

AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER TO THE TLS

That's How It Was

Sir, – Josephine von Zitzewitz (Commentary, September 9 [2011]) persuasively presents the main arguments of the recent revisionist Russian book about the celebrated meetings between Anna Akhmatova and Isaiah Berlin in Leningrad soon after the end of the Second World War. The discrepancy between Berlin's own account and what, according to the book's authors, must actually have happened is so marked that it cannot plausibly be attributed to a failure of memory on Berlin's part, especially given the intense significance of the encounter for him.

Dr von Zitzewitz suggests that Berlin may have deliberately downplayed the number of his meetings with the poet in order to protect her from reprisals by Stalin. This is almost certainly right, but it should be added that he would also have been shielding his own relatives in the USSR. As he said in a letter dictated to Violet Bonham Carter in 1967:

After my return from the Soviet Union in 1946, I did a certain amount, if not of protest, of critical comment on the appalling conditions of individual persons in the Soviet Union. I learnt to my horror shortly afterwards that among the direct victims of this were some of my Russian relations, who were in due course arrested, grilled, [and] one of them was exiled to Siberia, where he was not actually killed, but where his health was sufficiently undermined for him to die very shortly afterwards in squalid conditions. [...] Akhmatova, a poet of genius and a most distinguished and wonderful woman, with whom I made great friends, [...] hinted something about this when I spoke to her on the telephone in Moscow in 1956, and then, when she came and was given a degree at Oxford two years ago, told me the whole horrifying story about the direct effect of an

AN UNPUBLISHED LETTER TO THE TLS

innocent visit by me to her, in the course of which nothing was said about politics; she corroborated in grisly detail the fate of my relations, in which, owing to our warm friendship, she took particular interest [...]. She has written exceedingly moving poems about all this: beautiful as they are, they hardly compensate for the facts out of which they grew. She is now dead, but it cannot be referred to for fear of further reprisals. My responsibility for the disgrace of Akhmatova and her sufferings, and the unenviable fate of my two relations, still lies heavy upon my conscience, although I could not have known that a mere meeting with me in 1945 would have had that result. Although I tried to argue that it cannot have been a *mere* meeting with me that produced it, Akhmatova was quite clear that it *was*, and produced tragically conclusive evidence. My own personal silences followed.

The relation exiled to Siberia was Berlin's uncle Lev Borisovich Berlin, who was arrested on a trumped-up charge of spying and passing information to his nephew, and tortured to the point of attempting suicide. The nephew later learnt (as he recorded in 1995) that in 1955, after Lev had been freed, "he was walking along a street in Moscow and, on the other side of the pavement, saw the man who had interrogated and tortured him: whereupon he had a heart attack and died in the street there and then". Could this have given Boris Pasternak the idea for the manner of Yuri's death in *Doctor Zhivago*?

One of the most striking alleged discrepancies cannot be accounted for in the same way. The authors argue that Randolph Churchill could not have walked freely into the courtyard garden outside Akhmatova's apartment and shouted Berlin's name, as Berlin's account relates. The Soviet security guards at the entrance would have prevented him. But it seems to me quite out of character for Berlin simply to have invented this vivid and detailed episode (despite the claim by Irina Punina, who also lived there, that it cannot have occurred, since it would have led to the arrest of Akhmatova and other residents). Perhaps the guards escorted the visitor towards the apartment, and Churchill, in his impatience, before he entered the staircase, shouted "Isaiah!" under the windows to attract his attention?

HENRY HARDY
Wolfson College, Oxford.