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"Not by Thought nor by Action Will I Lie": The Emergence of the Public Voice in the Poetry of Olga Berrgolts

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"NOT BY THOUGHT NOR BY ACTION WILL I LIE": THE EMERGENCE OF THE PUBLIC VOICE IN THE POETRY OF OLGA BERRGOLTTTS

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Using Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of public and private identity, this study analyzes the poetry of Olga Berrgolts and traces the development of her poetic voice from private to public during World War II.

Olga Berrgolts was among the first women in the early decades of Soviet Literature to achieve fame. She started her career in journalism, working as a travelling correspondent in Kazakhstan and then as a writer/editor in her home city of Leningrad during the 1930s. She was extremely active in the communist youth group Komsomol, and, like many others of her generation, followed closely and with great enthusiasm the political developments of the Soviet Union. Yet the Soviet dogma which dictated the social and cultural life of the nation was not the focus of Berrgolts' poetry. Her verses were very lyrical and centered on personal thought and experience. This type of artistic expression was considered superfluous to a society which was not concerned with the individual, but rather with the large-scale identity of a nation and its development. Thus, it was not in that pre-war, public-oriented sphere that Berrgolts achieved her notoriety.

It was not until the beginning of World War II and the 900-day blockade of Leningrad that Berrgolts' individuality coincided with the experiences of millions and her private voice became public. As a native of Leningrad, Berrgolts shared in the suffering and losses of others and was able to express these very intense, very private emotions in her verse. However, she was no longer expressing her experience alone, but the experience of many. This "life entering" (вживание), or sympathy of mutual experience, brought Berrgolts' poetry and the needs of a nation together on one level. For the first time in her life, Berrgolts' private identity merged with the public identity and her voice was adopted as the voice of a nation.