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Soviet Ideology of Waiting: The Poetics of Time and Temporality in Olga Grushin's *The Line* (2010)

Sovyetlerin Bekleme İdeolojisi: Olga Gruşina'nın *Sıra* (2010) Romanında Zaman ve Zamanlılık Poetiği

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ABSTRACT
The article explores the treatment of temporality in Olga Grushin's novel *The Line*, situating her work within the broader context of a new wave of Russian American fiction. In the novel, Grushin uses the act of waiting in line, a usual practice in Soviet life, and transforms it into a metaphor for suspended time, deception of hope, and disillusionment. The line becomes not only a spatial construction but an existential temporality in which characters remain trapped, waiting for change that never happens. Drawing on themes of memory, nostalgia, and historical repetition, the novel presents waiting as a ritualized human condition that denies agency and authority. Writing from a transnational position, Grushin erases the boundaries between Soviet and post-Soviet temporality. In her critique of the psychological toll of authoritarian regimes, the author depicts a continuity of inaction that spans across political eras.

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Introduction

At the beginning of 1990 I had a chance to visit the first McDonald's restaurant soon after its launch in the Soviet Union on Pushkin Square in the center of Moscow. Several months after it opened on January 31, 1990, crowds of people were waiting in the streets surrounding what was more than a fast-food chain but a testament to a new ideological direction. The irony of its launch is still astonishing: a restaurant built on the premise of efficiency and speed was the site of lines lasting for hours. In the first day alone, more than 30,000 people queued for over six hours in a line that was several kilometers long (Clines 1990, p. A13). However, this waiting was not regarded as wasted time. Instead, it was a performative gesture, a community display of interest, desire to change and accept western (and specifically American) cultural currents that found their way into the Soviet Union. Although the price for a burger was quite high for an average Soviet citizen, whose pay had already been hit by the Perestroika-driven financial turmoil, its symbolic value outweighed the nominal one. In hindsight, the queue in front of the first McDonald's in USSR was not merely a literal act of waiting but a sign of expectation of change, serving as a representation of hope that the Soviet Union was on the verge of transition.

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Although lines have been part of various cultures throughout history, they acquired a unique meaning in the Soviet Union. Waiting in line was an everyday reality for Soviet people and became an 'integral part' of their consciousness and collective experience. The lines in the Soviet era were not only a routine activity in daily life but became the symbol of tensions within the society, which emphasized the challenges faced by the system. Because the phenomenon of the line was a stable and well-known aspect of the Soviet experience, it has inspired substantial number of texts of various genres and disciplines, including essays, sociological and psychological studies, newspaper and personal accounts, fiction stories, graphic art, documentaries and philosophical reflections. Academic and scholarly interest in the Soviet line as a sociocultural and political phenomenon has developed over several decades, with contributions emerging both within the Soviet Union and in Western academia. In the Soviet Union, discussions of lines were often limited to literary or anecdotal forms due to censorship (Bajburin 2014, p. 78). More systematic studies began to appear after the late 1980s, especially following the dissolution of the USSR. Early post-Soviet works, such as Ilia Zemtsov's *Encyclopedia of Soviet Life* (1991) published in the United States, emphasized the scale and social cost of queuing, while Russian scholars like Vladimir Nikolaev and Lyudmila Yakusheva explored the queue as a lived environment and cultural model. Other post-Soviet studies analyzed lines through the lenses of folklore, behavioral patterns, and informal communication networks.

In Western scholarship, the Soviet line has been examined through economic, sociological, and cultural perspectives since the 1960s. Analyses by Beliaev et al. (1962) and economic studies by Stahl and Alexeev (1985) focused on the structural role of queues. More recent cultural studies, namely Andrew Chapman's *Queuetopia* (2013) and Jillian Porter's *Standing in Line* (2017), have investigated the line as a symbolic and social space, linking it to ritual, authority, and censorship. The theme has also been extended into theoretical discussions of temporality and embodiment, as in Katherine Verdery's work on the "etatization of time" and Anna Fishzon's interpretation of queues as spaces of subversive desire. These contributions, together with other studies of the concept, help explain importance and meaningfulness of a line in terms of practical and metaphorical structures of Soviet and post-Soviet life.

The line in its multiple forms has become not only a subject of critical studies but also a recurring metaphor of the Soviet regime in artistic works. The line proved to be a frequent literary motif of Soviet art as a reference to the social, psychological, and existential conditions of the time. In *Requiem*, a 1935-1961 cycle of poems by Anna Akhmatova, the image of women waiting outside prisons for any information about their incarcerated loved ones serves as a symbol of collective grief and paralyzing terror imposed by the state. Natalya Baranskaya's novella *A Week Like Any Other* (1969) incorporates scenes of waiting, depicting the line as a backdrop to the burden of Soviet routine. By the 1970s and 1980s, Soviet writers like Sergei Dovlatov, Vasily Aksenov, Mikhail Zhvanetsky, and Vladimir Makanin explored lines as spaces of absurdity and social tension. Igor Shteymler contributed to portrayal of "the man from the queue" with his criticism of bureaucracy and collectivism showing *homo soveticus* as a product of systemic inertia and a model of survival. Another notable example is Alla Sokolova's one-act play *Green Bananas* (early 1980s), which stages the line as both a physical and emotional arena where personal desire and social conformity collide. Vladimir Sorokin's *The Queue* is regarded as the most prominent literary exploration of the phenomenon of Soviet line. Written in 1983 but banned in the USSR, the novel was first published in Paris in 1985 and translated into English in 1988. The narrative is entirely composed of a dialogue among anonymous people waiting in line, which makes the text a radical experiment in literary form. The author treats the queue as a "many-headed monster," embodying "Leviathan that wound entire cities in its motley coils." As Sorokin writes in his later essay *Farewell to the Queue*, with socialism's collapse, this collective ritual—this "living, linguistic creature"—has vanished into history (Sorokin 2008).

The motif of the queue appeared not only in Soviet cultural production but also in other national contexts, acting as a metaphor for social and existential anxieties. Israel Horovitz's Off-Off-Broadway play *The Line* (1967), an absurdist drama about five people waiting in line for some unknown purpose, demonstrates that this image was not restricted to Soviet context. As a metaphor of blind pursuit of irrational goals, the waiting in line becomes an emblem of competition and futility of human effort. However, the queue as a symbol of systemic paralysis remains most closely associated with representations of the Soviet past, particularly in contemporary works that revisit and reinterpret its history. This sustained interest reflects not only the lasting cultural memory of Soviet life, but also a broader effort to confront the psychological and temporal legacies left by authoritarian rule. Among the recent contributions to this body of work is Olga Grushin's novel *The Line*. It offers a particularly interesting subject for analysis due to its unique transnational positioning. Although the author was born and raised in the Soviet Union, she is often categorized as an American writer. *The Line* was originally written and published in English in the United States, where it received critical acclaim in the Anglophone literary world; the Russian translation appeared only three years later. The author's dual identity between cultural insider and outsider shapes the novel's distinctive narrative perspective on Soviet history. It allows *The Line* to function both as a portrayal of Soviet life and as a universal meditation on human hope and endurance. In this way, the novel demonstrates how post-Soviet themes can be analyzed within the framework of global literature, challenging national boundaries and reshaping collective memory.

Olga Grushin is part of a cohort of contemporary transnational writers, whose work transcends national and linguistic borders. Born in Moscow in 1971, she spent her early childhood in Prague before moving back to Moscow in 1981. In 1989, Grushin received a scholarship to Emory University in Atlanta, becoming the first Soviet citizen to enroll full-time in a four-year undergraduate program in the United States. She graduated *summa cum laude* in 1993 and in 2002 became an American citizen while still keeping her Russian citizenship. Over the years, Grushin's career has taken many unexpected turns, from working as a cocktail waitress in a jazz bar, to interpreting for U.S. President Jimmy Carter, to serving as an editor at Harvard's Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection. To date, she has published four novels: *The Dream Life of Sukhanov* (2006), *The Line* (2010), *Forty Rooms* (2016), and *The Charmed Wife* (2021), and her essays, stories, and criticism have appeared in *The New York Times, Granta, Vogue, The Wall Street Journal*, and *Partisan Review*. It is tempting to assess Grushin's journey as a well-known story of immigrant hardship and assimilation; yet, such adaptability and intellectual fluidity seem to be characteristic for the new generation of Russian American transnational authors who do not want to limit their experience to ordeals of immigration. Alongside writers like Gary Shteyngart, David Bezmozgis, Lara Vapnyar, Michael Idov, Anya Ulinich, Sana Krasikov, and Irina Reyn, Grushin shares Soviet and post-Soviet background and has gained critical recognition at the turn of the twenty-first century, shaping a transnational literary tradition in contemporary American literature. Though writing in English and identifying as American, these authors maintain a deep engagement with their Russian heritage. As Furman (2011) and Wanner (2008) argue, their fiction exemplifies this duality: it moves beyond traditional immigrant narratives by reinterpreting concepts of national identity, cultural belonging, and historical memory. Similarly, Grushin's fiction draws on her authentic understanding of Soviet life as the author addresses universal themes of nostalgia, belonging, life fulfillment, and human connection. This perspective not only allows her to resonate with American audiences but also places her within this distinct group of writers with complex cultural affinities.

Grushin's 2010 novel published as *The Line* in the United States and *The Concert Ticket* in the United Kingdom, explores themes of desire, endurance, and collective illusion through the metaphor of a queue. The story begins with the sudden appearance of a mysterious kiosk in a

shadowy alley, surrounded by "gloomy, drooping buildings" (Grushin 2010, p. 2) of an unnamed city on a gray November day. Without knowing what is being offered, people begin lining up, each secretly hoping it will be the object of their deepest longing: "imported scarves," "toothpaste," "women's boots, genuine leather" (p. 3), "children's coats," "layered cakes with coconut shavings on top" (p. 11), "imported crystal or ingenious toys or exclusive book subscriptions, or tickets for a new State lottery in which one could win an automobile or a vacation to the sea" (p. 20). The line quickly becomes more than a mere physical setting, emerging as a microcosm of society, a performative space of collective experience that functions as a symbolic Greek chorus. Eventually, a rumor circulates that the kiosk will sell tickets to a concert by the legendary exiled composer Igor Selinsky. However, no one knows when—or if, for that matter—the tickets will appear, since the composer remains officially banned in the country. The kiosk stays closed until the end of the novel, with its handwritten signs offering a series of vague excuses, ranging from "Out with flu. Will reopen in January" (p. 21) to "Closed for accounting. Back on Monday" (p. 41). Nevertheless, the queue endures for an entire year, as the people are convinced that their patience will eventually be rewarded. The novel deliberately never reveals whether the tickets are sold or the concert ever takes place, emphasizing that the real focus is not the outcome but the act of waiting itself.

Although *The Line* is set in a fictional country, the story clearly refers to specific periods of Soviet history. The events take place thirty-seven years following "the Change," which is an explicit reference to the October Revolution of 1917. Yet, as Grushin explains in her historical note, the plot is based on three different epochs in the Soviet history, which creates a complex and symbolic setting. The Stalin era of 1930s constitutes the first layer of the novel's temporal setting. Defined by an atmosphere of fear, constant surveillance, and unexplained disappearances, it reveals the authoritarian control and enforced silence of the regime. The second layer reflects the Khrushchev Thaw of the late 1950s and early 1960s adding to the feeling of hope, optimism, and renewal. This period that followed Stalin's death, brought a promise of progress when political prisoners were freed, censorship was relaxed, and limited cultural exchange with the West was reestablished. Finally, the Brezhnev-era stagnation of the 1970s shapes the novel's tone of stagnation, showing a time of slow economic growth, bureaucratic problems, and a loss of interest in the ideology. Grushin intertwines these three periods to create a narrative world where repression, hope, and inertness coexist. At the same time, the author intentionally uses the term "The Change," referring both to the October Revolution of 1917 and to the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. If interpreted as the latter, the novel's events would be set in 2028, which puts the story in the near future, making it a dystopian story that comments on current political conditions. So, *The Line* is neither purely retrospective, nor is it set entirely in the present. Instead, it examines common issues of state power, collective memory, and the uncertainty of waiting. Grushin makes the boundary between historical times unclear and mixes Soviet and post-Soviet realities creating an allegory of time that looks at how individuals survive, endure, and continue to dream under unchangeable political constraints.

While the overall timeline and setting of *The Line* are allegorical, Grushin often draws on real historical events. As she notes in the afterword, the concert at the heart of the novel is based on a real event from 1962, when the renowned composer Igor Stravinsky who had left Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution and lived in exile for almost 50 years, came back to conduct a concert in Leningrad's Great Hall of the Philharmonia. The demand to see him was so intense that a queue for tickets began forming a year in advance eventually developing into an informal but highly organized system, with strangers collaborating and taking turns to hold places in line. Stravinsky gained fame through his work with the "Ballets Russes," an acclaimed ballet company in Paris of the early 1900s. Unknown at the time, the composer wrote music for some of their most celebrated performances, including *The Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911), and *The Rite of Spring* (1913).

Grushin's novel shows this artistic collaboration through the memories of one of the characters, creating another real-world link within the narrative (pp. 321-322).

Grushin divides *The Line* into distinct sections, with each part focusing on the perspective of one of the four main protagonists. By shifting viewpoints, the author uses multiperspectivity to explore their inner lives, depicting each character's thoughts and emotions while keeping a consistent third-person narrative distance. Anna, a middle-aged literature teacher, is the first to be introduced. An unfulfilled wife, mother, and daughter, she is struggling to find happiness both at home and in her profession, but instead of facing the emptiness of her life, she holds on to the idea of a perfect family. When Anna first sees the line forming outside the kiosk, she thinks it is "silly" and not worth her effort, yet over time the temptation of the unknown slowly pulls her in. Yet, as the novel develops, Anna's impulse toward self-sacrifice takes over and she begins to imagine offering the treasured ticket to her mother or husband, thinking that such a gesture might bring the family back together. The thought of claiming the ticket for herself never occurs to her; instead, she finds emotional fulfillment in imagining the act of giving it away, taking pleasure not in the event itself, but in the imagined moment of sacrifice.

Anna's husband, Sergei, is another deeply disillusioned character. Once a promising violinist ("My parents were paying for the best musical education" (p. 152), he recalls with regret), his hopes were interrupted by "The Change" that brought a period of reforms to cultural institutions and "enforced open admissions" aimed at "Bringing Art to the Masses." As a result, Sergei was required to abandon the violin and retrain as a tuba player, an instrument considered sufficiently revolutionary (p. 152), a compromise he has never come to terms with. Now employed in a state orchestra, he performs "turgid, State-sanctioned drivel that drowns his lungs" (p. 28) and patriotic marches at parades he detests. His career is a source of constant resentment, a reminder of both personal and systemic failure. Sergei learns about the line in an episode that resembles a fable-like twist. During a highly controlled New Year's Eve ball where his orchestra performs for foreign diplomats, a masked stranger discreetly drops a matchbox at Sergei's feet with a single name written on its cover: "Igor Selinsky." Sergei realizes that the queue his wife is spending more and more time in is for tickets to the return concert by the banned composer. For Sergei, the ticket becomes a symbolic redemption of the artistic life he was denied: "He saw in Selinsky's music his chance to start living at last, to become something more than he was, to try summoning into existence the notes he could almost imagine flowing from the tips of his fingers" (p. 65). Securing a ticket turns into a personal mission. Sergei dreams of meeting Selinsky, telling him how much his work inspired him, and reconnecting with the kind of music that once gave his life a purpose. In a moment of honesty, he confesses that "this concert changes everything… maybe… the melodies I once dreamed of composing will come to me at last—and notes will align on my staffs like scores of migrant birds returned home" (p. 58). Alongside Anna, Sergei takes turns standing in line, hoping to recover a lost artistic identity. For Sergei, the ticket means more than professional and creative satisfaction; it represents a desire to reclaim his past self-corrupted by the regime's pressures.

Eventually, Anna and Sergei engage the help of their son, Alexander, to take shifts in the line and hold their place whenever work or daily demands keep them away. Restless and disillusioned, the boy is a secretive teenager filled with contempt for his family as well as for the decaying city—a place, in his words, "where time is communal and worthless" (p. 287), "the enormous, dusty aquarium in which, he knew, lethargic, bleary-eyed fish were pushing through the faintly illuminated water as through thick jelly" (p. 41). Although in his final year of high school and expected to prepare for university, he gradually turns his back on that path, skipping classes and falling in with a group of petty criminals, drunks, and black-market smugglers. Alexander has no interest in the concert or the banned composer, but he understands the ticket's street value. To

him, it represents not emotional or cultural salvation but a practical escape—a chance to sell it for enough money to buy a train ticket out of the city. In his eyes, the ticket is a symbol of personal freedom, the only way to break free from what he calls a "hateful city … where age erases identical, meaningless lives before they are even written" (pp. 288-289).

Finally, the fourth central character in *The Line* is Anna's mother, Maya—a figure of profound psychological and existential detachment. Though physically capable of speech, Maya remains silent throughout most of the novel, "maintaining an aloof, maddening silence for so many years" (p. 18), gliding through the household like a ghost, "straight and small and royal, without a word, without a noise" (p. 25). She appears only occasionally, always wearing precious diamond earrings, emerging "between the disorder of pots and pans, … [pouring] tea into a porcelain cup with a thin gilded edge, reserved for her use alone" (p. 25) before quietly retreating back to her room. Her silence began sometime after "The Change," although the reader never learns the exact reason. It suggests a deep break from reality, as if her internal world has completely withdrawn from the external one. Notably, Maya is the only character granted a first-person voice in the narrative, though these passages are so subtly embedded in the text that other characters mistake her monologues for a distant radio broadcast overheard through the apartment's thin walls. In this series of nightly soliloquies, she recalls her youth as a celebrated ballerina in an unnamed European "dazzling city of light at the heart of the cultured world" (p. 129)—a time and place that continues to haunt her. When Maya breaks her silence to say she wants to go to the concert, her family is taken by surprise. It soon becomes clear that her wish comes from a short romance with the composer when she was a ballerina abroad. For Maya, the concert ticket is more than a chance to reconnect with the world. Feeling detached from the present, she imagines meeting her former lover as a means to regain a lost sense of beauty and self-worth. In this way, the ticket becomes her own "Fountain of Youth," a symbol of renewal and personal recovery.

As the story develops, the ticket develops into an object of obsession for each of the characters. It is no longer seen as just a concert pass, but as a potentially life-changing artifact. Each protagonist projects onto it their own hopes, giving it meaning far beyond its material value. In Jacques Lacan's theory, *the objet petit a*—the unattainable object of desire—offers explanation for this conception: it is not the item itself that is craved, but the lack it represents, the elusive promise of fulfillment (Lacan & Miller 2004, p. 180). Slavoj Žižek expands on this idea, describing *objet petit a* as "a cause which in itself doesn't exist, i.e., which is present only in a series of its effects, but always in a distorted, displaced way. If the real is impossible, it is precisely this impossibility to be grasped through its effects" (Žižek 1988, p. 104). The concert ticket functions in much the same way. It is not a mere piece of paper, but a symbolic Holy Grail, an emblem of ultimate, sacred, and unattainable desire. Like the Grail, it creates obsession, reveals character, and tests the morality of those who pursue it. Each family member is aware that only one of them may eventually possess the ticket, which makes them conceal their true motives and nurture secret hopes they dare not share. This unspoken tension gradually damages their relationships and compromises their moral integrity, making the family members vulnerable to deception and self-delusion. Later, the novel also offers glimpses into the stories of other characters, revealing equally complex motives. Some dream of appealing to the famous composer in an attempt to find a missing repressed husband; others believe the concert might work a miracle and heal a fatally ill child. The ticket, then, becomes an elusive dream, a vessel into which everyone pours their desperation and desire.

It is no coincidence that in Grushin's novel, the kiosk stands at the end of a street, directly facing an old, abandoned church. Though worn and decaying, the church offers an architectural counterpoint to the kiosk, always visible against the pale sky as the characters move towards the line. With its peeling domes and crumbling plaster, the church is not romanticized but serves as a setting for the city's underworld, where black-market transactions take place in its hidden

courtyard. In this juxtaposition, the line assumes a quasi-religious function, replacing the hope of divine salvation with a secular yet equally obsessive pursuit of a ticket. This spatial and symbolic opposition echoes Sorokin's observation in "Farewell to the Queue," where he describes the Soviet queue as a "quasi-surrogate for the church": "Through the act of standing up… people participated in a sort of ritual, after which, instead of the Eucharist and absolution of their sins, they received foodstuffs and manufactured goods" (Sorokin 2008). Although Grushin does not cite Sorokin directly, the parallels between the two authors' treatments of the concept of the Soviet line are striking. Similar to Sorokin's *The Queue*, parts of *The Line* are composed of fragmented dialogue among queuers, with no omniscient narration or traditional character exposition, revealing meaning through collective speech rather than the authorial voice. Both authors depict the queue as a communal ritual; Grushin, however, adds the architectural setting (placing the kiosk opposite the abandoned church) to strengthen the ticket's symbolism as a secular sacred object, a modern Grail that replaces spiritual redemption with the ritual of collective endurance.

Several scholars who have examined the social phenomenon of Soviet lines have also highlighted its ritualistic dimensions. For instance, Vadim Nikolaev in his study "The Soviet Queue as a Living Environment" observes that the line acquired self-sufficient ritual features and in fact turned into a Soviet ritual in its own right. An integral part of daily life, the queue was a defining feature of the Soviet routine, with citizens often spending up to a third of their day standing in line. The significant investment of time and effort—combined with the almost quest-like search for even the most basic goods, which had to be haunted down or "procured" through persistence—gave anything obtained in this way a heightened symbolic value.

> The queue functions as a kind of continuous ritual, so to speak, which people regularly join—day after day—depending on their personal spatial location and time availability, receiving a charge of social involvement and once again reaffirming that the social world has not changed, remains the same as yesterday, and continues to function. Essentially, nothing changes based on where or when one joins the queue: the same crowd of people, the same shortages, the same behavioral norms, the same values, the same models and strategies of conduct, the same physical and emotional experiences, the same sense of community. (Nikolaev 2000, p. 48)

The ritualized structure of the Soviet line came from its own setup, which included unspoken rules, coded actions, and a shared ethic of endurance. Through these characteristics, the line evolved into a ceremonious pattern for navigating and, to some extent, influencing the complex logic of the Soviet system. As a nationwide ritual embedded in daily routine across the Soviet Union, the line shaped individual encounters with distant and often inaccessible state authority and helped create a feeling of community. To stand in line was, in effect, to participate in Soviet social life—to affirm one's position within the system. Victor Turner's theory, which sees ritual as a dialectical movement between structured hierarchy and communitas, can explain this connection:

> Society (societas) seems to be a process rather than a thing—a dialectical process with successive phases of structure and communitas. There would seem to be—if one can use such a controversial term—a human *"need"* to participate in both modalities. Persons starved of one in their functional day-to-day activities seek it in ritual liminality. The structurally inferior aspire to symbolic structural superiority in ritual; the structurally superior aspire to symbolic communitas and undergo penance to achieve it. (Turner 2011, p. 203)

Queuing offered a ritualized means of participating in the social order, acting as a symbol of belonging and ideological loyalty. It allowed ordinary citizens to enact a form of agency, temporarily affirming their identity as members of the collective body. In this sense, standing in

line gained ideological and quasi-religious dimensions. While visiting postwar Moscow, John Steinbeck observed the queue to Lenin's Mausoleum, describing the experience as "a religious thing, although they would not call it religious" (Steinbeck 1999, p. 111). The line, he wrote, stretching for a quarter mile, moved slowly and solemnly toward Lenin's embalmed body, watched over by silent, motionless guards: "There is a hush over the place... people speak in whispers, and the lecturers with their pointers talk in a curious melodic litany" (p. 35). Much later, Lev Rubinstein describes this situation in the following way:

> The queue to the Mausoleum was a kind of test of 'Sovietness.' A Soviet person, once they had recognized themselves as such, felt almost morally obligated to stand in that line at least once—to become part of it, to take part in the ritual, to be 'communed.' With the onset of perestroika, the Queue began to lose its monolithic character, thinning out and crumbling. New reference points appeared on the horizon. The air noticeably filled with the scent of the West, and the Queue, disbanding near the Mausoleum, reassembled for a while at the walls of the newly opened McDonald's, which shimmered with an unearthly light. It was the same queue, but now it stood not for a velvet-draped tomb, but for a sparkling, 'heavenly' America. Then, somehow, it quietly faded away as well, and the mass-produced McDonald's restaurants ceased to be 'America' and became just another part of Moscow. Then even the 'ordinary' queues disappeared, and a completely different story began. (Rubinštejn 1998, p. 58)

In Soviet daily life, the long lines were not only caused by shortages but also mirrored the core values of a shared social identity. Being patient, which was needed when waiting in line, was central to Soviet ideology, suggesting rewards would come later, though always deferred. Therefore, the person in line symbolized the ideal Soviet citizen: hopeful, disciplined, and oriented toward a future that gave meaning to current struggles: "The social project that was Soviet society assumed a willingness to believe and a willingness to wait" (Bogdanov 2012, p. 96). As Eliot Borenstein writes in *Unstuck in Time*, "Soviet ideology, while it remained current, justified any number of sacrifices in the name of the promised radiant future, either draining the present of all meaning or imbuing it with significance based entirely on what was supposed to come" (Borenstein 2024, p. 4). Endurance, therefore, was not just a survival strategy but a form of ideological participation. In Grushin's *The Line*, Anna echoes this belief, stating with quiet resignation, "She had a good life, such a good life. They all did" (p. 7). Her words reflect a faith based not on present reality but on the promise that the future would redeem all sacrifice. Grushin offers a secular parallel to the Christian image of salvation imagined as a line toward the Kingdom of Heaven: the queue at the kiosk becomes a modern ritual of patient, communal waiting.

When hope is sustained without active effort, the motif of waiting gains a metaphysical and theological dimensions. The eschatological anticipation of a distant future, emptied of human agency, is best represented by the apocalyptic image of waiting for the Day of Judgment. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* epitomizes this condition, dramatizing the futility of a life based on expecting a savior who never arrives. Estragon and Vladimir's recurrent line, "Nothing to be done," captures the paralysis of waiting, where time flows yet remains devoid of change. Beckett's characters admit having wasted "half a century" in trivial conversations which shows the toll of giving in to passive expectation. The elusive promise of Godot— as Estragon asks "If he comes?" Vladimir replies "We'll be saved" (Beckett 1954, p. 60)—acts as a secular analogue to religious hope for redemption, yet this hope only sustains endless inertia.

While Soviet ideology looked forward to a bright future, the characters in *The Line* remain trapped in the past, unable to live in reality. They are caught between a future that hasn't happened and a past they can't get back, existing in a state of being suspended and disconnected. Though they join the line in anticipation of some extraordinary reward, their inner lives are shaped by nostalgia,

regret, and unresolved longing. This temporal conflict leaves their subjectivities loose—disconnected from the present, disillusioned by the future, and burdened by memory. Therefore, in *The Line*, the queue becomes not only a spatial structure but a temporal metaphor, a symbol of suspended time in which the characters wait endlessly for meaning and fulfillment. This constant state of waiting captures the main dilemma of the characters' existence, as Anna reflects: "If you want to live forever … spend your life waiting for some great future happiness" (p. 175), emphasizing the novel's focus on how life is constantly put on hold.

Time is a central motif in *The Line*, shaping both the plot structure and overall meaning of the novel. It is arranged according to a calendar year, with sections titled "Winter," "Spring," "Summer," "Fall," "December," and "Christmas," which creates a circular framework and reflects the characters' feeling of being trapped in a cycle of repetition. Temporal details are elaborately depicted throughout the text by tracking hours, days, and dates which gives the narrative a carefully structured chronology. The frequent mention of clocks reinforces the novel's sense of time: from "the black-and-white clock up on the wall, big, round, and bare-faced" (p. 7) in Anna and Sergei's kitchen, to "a gilded clock on the wall, which […] had stopped on some dull, dead, dusty afternoon when nothing much had happened" (p. 292), to moments when characters check their own watches or glance at those worn by others. Despite these temporal references, the characters don't seem to be aware of passing time. The clocks rarely provide clarity: their "shifted shadowy hands over an indiscernible face" (p. 301) remain "forever frozen" (p. 246) or creep forward "with tormenting slowness, as if the figures on its face were spread with glue" (p. 245). Time in the novel becomes untrustworthy, "presiding indifferently" (p. 7) over lives that feel suspended, while time itself "floated around them, weightless and unreal" (p. 79), reinforcing sense of existential stasis. Anna articulates her experience of time as "slowing around her, becoming denser, thicker, brighter, until it acquired the consistency of amber, and she herself was now a mote of dust, or perhaps a fly, yes, a fly suspended for a small, private eternity in this hour, this day, this never-ending year" (p. 175). This moment of timeless suspension contrasts with her childhood memory, from before "the Change," when time was a source of joy. She remembers a cuckoo clock, "a lacquered gingerbread house from whose balcony a crimson-beaked, brightly painted bird took eager, lopsided bows," which she used to watch for hours, "happily anticipating the passage of time" (p. 93). That anticipation, however, has faded into something distant and unreal, the memory itself reduced to "an illustration to some fairy tale… glimpsed through a milky, semitransparent sheet used to cover pictures in old books" (p. 93). Now, Anna's perception of time has shifted from wonder to entrapment: "Like a cuckoo in a clock," she says, "They wind me, and I sing" (p. 93).

Grushin's characters often appear stuck in a numbing timelessness, living in invisible temporal voids, "existing in some secret, timeless pocket of invisibility" (p. 124), in a kind of "soul-numbing" (p. 131) emptiness. Time for them has merged "into a solid, hard, flat essence… like a vat of frozen concrete, undistinguished save for a succession of doled-out State festivities" (p. 6). Sergei imagines himself as "a ghost… insubstantial, invisible save to other ghosts, passing through the city… through time… without leaving a trace" (p. 228). Alexander likewise feels suffocated by undifferentiated time: "staring into the rapidly telescoping depths of an empty summer followed by an empty year followed by an empty decade followed by—but here the telescope jammed" (p. 157). The characters drift barely aware of the passage of time, surrounded by "all this useless time […]—days and hours and months and years and … and whatever comes after that . . . but nothing ever changes […] Not here, anyway" (pp. 50-51).

These depictions of frozen, unchanging time echo Martin Heidegger's concept of *das Man*, introduced in *Being and Time* (1927). Heidegger's existential analysis places *Dasein*, literally "being-there," at the center: a mode of human existence that recognizes its own presence and potential. However, *Dasein* is often taken over by *das Man* ("the They"), an inauthentic being when

individuals conform to impersonal social norms. In this state, personal uniqueness disappears, and life becomes controlled by routine approved by society:

> We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they [*man*] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as they see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the 'great mass' as they shrink back; we find 'shocking' what they find shocking. The "they", which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness. (Heidegger et al. 2010, p. 164)

In this state of inauthenticity, individuality fades, "everyone is the other, and no one is himself" (Grushin 2010, p. 165). From this perspective, the lives of Grushin's characters in *The Line* appear firmly situated within *das Man*. They move through life as if suspended—caught in routine, lacking control, and always waiting. Standing in the queue becomes a repeated act of conformity, erasing presence and possibility. Through this lens, the characters' timeless inertness mirrors *das Man*: they act without authenticity and wait without real choice. In Grushin's allegorical world, the line that is seen as a ritual lacking self-awareness and change embodies inauthentic Being.

As the characters in *The Line* grapple with the purpose of their lives, time changes to assume very real but contradictory forms. When they drift through life waiting, it turns into "a monster devouring its children" (p. 223). This echoes Aleksander's thought that he "had wasted so much time waiting for something to happen, waiting in vain, for nothing ever happened in anyone's life" (p. 241). Constant anticipation creates no satisfaction or meaning, leading to disappointment as the characters realize how much of their lives have been consumed by unmet expectation. In this state, temporality is reduced to a formal measurement of a lifespan—"the chalk-crumbling formula of a physicist sanctified by a silver nimbus of hair"—or to "our own small stretch, bleak and fast-rolling along its darkening bends," where "the happiest moments [are] most likely spent hoping for something wondrous, something luminous—a brush, perhaps, with a tiny miracle of immortality, a sunbeam forever preserved in an amber tear, Faust's doomed plea: 'Instant, freeze, you are perfect!'" (p. 223). However, the perception of time transforms when the characters acknowledge the finality of their lives. Within this understanding, the time appears as "the breath of God" (p. 223), a precious gift to be cherished rather than wasted. This knowledge challenges the idea of time as a neutral flow, recasting it "as if [it] were some real thing you can lose or save or spill or break or put on a shelf" (p. 50). In this metaphorical vision, time becomes something to be carefully "hoard[ed] grain by grain, […] like sand in an hourglass […] an hourglass compartment of your soul" (p. 50).

According to Heidegger, facing one's mortality through *Being-toward-Death* (*Sein-zum-Tode*) is the only way to escape the inauthentic anonymity of *das Man*. This experience removes the comforting illusions of passive existence, pushing people to take ownership of their decisions and live authentically instead of just conforming to societal norms in the "they-world." Heidegger notes that "anticipation reveals to *Dasein* its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concernful solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned freedom towards death—a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the "they", and which is factical, certain of itself, and anxious" (Heidegger et al. 2010, p. 311). For the characters in *The Line*, to "climb out of this hushed pocket of timelessness" (p. 292) requires confronting time's finality and taking purposeful action. Aleksander faces this revelation at the end of the story. After waiting in line for over a year for a seemingly rewarding ticket, he must choose between his desires and another person's life. When his mentor and friend, the elderly Vladimir Semyonovich, has a heart attack as the ticket sale is about to commence, Aleksander leaves his spot in line to help him. This moment makes him aware of time, compressing the previous year into a single, meaningful instant:

> As he ran, light and night, night and light, passed through him again and again, time accelerating in rhythm with his accelerating heart, and he felt its substance changing, changing with the roaring of the chill in his ears, until his universe, which before last year had stood completely still, his entire universe accelerated too, became a spinning, vertiginous blur of colors and winds, then rested, hard and brilliant, on one sharp, well-defined moment, the pinhead of time, a crystal on the head of a needle, balancing precariously as he ran, chanting silently, I will be on time, I will be on time, on time, on time, on time. (p. 293)

When Aleksander leaves the queue's paused temporality, he enters a real present, where choice, death, and duty converge. The "pinhead of time" becomes the site where life should be claimed, not delayed.

Grushin often draws on classical Russian literature, and her treatment of time in *The Line* recalls Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (1886). Notably, Martin Heidegger mentions Tolstoy's novella in *Being and Time* as a main example of *Being-toward-Death*: in a footnote he notes that Tolstoy "presented the phenomenon of the disruption and breakdown of having 'someone die'" (Heidegger et al. 2010, p. 495). In the novella, Ivan Ilyich's awareness of his approaching death changes his sense of time. It no longer feels routine or elastic but becomes finite, pressing, and real. This change shows Heidegger's idea that true life appears only when *Dasein* faces its own mortality (*Sein-zum-Tode*), escaping the pressure of *das Man*. Similarly, Grushin's characters, entrapped in a suspended temporality, must face death to break the illusion of infinite time. Aleksander's choice to leave the queue and help his friend becomes a turning point: by facing the inevitability of death, he gains a sense of control and sees time's true nature as limited and meaningful. This episode ends the illusion of abstract, general time, showing a temporality that is immediate, limited, and filled with existential weight.

For Grushin's characters, their redeemed appreciation of time coincides with the sudden and unexplained disappearance of the queue. Even though the author deliberately leaves unclear whether the tickets were ever sold, the characters wake up to the new perception of temporality once the structure that defined their waiting vanishes. Aleksandr comes to understand that "this ticket that no one he loved appeared to need after all" (p. 308) may have never had the meaning he thought it did. Even simple things gain importance: "The radio announcer crisply informed the city that it was now two o'clock in the afternoon; then music began to play. At once aware of the time—Two already, and I have so much to do—Anna flew about the kitchen" (p. 311). The novel ends with a symbolic scene: after the queue disappears, "fifteen or twenty people… remained waiting before the kiosk, just in case" (p. 311). At midnight they hear the bells of the abandoned church at the other end of the street, "the rising sound playing up and down the transparent silver keyboards of the sonorous skies" (p. 311). They adjust their coats and exchange ritual farewells—"Happy New Year!" and "See you tomorrow!"—starting a new cycle of waiting that begins with each new day and each new year. As the ritual of queueing is proven to continue, this scene becomes a testament to the human condition of waiting. Grushin implies that there will always be those suspended in time, caught in the inertia of hope, unable or unwilling to let go of the illusion that their waiting will one day bring extraordinary reward.

In *The Line*, Grushin converts the routine practice of standing in line into a metaphor for the Soviet and post-Soviet experience. Extending indefinitely across decades and different political regimes, the line is a space where hope is manifested through the act of waiting. In this paused point in time, meaning is always pushed into the future. Grushin shows the line as a shared dream where being inactive looks like strength, and waiting is expected to cause change. This illusion summarizes the author's critique of the individual stance within the political context: by putting their lives on hold in anticipation of something remarkable, the characters sacrifice their agency. This allegory

extends beyond the Soviet past into the post-Soviet present. Grushin suggests that in a world shaped by the legacy of collective waiting, the refusal to confront reality carries the line forward. In this way, the novel provides exploration of lost illusions and the existential cost of inaction.

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