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# Oblivion



SERGEI LEBEDEV

TRANSLATED BY ANTONINA W. BOVIS



## Synopsis

"Opening in stately fashion and unfolding ever faster with fierce, intensive elegance, this first novel discloses the weight of Soviet history and its consequences. ... Highly recommended for anyone serious about literature or history." *Library Journal* (Starred review) "Packs a wicked emotional punch through fierce poetic imagery ... Lebedev takes his place beside Solzhenitsyn and other great writers who have refused to abide by silence ... Courageous and devastating." *Kirkus Reviews* (Starred review) "An important book about where Russia is today, with poetic descriptions and unforgettable images evoking that nation's often elusive attempts to understand its dark past. I stand in awe of both the author and translator." *Jack F. Matlock, Jr*, former US Ambassador to the Soviet Union "The subject matter of *Oblivion* is the eerie frozen landscape scattered with the human detritus of an inhuman bygone era. What brings it back from oblivion is the author's exceptional power of language. A haunting read." *Michael Zantovsky*, former press secretary to Czech President Vaclav Havel, author of *Havel: A Life* and former Czech Ambassador to the United States, Israel and Britain *Beautifully written, haunting and unputdownable. A masterpiece novel which relates the horrors of Russia's unburied Soviet past through the eyes of a man revisiting and filling in the gaps in his half-understood childhood.* • *Edward Lucas*, senior editor, *The Economist* and author of *The New Cold War: Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West* "Sergei Lebedev's debut novel is a haunting tale about the loss of national memory and its moral consequences for the individual. The brilliant translation by Antonina W. Bouis captures the evocative beauty of the poetic first-person narration and renders it into memorable English." *Solomon Volkov*, author of *Shostakovich and Stalin*, *St. Petersburg: A Cultural History*, and *The Magical Chorus: A History of Russian Culture from Tolstoy to Solzhenitsyn* "An extraordinary book that takes readers across Russia's desolate northern landscape and turns up secrets about the terrible legacy of the Soviet gulags, described through evocative, often poetic portraits of people and places." *Celestine Bohlen*, International *New York Times* columnist and former Moscow correspondent for *The New York Times* "A monomaniacal meditation on memory and forgetting, presence and emptiness ... Lebedev's magnificent novel has the potency to become a mirror and wake-up call to a Russia that is blind to history." *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* "Sergei Lebedev opens up new territory in literature. Lebedev's prose lives from the precise images and the author's colossal gift of observation." *Der Spiegel* "The beauty of the language is almost impossible to bear." *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* In one of the first twenty-first century Russian novels to probe the legacy of the Soviet prison camp system, a young man travels to the vast wastelands of the Far North to uncover the truth about a shadowy neighbor who saved his life, and whom he knows only as Grandfather II. What he finds,

among the forgotten mines and decrepit barracks of former gulags, is a world relegated to oblivion, where it is easier to ignore both the victims and the executioners than to come to terms with a terrible past. This disturbing tale evokes the great and ruined beauty of a land where man and machine worked in tandem with nature to destroy millions of lives during the Soviet century. Emerging from today's Russia, where the ills of the past are being forcefully erased from public memory, this masterful novel represents an epic literary attempt to rescue history from the brink of oblivion. Sergei Lebedev was born in Moscow in 1981 and worke

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## **Customer Reviews**

My view of this book differs from those who have previously posted. I love Chekhov, have read some Tolstoy and Turgenev, but I'm not an expert or maybe even a fan of Russian literature. My idea of a good time is Lydia Davis's translation of Proust, the first chapters of Joyce's Ulysses, and Virginia Woolf. So read this review with my prejudices in mind. This book is first and foremost an original work of art; I've read nothing like it before. But that doesn't mean I like it. I found the first 100 pages of this novel difficult to get through, alternating between thinking Lebedev was a genius or merely tedious. These pages were dense with language, sometimes abstract, often abstruse. I

couldn't tell if the abstruseness was a result of the Russian language, the translation, or a personal vision drenched in the northern landscape. The story gradually sinks into its own language, falls in love with it and drowns in it, and the author's natural bent for surrealism or dream imagery takes over. The last fifty pages were for me cold and repellent. To be fair, that's what the author wanted to produce.BELOW IS A PARODY OF MR. LEBEDEV'S STYLE--which some readers will object to. It is easy, they will say, to parody a writer than to create an original work of art. That's absolutely right.As I came closer to the pump house I saw that its contours were not fixed by its walls but by some kind of air, a compressed thickening of oxygen, a thousand attenuated sighs or ejaculations of surprise from those who were no longer thereÃ¢Â"perhaps never had been thereÃ¢Â"but who had left their essence behind in tracings that refined the boredom of an institution which had ceased to function and was only now allowing the dead to pursue their own ends, quietly, without guilt or joy, speaking of the water that in winter, in the deep aloneness of that place, flooded a dimly lit office where both the old stamps and the stamped documents had been archived as if in the dark gullet of the Stalinist bureaucracy, looked after by one old man whom I knew from the dacha, an apple grower who left the apples on the trees so that in autumn the thudding fruit fell onto the earth like iron, and our bones our very eyes were sluiced by the lost and forgotten past which rose like smoke from the glue factory.

Astonishing insight the lived experience of 20th-century Russia. Deeply moving work.

Harrowing. Unforgettable.

Beautiful prose. The crush of an authoritarian state on its people making them inhuman in almost all, but not all ways.

In One Hundred Years of Solitude Gabriel MÃ¡rquez tells how in Macondo three thousand workers are machine-gunned at the behest of a ruthless banana company. Their corpses are thrown into the sea and relatives are told that there havenÃ¢Â™t been any dead bodies: Ã¢ÂœYou must have been dreamingÃ¢Â| Nothing has happened in Macondo, nothing has ever happenedÃ¢Â|This is a happy town.Ã¢Â• Residents accept the official account and dismiss the testimony of the only survivor. But subsequently the town sinks into ruin. Such is the story of Macondo, and of all world dictatorships, which leave a destructive, lasting, and demoralizing legacy.The brutal Stalinist regime left Russia depopulated and suffering from collective loss of memory. Millions were destroyed in the

Gulag and during the Terror Famine. But in Putin's Russia, the history of Communist terror has been replaced with the myth of the country's great past. There is no national monument to the numerous victims; instead, there are calls to restore monuments and museums honoring Stalin. Recently, in her Nobel lecture Svetlana Alexievich called Russia "a country without memory, the space of total amnesia." The loss of Russia's national memory is the main theme in Sergei Lebedev's insightful debut novel, *Oblivion*. It belongs to a new generation literature examining the impact of Stalinism on Russia today. The novel is masterfully translated by Antonina W. Bouis, whose list comprises 80 titles—writings by famous Soviet and post-Soviet authors as diverse as Mikhail Bulgakov and the Nobel Prize Laureates Alexievich and Andrei Sakharov. Lebedev's compressed metaphorical novel is the prose of a poet, and Bouis renders his original style effortlessly and artfully. Lebedev's writing benefited from his training as a geologist: he can read the story in a rock or the tundra permafrost. As a poet, he tells it through imagery, creating sensual portraits of objects: "It was through a break in the fog that I saw the barracks in a mountain pass. The barracks stood like plywood cargo crates in which people were stacked... The outlines felt like a long scream." Having traveled widely in Siberia and Russia's north, Lebedev had come across the many decaying barracks of the Gulag Archipelago. Soviet labor camps were constructed in desolate places with no witnesses, at the limit of the inhabited world, as Lebedev aptly puts it. Russia's vastness helped conceal the existence of prison camps where conditions were similar to the Mauthausen. Scientists, philosophers, writers, dispossessed peasants, and international communists shared a single and horrible fate. Branded as "enemies of the people," they were starved and worked to death in uranium and gold mines or constructing railroads and canals. Lebedev creates a collective portrait of the generation, which vanished without a trace, of people whose lives were "mashed" by the will of the state. His novel traces their experiences through visions and dreams—"of people becoming prisoners instantaneously; of freight cars with barred windows; of a train engineer unaware he is transporting his own brother to the Gulag. Robbed of names, families, and freedom, multitudes were banished to places where everything from landscape to speech was meant to dehumanize. Their destruction was complete: branded as "enemies of the people," they were crossed out of contemporary records and died in anonymity, so that their deaths took place in geography, not in history." The Soviet State viewed its people as dispensable and their lives as subordinate to production targets. But the gigantic construction projects, devised by the Party and built by slave labor, such as the White Sea canal and railways constructed beyond the Polar Circle,

proved useless. Lebedev alludes to this through the story of an abandoned railroad he saw in the mountains near the Arctic Ocean. He makes the reader feel the anguish of prisoners who cleared the rock with bare hands, only to realize futility of their labor. The railway line was left unfinished: the ends of rusty rails hung over the emptiness. The mountain, where prisoners toiled, opens a view to the lake with striking contours: a mean trick of nature, a joke that had waited several million years: the lake looked like Lenin's profile, which was imprinted on us by medals, badges, stamps, statues, paintings, and drawings in books. Soviet history was a series of falsifications, its ideals were stillborn, and the end of the Soviet era spelled out their demise. Soviet textbooks and insignia with Lenin's profile were discarded; paper money, too toxic to be burned, was dumped in plastic bags in a northern mine. But Stalinism did not end there: the old guard resisted the change. Oblivion is a first person account, a meditation on the memory of millions, and on personal memory. The narrator recalls his family's neighbor at their dacha, whom he had met in childhood and whom he named Grandfather II. The old man is hiding his past, so his story unwinds slowly, until it becomes apparent that Grandfather II was a warden in a Gulag camp where prisoners dug radioactive ore; he had administered death through labor. For this service the state rewarded him with a luxury apartment. Grandfather II is blind, and his secretiveness and blindness are suggestive of Russia's suppression of facts about the past. Having outlasted his epoch, dead inside, the old man wants to continue living through the boy. The episode of Grandfather II saving the boy's life by donating his scrawny blood is symbolic. The transfusion takes place in 1991, when the Soviet Union collapsed and the new era dawned. Grandfather II dies, and the boy, saved by his blood, grows like a graft on old wood. This is a fitting image for an embryonic Russian democracy, grafted on Stalinist stock. The Stalinist legacy is pervasive in contemporary Russia: There were barriers everywhere, warning signs, 'no entry' symbols, guard booths. Man was not master in these lands, and the guard booths were the architectural descendants of prison camp guardhouses; this land was infected with a fungus, the fungus of the watchman, and all of this, the fences, wire, barricades, was like a single never-ending shout: 'Stop or I'll shoot!' The northern town, where Grandfather II had lived supervising prisoners in a nearby uranium mine, was built by slave labor. Every brick tells the story of working under duress. Love of labor has been destroyed here forever, which is why the whole town drank, its residents bent on self-destruction. The town's self-isolation is a part of the Soviet legacy and of Russia's present. The town cut off its own path to the outside, destroyed the window to the big world. Russia's failure to

deal with its Stalinist legacy, to establish the truth by remembering the millions who died, has invited the past to return. Lebedev's imaginative novel is thoroughly pessimistic, as it's meant to be: "This text is a memorial, a wailing wall, for the dead and the mourners have no other place to meet, except by the wall of words..." An insightful and soulful tale about Russia's historical amnesia, Oblivion speaks of the need for us to remember and to renounce evil regimes with their man-made calamities.

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