unleashed repressions were entirely excluded from curricular content taught to Soviet children, and grandchildren who found out about them tended to fall back on a certain "indifference" that was inculcated both at school and at home as the best response to family stories told to them (see Żak 2015; Balina 2019; Voronina 2019a). In contrast to this silence and/or disinterest, the image of the Second Word War, including the blockade of Leningrad, but excluding any references to Stalin's collaboration with Hitler between 1939 and 1941, has always been the paramount component of ideological and patriotic education, serving as the foundation for establishing and cultivating a bond with the country, complete with pride in its heroic posture. Moreover, such an image was common in Russian children's books of the second half of the twentieth-century (see Mikhaylova 2023: 200–201; Maslinskaya 2020: 289). Carefully selected books about the war were included in literature curricula, whereas stories and tales about pioneers' valiant deeds were eagerly used in extramural activities (see Voronina and Barskova 2019; Maslinskaya 2019; Voronina 2019b). These texts tended to stray rather far from the historical truth. Real lives of families in wartime, with the dramas experienced by adults and children, have been concealed from the young because they were not part of the ideology of "victory," but rather represented the necessary cost to be brave for the sake of achieving the desired final outcome. Considering the ideological component of many Russian children's books about the war and the way they position young Russians as courageous heroes fighting the enemy, it is unsurprising that they remain popular with Russian educators and young readers at a time when the government glorifies Stalin's dubious legacy and distorts history. After all, "In modern Russia, the Great Patriotic War remains an important element of official memorial policy and collective memory, mainly in the form of a heroic mythological narrative" (Thibonnier 2020: 144).

The first children's and young adult books to portray childhood in the times of the Stalinist repressions and the Second World War in ways that revealed the atrocities of armed conflicts and challenged the myth of the Great Patriotic War only appeared in Russia in the 2000s. These texts took highly varied artistic approaches to handling the previously erased thematic concerns, with writers energetically and comprehensively looking for a "language" in which to convey the tragic truth of the history of their country to children and young adults. While this literature raises controversy by weaving narratives "alternative" to the officially accepted version of Russia's past, it nevertheless continues to glorify the events of the Great Patriotic War and its authors omit some of its more problematic aspects. Moreover, despite the appearance of several important books, including Eugene Yelchin's *Breaking Stalin's Nose* (2011), written in English and translated into Russian by Olga Bukhina in 2013, Yulia Yakovleva's series *The Leningrad Tales* (2016–2021), Olga Gromova's *Sugar Child* (2014), and Olga Lavrentieva's graphic novel *Survilo* (2019), the theme of the Stalinist repressions is not particularly popular either with readers or with writers of contemporary children's and young adult literature in Russia (see Kamińska-Maciąg 2020; Świetlicki and Kamińska-Maciąg 2023). This disengagement primarily results from the socio-political moods prevalent in the Russian Federation. As pointed out by historian and culture scholar Alexander Etkind, "[w]hile Europeans are talking about the 'mnemonic age,' a 'memory fest,' and a growing obsession with the past 'around the globe,' some Russian authors complain about the 'historical amnesia' in

their country" (Etkind 2013: 10). Etkind reminds that although efforts to rehabilitate and compensate the victims of repressions were launched in the 1990s, every politician or scholar "can disseminate propaganda for the Soviet past and ignore or deny its crimes without subjecting himself or herself to the slightest risk" (Etkind 2013: 10, see Kamińska-Maciąg 2021). This is still true today, and the situation is powerfully reinforced by the endorsement of the myth of happy Soviet childhood in Russia's socio-cultural space (see Żak 2015). It is therefore a rare occurrence in modern Russian literature for the action of a novel to be set in the 1930s and 40s[1] and at the same time to unambiguously foreground adverse facets of life.

Considering the current socio-political situation in Russia and the ideological distortion of its Soviet history, particular attention should be paid to how Russian texts for children and young adults engage in the transfer of the (post)memory of traumatic events in Russia's history and to how the aesthetic structure of the books reveals bonds or chasms between the generations (see Bagdasaryan 2019: 133). Having grown up amidst the traumatic childhood stories of their family seniors, some Russian contemporary writers are looking for their own ways to preserve them in the cultural memory of their nation. Lavrentieva is one of them as she spins a narrative based on the history of her own family and, specifically, on the life of her grandmother, Valentina Survilo, whose childhood overlapped with the Great Terror with its atrocities and her adolescence with the blockade of Leningrad. This article demonstrates that *Survilo* – one of the latest iterations of the return to the difficult moments of the past in Russian literature for a young readership which has already been translated into German, French, Swedish, Norwegian, and Polish – is notable among the productions that marshal the comic form in order to overcome historical taboos which have recently proliferated on the international market of children's and young adult literature.

Graphic novels enjoy continuing popularity with children and young adults worldwide. However, most Russian graphic novels target adult readers, not only in terms of emotional maturity they require, but also in terms of the age-classification as defined in their editorial pages. This means that Lavrentieva's book is the first Russian historical graphic novel for young people, as it is recommended for readers aged 12 and older. Researchers of the graphic novel investigate what preoccupations and occurrences are reflected in such books and how they may influence the formation of historical memory, what nation-specific approaches are exhibited by comics on military themes, and what techniques their authors apply to convey "less-than-entertaining" themes. I use the term "graphic novel" as understood by Wojciech Birke, who claims that it is one of the three basic generic forms of the comic and a variety closest to literature, characterised by "de-heroisation […] realism in the construction of the diegetic world, the frequent use of first-person narrative, self-contained plotting modelled on the literary novel, autobiographical investment, profound psychological motivation and references to a range of traditional literary genres, such as coming-of-age novel,

[1] Numerous Anglophone books set in this period in the Soviet Union have been published in the last two decades, including Marina Scott's *The Hunger Between Us* (2022) and dozens of Canadian novels about the Holodomor – the Great Famine of 1932–1933 – Stalin's collectivization, and the Second World War studied by Mateusz Świetlicki in *Next-Generation Memory and Ukrainian Canadian Children's Historical Fiction: The Seeds of Memory* (2023).

milieu novel, family chronicle, non-fiction" (Birek 2009: 248). What matters in the case of *Survilo* is *how* Lavrentieva understands and narrates a history shared by a certain group of people, especially regarding traumatic events. Thus, I argue that although she writes about Stalinist atrocities in her fragmented biographical graphic novel, Lavrentieva does not deconstruct the Soviet myth of the Great Patriotic War but weaves a narrative based on a particular version of postmemory. In my analysis, I use the framework of memory studies and focus predominately on the textual layer of *Survilo*, where the black-and-white vignettes composed by Lavrentieva add up to a formally and thematically thought-provoking book.

Literature for Young People and Russian Mnemonic Discourses

Children's and young adult books on the themes of Stalinist repressions and the siege of Leningrad are an interesting resource for exploring the experience of history and the issues addressed in memory studies, such as commemoration, places of memory (*lieux de mémoires*), social memory, personal memory, and postmemory. At the same time, these texts – novels and graphic novels – can indisputably be classified as "trauma fiction," which Marek Oziewicz describes as a "category encompassing young people's literature about genocides and other atrocities that affected ethnic groups, religious minorities, or conquered nations" (Oziewicz 2019). The literary aestheticisation of war in narratives for a young readership can be fruitfully explored from a variety of research standpoints. Among other possibilities, the concept of inherited experience appears to be a suitable methodological tool for interpreting texts in which contemporary writers tackle themes and events from their nations' history. Revisiting past events comes with an array of ideological risks to authors. Answering her own question of whether it is better to remember or to forget, Aleida Assmann argues that because today's culture of memory comprises responsibility for one's own faults and empathy for the suffering of others, the burden of history can morph into a value for the future (Assmann 2013: 15). For a very long time, the Russian culture of remembering sourced the past exclusively for what the regime deemed "gainful" to the public. Understandably, it was not until the twenty-first century that the generational distance between the memory of the witnesses and the awareness of those to whom history was transmitted through others' stories grew long enough to open the door for new accounts of particular elements of history.

Generationally deferred narratives permit an entirely different view of and attitude to past events because these are perceived from the perspective of inherited memory. Russian authors usually dedicate their works to their parents or grandparents, and the front/back matter of the books announces that the events narrated in them were inspired by family histories. Such a transfer of exposition on "children/grandchildren" brings to mind Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory, which she coined to depict experiences of the offspring of the generation that had gone through trauma. Fiction works as a medium of postmemory by drawing subjective images of the past, which, so to speak, compete with the historical records (see Hirsch 1997). Post-Soviet politics banned compassion for the several million victims of the Soviet terror, and it is only the currently produced Russian cultural memory that brings together two

processes: the vilification of the past and the resumption of the repressed. Nevertheless, "exhuming the past buried in the present, the scholar watches memory turning into imagination" (Etkind 2013: 19). The narrative techniques mobilised by Russian writers serve to poetically reproduce the disastrous past, which is avoided in public discourse, and encourage the transfer of the seeds of memory (see Świetlicki 2023, 4–5). Thus, with its specific narrative, fiction as such is a vehicle for the postmemory of the bygone events and tends to inspire interrogations of and polemics with socially entrenched beliefs and myths.

The polemic around the depiction of the Stalinist repressions of the 1930s and the siege of Leningrad that arose in Russia's contemporary cultural space a few years ago has amply shown that consecutive generations of Russian writers are engrossed with the search for the truth about the past (see Komisaruk 2021: 11). Today, writers in Russia have come to face the challenges with which artists in Europe – but also North America – grappled in the direct aftermath of the Second World War, trying to figure out how terror, mass killings and inhuman violence could be rendered in art and how the young generation could be told about them. In this respect, the black-and-white scenes fashioned by Lavrentieva are an important contribution. Crucially, credibility is widely believed to be central to the concept of fostering postmemory in literary texts. This very model is discernible in *Survilo*, which opens with a note saying that it is a biographical novel based on the history of the author's family, specifically on the life of her grandmother, Valentina (Vala) Survilo, who lived through the Great Terror and the siege of Leningrad. This device renders the story unquestionable, while the narrative told from the viewpoint of a child going through traumatic moments is supplemented with comments offered by the adult protagonist. Moreover, the child protagonist's limited knowledge of the socio-political situation in the Soviet Union may explain the historical inaccuracies and problematic issues absent from Lavrentieva's narrative, such as the atrocities during Stalin's collectivization, the brutality of the deportations to Siberia, the Great Famine of 1932–1933, or the fact that the Second World War started in 1939 with the double occupation of Poland by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, not in 1941.

Postmemory of the Great Terror and the Siege of Leningrad in *Survilo*

Survilo attempts to portray childhood in the Soviet Union in opposition to the myth anchored in Russia's social memory. The cold, persistent hunger, nagging fear, air raids, repeated shelling, betrayal by friends, all this leaves a deep scar in the protagonist's heart and makes her suffer recurrent nightmares and abiding anxiety for her relatives even in the relatively comfortable post-war years. The plotting is distributed among several temporal planes represented by the novel's cover, which depicts Valentina at different stages of her life[2]. While in the child, adolescent, and adult images Valentina looks at the reader with a piercing sadness, the fourth picture shows her as

[2] All translations of *Survilo* feature slightly changed cover art or use completely different cover illustrations.

an old smiling woman. This may suggest that despite her difficult experiences, Valentina's life has a happy ending.

The action is fragmented and starts in and sometimes transports readers to 1997, when two young children are out in the woods near Saint Petersburg (between 1924 and 1991 Leningrad), picking mushrooms with their grandmother, Valentina. *Survilo* pictures the forest as a dangerous place, with the ground uneven from deep holes left by the wartime bombardments which may symbolize the depth of the protagonist's lingering childhood trauma. Time and again Valentina panics when the grandchildren disappear from her sight (see Świetlicki and Kamińska-Maciąg 2023: 64). In 2017, *Survilo*'s another temporal plane, her granddaughter, already an adult, carefully listens to the elderly woman's tale (the central narrative situation of the novel) and tries to understand her fear of losing her loved ones. The grandmother's memories alternate with the digressions of her granddaughter, now a young woman, who comments on what Valentina Survilo says. As a five-year-old, Valentina – whom her family calls Vala – enjoyed a happy childhood with her sister Lyalya – consistent with the Soviet myth but in opposition to the reality of many Soviet children who were dying of starvation in the aftermath of Stalin's collectivization (see Snyder 2010). Valentina's happiness stops in 1937 when she is twelve, and her father is arrested for being "the enemy of the people (40). Consequently, she is exiled to Siberia and loses her mother. When she returns to Leningrad, she is discriminated against for being the daughter of "the enemy of the people" until her father's rehabilitation in 1958. Most of Valentina's close ones die during the siege of Leningrad and the war, but the protagonist survives and remembers everyone who helped her while expressing symptoms of survivor guilt (293).

In the temporal plane set before her father's arrest, Valentina describes herself playing with her older sister, admiring her mother's beautifully embroidered tablecloths, sleeping in one bed with her siblings, their heads turned in different directions, and above all loving her grandmother (who she calls her great-aunt), to whom she was attached more strongly than her parents. This relationship is an important aspect in Valentina's narrative. Moreover, it further highlights *Survilo*'s focus on demonstrating the role of intergenerational solidarity in the transmission of postmemory. As Valentina recalls: "Ever since [after the grandmother's passing], I've always feared for the loss of my loved ones; it's become part of my character. I would spend hours standing at the window, waiting for mum and for dad. It seemed to me that they'd never come back. They always did, but *the fear never went away*" (Lavrentieva 2019: 25; emphasis mine). Thus, Lavrienteva suggests that Valentina's trauma started not with her father's arrest but with the loss of her grandmother.

The historical context is sketched so as to lend credibility to what happens later. The protagonist remembers that her Polish-born father arrived at Saint Petersburg (before it became Leningrad) in search of employment. He was a devoted communist, a member of the party and a respected worker, but none of this protected him against the repressions of the Great Terror when he was labelled as "an enemy of the people." This device seems to be an attempt to mitigate the non-representative quality of the trauma of direct personal experiences by correlating them with the official narrative about the war. While elderly Valentina suggests that her father was arrested because the authorities wanted to take control over his attractive apartment, Lavrien-

tieva does not mention the fact that "nearly seven hundred thousand Soviet citizens were shot" between 1937 and 1938, among them about two hundred thousand ethnic Poles (Snyder 2010: 411). Thus, it is likely that the real reason of Valentina's father's arrest was his Polish heritage.

The pre-1937 "happy childhood" tale about growing up, going to school, attending maths lessons, enjoying outdoor games, exercising in physical education classes and engaging in other common childhood activities is terminated when Valentina recalls the day her father did not come back home: "My childhood came to an end when I was twelve, in November 1937. […] My father was arrested in mid-November, and two weeks later we were ordered to leave our flat and to move up-country" (Lavrentieva 2019: 43). While most Anglophone books about exiles to Siberia – including Ruta Sepetys' *Between Shades of Gray* (2011) and Gabriele Goldstone's *The Kulak's Daughter*/*Red Stone* (2010/2015) – focus on showcasing the hardships of the long journey in freight cars, in *Survilo* it is portrayed as a regular train trip, with Valentina and her mother and sister sitting in a regular passenger car. Thus Lavrentieva seems to minimalise the brutality of the deportations.

A handful of episodes in the life of Valentina, now a twelve-year-old girl living in Siberia, make readers realise that she was exposed to hardships which are not part of regular teenagers' everyday routines (regardless of the temperature, she goes to the forest to collect brushwood and sleeps in a barn with the livestock). However, these experiences are not easily associable with the history of the country and the dubious legacy of Stalin. Valentina recounts: "Political repressions, mass arrests, we knew nothing about them. We believed we were the only ones, that it was simply a mistake" (Lavrentieva 2019: 49). Her statement seems surprising considering the number of Soviet citizens exiled to Siberia. In this part of the graphic novel, the narrative focuses on the fate of a victim of certain circumstances, without explaining who was to blame for them or why they came about in the first place. Valentina even recollects how disappointed she was when, aged fourteen, she was refused membership in a youth communist organisation which she wanted to join but which did not care to admit the daughter of "an enemy of the people" into its ranks. While she longed for her father, she failed to recognize who was responsible for his fate.

The following timeframe portrayed in the novel begins in the summer of 1940 and relates Valentina's life in Leningrad, where she attends a secondary technical school after her surprisingly unproblematic return from the exile. This offers today's young readers a glimpse into the struggles of a teenager who must get by in a big city with only scant resources for the bare necessities of subsistence. The ramifications of the repressions visited on her family affect the girl even as the war breaks out, as she cannot either be evacuated or find a decent job. The "father" rubric in all papers, which she truthfully fills in with "arrested in 1937, whereabouts unknown" (Lavrentieva 2019: 112), makes her existence in the city under siege even more difficult. Finally, Valentina gets a job in a prison hospital, where she spends the entire period of the blockade of Leningrad.

Notably, Lavientieva pays more attention to the depictions of the siege of Leningrad than the Great Terror and Siberian deportations. The siege of Leningrad became the centre of the Russian memory of the Second War World and "continues to be relevant and meaningful, because the current generation find it crucial to understand

the blockade as an extreme, liminal experience" (Komisaruk 2021: 14). The Nazis wanted "to starve Leningrad out of existence" and by the end of 1941 fifty thousand people were killed after the destruction of the city's "food warehouses and oil tanks" (Snyder 2010: 173). For two and a half years, from 1941 to 1943, the chief aim of the Leningrad population was to survive in a besieged city, where food was scarce and which was the target of daily shelling and attacks. Even though about one million people were evacuated from Leningrad, statistics estimate that another million civilians starved or froze to death or were killed in bombings (Snyder 2010: 173). Today, eighty years after the city was encircled by the German troops, the blockade remains an object of controversy, and the memory of it is tapped into for political and economic gains, despite the concerted attempts to restrain the memory of the Great Patriotic War. These days, Russian citizen society and media are outraged more fiercely than ever before by whatever breaches the entrenched heroic canon. Even though there are ever fewer witnesses of these events, no deideologised and balanced attitude to the historical facts has been engendered in Russia yet (see Chizhova 2019; Shevchenko 2023). Not much changes with this controversy in Russia, with writers mainly accused of spreading a false image, libelling or discrediting the history of the blockade (see Komisaruk 2021; Kamińska-Maciąg 2023).

Lavrentieva's graphic novel pictures the blockade by introducing a new narrative to the memory of the siege. Closed up in her workplace, Valentina recalls: "I found out about what had been going on in the city only later, from books. About the stealing of food stamps, about cannibalism. At the time, we knew nothing of it. Neither news nor rumour made it through the hospital walls with barbed wire. We lived in our own prison world" (Lavrentieva 2019: 134). Nevertheless, the protagonist's "ignorance" does not prevent the transmission of memory, which takes place in a different – indirect – manner. Lavrentieva's chilling illustrations depict bombings, air-raid sirens, people dying in explosions and starving to death and, at the same time, the protagonist's exertions as she takes care of wounded soldiers. Despite this innovation in employing a concrete biographical viewpoint to break from the vision of the blockade consolidated in post-Soviet Russia, the presentation of suffering itself in *Survilo* seems rather "conservative and restrictive," as noted by Alexey Pavlovsky (2019), and does not challenge Russia's dominant mnemonic discourse.

The episodes and images of direct threat to life, shelling and dead bodies are nightmarish and rendered in a non-realistic, dreamlike fashion, with Lavrentieva applying an array of devices such as blurring, black figures, shading, sketching places and people without contours and graphically exposing cries. This is an important issue insofar that contemporary children's and young adult literature and art appear to seek not so much to directly address the siege as to produce sufficient distance and space for young readers' imagination, for example by falling back on magic realism. Although "several ego-documents have perpetuated a range of facts and processes directly or indirectly concerning the corporeality of people trapped in the besieged city, with dystrophia being the most frequently depicted one" (Komisaruk 2021: 55), the *Survilo* protagonist, who is "too transparent to have a mirror reflection" (Lavrentieva 2019: 181), dehumanises *herself*, which precludes young readers' identification with her. At the same time, visions stamped by magic realism appear to carry less of a memory-forming potential. After all, "What is at stake when reading literature as

collective texts is thus 'truth' according to memory" because narratives "have to be able to resonate with memory culture's horizons of meaning, its (narrative) schemata, and its existing images of the past" (Erll 2011: 165–6).

When Leningrad is liberated in 1943, eighteen-year-old Valentina leaves the hospital and takes up a job as an accountant; in 1945, she marries a family friend she has known since childhood and has a daughter in 1950. Although her life appears to be happy, Lavrentieva emphasises that the trauma of the Great Terror, the war, and the siege continue to take its toll on the protagonist many years after the events. Valentina concludes: "I've lived my entire life in fear; it's always been with me. Fear's been in me and around me, and I've got used to it. Fear and guilt – I don't know what for" (Lavrentieva 2019: 275). In works on the traumatic memory of the nation's history, the barely explicable but easily impartible anxieties of the older generation serve as channels of indirect transmission of the memory of past events (see Bagdasaryan 2019: 135).

The generalisation of the family's fate tempers the effect of their suffering, especially in the light of the graphic novel's happy ending, which comes complete with the post-war rehabilitation of the protagonist's father and her being awarded for service to society. As it implausibly turns out, the fact that Valentina was not awarded for her contribution during the siege of Leningrad was not caused by her status as the daughter of "an enemy of the people" but a mistake. Valentina remembers that when she was eventually allowed to see the documents in the NKVD archives in 1992, she learned that her father's arrest had been entirely groundless and that he had been executed a mere few days afterwards. Crucially, she adds: "I've never had thoughts of revenge, never harboured any grievance or hated anybody. I live free of hatred. I've always only wanted to know why this happened to my family, what was the reason, but I found nothing in the archives. I've read a lot about the repressions, about the 1930s, when one started to write about that. I've come across plenty of similar stories, exactly the same things that happened to us" (Lavrentieva 2019: 286–287). Thus, Valentina never openly puts the blame on the people responsible for her father's death – it is positioned as the consequence of yet another "mistake."

All this does not make the reading of Lavrentieva's novel any easier. In order to understand the complexity of the drawings and the text, with their metaphorical load and allusions, readers, especially in the age-group tagged as the target readership of *Survilo*, must peruse the novel slowly and preferably a few times. For instance, it takes repeated reading to grasp that memory is often rendered as an overgrown forest space, with this being but one example of *Survilo*'s plentiful metaphors. Nevertheless, the way history is presented in this graphic novel makes it an innovation in Russian comic-book culture. The visual and the verbal combine to produce additional meaning, and the voices of the grandmother and the granddaughter initiate bivocality. Postmemorial work in this case involves both remembering and reproducing all over again: "a return" to the times in which the writer did not participate, a desire to "see" the terrible reality that her relative saw; a new identity literally springing from old resources. In this way, the generation of postmemory can step into other people's remembrances and make them their own space. *Survilo* can certainly be incorporated into the postmemory of the following generation as an aesthetic attempt at relating to one's own past.

Conclusion

Globally, the popularity of the graphic novel as a genre associated with historical themes is soaring, as evidenced by the publication of original books and adaptations of classic novels in various languages, including English, French, and Polish (see Świetlicki and Kamińska Maciąg 2023). Besides other factors, this development is driven by a range of social and commercial mechanisms, which are succinctly captured by Anna Podemska-Kałuża: "Sometimes students decide to read one or another comic book because it has been labelled as controversial, difficult and shocking in the contemporary cultural circuit, and cultural and literary scandal is known to sell much better than smooth, beautiful and formally refined tales" (2016). However, in Russia, the graphic novel is only beginning to develop and carve out a place for itself in the consciousness of the reading public, and the comics studied by Russian literary scholars are predominantly translations of foreign publications. This may be caused by a variety of reasons. The graphic novel only appeared in Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. If, before the 1990s, strong prejudice against comics with their American provenance was disseminated in a concerted manner, today the major problem lies in the lack of funding and scarce interest from influential publishers. As a result, a vast number of translations of popular Western comics are available on the Russian market, but graphic novels authored by Russians are very scant (a dozen or so titles). Among the vernacular graphic-book artists, particular popularity has been garnered by Askold Akishin and Misha Zaslavsky, the pioneers of the Russian graphic novel, who have produced graphic adaptations of the classics of Russian literature, including the very successful *Master and Margarita* from 1993.

The history of the graphic novel in Europe does not register any reputed Russian names, but in recent years, interest in comics on military and war themes has been steadily growing in Russia, and *Survilo* is a pioneering work in this category as well. At the same time, Russian scholars tend to examine graphic novels as artistic products, focusing on their visual form, with little, if any, reflection on them as tools for representing the past or constructing social identity. As Santiago García points out: "historical comics interested fundamentally in events, which in 'historical adventures' serve only as a backdrop, had not had much impact until recently, when more and more artists have been turning their attention to the genre" (García 2015: 166). As a result, the influence of such publications on the formation of historical memory or postmemory, especially among young people, lies outside the attention of literature scholars in Russia.

Whether history can be recognised by and make a difference for young readers remains an open question. Lavrentieva herself concludes: "The graphic novel may sometimes affect readers more powerfully than traditional literature, because readers become immersed in the space of the book, and the story is told not only through the text, not only through images – it is told through lines, spots, half-tones, shading. Along with the text, it makes a strong impression" (in Pavlova 2019). In this case, the narrative of the past trauma unfolds on several planes as Lavrentieva constructs relations with readers both through text and through image. Her drawings are replete with positive emotions, such as in portrayals of joyful spinning dance rendered in bright, clean lines, and also with negative ones, such as the protagonist's panic upon

losing food stamps, pictured through dark shading and the pictorial chaos of dark, thick lines. Nevertheless, young people's reading of this novel could ideally be aided by commentary and discussion, if the novel is included in the school discourse on the history of the country and the fate of its citizens, a history which is not really remote but is only remembered by the generation who are passing away now. There do exist methodology textbooks on how to work with comics and graphic books, and teachers use comics as teaching aids, such as asking students to produce their own comics based on novels (Asonova 2021: 421). Regrettably, graphic novels, a genre that really stirs interest for children and young adults, are rarely objects of classroom discussions or of compelling didactic pursuits in Russian classrooms. Nonetheless, the fact that the second edition of Lavrentieva's graphic novel was published already in 2020 suggests readers' considerable interest in it and indicates that this form of historical transmission is becoming increasingly acceptable in Russia. The appearance of approachable graphic novels introducing the readers to more problematic aspects of Russian history is of tremendous importance, as such books offer an alternative to the ideologically re-written historical narratives found in textbooks endorsed by the Kremlin (see Shevchenko 2023).

References

Asonova, E. 2021. 'Визуальное в литературе, или О современном компетентном ребенке.' *Детские чтения* 16 (2): 416–24.

Assmann, A. 2013. *Między historią a pamięcią. Antologia*, trans. A. Teperek et al., ed. M. Saryusz-Wolska. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.

Bagdasaryan, O. 2019. 'Память второго поколения и работа с прошлым в современной детской литературе.' Политическая лингвистика 6(78): 132–8.

Balina, M. 2019. 'Re-imagining the Past for Future Generations: History as Fiction in Soviet Children's Literature.' In *A Companion to Soviet Children's Literature and Film*, ed. O. Voronina, 197–211. Leiden-Boston: Brill.

Birek, W. 2009. 'Powieść graficzna.' Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich 52(1–2)/(103–104): 248.

Chizhova, E. 2019. 'Das doppelt verriegelte Gedächtnis – die Wahrheit über die Blockade Leningrads war in Russland lange ein strikt gehütetes Tabu.' *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* 6 May 2019; https://www.nzz.ch/meinung/tabuisierte-blockade-leningrads-das-gedaechtnis-meiner-familie-doppelt-verriegelt-war-von-innen-und-von-aussen-ld.1466171?reduced=true. Access 23 September 2022.

Erll, A. 2011. *Memory in Culture*, trans. S. B. Young. New York: Palgrave Macmillan Memory studies.

Etkind, A. 2013. *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of Unburied*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

García and Santiago. 2015. *On the Graphic Novel*, University Press of Mississippi.

Hirsch, M. 1997. *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory*. Cambridge, MA, London.

Kamińska-Maciąg, S. 2020. 'Pamięć o wielkim terrorze we współczesnej literaturze dziecięcej (*Breaking Stalin's nose* Eugena Yelchina).' Przegląd rusycystyczny 3(171): 90–104.
Kamińska-Maciąg, S. 2021. 'Strategie narracji i pamięci o terrorze w dzieciach Kruka Julii Jakowlewej.' *Filoteknos* 11: 315–326.
Kamińska-Maciąg, S. 2023. 'The Controversial Truth: Postmemory and the Great Terror in Yulia Yakovleva's *The Raven's Children* and Eugene Yelchin's *Breaking Stalin's Nose*.' In *Navigating Children's Literature through Controversy: Global and Transnational Perspectives*, eds. E. Jamróz-Stolarska, M. Świetlicki, A. Zarzycka, 70–84. Leiden-Boston: Brill.
Komisaruk, E. 2021. *Blokada Leningradu w doświadczeniu i diarystycznych narracjach kobiet*. Wrocław: Atut Oficyna Wydawnicza.
Lavrentieva, O. 2019. *Survilo*. Sankt-Petersburg: Izdatelstvo Bumkniga.
Maslinskaya, S. 2019. '"Be Always Ready!": Hero Narratives in Soviet Children's Literature.' In *A Companion to Soviet Children's Literature and Film*, ed. O. Voronina, 250–302. Leiden-Boston: Brill.
Maslinskaya, S. 2020. 'Be Always Ready!': Hero Narratives in Soviet Children's Literature.' In *A Companion to Soviet Children's Literature and Film*, eds. O. Voronina, 250–302, Leiden and Boston: Brill.
Mikhaylova, O. 2023. '"Untying the Knots" of the Past: The Representation of Traumatic Events of Soviet History in Contemporary Russian Young Adult Literature.' In *Political Changes and Transformations in Twentieth and Twenty-first Century Children's Literature*, eds. B. Kümmerling-Meibaurer and F. Schulz, 199–214, Heidelberg: Winter.
Oziewicz, M. 2019. 'Truth-Telling, Trauma Fiction, and the Challenge of Critical Engagement: A Reading of *Breaking Stalin's Nose* and *A Winter's Day in 1939*.' *Children's Literature in Education* 51(4): 519–33.
Pavlova, S. 2019. 'Несчастье случилось в ноябре. Графический роман о репрессиях и блокаде.' https://www.svoboda.org/a/29863564.html. Access 23 September 2022.
Pavlovsky, A. 2019. 'Первый графический роман о дочери "врага народа." Поколение постпамяти и черный ящик невыразимого.' *Colta*, https://www.colta.ru/articles/art/20863-pervyy-graficheskiy-roman-o-docheri-vraga-naroda. Access 23 September 2022.
Podemska-Kałuża, A. 2016. 'Ciężar postpamięci. *Maus* Arta Spiegelmana: Holocaust w komiksie, który ocieka krwią.' *Akademia rozwoju nauczyciela* 15, online, https://www.czasopismopolonistyka.pl/artykul/ciezar-postpamieci. Access 23 September 2022.
Shevchenko, V. 2023. 'Russia's New Schoolbook Aims to Justify War on Ukraine.' *BBC*, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-66450520. Access 30 August 2023.
Snyder, T. 2010. *Bloodlands: Europe Between Hitler and Stalin*. New York: Basic Books.
Świetlicki, M. 2023. *Next-Generation Memory and Ukrainian Canadian Children's Historical Fiction: The Seeds of Memory*. Routledge.
Świetlicki, M. and S. Kamińska-Maciąg. 2023. 'Northern Lights Are Our Friends: Soviet Deportations and Siberian Nature in Children's and Young Adult Literature.' *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literature*, 61 (2) 2023: 59–68.
Thibonnier, L. 2020. 'Великая Отечественная война в современной русской детской литературе: в поисках альтернативы.' Детские чтения 17(1): 144–66; https://cyberleninka.ru/article/n/velikaya-otechestvennaya-voyna-v-sovremennoy-russkoy-detskoy-literature-v-poiskah-alternativy. Access 20 November 2022.
Voronina, O. 2019a. 'Introduction "The Only Universal National Text": On the Centennial of Soviet Children's Literature and Film.' In *A Companion to Soviet Children's Literature and Film*, ed. O. Voronina, 1–46. Leiden-Boston: Brill.
Voronina, O. 2019b. 'Education of the Soul, Bolshevik Style: Pedagogy in Soviet Children's Literature from the 1920s to the Early 1930s.' In *A Companion to Soviet Children's Literature and Film*, ed. O. Voronina, 212–249. Leiden-Boston: Brill.
Voronina T. and P. Barskova. 2019. 'Unspeakable Truths: Children of the Siege in Soviet Literature.' In *A Companion to Soviet Children's Literature and Film*, ed. O. Voronina, 303–338. Leiden-Boston: Brill.
Wrońska, A. 2011. 'Idea szczęśliwego dzieciństwa w konfrontacji z radziecką rzeczywistością.' In *Idea i komunikacja w języku i kulturze rosyjskiej*, ed. A. Dudek, 111–17. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
Żak, E. 2015. 'Infantylizacja kultury radzieckiej: tęsknota za czasami "szczęśliwego dzieciństwa."' In *Rosyjskie dzieciństwo*, eds. K. Duda and A. Dudek, 185–93. Kraków: Księgarnia Akademicka.

Sylwia Kamińska-Maciąg is Assistant Professor at the Institute of Slavic Studies, University of Wroclaw, Poland. Her research focuses on Russian fantastic literature of the 19th century, psychoanalysis in literature, Russian children's and young adult literature and memory studies. Her recent publications include *Zjawiska tajemne i fantastyka w prozie rosyjskiej XIX wieku* [*Occult Phenomena and the Fantastic in 19th -Century Russian Fiction*] (Wrocław; Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, 2019).