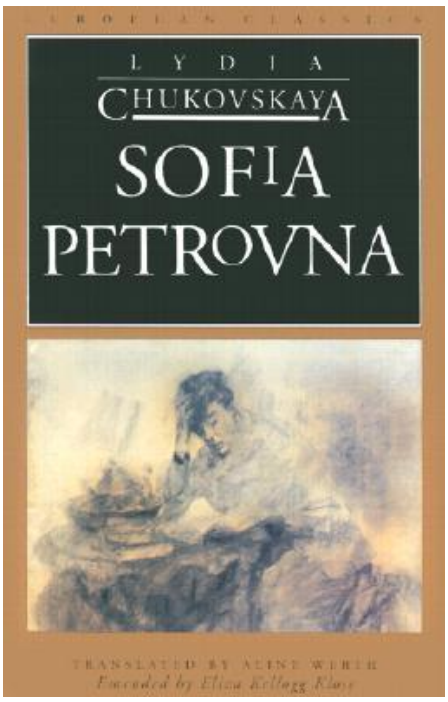

Sofia Petrovna

Lydia Chukovskaya , Aline Werth (Translation)

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Sofia Petrovna Lydia Chukovskaya , Aline Werth (Translation)
Sofia Petrovna is Lydia Chukovskaya's fictional account of the Great Purge. Sofia is a Soviet Everywoman, a doctor's widow who works as a typist in a Leningrad publishing house. When her beloved son is caught up in the maelstrom of the purge, she joins the long lines of women outside the prosecutor's office, hoping against hope for good news. Confronted with a world that makes no moral sense, Sofia goes mad, a madness which manifests itself in delusions little different from the lies those around her tell every day to protect themselves. *Sofia Petrovna* offers a rare and vital record of Stalin's Great Purges.

Sofia Petrovna Details

Date	:	Published June 8th 1994 by Northwestern University Press (first published 1965)
ISBN	:	9780810111509
Author	:	Lydia Chukovskaya , Aline Werth (Translation)
Format	:	Paperback 120 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Cultural, Russia, Classics, Literature, Russian Literature, Historical, Historical Fiction

From Reader Review Sofia Petrovna for online ebook

Tony says

There is great acting in this novella. I don't mean that this was cinematic, exactly. I mean that I was able to *see* each character. And there were a lot of characters, in that Russian way.

This is a novel about The Great Purge. Sofia Petrovna is a doctor's widow and a true believer. She trains to be a typist after her husband dies, because everyone must work. Her son joins the Komsomol. Sofia Petrovna advances, is spotlighted as an ideal.

And then, one by one, she sees people 'exposed' as saboteurs, tried and convicted. People she *knows* to be good, and good Soviets. Her son, too.

But to get back to the 'acting'. There's a woman at work. We never hear her speak. Yet we know her intimately. Another doctor's wife is introduced to us. Her eyes...HER EYES...tell us all we need to know, and more. Even Sofia Petrovna evolves from naïveté, to doubt, to something beyond.

Yes, this book may fill a gap in an understanding of the Communist system. But the acting is brilliant.

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And for my fellow booknerds:

I picked this up off the $2 clearance shelf largely because I really liked the other two 'European Classics' series books I read: The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin and The Sins of Childhood and Other Stories. This is really a spectacular series and ever-expanding. And I'm hooked.

Nick says

Kafka's "The Trial" is almost an allegory, if an unusually powerful one. "Sofia Petrovna", by the Russian writer Lydia Chukovskaya, gives the Kafka story flesh. Sofia Petrovna is cursed by being the mother of an exceptional but conventionally Marxist son and a friend and fellow-typist in a publishing house who has the misfortune of being born to a disgraced middle-class. It is a world in which apparatchiks run publishing houses, where evidence of skill is the mark of being insufficiently proletarain. The foundation of law and justice is the systematic denial of information and access, with the whole charade papered over by Marxist slogans. It is a system designed to crush not only those who are implicated by innuendo, or those who think for themselves, but anyone who doesn't belong to or appear loyal according to the whims of the clique in power. The results are that the patriotic are jailed, the healthy are driven to suicide, those whose only crime is to love their relatives are driven mad. The characters are not drawn with particular clarity, but that adds to the power of the book--this insanity could descend on any skillful typist, any patriotic member of the Communist youth, any devoted mother. The fate of the book resembles the fate of its characters: accepted for publication in the post-Ivan Denisovich world, in which criticism of the Stalinist madness was encouraged, it fell victim to one of those sudden shifts of ideological wind--enough criticism of Stalinism had already been published. As if enough criticism of Stalinism could ever be published. I cannot leave this theme without quoting the poem of the great Anna Akhmatova (friend of Chukovskaya's) from the opening to the

magnificent "Requiem." In it, Akhmatova, who spent many years in the same lines of people searching for their relatives as Sofia Petrovna, is asked by another woman if she could describe it. When Akhmatova replies that she can, she writes of the woman who asked her the question, "something that looked like a smile passed over what had once been her face."

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Pooriya says

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Brina says

Having just finished one of Tolstoy's masterpieces that looks ahead to Russia's future, I selected a novella set in 1937 that details the purge of enemies of the party. Born in 1907, Lydia Chukovskaya became a well known author and wrote books of poetry for children. Today, however, she is best known for her The Deserted House, a novella describing the great purge. Hidden for 25 years, the book has yet to be published in Russia, and in 1967 was published in New York. Through translator Aline Werth, Chukovskaya's words were brought to light in the west.

Olga Petrovna Lipatova was a loyal party member and worked at a steady job in a publishing house to support her only son Nikolai Fydorovich "Kolya." A rising star in the Komsomol and as a future engineering genius, Kolya along with his friend Arik head to an outer province to start up a factory. Despite inventing a new mechanism and heading his class, Kolya is arrested almost immediately upon arrival, setting his mother Olga Petrovna into panic. Rather than acting as a loyal party member, Olga Petrovna believes that her primary role is to petition to have her son freed from prison.

Still loyal to Stalin and the party, Olga Petrovna lives a life in constant fear at both work and home. Acquaintances look at her as a relative to a deportee and would rather not associate with her. Even though she is a proud communist and takes an active role at party meetings, Olga Petrovna can no longer trust anyone. She stops speaking to her colleagues and to the other people in her apartment building. Rather she becomes paranoid that she will be arrested next, lives in isolation, and devotes herself to getting her son freed.

Written in third person, Chukovskaya has her readers on edge in anticipation of what will happen next for Olga Petrovna. Using short sentences, we move from one day to the next, hoping that Petrovna has lived to

see another day. Although fictional, this novella describes the time of the purges in detail when all Russians lived in fear, not knowing who they could trust, who was a friend or enemy, and who would be deported. Even though a translation, Aline Werth does a masterful job in creating this feeling of fear and hopelessness, that big brother is always watching.

In my quest to read women authored books from around the globe, I came upon the works of Lydia Chukovskaya. Russia is not known for its female authors, yet Chukovskaya managed to leave the west the only detailed account of the great purges written during the same years. Even though A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich is better known, A Deserted House puts the reader right in the middle of the purges, in a feeling of constant fear and vigilance. Unfortunately most of Chukovskaya's work is not available in English or never published. A Deserted House was a necessary read, for which I rate 4 stars.

Morvarid says

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Sepideh Salarvand says

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Edward says

Author's Note

--Sofia Petrovna

Afterword: From 'The Process of Expulsion'

Nataliya says

USSR. 1937. *Enemy of the people*. These short words might as well be - and often were - a death sentence. For you. For your friends. For your family. For anyone connected with you. For **millions and millions** of the Soviet people that have perished in the Great Purges, courtesy of the terror state run by paranoid and fanatical Comrade Stalin (*)

> (*) Little-known fact: *"Joseph Stalin, the Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1922-1953), was nominated for the **Nobel Peace Prize** in 1945 and 1948 for his efforts to end World War II."* From www.nobelprize.org (**)
>
> (**) Who would nominate such a standup guy for the Nobel Peace Prize??? Hitler???

Enemy of the people. The dreaded doorbell rings in the middle of the night, uniformed people drag you away from the crying family into a nondescript black car outside. You think it must be a mistake, a misunderstanding; desperately try to explain that you are a good worker from an honest peasant family. Prison cells, vermin, hunger, torture, forced coinfessions. Realizing that everyone else here has gone through the same thing. Seeing your loved ones on the other side of the bars, lying to them that you'll be alright. Exile to concentration camps if you are lucky, shot in the night otherwise.

Sofia Petrovna sees the other side of the Purges. An apolitical middle-aged woman, she goes from being a proud mother of a promising young engineer to being a mother of an "enemy of the people". And yet she still fails to understand that those *other* political prisoners ("poisoners, spies and murderers") are innocent victims of the Stalin regime just like her son Kolya. She fails to make the connection. After all, USSR does not detain the innocents. After all, the Party and the Party newspapers don't lie.

.....
Thank you, dear Stalin, for our happy childhood!
Thank you, indeed...

This is a chilling, gripping story of one of the darkest times in Russian/Soviet history. Written in a detached voice, it succeeds in conveying the suffocating terror, deceit and disbelief the Soviet people lived in. And all I can think when reading it is - please don't let me *ever* live through anything like this. Ever.

_____
By the way, if you want to know more about the Soviet Great Purges of 1930s, here is a handy Wikipedia link and another one as well.

Cathy says

This novel was written in the winter of 1939-1940, and it sheds insight into “ordinary” life under a totalizing Soviet regime. Sofia Petrovna, a staunch Bolshevik, works at the government publishing house while taking care of her beloved son Kolya. She is respected in her senior position, and Kolya’s cogwheel invention is recognized in the Party newspaper.

Yet her simple life starts unraveling when a family friend, Dr. Kiparisov, is arrested. Then the director of the publishing house is arrested. Sofia Petrovna is shocked but not personally affected by this wave of arrests until Kolya is arrested. Her once-straightforward life gradually transforms into one of waiting, pleading, hypothesizing, defending, hiding, despairing, and madness. News of her son's arrest cause her acquaintances to either turn against her or pity her. Alik and Natasha, who had supported Sofia Petrovna and Kolya, are arrested and commit suicide, respectively. Left on her own with no hope of communication with Kolya for ten years, Sofia Petrovna's life loses meaning and mooring.

As much as this story is about a particular time in a particular place during a particular phase of the Soviet regime, I believe this novel also speaks to a more universal conflict: between what one knows and what one believes. Sofia Petrovna knows that her son is deeply loyal to the Komsol party and incapable of being a saboteur. Yet she believes that the regime would not arrest innocent people. Sofia Petrovna initially attempts to rectify this conflict by believing that the police had made an honest mistake with Kolya, and would shortly release him. Meanwhile, she is able to keep her belief by hypocritically viewing the other wives, mothers, and sisters waiting in line as relatives of saboteurs.

But it becomes impossible for Sofia Petrovna to simultaneously know what she knows as a mother and believe in the goodness of the regime. Reality around her is warped to support the ideology of the regime. Kolya confessed to his crimes. The prosecutor and public defender both tell Sofia Petrovna that fighting for her son is a lost cause. Others her work and in her apartment increasingly treat her as the mother of a saboteur. Her supporters and believers are arrested or dead. Her letters to Stalin go unanswered.

Reading Sofia Petrovna is like watching a train wreck in slow motion. As much as I'd like to, I can't tear my eyes away from the tragic and irresistible way that ideology cannibalized reality. A thought-provoking, eloquent, and sentimental short read.

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Lobstergirl says

The author wrote this novella during Stalin's purges, and gave the manuscript to a friend for safekeeping in

case something happened to her. Once Stalin had died and his actions were being looked on with disfavor, she submitted it for publication and got a contract to publish. But over the next few years, the winds of ideology shifted again and the authorities deemed her manuscript problematic and refused to publish it. She sued the publisher in court for full payment and won, but the court wasn't the proper jurisdiction for seeing that the book could actually be published. It was finally published in France in 1965, and then in the United States, and finally in the Soviet Union in 1988.

It is the story of a widowed mother, Sofia Petrovna, who loves her typist job at a Leningrad publishing house. She is an enthusiastic Communist with an almost childlike trust in the state and never wavers in her commitment to it, not even when her acquaintances and colleagues begin to be arrested and accused of sabotage, nor when her beloved son Kolya is arrested. She naively believes her colleagues had been saboteurs and she was blind to it. Kolya's arrest is surely a mistake; if only she can speak to someone about it, she feels certain she can get it all straightened out. She spends hours in endless lines waiting to speak to officials and prosecutors, along with her good friend Natasha, who is in love with Kolya, and Kolya's best friend Alik. Finally, more than a year after Kolya disappears, she hears that his sentence is 10 years hard labor, for terrorism. Natasha, (view spoiler).

This is another one of those novels with cover art chronologically mismatched to the subject matter. It is a charcoal sketch by James Ensor of his sister Marie, done in 1881. She wears full Victorian skirts. Because it's 1881. I expect this from Penguin. I expect more from this imprint.

Ann says

This story of a woman and mother during Stalin's purges was very moving. The sense of loss, combined with the sense of frustration of those whose family members were taken away, is outstandingly portrayed. Perhaps it is the fact that this book was actually written at the time of the purges that gives it its immediacy, but the overwhelming sense of repression, unfairness and complete lack of justice or voice found in this book will linger with me.

Melika Khoshnezhad says

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Ben Winch says

For what it is, this is good. What is it? The social realist, small-scale, human, *truthful* drama of a woman coming to terms with the abduction, by the Stalinist state, of her son. Its power lies in its mundanity?in its view of workplace politics, of state-sponsored peer pressure, of mothers queuing for hours/days/months for the merest tidbits of information. It has every appearance of complete truthfulness to life. If I prefer my

fiction a little *less* truthful to life, that’s no fault of Lydia Chukovskaya’s. Maybe it could have gone further, though? If its aim (as stated by its author in the afterword) was to show its protagonist’s descent into madness, I don’t think it *quite* gets there, but there’s enough here to at least suggest how that descent might have proceeded. As a reminder of what depths people can sink through propaganda and political coercion, and the ways in which that coercion manifests itself at street level, this is powerful. If nothing else it’ll help put your Platonov, Zamyatin and Akhmatova in context.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Sofia Petrovna, Lydia Chukovskaya
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Brian says

One of (the only, perhaps?) the narratives actually written during the Stalin-era purges, Chukovskaya's long-supressed novel detailing the terror of living in Leningrad in the '30s is a nightmare. The reader feels the State's fist slowly closing over all areas of life - leaving nothing but ground up lives in its clutch.

The author wrote this book in a school exercise book and kept it hidden in a desk drawer - a certain death sentence if it were to be found. Some very real skill in characterization and story telling is displayed here - I felt the bafflement, frustration and soul crushing hopelessness right alongside the heroine of the story.

Serena says

Sofia Petrovna is a touching novel with its stark tragedies and complexities. The frank tone in which Sofia Petrovna accepts and denies the circumstances within her life brings to life the reality of the Russian mindset during the purges of Stalin. Although the author has repeatedly stated that she does not understand the aesthetics of her piece, only that it portrays the honesty of that period in time, it nevertheless holds the caliber of a written masterpiece.

The reader is bound to feel for the mother, though at times frustrated with her blatant... madness. It is about the power of denial, the power of trust and most of all, the power of a lie imposed on a people through governance.

Bjorn says

In *Kolyma Tales* , his memories of life in Stalin's prison camps, Varlam Shalamov wrote that one of the most horrifying aspects of Stalin's rule (and, one suspects, of any autocratic system) is how arbitrary it is. A dictator takes power in the name of the people, makes laws in the name of the people, convinces everyone that what's happening is for the people to protect them from dangerous elements without and within ... Except in reality, it didn't matter what you did. Anyone could be convicted of anything at any time on any pretext.

Sofia Petrovna, then. Written in 1939 after Chukovskaya's husband was disappeared and executed, kept in a drawer for decades, only published in her home country after 50 years. The titular woman is a widow with one single son. She works in a publishing house, typing up manuscripts for the betterment of the people. She believes in the ideas, in the union, in the leader who only wants what's best for everyone even if he has to be firm sometimes. Her son is the perfect Soviet citizen, born with the revolution, well-read and intelligent and contemptuous towards enemies of the revolution ... and one day, he's arrested. (For terrorism, as it happens.) What specific act of terrorism? Where is he? What will happen to him? What can she do? No one will tell her. But she has to fight; after all, he must be innocent, he can't be like all those others who really *are* guilty, it must be a mistake, this isn't the corrupt imperial Russia anymore, this is a free country where everyone is equal and there are laws to protect the innocent and courts dedicated to finding out the truth. That's the whole *point*. If that's not true, then what is?

It's easy to draw parallels to Kafka as Sofia circles round and round that question, but there's just as much an Orwellian sense of dread here, a feeling that doesn't just apply to dictatorships. Everyone plays their part in building a society built on fear and intolerance, and the less you *want* to see it, the more you stare yourself blind at what happens on the other side - whether it's being grateful that things aren't as bad as in Germany, or being outraged at having to wait in line at the magistrate's office with mothers of *actual* criminals - the less the actual dictator actually has to do. People are all too willing to be a cog, to help drive the machine that eats them.

Then again, the perhaps strongest image here isn't necessarily the holes it smashes in high-flying ideals, but that image of a mother, aging years in months, starving in her one-room apartment next to hundreds of cans of her son's favourite food, waiting for the day he'll come home again. Any day now, any day now.