Twentieth-century Russian literature provides a distinct example of the bond between society and its spirituality. Despite the Soviet government’s efforts to officially eliminate religious faith and replace it with faith in socialist ideology and leadership, many Soviet citizens maintained their own religious beliefs. Writers such as Boris Pasternak in his novel *Doctor Zhivago*, Anna Akhmatova in her poetic cycle *Requiem*, and Ludmila Ulitskaya in her novel *The Funeral Party* address the effects of prohibited spirituality. Despite the many differences between the three works—namely in genre, era, and setting—the theme of spirituality, and the effort to retain freedom in one’s soul despite outward struggle, is consistent throughout.

Spanning nearly five decades of Russian history, *Doctor Zhivago* gives insight into the development from pre-revolutionary to post-revolutionary views of spirituality. Early in the novel, Pasternak focuses on Nikolai Nikolaievich, Yuri Zhivago’s uncle and guardian. Pasternak presents Nikolai engaging in intellectual discussions several times, in which Nikolai proposes his unwavering belief that man “must be true to immortality—true to Christ” and “cannot advance... without a certain faith.” Nikolai also explains that “that's why people discover mathematical infinity and electromagnetic waves, that's why they write symphonies. (9–10) It is no coincidence that Pasternak grants Nikolai one of the first voices in the novel, since he uses this character and his speeches in order to establish the significance of and adherence to religion in...

2 “...надо быть верным Христу… для этих открытий требуется духовное оборудование… для этого открывают математическую бесконечность и электромагнитные волны, для этого пишут симфонии.”
pre-Soviet Russia; Nikolai is an educated humanist, as well as the embodiment of spiritual optimism at the turn of the twentieth century. He impresses the young Yuri Zhivago, who retains many of his uncle’s values throughout the novel.

Though some similarities are shared between uncle and nephew, Yuri develops a unique sense of spirituality as he matures. J.W. Dyek writes that “in Doctor Zhivago, we find a constant change from the ideal to the real.” Yuri’s piety is never represented through attending church or performing religious rituals, yet this does not mean he rejects religion entirely. Rather, Yuri makes a compromise, since such religious practices are neither safe nor practical in the midst of the revolution. His Christian values manifest themselves instead through encounters and interactions with the natural world. He values the beauty of the nature around him, and creates a personal sanctuary out of it.

Yuri’s preference for the real over the ideal can also be seen in his approach to the revolution. In response to the rhetoric of General Liberius, whose name suggests the intensity of his ideals, Yuri says “none of [your] clichés...appeal to me...I'll admit that you are Russia's liberators...that without you it would be lost, sunk in misery and ignorance, and I still don't give a damn for any of you. (340)” Pasternak addresses Yuri’s values through this interaction. Yuri’s remark makes his values unclear; he is, and has been, in favor of empowering the weak, but he has difficulties accepting the revolution and its proponents. Thomas Rogers explains that “Yuri and his creator generally disapprove of socialism's machinelike manipulation of persons and its totally deficient response to deeper human needs.” Thus, Yuri views spiritual oppression as

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4 “Я допускаю, что вы светочи и освободители России, что без вас она пропала бы, погрузив в нищете и невежестве, и тем не менее мне не до вас и наплевать на вас, я не люблю вас и ну вас всех к чорту.”
5 Thomas Rogers, “The Implications of Christ's Passion in Doktor Živago,” The Slavic and East
more detrimental to a reformed society than the empowerment of the lower class. In this light, it is important to analyze the effects of what Yuri sees as a soulless revolution. As the Forest Brotherhood, a guerrilla branch of the Bolsheviks, travels deeper into the “dense, impenetrable taiga,” Yuri observes the following:

… granite boulders standing on end, looking like the flat stones of prehistoric dolmens... he was ready to swear that it was not of natural origins, that it bore the mark of human hands (354–355). This stands in contrast to the positive, beautiful, life-giving view of nature that Pasternak provides elsewhere in the novel. Yuri sees this place as a product of the work of the revolutionaries; their tampering has twisted the beautiful natural landscape into a site of destruction.

Pasternak also presents the effects of the revolution on the collective conscience. As the novel progresses further into the revolution and Yuri progresses further into the provincial regions, a change comes over the people of Russia. Through characters like Kubarikha, the cattle-healing spell-caster, and Pamphil Palykh, whom Yuri describes as “inhuman,” “barbaric,” and a “gloomy and unsociable giant,” (351) Pasternak shows a spiritual regression among the people. This showcases the effects of the Soviet government’s effort to demoralize its people, especially the deeply religious, provincial ones. The provincial people really have no use for the philosophical ideas forced upon them by characters like Liberius, nor do they even fully understand them. Pasternak infers that in the attempt to reform life, a vacuum is created and subsequently filled—not by the intended socialist fervor, but by backwards, primitive folk

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6 “…лес сплошной, непроходимый, таежный…ребром стоявшие гранитные глыбы. Они были похожи на плоские отесанные плиты доисторических дольменов… он готов был поклясться, что это место с камнями совсем не природного происхождения, а носит следы рук человеческих.”
7 “бесчеловечность,” “варварство,” “мрачный и необщительный силач.”
occultism. In a scene depicting the execution of several men, a voice calls out, questioning the executioners: “aren't you Christians?” The subsequent gunshots imply a negative response (359).

Pasternak concludes the novel with a message about the impossibility of surviving in the newly-established Soviet Union. R.E. Steussy notes that Yuri’s “heart attack is brought about by suffocation in the stifling atmosphere of the Soviet [Union].” Alexander Gerschenkron adds that “his death is also an act of will,” but “not a suicide.” Yuri accepts that, as a man who believes in spiritual freedom but is trapped in an atheist state, he cannot live truthfully, and instead accepts the fate of a martyr. Pasternak sees the Stalinist Era as not just the death of Yuri, but the death of spirituality, poetry, and beauty, which he stood for as well.

Where Doctor Zhivago ends, Anna Akhmatova's Requiem begins. Requiem, according to Timothy Sisler, is “representative of the ways in which the Russian people communicated with each other... in secret, in veiled language.” Her poetic cycle takes place during the time of Stalin's reign, and addresses, through Christian overtones, the efforts made to overcome the maddening sense of fear and despair permeating life in this era. Due to the actual dangers of imprisonment Akhmatova faced at the time, the elusive nature of Requiem was not only a poetic choice, but a near necessity for the poet’s safety.

Due to the complexities of the work, Requiem is best understood by beginning with the outward, external structure, and working toward the inner subtleties. According to Sonia Ketchian, Akhmatova's decision to begin with “an epigraph and three introductory pieces” before

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8 “Товарищи миленькие, хорошие! Как же это?”
the actual cycle establishes a sense that “a work on imprisonment [is] difficult to commence.”\(^{12}\)

The division of the work into a total of seventeen parts enables Akhmatova to provide a greater range of viewpoints, emotions, and images than would be possible in a single poem.

An important factor in *Requiem* is the poetic voice, which is only partially Akhmatova’s—she draws from her own experiences waiting in prison lines, but writes from the point of view of all women. This is evident at the poem’s outset, in the section, “Instead of a Preface,” in which she describes an encounter with the mother of a prisoner:

A woman with bluish lips... woke up from the stupor to which everyone had succumbed and whispered...'Can you describe this?’ And I answered: “Yes, I can.”(131)\(^{13}\)

This excerpt demonstrates the relationship between Akhmatova and the collective mothers and wives of Russia. Not only is this blue-lipped woman suddenly brought out of the inanimate daze of oppression by the sight of Akhmatova. Speaking in the hushed tones of fear, she also acts as Akhmatova’s muse, giving her a voice with which to begin the cycle of *Requiem*.

In order to create both a collective and individual voice for the women of Russia, Akhmatova incorporates the theme of religion. According to Sisler, the inclusion of Christian elements allows the voice to “transcend [the] personal,” and become “universal.”\(^{14}\) Akhmatova does not use religion as a moralizing code to admonish those who have imprisoned her son and filled her life with grief, but rather as a symbolic beacon of hope. The title of the work complements this notion, since a requiem is a mass for mourning the dead. Although so many


\(^{13}\) “Женщина с голубыми губами... очнулась от свойственного нам всем оцепенения и спросила...—А это вы можете описать? И я сказала: Могу.” This and all subsequent quotations from *Requiem*, in both Russian and English, are from Anna Akhmatova, *Selected Works*, trans. Judith Hemschemeyer, (Brookline, MA: Zephyr Press, 2001).

\(^{14}\) Sisler, “*Requiem* by Anna Akhmatova,” 2.
lives have been lost, those who remain living, such as the speaker, retain the hope of a liberating and spiritually-fulfilling afterlife. This concept unifies all women who share her pain; she speaks not to the oppressors, but to, and ultimately for, the oppressed.

Akhmatova’s subtle reference to Christian elements symbolizes the marginalized role of religious institutions in the milieu of Stalinist Russia. She mentions religious icons in passing, such as the cross her son must bear, and in the second poem, in what appears to be a hushed whisper, she concludes with a plea, “say a prayer for me. (136)”\textsuperscript{15} Despite the lack of physical religious institutions in Stalinist Russia, Akhmatova demonstrates that her speaker still finds solace in recalling their imagery and rituals.

Akhmatova's references to her spirituality come in other forms as well. She refers to flowing rivers, such as the Don, and she repeatedly turns emotions, hearts, and people to stone. Akhmatova's choice of such imagery is explained by Ketchian, who states that “in Acmeist poetics, concrete objects...further the story when emotion prevents proper expression.”\textsuperscript{16} This method reflects the similar use of nature as an aspect of spirituality in \textit{Doctor Zhivago}, since the images of stone and flowing water create sensations of eternity. These references further embolden Akhmatova’s Christian theme—both in her hope for salvation from the seemingly endless, hellish life in Stalin's Russia, as well as her desire for heavenly peace—through the “inherent concept of death and resurrection” that transcends the sufferings of corporeal life.\textsuperscript{17}

The subtlety of \textit{Requiem} disappears in “Crucifixion”—the last poem in the cycle. Akhmatova sheds the voice of the Russian woman, and in its place, she places focus on Mary, Mother of Christ, during the Passion, the fatal suffering of Christ at the hands of the Roman

\textsuperscript{15} “помолитесь обо мне…”
\textsuperscript{16} Ketchian, “Women and Russian Literature,” 15.
government. Akhmatova writes the following:

Mary Magdalene beat her breast and sobbed,
The beloved disciple turned to stone,
But where the silent Mother stood, there
No one glanced and no one would have dared. (147)\(^{18}\)

This bold religious reference has several purposes. First, it is the most universal occasion of motherly suffering that many women in Russia, despite religious censorship, would have understood and been able to relate to. Also, it shows that the speaker, unable to bear more pain, has passed over a threshold, and lucidly experiences a moment of religious sanctuary.

Akhmatova's *Requiem* gives insight into the survival of faith both in religion and humanity.

Roberta Reeder suggests the following:

Portrayal of intense suffering does not signify... that Akhmatova has lost her faith and arrived at unrelieved despair. Inherent in the works of great Russian writers... is the Russian Orthodox belief that suffering is at all times an essential part of life.\(^{19}\)

Akhmatova acknowledges this inevitability of pain, and copes through her faith. She attempts to find solace in unity with all Russian women, and recognizes the potential for salvation. Her Christian theme humanizes religion, yet gives a sense of immortality to people in their perseverance of pain.

Ludmila Ulitskaya's novel *The Funeral Party* takes place well after the terrors of Stalin. In fact, the novel does not even take place in Russia. However, Ulitskaya's work retains a distinctly Russian nature, as its central cast of characters all emigrated from the Soviet Union, each for their own reason. Despite the apparent excesses they have gladly taken upon themselves, courtesy of American liberties, the characters of *The Funeral Party* also reanimate

\(^{18}\)“Магдалина билась и рыдала./Ученик любимый каменел./А туда, где молча Мать стояла,/ Так никто взглянуть и не посмел.”

their spirits, which they felt had been suppressed under Soviet power.

Alik, the bohemian artist at the center of Ulitskaya's novel, despite being physically consumed by disease, was not written to be a sympathetic character. In Bonnie Marshall's review of Ulitskaya's novel, Alik is described as not only “impractical,” but “flawed” as well. Alik does not consider paying his own bills, and when he acquires money, he immediately squanders it on luxuries, often at his friends’ expense. Ulitskaya intentionally establishes Alik as a character whose actions are not entirely agreeable. The immediate result of this characterization is that Alik seems more real and unpolished, similar to the average person. Moreover, it creates a spiritual mystique surrounding Alik. By portraying him in this way, Ulitskaya forces the reader to focus on the question of why, despite Alik's many flaws, the eclectic group of characters who surround him seem infatuated by him and unable to dislodge themselves from his charm.

Early in The Funeral Party, Ulitskaya begins to reveal certain qualities about Alik. She writes that Irina “find[s] [Alik and Maika] screeching at each other like two angry birds,” yet, through this brief contact, Alik “had effortlessly dispelled the strange autism that had afflicted [Maika] since she was five. (8)” This comedic scene serves several functions. First, its bizarre nature demonstrates that there is no medicine or other formal types of healing in what Alik does. Nor does he even try to heal the girl; rather, Maïka’s misanthropy, the origins of which Ulitskaya leaves unclear, is cured simply by being in the man’s presence. Subsequently the moment acquires a spiritual significance, since Alik’s actions are reminiscent of Christian miracles. Like Christ, Alik has the ability to heal seemingly incurable diseases with mere words. Through this

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miraculous power, Alik begins to compensate for his careless nature by being valuable to others.

Ulitskaya also uses the concept of emigration as a spiritual symbol. While her characters gather and watch the 1991 coup in Moscow that foreshadowed the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the author muses:

All the people sitting here who had been born in Russia differed in their gifts, their education and human qualities, but they were united by the single act of leaving it (90).

She emphasizes this concept of leaving one’s country, a notion that both Pasternak and Akhmatova refused to consider, in order to complement the spiritual nature of The Funeral Party. There is a metaphorical death of one’s previous self during emigration, followed by a rebirth, or resurrection, into a new life in a new land.

Additionally, Ulitskaya demonstrates Alik’s power through the lives of his fellow emigrants. This is similar to Akhmatova's Requiem, as both works address the trials of many characters instead of just one. Ulitskaya dedicates many chapters to provide the backgrounds of the people who tend to Alik in his last days. She reveals the breadth of his influence through the description of the crowd tending to him, which includes the following characters: Irina, an emotionally attached lover from his youth; Valentina, his current mistress; and Nina, his beloved wife. Because he helps so many people become spiritually reborn and reestablished in the United States, Alik acts as a guiding force or a sort of essence enigmatic essence, despite his careless ways.

Similar to the views of Pasternak in Doctor Zhivago, the moral code of The Funeral Party is fairly broad and general. Ulitskaya highlights this in Alik’s interactions with religious

22 “Все сидящие здесь люди, родившиеся в России, различные по дарованию, по образованию, просто по человеческим качествам, сходились в одной точке: все они так или иначе покинули Россию.”
officials. When Alik first meets the Russian Orthodox priest, Fr. Victor, he considers the situation to be “totally stupid and pointless,” yet, later in their conversation, Alik gains an “impression of [Fr. Victor] being brave” and “statelier” (46, 49–50). Similarly, Ulitskaya initially portrays the Orthodox rabbi, Reb Menashe, as coldly reserved, but later when the rabbi speaks to Alik, “his bright happy eyes” flash open, and the men gain an “understanding [of] each other better perhaps than in reality they should have. (50)” Ulitskaya groups Alik with these orthodox figures in order to show the human side of religion, as well as the inherent religion in human nature. There is a respectful dynamic between Alik and these men, since they recognize each other’s understanding of spirituality. Though Alik lacks the formal garments and theological education of the priest and the rabbi, he lives with a distinct appreciation for life, treating it with a sacramental reverence. He even brings these distinctly different religious men together, creating an otherwise unlikely union made possible only by Alik’s unique understanding of spirituality.

The Funeral Party ends with an optimistic message. During the fall of the Soviet government, Alik victoriously proclaims, “we’ve won,” although it is pointed out that “it was unclear who ‘we’ was” (101). Only one, outward aspect of Russia is lost in the fall of the Soviet government, while the spiritual essence of the nation and the life it breathes into its people, even its émigrés, continues. This is echoed by Alik’s death, since Nina is not incorrect in her binary belief that “[Alik] had gotten better, and that he was no longer alive (135).” Liberated from his feeble physical form, his spirit is immortalized within his many lovers, admirers, and friends. Ulitskaya’s characters provide a sense of closure to the era: in contrast to

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23 “…глупо и нелепо…как изменился отец Виктор, переодевшись, как постройнел и постарел.”
24 “…блеснул светлыми и радостными глазами…но понимали друг друга гораздо лучше, чем, в сущности, должны были бы.”
25 “мы выиграли…вот это как раз совершенно неизвестно, кто в действительности выиграл.”
26 “что он выздоровел и что его больше нет.”
the grave uncertainty experienced by Pasternak's and Akhmatova's, these Russians shed the anti-
spiritual weight of the Soviet Union and, in turn, gather and rejoice in their spiritual fulfillment.

*Doctor Zhivago* did not need *Requiem* to carry its message through the Stalinist Era, nor
*The Funeral Party* to provide closure to the Short Century, the era of Soviet power in Russia.
Likewise, Ulitskaya makes no direct reference to her predecessors. Each of these works,
therefore, stands firmly on its own. The works possess an anthropological value, however, as
there is always truth to be found in fiction. Through literary analysis, one can see that the
individual efforts of each work spill over, uniting all three works and providing a clear,
synergetic window into Russian spiritual culture.
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