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## BOOKS

Five Best: A Personal Choice

### Sheila Fitzpatrick on Soviet women

*Ms. Fitzpatrick is the author, most recently of: "On Stalin's Team: The Years of Living Dangerously in Soviet Politics."*

#### 1 Kremlin Wives by Larissa Vasilieva (1994)

Wives at the top of the Soviet elite were kept well out of sight in Stalin's time, but some of them lived to tell the tale when interviewed in the 1990s by Russian insider Ms. Vasilieva, who also had access to KGB files on her subjects. High-placed though they were, their lives were far from serene. Kind and beautiful Nina Gegechkori, a research scientist, was the wife of Stalin's top security man, Lavrenty Beria, who was accused of treason and shot by his colleagues eight months after Stalin's death; she stood by him throughout his ordeal. Stalin's own wife, Nadya Alliluyeva, killed herself in the early 1930s. Marshal Budyonny's opera-singer wife Olga disappeared into the Gulag in the late 1930s; when she re-emerged, he was married to someone else. Polina Zhemchuzhina, founder of the Soviet cosmetics industry and wife of Stalin's No.2, Vyacheslav Molotov, was arrested for Zionism in 1948 after Stalin have forced the couple to divorce. "Granny could endure anything," her granddaughter remembered. "She went off to jail in a squirrel fur coat and returned in the same coat, now in tatters." Reunited in 1953, the Molotovs were famous for their mutual devotion and unreconstructed Stalinism.

#### 2 The Exile by John Carswell (1983)

Married to Maxim Litvinov, Stalin's longtime foreign minister, Ivy Litvinov (née Low) was an eccentric English woman whose indiscretions and caustic comments on her husband's colleagues (and their wives) were legend. Fittingly, her biographer was an Englishman whose mother was a close friend of Ivy's. From his own memories and Ivy's frank letters to his mother, Carswell paints a fascinating portrait of a deeply nonpolitical woman, loyal to her husband when he was in political danger but otherwise "unfaithful almost on principle" – "a maddening woman" who was "brave as a lion." The London literary-bohemian milieu remained Ivy's spiritual home, despite

five decades in Russia starting shortly after the Revolution. When I met her in Moscow in the late 1960s, she served kasha from the pan like a babushka, but all she wanted to talk about were the Georgian poets and George Eliot. “Englishwoman, go home,” were Maxim’s dying words in 1951, but she stayed in Moscow long enough to see a grandson, Pavel Litvinov, become a prominent dissident. She died in 1977 in the English seaside town of Hove.

### 3 The Diary of a Soviet Schoolgirl by Nina Lugovskaya (2003)

This is one of the most vivid of the Soviet diaries rediscovered and published in Russia after the collapse of Communism. Unhappy at school, depressed as an adolescent, Nina, born in 1918, was the daughter of an old non-Bolshevik revolutionary who was in and out of political trouble and prison from the time she was 11. Politics was only intermittently on her mind, taking second place to worries about being ugly (she had crossed eyes and “messy hair”); but when her father was refused a Moscow residence permit when she was 14, she had furious fantasies about killing Stalin and wrote, “To hell with the new society” in her diary. She was just starting to outgrow her teenage angst and enjoy life when the Great Purges hit. The security police did a house search and found her diary, underlining the incriminating bits, and she and her mother and sisters were packed off to the Gulag for five years.

### 4 Sofia Petrovna by Lydia Chukovskaya (1965)

The great purges have been described in dozens of accounts, but this novella is the most heartbreaking I know. The author, daughter of the famous children’s writer Kornei Chudovsky and a lifelong friend of the poet Anna Akhmatova, lost her young physicist husband to the Purges in 1938. But when she wrote this novella a year later she didn’t write about herself but about a middle-aged office worker, conventional, unimaginative and happy in her job, whose much loved only son, Kolya, is a good student and enthusiastic young Communist – until he is arrested as “an enemy of the people.” It must be a mistake, Sofia Petrovna thinks, but is bewildered to find that all the sad bedraggled women queuing up for news of their sons and husbands have the same belief. Don’t look for a happy ending; the twist at the end is even more wrenching than what has gone before.

### 5 A Revolution of Their Own Edited by Barbara Alpern Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck (1997)

An American historian and a Russian feminist collaborated to produce this remarkable book of interviews with ordinary Russian women shortly after the collapse of the U.S.S.R. The timing was perfect, for their subjects were far enough away from their Soviet lives to reflect on them but not yet Westernized enough to tell us their stories quite as we expect to hear them. All had hard lives, but complaining is rare, and many remain somewhat attached to the old Soviet ways. “It’s very hard for me as an old person, you know, to refashion myself...It’s hard to give up your convictions, your former way of thinking,” one says. Anna Dubova was both a victim and a

beneficiary of Soviet policies, being first chased out of her village as the daughter of an alleged kulak (prosperous peasant) and then trained successively as a cake decorator and a chauffeur in the town. If not for the Revolution, she says, she would have remained a peasant: “I feel as if I’ve lived someone else’s life.”

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