Blokada v slove: Ocherki kriticheskoi teorii i biopolitiki iazyka. By Irina Sandomirskaia. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2013. 425 pp. Hard bound.

Blockade in the Word: Essays in the Critical Theory and Biopolitics of Language is a groundbreaking, highly theoretical work of literary scholarship whose chapters could easily stand as separate works. What unites them are two main projects: first, to study how authors experienced and responded to a crisis in writing and language during the Stalinist terror; and second, to put Soviet intellectual culture in contact with European theory—most of all, that of Walter Benjamin, but also Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, and Paul de Man.

In a sign of this book's innovative approach, the chapters on familiar literary and historical figures are framed by case studies on deaf-blindness, which Irina Sandomirskaia presents as "an allegory for the thinking, speaking, and writing person in conditions of the Stalinist symbolic regime and also a lesson in the assimilation and adaptation of language that is in the broadest sense 'not mine/mute' [*nemo(e)go*]" (8). The preface—probably the most striking section—analyzes an unpublished monograph by Ol'ga Skorokhodova, who in the late Stalin era became a prominent scholar in the field known today as disability studies. For Sandomirskaia, Skorokhodova is more than a model for understanding language under Iosif Stalin—she is a Russian Descartes and a self-styled phenomenologist after Edmund Husserl because of the way she self-consciously recounts her reevaluation of her relationship to the world after losing her sight, hearing, and speech as a child.

Chapter 1 treats Benjamin's autobiographical writings along with his theory and philosophy, building parallels between him and Skorokhodova. In Moscow, Benjamin cannot master Russian and becomes a "speechless child" (62). He correctly prophesies the revolution's failure and the coming terror, specifically through his attention to language—for example, the rise of "chatter" (*Geshwätz*, *boltovnia*). He also notes that the revolution has replaced the power of money with that of the word, bringing about a linguistic turn that would later be realized in Stalin's works.

Sandomirskaia's argument in chapter 2, on Mikhail Bakhtin's "Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity" (c. 1920–23), is most provocative. Drawing on work by Ann Jefferson and Peter Hitchcock, Sandomirskaia contends that Bakhtin makes of the author a "totalitarian" figure (144) and the hero a "passive, feminine substrate" (113). She proposes that he left the work unfinished precisely because he sensed that it constituted an aesthetic manifestation of violence and terror. This chapter treats Konstantin Vaginov's *Works and Days of Svistonov* (1929) as a systematic response to "Author and Hero." When the fictional author Svistonov writes his acquaintances, and himself, into his novel, he kills them. Vaginov further upends and parodies Bakhtin's idea of the author's loving relationship to the hero by eroticizing it and by depriving Svistonov's art of anything sublime or moral.

As a counterargument, one might ask: if Bakhtin's primary concern was with the creation of artistic wholes, is it so strange that a fictional hero would appear "less human" than the author? Sandomirskaia's is a dark ethical reading. In many places, Bakhtin reminds us that his theory is above all an aesthetic one. Yet elsewhere he opens the door to Sandomirskaia's critique, for instance, describing the author-hero pair with comparisons to self-other relations, placing the author on a higher plane, with the ability to judge bestowed by the "outsideness" of the creator to the created personality.

Biopolitics sometimes fades from view but is crucial to chapter 3, at whose center is the extreme situation of the Leningrad blockade, in which life itself was "rationed." Sandomirskaia suggests that the social body (the city), the textual body (writing), and the individual body (the person) were all governed by an economy of "dystrophic

semiotics," in which the subject responded to the external restrictions with acts of self-censorship and self-cannibalization. She juxtaposes Lidiia Ginzburg's writings with the medical literature about dystrophy, whose completely alienated language codifies the same starving blockade subject Ginzburg so sensitively probes. In line with her metaphorical treatment of the "blockade in the word," Sandomirskaia boldly uses the notion of semiotic dystrophy to interpret Ginzburg's prewar, wartime, and postwar writings. She reads the famous ending to *Notes of a Blockade Person* pessimistically, noting that "to draw [*opisyvat'*] a circle means, after all, to go along it. Language itself performs a mocking charade for the dystrophic" (264). And yet, the fact that Sandomirskaia builds her rich analysis of the Soviet literary environment on Ginzburg's own observations suggests that the desk-drawer writer achieved contact with reality, even during the blockade itself.

Chapter 4 contains excellent close readings of Anna Akhmatova's later works. Sandomirskaia argues that the poet's long period of "muteness" (1925–40) resulted from the need to find a new relationship to history. Akhmatova emerged with a lyrical, subjective view of history that involved myths, mystifications, the grotesque, and codes. Her concept of "secret writing" (*tainopis'*) corresponds with Benjamin's view that one can reconstruct historical truth by using one's sense of the present "to read what was never written."

The descent into silence that Benjamin foresaw in 1920s Moscow culminated in late Stalinism and the leader's own work "Marxism and the Problems of Linguistics" (1950), in which Stalin no longer saw language as base or superstructure but rather as directly related to the national factor. He therefore expanded the discipline of linguistics and disciplined it, introducing the form of the "academic debate" to the purges by writing his treatise as a Socratic dialogue. He accused Nikolai Marr and his followers of concealing language's transparency and declared that language is simply an unambivalent means of communication and that all truths are complete and universally present, changing by self-perfection rather than revolution.

OBERIU aesthetics, which privileged incomprehensibility and touch over the spoken word, so opposed the notion of language as transparent ice structure that they ended up functioning surprisingly well in the "blockade in language." Nikolai Zabolotskii's 1948 poem "Reading Poetry" ("Chitaia stikhi"), a "hypercorrect" demonstration of loyalty to Stalin's language policies even before their publication, is interpreted to be in line with these aesthetics, "not only reaching out to touch the world with its hand but meeting its blow with the whole of its verbal body" (351).

Blokada v slove deserves to be read by literary scholars, historians, and anthropologists of Stalinism and the Soviet period more generally, as well as those working on Vaginov, Bakhtin, Zabolotskii, Akhmatova, and Ginzburg. Specialists on Benjamin will appreciate how his philosophies of language and history are productively paired with Russian texts.

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The End of Russian Philosophy: Tradition and Transition at the Turn of the 21st Century. By Alyssa DeBlasio. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. xii, 220 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Chronology. Index. Illustrations. Figures. Tables. $95.00, hard bound.

Rumors of Russian philosophy's demise, suggested in the title of Alyssa DeBlasio's new book, may be premature. At the outset, DeBlasio makes the crucial distinction