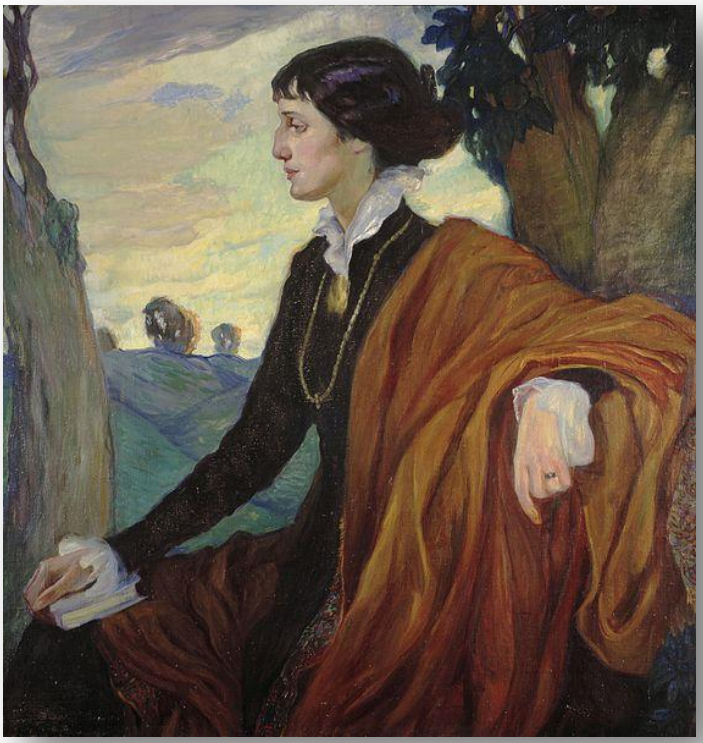
Rother Baron:

Anna Akhmatova and the Russian Soul

Poems against Terror



Anna Akhmatova, a renowned poet before the October Revolution, became an ostracised outsider in the Bolshevik state. This is also reflected in her poems.

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Cover picture: *Olga Della-Vos-Kardovskaya (1875 – 1952): Portrait of Anna Akhmatova (1914); Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery (Wikimedia Commons)*

1. At Night, Fear Rummages Through my Belongings

At night, fear rummages through my belongings,
a hatchet flashes in the moonlight.
Behind the wall, an ominous rustling:
Rats? A ghost? A thief?

In the kitchen haze a numbers game
of creaking planks and dripping water.
Outside the window a stealthy scurry,
a black beard flashing past the window.

Match fragments, candle stubs –
you will never catch a ghost.
I'd rather choose muzzle flashes,
the cold hand of the gun on my chest!

I'd rather mount the scaffold openly
on the great square, cheered and bewailed,
and quench the thirst of the earth
proudly with my blood.

From my fear-soaked sheets a paralysing breath
of pestilence blows to my head.
Silently the cross beseeches on my breast:
Lord, breathe peace into my heart!

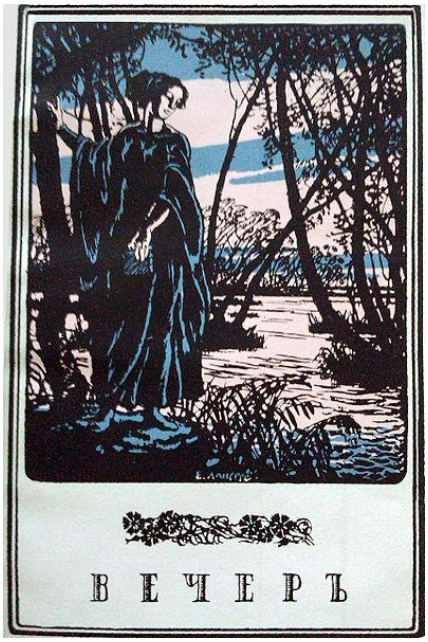
Anna Akhmatova: poem no. 25 (1921)
from: Anno Domini MCMXXI (1922); English adaptation

Sheltered Childhood and Youth

When in 1889 Anna Akhmatova – as Anna Gorenko – was born in a village near Odessa, she seemed to be destined for a life in sheltered and orderly ways. Both her parents came from privileged backgrounds: Her father, a Ukrainian from a Cossack noble family, served as an engineer in the navy. Her mother was a Russian noblewoman with family connections to Kiev.

Indeed, Akhmatova's life initially took the course that was to be expected for a girl from her social milieu. After the family moved to Tsarskoye Selo near Saint Petersburg in 1890, she received there her secondary education. In the summer, the family used to retreat to a dacha near Sevastopol in the Crimea.

After her parents separated in 1905, Akhmatova moved completely to the Crimea with her mother and siblings for a time. Shortly afterwards, she finished her school education in Kiev and then began to study law there – in a reduced programme for women. In 1910 she married the poet Nikolai Gumilyov and travelled with him through Europe. Two years later, a son was born to the couple – Lev remained Akhmatova's only child.



Akhmatova also quickly became successful with her poetry. Her father, though, distrusted her artistic talent, which is why she published her poems not under her family name, but under that of her Bulgarian great-grandfather. By contrast, the literary world received her poems with great favour. Her first two volumes of poetry, published in 1912 and 1914, met with broad recognition.

Promising Beginning as a Poet

Soon Akhmatova established herself in artistic circles. Together with her husband, Osip Mandelstam and others, she formed the *Цех поэтов* (Tsech Poetow), a poetry workshop dedicated to a style that was more representational than other poetry of the time and more oriented towards everyday life.

In Russian literary history, the poetry in question is called "acmeist". The Greek root of the word (akme: climax, peak, maturity) points to the special appreciation for this poetry and for the epoch as a whole in which it was written. This is also reflected in the labelling of the period from 1890 to 1930 as the "Silver Age" – in distinction to the Golden Age, characterised by poets such as Pushkin, Lermontov and Gogol, which is located in the first half of the 19th century.

Acmeism turned against the prevailing, symbolist-hermetic style, although without entering into ideologically hostile competition with it. Thus, one of the most important representatives of Russian Symbolism, Alexander Blok, was a close friend of Akhmatova.

The Turning Point of the October Revolution

The years until the First World War were all in all a happy time for Akhmatova. The war, however, changed her life fundamentally – not only through the events of the war itself, but also and above all as a result of the Bolsheviks' subsequent seizure of power.
Poems like Akhmatova's no longer had a place in the "proletarskaya kultura" ("Proletkult" for short) proclaimed by the new regime. Already as a member of the despised bourgeoisie, she was generally suspicious. But with her poems, in which personal feelings played a major role, she was also considered an enemy of the people in the cultural ideological sense, an author whose work ran counter to the desired celebration of the new socialist everyday life.

First a Celebrated Poet, Then an Enemy of the State

This was the beginning of a long period of suffering for Akhmatova, which ultimately lasted until her death in 1966. Her poems were banned, and distribution by samizdat – i.e. by copying them secretely, without official permission – was also dangerous.
This was all the more true in view of the increasing aggressiveness of Soviet cultural policy under Stalin. Some of Akhmatova's

poems only survived because friends learned them by heart and passed them on orally to others.
In addition, Akhmatova's husband, from whom she had divorced in 1918, was suspected of counter-revolutionary activities and was shot in 1921. As a result, the poet herself and her son also came into the sights of the authorities and were observed at every turn. The feeling of threat that arose from this was expressed by Akhmatova in the poem reproduced above.

Picture credits: p. 4: *Anna Akhmatova (1904);* ***p. 5:*** *Cover of Akhmatova's first book of poems (Vyecher/Evening), designed by Eugène Lanceray (1912);* ***p. 7:*** *Anna Akhmatova with her first husband, Nikolai Gumilyov, and her son Lev, 1915; photo by L. Gorodetsky (all pictures from Wikimedia Commons)*

2. The Gloomy Wings of Madness

The Fiend of Madness with his gloomy wings
already shadows my soul's land.
He pours burning wine into my veins
and lures me into his dark valley.

I know he will be the victor,
the fortress of my mind is too weak.
My own musing already seems to me
like the fluttering of a foreign frenzy.

In vain are my child-like imploring
and my fervent prayers.
I know there's no way to appease him:
He will carry me off to his realm.

Only food for his fire are
the day the tempest seized us,
my son's eyes, nightmarishly dark,
frozen words in the prison yard.

Still I can feel the trembling of his hand
in mine, like a faded raven's feather,
and the echoing whisper of comfort
in the flickering shade of the lime tree.

Anna Ackmatova: Poem no. IX (1940) from the cycle Реквием
(Requiem; 1934 – 1963); English adaptation

Living in Difficult Circumstances

Anna Akhmatova's life after the October Revolution could have taken a much more tranquil course. After her divorce from Gumilyov in 1918, the artisan Boris Anrep offered her the opportunity to emigrate with her to a Western country. She refused, however, because she did not want to live permanently outside her homeland.

Instead, she began a relationship with a literary critic who died of tuberculosis shortly afterwards. Her four-year marriage to the assyrologist Vladimir Shileyko, who was critical or even hostile towards her poetry, was also decidedly unhappy.

Her marriage to the art historian Nikolai Punin, with whom Akhmatova entered into wedlock in 1925, seems to have been privately happier. However, the circumstances in which the couple lived were decidedly difficult.

Marginalised as intellectuals in the new state, they could not afford their own flat and instead had to live in a Kommunalka with Punin's ex-wife. They lacked the most basic necessities, even food was scarce, so that Akhmatova later referred to this period as her "vegetarian years" in bitter irony.

Persecution at the Time of the Stalinist Purges

What bothered Akhmatova the most, however, was the persecution to which her husband and son had been subjected since the

1930s. In keeping with the usual practice during the Stalinist Purges, this was not a matter of specific anti-state activities. As in the case of Akhmatova's son Lev, it was enough to be the descendant of a father who had been shot for alleged anti-Bolshevik activities.

After being denied access to study, Lev was eventually imprisoned and even sentenced to death. Unlike her husband, who died in a labour camp in 1953, Akhmatov's son did escape death. But his mother had to be constantly prepared for the death sentence to be carried out.

Desperate Struggle for the Life of Her Son

Apart from this exceptional emotional situation, the mere physical fight for her son's life was a tremendous challenge for Akhmatova. Relatives of detainees had to queue for hours before they were allowed to see them and bring them food or warm clothes.

On top of that, Akhmatova herself lacked the means for this. She had to go hungry herself and beg from acquaintances to keep her son from starving.

The poem that precedes this chapter tells of the despair that apparently often gripped the poet in this hopeless situation. It is part of a cycle entitled *Requiem*, in which Akhmatova deals with her experiences during the time of the Stalinist terror.

3. Suffocate Me with a Boring Fairy Tale

To Death

You will come anyway – so why not now?
I am waiting for you, my life is too burdened.
The door is wide open and the light is extinguished
for you, the undemanding stranger.
Appear to me in whichever shape you like!
Tear my heart apart with a poisoned dart,
sneak up like a cunning thief
with a heavy piece of wood,
wrap me in typhoid smoke
suffocate me with a boring fairy tale,
until the pale-faced caretaker
and the blue-capped commissioners pick me up.
That's all the same to me. With the mists
dancing on the Yenisei, the shining Polar Star
and the blue sparkle in beloved eyes
my last fear has dissipated.

Anna Achmatowa: K Smyerti (1939); Poem no. VIII
from the cycle Реквием (Requiem; 1934 – 1963);
English adaptation

Writing Poetry under Stalinism: a Life-threatening Undertaking

Given her mental and physical exhaustion, Anna Akhmatova even plays with the thought of escaping into death in one of the poems of her *Requiem* cycle. However, in keeping with her unpretentious style, avoiding any pathos, she distances herself from her own despair here with subtle irony.

What for Anna Akhmatova was only a mind game became bitter reality for other poets of her time. Many saw themselves so marginalised by the Bolshevik rulers or were so relentlessly persecuted that they either died of debilitation or took their own lives.

Alexander Blok died as early as 1921 from inflammation of the heart, which had become life-threatening due to his acute malnutrition. The poet had a particularly close relationship with Akhmatova, to whom he referred in several poems. Blok also plays an important role in Akhmatova's poetry, both in terms of stylistic orientation and – as in her poem *Гостьь* (*Gost'* – The Guest) from 1914 – as a person.

Osip Mandelstam, who had collaborated with Akhmatova in the Acmeist poetry workshop from before the October Revolution, was targeted by the regime from 1934 onwards because of disliked publications. When the Stalinist authorities briefly let him go in 1937, he and his wife spent some time with Akhmatova in Leningrad.

The poem she wrote for him during this time (*Немного географии / Nyetnogo geografii*: A Little Geography) turned out to be a requiem. Mandelstam did not survive the renewed camp imprisonment that followed shortly afterwards. At the end of 1938, he died, physically and psychologically shattered, in a camp in Vladivostok.

Mandelstam had already attempted suicide, Akhmatova had only toyed with this possibility. Sergei Yesenin and Marina Tsvetayeva, however, actually took their own lives: the latter in 1941, Yesenin as early as 1925.

Subjective Poetry and the Dignity of the Individual

All these poets have developed their own distinctive style. What unites them, however, is the insistence on the independence of the individual, on its autonomous interpretation of the world. This was reflected in a primacy of subjective feeling and in its poetic shaping.

Of course, it can be argued that the authors thus inevitably placed themselves in opposition to the official communist doctrine. After all, it is precisely the crucial characteristic of the latter that it strives for an objective change of the course of history. In this context, the focus on subjective feelings seems not only superfluous, but even obstructive. It is seen as a bourgeois escapism, through which the struggle for a more just society is weakened.

Committed Compassion: Giving a Voice to the Victims of Terror

On the other hand, the primacy of the individual also implies that every single human being is respected in its uniqueness and dignity. Sensitive poetry, such as that written by Akhmatova and her fellow poets in the first half of the 20th century, therefore always included empathy with others.

For Akhmatova's poetry in particular, sympathy and compassion were essential. In the epilogue to her *Requiem* cycle, she explicitly points to this deeply felt solidarity with others as a central motivation for her writing. With her poems, she wanted to rescue from oblivion those who, like her and her relatives, had been caught up in the wheels of history. In this way, a voice could be given to those who had been reduced to silence:

> *How I would have liked to mention all their names!*
> *But the wind has blown them away, the lists are burnt.*
>
> *For them, from their unhappy words*
> *this blanket of verses is woven.*
>
> *They will live on in my spirit,*
> *even if new misfortunes come my way.*
>
> *Even if they take the voice from my mouth,*
> *its suffering will sing of all the other sufferings.*

Compassionate Poetry: Incompatible with Marxist Doctrine?

Of course, a cycle of poems such as Akhmatova's *Requiem*, dedicated to the victims of Stalinism, could not be printed under the Stalinist dictatorship – the text was not published in the Soviet Union for the first time until 1987. Nevertheless, Akhmatova's poems demonstrate that the condemnation of a subjective approach to poetry by the socialist cultural doctrine cannot necessarily be derived from the ideal of communism.

Isn't active compassion for others the very root of communism – the very motivation for the development of the utopia of a more just society in which hunger and need are overcome?

It is true that this does not correspond to Marxist theory. As is well known, the latter assumes that it is not consciousness that determines being, but being that determines consciousness – that is, that the decisive change does not take place on the level of subjective reflection, but on the level of an objective structural change.

Ultimately, though, we are dealing here with a chicken-and-egg problem. Marx himself is the best example of the fact that a change of consciousness on the level of individual subjects is needed to initiate social changes – which in turn can promote a change of consciousness in others and thus trigger a comprehensive structural change.

The initial change of consciousness in individuals, however, is inextricably linked to emotional components. It is based on compassion for those who suffer from oppression and disadvantage, who are marginalised or excluded from social participation altogether.

When the Utopia of a More Just Society Solidifies into Dogma

Seen in this light, the hatred with which sensitive-compassionate poetry was persecuted in real-socialist societies is basically a case for the psychiatrist. The blanket condemnation of such poetry as "bourgeois" and "decadent" ultimately testifies to an alienation of cultural functionaries from the ideals that stood at the beginning of the struggle for social change.

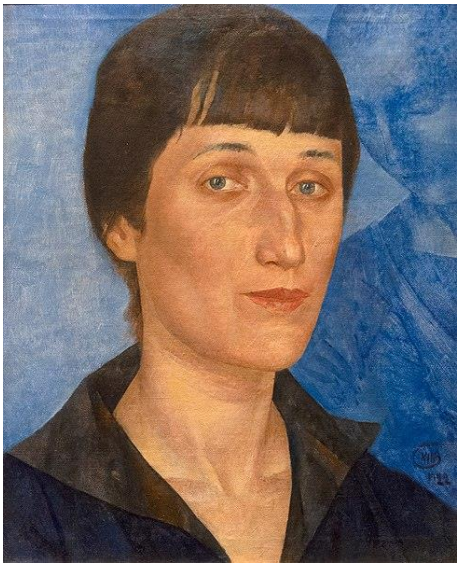
Due to this alienation, all that remains of the ideal is its outer shell. Thus, the ideal congeals into a dogma that is only enforced for its own sake. The increase in justice and humanity that was originally associated with it no longer plays any role at all.

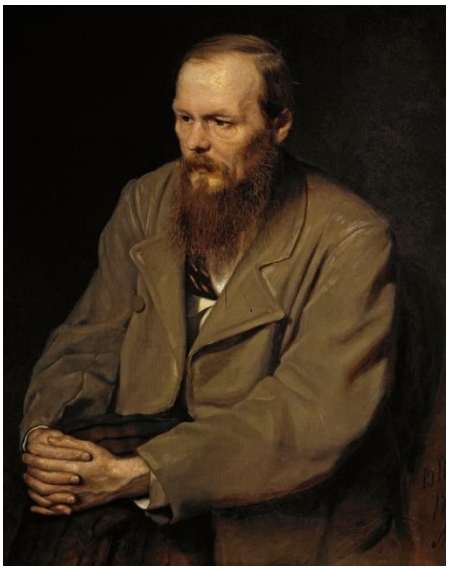
Alienation from Former Ideals as a Motivation for Persecution

The persecution of authors in whose work the original communist ideal of practical empathy and compassion for others – as a prerequisite of a common struggle for a better world – lives on, could then be explained psychoanalytically with a shift mechanism.

Instead of taking a self-critical look at one's own behaviour and correcting mistakes, those in which the lost ideal is reflected are persecuted. They are the mirror of one's own past, supposed to be destroyed in order to escape the painful process of coming to terms with one's own aberration. The degree of aggression emerging in this is at the same time a yardstick for the degree of alienation from one's own ideals.

Photos: Alexander Blok and Osip Mandelstam (1914); Wikimedia Commons





4. Putin and Stalin versus Akhmatova and Dostoyevsky: What is the Russian Soul?

Picture credits: *Kuuma Petrov-vodkin (1878 – 1939): Anna Akhmatowa (1922); St. Petersburg, Russian Museum; Vasily Perov (1833 – 1882): Fyodor Dostoyewsky (1872); Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery; Vladimir Putin stunning a Siberian tiger (Amur tiger) in south-eastern Russia (Premier.gov.ru / Wikimedia Commons; modified); Stalin with a sniper rifle (1936); Picture 1 – 3 from Wikimedia Commons*

Indiscriminate Killings and Unconditional Compassion for the Victims

In the past, poems like those from Akhmatova's *Requiem* cycle would probably have been regarded by some as a typical expression of the "Russian soul". For a long time, its central characteristic was considered to be unconditional compassion for others, a solidarity that overcomes all barriers and simply sees other people as fellow human beings, beyond all social and cultural influences shaping their existence.

However, those who cause the suffering lamented in the *Requiem* poems are also people with a "Russian soul". This was just as true for Stalin's henchmen as it is for Vladimir Putin's death squads today.

So the question arises: What does this phantom of the "Russian soul" actually reveal itself in? In the unconditional empathy and compassion as manifested in Akhmatov's *Requiem*? Or rather in the indiscriminate, ostentatiously merciless murder that characterises the Stalinist Purges and Putin's terror wars?

The Werewolf Nature of Man

Unfortunately, there is no clear answer to this: both features are part of the Russian soul. In Russia, we might encounter this picture-book old man in his ramshackle peasant hut who shares his last piece of bread as a matter of course with the stranger who knocks on his door at night. But we may also come across killer squads who burn down this hut without blinking an eye in order to snatch the last piece of bread from the freezing old man inside.

At the same time, however, it must be said: Neither is in itself "typically Russian". We have the World Food Programme and – as is currently the case in the Ethiopian civil war – the deliberate use of hunger to wear down the population. We have charity organisations and predatory capitalism; the commandment of mercy during the Islamic fast breaking in Ramadan and the terror of the "Islamic State"; refugee aid and deportations; Saint Francis, who distributed his possessions to the poor, and the speculator who causes entire economies to tumble for the sake of his own profit.

As far as unrestrained brutality in war is concerned, we also do not necessarily have to look to Russia. After all, the Vietnam and Iraq wars or even the horrors of the Second World War are, by historical measures, only a blink of an eye behind us. So we can by no means claim to have overcome the corresponding eruptions of violence once and for all.

Werewolf Nature and Longing for Salvation

But then what is special about the Russian soul? – Perhaps that the werewolf nature of man is revealed in Russia in a particularly pronounced form. On the one hand, there is a culture of unconditional openness to others in the country. This is expressed both in a spiritual-emotional openness and in a material openness, as manifested in the proverbial Russian hospitality.

On the other hand, however, there is also a culture of violence in Russia, which finds expression both within the country and in relation to the outside world in a particularly inhumane and brutal way of dealing with others. This seems all the more frightening

the more one associates the other, compassionate side of Russian culture with the Russian soul.
If, however, we assume that this contradiction is characteristic of human nature in general, the specifically Russian element would be the longing for salvation that arises from the insight into man's werewolf nature. Where the extremes of the human soul, our eternal vacillation between unconditional mercy and ruthless egocentrism, are experienced in a particularly pronounced way, the longing to overcome this inner contradiction must also be particularly strong.

Literary Shaping of the Werewolf Nature in Dostoyevsky's Works

It is hardly by chance that the author who has given this longing the most intense literary expression comes from Russia: Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Man's struggle with his werewolf nature is a key element in all of this author's novels. It is shaped both on an inner-psychic level and through a constellation of personalities in which the opposing poles of human nature are embodied by various characters.
The most famous example of the inner-psychic shaping of the human werewolf conflict in Dostoyevsky's work is probably Raskolnikov, the protagonist in the novel *Преступление и наказание* (*Prestupljenije i Nakasanije* – Crime and Punishment, 1866). After the latter has given in to his baser instincts by murdering a woman who works as a pawnbroker, he gradually realises that every human being has its own dignity and right to live, and that no murder is therefore justified.

In the metaphorism characteristic of Dostoyevsky's novels, this is symbolised by the pawnbroker's good-natured sister. She personifies the other, brighter side of the pawnbroker – but because she happens to be present at the murder, she also has to be killed by Raskolnikov. Thus, with the murdered woman's perfidy, her good-natured potential, which is inherent as a possibility in every human being, is destroyed at the same time.

In Dmitri, the eldest of the three brothers in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1878 – 1880), the human struggle between good and evil is also located on the inner-psychic level. At the same time, however, this novel also personifies the conflict in the other two brothers, Ivan and Alyosha. While the former, as a man alienated from religion, tends towards self-importance and immorality, Alyosha represents the ideal of a man acting entirely on the basis of the Christian ideal of compassion and mercy.

The figure of Alyosha finds a parallel in the character of Prince Myshkin in the novel *The Idiot* (1867/68). The title of this novel is telling insofar as the protagonist is perceived as an "idiot" by other people precisely because of his profoundly good-natured, guileless attitude towards them.

In his novel *Бесы* (*Byessy* – Demons / Evil Spirits, also known as *The Possessed*; 1873), Dostoevsky addresses the dangers that arise from relativising humanitarian commandments for the sake of a categorically advocated ideology. In it, he deals with his own earlier closeness to revolutionary groups, but at the same time, in an almost prophetic way, he points ahead to the later crimes of Stalinism.

Prince Myshkin to Power!

Today we all fervently hope that the Alyosha and Prince Myshkin side of the Russian people will regain the upper hand; that the compassion for others as expressed by Anna Akhmatova in her *Requiem* poems will determine Russian people's actions; that they, like Raskolnikov, will come to their senses and realise what monstrous crimes are currently being committed in the name of their people.

However, we should always remain aware that this alone will not be enough to prevent future eruptions of violence. Instead, the prerequisite for this is that we are all aware of our werewolf nature every second. Only if the whole of humanity succeeds in keeping its dark side under control is enduring peace possible.

Of course, this is a utopia of similar implausibility as that of a return to paradise. But the very decision to embark on this path would be a crucial step towards a world in which the Alyoshas and Prince Myshkins are more powerful than all the Stalins and Putins – whose violent dystopias currently bring us closer to the apocalypse than to a return to paradise.

Nathan Altman (1889 – 1970): Portrait of Anna Akhmatova (1914); Saint Petersburg, Russian Museum; Wikimedia Commons

Links

Anna Akhmatova's poems are easy to find on the web, mostly sorted by category (among others on culture.ru or stih.ru).
The early volumes of poetry can also be accessed in their entirety:
Вечер (Vyecher/Evening; 1912, Чётки (Chotki/Rosary; 1914)) and Белая стая (Byelaya Staya / The White Flock; 1917) on *ru.wikisource.org*;
Подорожник (Podorozhnik/Plantain; 1921) on *stihi-rus.ru*;
Anno Domini MCMXXI (1922) on *synnegoria.com*.

A comprehensive article about Anna Akhmatova is available on the website of the *Poetry Foundation* (with extensive bibliograhy).