

**2022
2023
SEASON**

Ensemble Theatre
Great Scripts. Cleveland Artists.

Describe the Night

by Rajiv Joseph

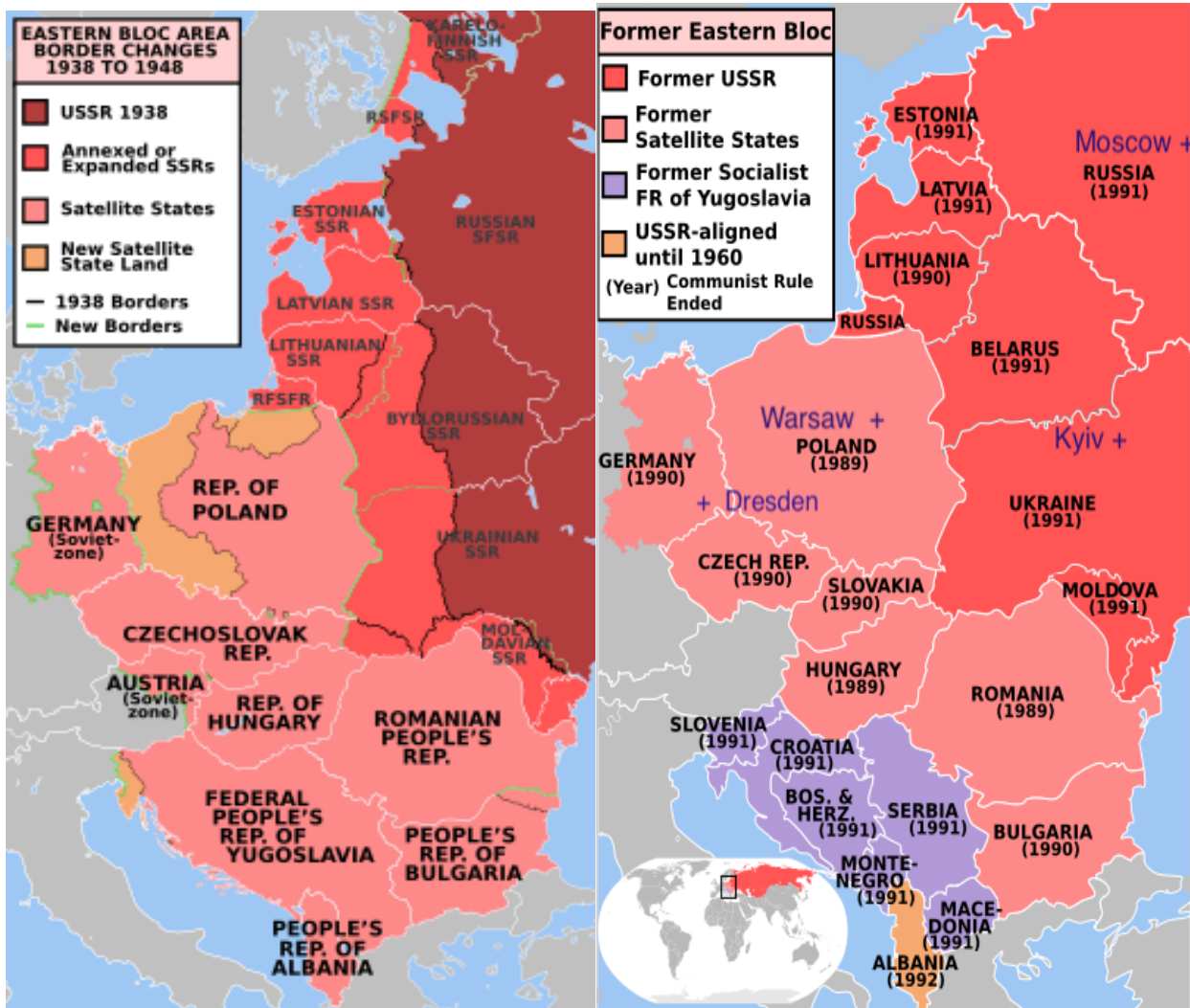


OCT 28 - NOV 13

Dramaturgical Packet

Prepared by Tyler Whidden

BACKGROUND



The **Polish-Soviet War (February, 1919 – March 1921)** marked the 22nd time these two nations participated in armed conflict, with the first coming in the year 981 AD when Vladimir the Great campaigned for the Cherven Cities.

The Polish-Soviet War also directly followed a Polish-led campaign by anti-communist nations to stop Russian expansion in Eastern Europe in the years 1918-1919. The Polish side included nations such as Ukraine, Belarus, Estonia, Lithuania and many more, with the support of Great Britain.

After World War I and the fall of German and Russian empires, European borders were redrawn, new countries were established, old countries were re-established, and battle lines & shadow alliances were becoming more and more prevalent. With Russia embroiled

in their own Russian Civil War (1917-1923), and also making moves for western expansion, Poland and Ukraine joined forces to prevent Russian advances.

Russia took an early lead in the war, gaining Polish territories and land, before Poland struck back in the summer of 1920 to regain control of lost lands.

The Peace of Riga (Treaty of Riga) was signed in March, 1921, ending the war. Poland and Russia divvied up Ukrainian and Belarussian land between them. This treaty was honored until the **summer of 1939** when Russian and Germany signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a non-aggression pact that allowed both countries to claim/invoke Poland. This, of course, led to World War II.

The **Russian Civil War (1917-1923)** came about after the fall of the Russian monarchy and inability for a new republican government to take hold. Several political parties combined forces, with the two biggest factions being the Reds (Bolshevik communists/socialists) versus the Whites (capitalism, monarchism, and social democracy).

With folks like Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky, and Medvedev at the helm of the Reds, we see a rise in the hallmark Russian espionage, spying on civilians and a general decay of human/civilian rights. Don't be surprised if you see a correlation between what was going on in Russian then and what is going on in Russia today. Or, in America today.

Following World War I, Eastern Europe is in chaos, with new and old borders being drawn and redrawn, secret allegiances being formed, and, frankly, some countries playing chess while others were playing checkers.

THE KATYN MASSACRE

Between the months of April and May, 1940, the NKVD and the Russian Army murdered nearly 22,000 Polish army personnel, officers, prisoners of war, and scholars. Mass graves were dug up in the Katyn Forest, where they laid unreported until the Nazi German army discovered them in 1943.

An investigation conducted by the office of the prosecutors general of the Soviet Union (1990-1991) and the Russian Federation (1991-2004) confirmed Soviet responsibility for the massacres, but refused to classify this action as a war crime or as an act of mass murder.

THE SMOLENSK AIR DISASTER

On April 10, 2010, Polish Air Flight 101 crashed near the Russian city of Smolensk, killing all 96 people on board. Included were Poland's president and wife, former president of Poland in exile, chief of Polish General Staff (military chief), president of the National Bank of Poland, senior members of Polish military, Polish parliament, Polish clergy and relatives of the Katyn massacre.

Pilot error is the official cause, including not diverting when fog in Smolensk hindered their ability to land the plane properly. Because the airfield was a former military airbase, the terminal didn't initially register the plane on approach. It is believed the pilots miscalculated their decline and altitude, causing them to believe they were higher than they were.

The plane hit trees and crashed not far from the runway.

HISTORICAL CHARACTERS

ISAAC BABEL



Isaac Babel was born July 13, 1894, in **Odessa** to Jewish parents. Odessa was, at the time, part of the Russian Empire (now Ukraine) and was one of many Eastern European cities enjoying a "Jewish Enlightenment" in which Jews made up roughly 37% of Odessa's population. Jewish writers of Odessa were working in Hebrew, Yiddish and Russian languages.

Jews of Odessa were also subject to acts of anti-Semitism throughout the 19th century, leading many to flee to the Ottoman Empire (including Palestine) at the turn of the 20th century.

While born to a well-off family, many of Babel's stories depict him growing up in an environment of destitution. He was home schooled by private tutors after falling victim to "Jewish quota" at a local prep school. He was fluent in Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, and French.

After being blocked from attending Odessa University, he attended school in Kiev where he met Yevgenia Borisovna whom he would marry in 1919. Graduating in 1915, he moved to Saint Petersburg (then Petrograd), where he met writer and activist **Maxim Gorky**, who said of Babel, "He's the best Russia has to offer." Babel wrote for several of Gorky's magazines/newspapers, even during the period when Lenin began limiting free press and free expression in 1918.

(Note: In the character description for Isaac, it states, "... he is a wire-service journalist - a job he took in order to experience something in life he could write about." This was at the request of Gorky.)

"My journalistic work gave me a lot, especially in the sense of material. I managed to amass an incredible number of facts, which proved to be an invaluable creative tool. I struck up friendships with morgue attendants, criminal investigators, and government clerks. Later, when I began writing fiction, I found myself always returning to these 'subjects', which were so close to me, in order to put character types, situations, and everyday life into perspective. Journalistic work is full of adventure." - Isaac Babel

Babel's marriage to Yevgenia would fail and she would take their daughter to France. Babel had relationships with two other women in which children were conceived. He has no grand-daughter named Urzula.

"Babel was, indeed, a man of many habitations, many styles, several pseudonyms, eight or so languages; he had three children by three different women, and for many years kept his common-law household in Moscow a secret from his legal wife, whom he married in 1919 and who lived in France from 1925 on. The daughter of that marriage, Nathalie, born in 1929, survived with her mother in Occupied France and eventually emigrated to the United States in 1961, four years after her mother died." - John Updike, "Hide-and-Seek", New Yorker October, 2001.

With Stalin decreeing that all writers and artists must conform to socialist realism, Babel fled from public life. Notably quiet creatively, Babel was allowed to visit Yevgenia in France where he stayed much longer than expected. He eventually returned to Moscow, lived in a writers' commune, and began a common law marriage with Antonina Pirozhkova.

He worked on several films, including pro-Stalin films, and had a daughter with Pirozhkova.

On May 15, 1939, Babel was arrested by the NKVD on charges of terrorism, conspiracy and espionage for the French and Austrian governments.



His name began being erased from Russian records, including many of his writing credits. Initially denying any wrong doing, Babel eventually “confessed” to conspiracy in hopes of being able to retain his unpublished works, something he had spent the majority of his time in captivity trying to accomplish.

Babel’s last recorded statement: 'I am innocent. I have never been a spy. I never allowed any action against the Soviet Union. I accused myself falsely. I was forced to make false accusations against myself and others... I am asking for only one thing—let me finish my work.’

Babel would then be put on “trial”, which lasted 20 minutes. He was shot the following day on January 27, 1940.

His ashes were buried with the architect of the Great Purge, **Nikolai Yezhov**.

Babel’s works were banned until Stalin died, and then were heavily edited. It wasn’t until after the fall of communism in Russia in the 1990s that his works were released.

Most Notable Works ...

Red Calvary was borne out of his experiences covering the Polish-Soviet War as a journalist.

Odessa Stories touched on the goings on of Jewish gangsters in Odessa.

His play, **Maria**, included themes of political corruption, being shut down by the NKVD during rehearsals. It was once produced at Stanford University in 2004.

NIKOLAI YEZHOV



Nikolai Yezhov was born in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1895. Five feet tall with a crippled leg, he was nicknamed “Dwarf.”

He served on the Eastern front during World War I (1914-1918) and later joined the Bolsheviks, fighting with the Red Army during the Russian Civil War (1917-1922). He would continue working with the Communist Party, raising in ranks, heading a few departments until becoming secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party (all the big dogs) in 1935. From 1935 to 1939, he was Chairman of the Central Commission for Party Control (disciplinary board). It was during this time that Yezhov would become the architect the **Great Purge**.

The Great Purge ... As part of his eradication of Lenin and Trotsky acolytes, Stalin (head of Communist Party, 1928-1952) had several high ranking officials murdered and then staged trials in which other high ranking officials would “confess” in public courts to the murders of their own allies along with plans to assassinate Stalin himself. Many did this to save their families from Stalin’s reach. Yezhov was behind most of these arrangements.

The Purge lasted from 1936-1938 and was executed by the NKVD (People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs, or Russia’s secret police), and really hit its peak when Yezhov took control in 1937. Essentially, they offed pretty much every government official, from the top to the bottom, Red Army military command, and pretty much anyone who was associated with Lenin and Trotsky.

People would be arrested on nonsense charges, tortured, forced to give bogus confessions, with many going to a public trial to “confess” to their bogus crimes and summarily executed or sent to Siberian gulags. Many of these also included artists, journalists, writers (i.e., Babel), actors, and scholars. The death toll for the two+ year purge stands between 700,000 – 1.3 million souls.

For you theater nerds, this was Macbeth times 1.3 million.

In 1938, Stalin – for reasons I don’t think anyone can explain – had a change of heart and declared that the Purge was over, and that it was over-executed (my words) and carried out by over-zealous nutters (my words).

One person to be arrested was one **Lavrenty Beria** who, once hearing of his name being on Yezhov’s “list”, flew to Moscow to plead his innocence to Stalin himself. Stalin then named Beria head of NKVD and Yezhov was demoted to People’s Commissar of Water Transportation. This marked the beginning of the end for Yezhov, who was well aware of his fate.

Yezhov **married Yevgenia Feigenburg** in 1930. Yevgenia was a magazine editor who enjoyed a rather lavish lifestyle in her marriage to Yezhov, including a large estate with a cinema, tennis courts and large staff. She was, allegedly, quite promiscuous, enjoying the company of various well-known Russian writers, journalists, artists, actors, etc. etc.

As her husband began falling out of favor with Stalin in 1938, Yevgenia began working to save herself and the couple’s adopted daughter Natalia. She wrote dozens of letters to Stalin begging for clemency for her and their daughter, but Stalin totally ghosted her. Instead, word was Beria was going to accuse her of being a British spy due to her having lived in Great Britain during her first marriage.

Unproven, but hear me out: knowing what was coming, Yevgenia asked Yezhov for poison so she could eat it and die without the upcoming arrest and torture. Yezhov asked for a divorce (to protect her) and Yevgenia had a mental breakdown, diagnosed as “asthenic-depressive condition” (super fatigued). Yezhov sent her poison and told her to await his signal, when all was definitely lost. He sent the signal, she drank her poison, and died on November 21, 1938 at the age of 34. The signal was a statuette of a dwarf.

Natalia was later returned to the orphanage and had the last name Yezhov revoked.



Falling out of favor with Stalin and his arrest imminent, Nikoali Yezhov fell into a drunken stupor, barely able to conduct himself professionally and waiting to meet his demise. A month after his demotion from the NKVD, Yezhov was arrested on April 10, 1939.

He was accused of various crimes against Russia, including espionage, embezzlement, incompetence, and sexual promiscuity (including homosexuality, which was proven true). Yezhov was tried on February 2, 1940, maintaining his innocence until the end, even claiming he would die with the name Stalin on his lips.

Yezhov was executed on February 4, 1940 in a basement kill room, which he himself designed. He was cremated and his ashes dumped in a public Moscow cemetery. His death and trial were kept secret, with many people believing he was in an insane asylum.

“In the whole of my—now, alas, already long—life, I had to meet few people who, by their nature, were as repellent as Yezhov. Watching him, I am frequently reminded of those evil boys from Rasteryayeva Street workshops, whose favorite form of entertainment was to light a piece of paper tied to the tail of a cat drenched with kerosene, and relish in watching the cat scamper down the street in maddening horror, unable to rid itself of the flames that are getting closer and closer. I have no doubt that Yezhov, in fact, utilized this type of entertainment in his childhood, and he continues to do that in a different form in a different field at present.” – Marxist activist Boris Nicolaevsky

VLADIMIR “VOVA” PUTIN

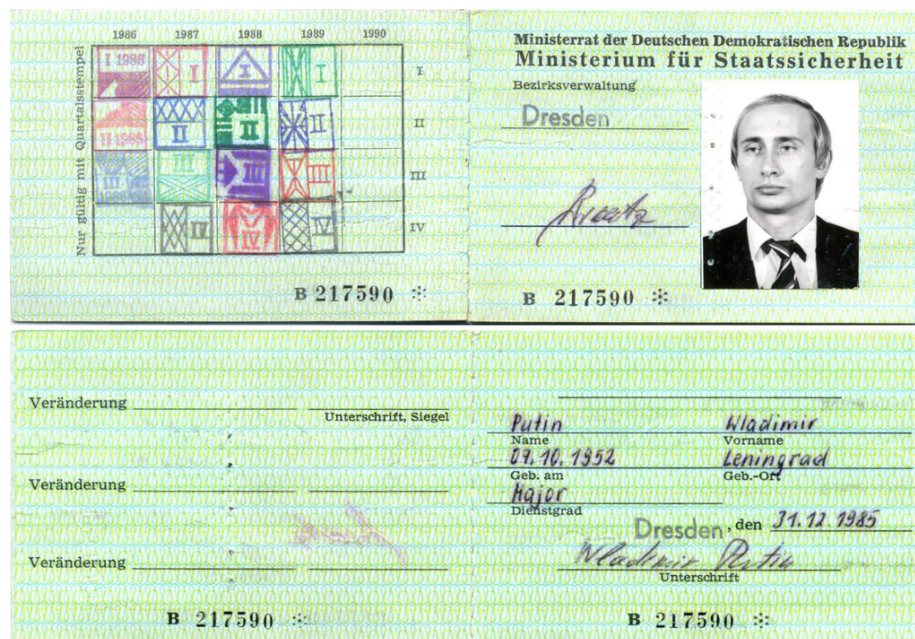


Vova was born October 7, 1952 in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad). His grandfather was personal cook to both Lenin and Stalin. His younger brothers both died before his birth, one of whom died of starvation during the Nazi occupation of Leningrad in 1942.

Vova's father was conscripted to the Russian navy, even serving with the NKVD in their "internal security" department. At age 12, he began studying judo and reading Karl Marx, Lenin and Friedrich Engels. He still speaks German as a second language.

He joined the Communist Party while in college (1970-75) and even became friends with Anatoly Sobchak who wrote the Russian constitution in 1993.

Vova joined the KGB in 1975, with rumors he served undercover (read: was a spy) in New Zealand for a period of time before working undercover in Dresden from 1985-1990 as a "translator" (read: a spy).



After the collapse of the Communist East German government, Vova resigned from the KGB under suspicions he wasn't so mad about the democratic uprisings in East Germany. He moved back to Leningrad to work on his doctorate with Sobchak. He eventually fully resigned from the military during the August 1991 coup attempt on Gorbachev, claiming he disagreed with the aggressors.

1990-1995, Vova worked in the administration of then St. Petersburg mayor, Sobchak, including in external affairs. After Sobchak lost reelection, Vova moved to Moscow where he worked several positions in Boris Yeltsin's government, including deputy chief of the Presidential Staff.

In 1999, when Yeltsin suddenly resigned, Vova became Acting President of Russia, eventually winning election in 2000 and re-election in 2004.

There were quite a few scandals during his first two terms, including accusations of financial “inconsistencies” (read: he was stealing money while working for Sobchak in St. Petersburg), arresting political opponents, and the assassination of several journalists.

Barred from running again in 2008, Vova appointed himself Premier of Russia, serving until 2012, when he would become President yet again.

Vlad Putin has always been corrupt, using his various political positions to enrich himself, enrich his allies, and do anything to keep hold of his power. This would include, allegedly, the assassination of dissenting voices, poisoning of political opponents, and owning a \$700,000,000 yacht while also owning several other multi-million-dollar vessels of aquatic travel.

He’s the first Russian to be awarded the 8th dan of black belt in martial arts. Whatever that means.

He’s terrible at hockey.

He’s short, opportunistic, incredibly insecure, and reminds me a bit of Nikolai Yezhov in a lot of ways.

SCRIPT NOTES

5 - VOVA: “Male, aged 71. Cause of death: Heart Attack.”

“A prisoner female paramedic from Zhytomyr, Matrina Gnienna, told how she was repeatedly called to prisoners who had been tortured during the investigation. The NKVD activists forced her to write out a false death certificate each time, in which she had to write that the prisoner had died of a heart attack or other disease.” - Institute of National Remembrance, Poland.

6 - NIKOLAI: Babel, I. Correspondent. YugROSTA. Wire Service.

This was Babel’s assignment with the southern section of the national wire service, in which he covered the 1st Calvary Army during the Polish-Russo War.

9 - NIKOALI: ... So, a man was killed today in Zhitomir.

Zhytomr is a city just west of Kyiv in Ukraine. In 1920, it came under Russian rule. It was one of the cities recently bombed by Russia during their most recent invasion.

10 - NIKOLAI: There are never enough cigarettes.

In 1917, Lenin, who abhorred smoking, began a campaign to limit the production and use of cigarettes in all of Russia. (Funnily, bathrooms were the only places you were allowed to smoke, causing quite a bit of overcrowding in Russian bathrooms.)

14 - ISSAC: They have leech soup.

No. They don’t.

34 - "Subversive":

Seeking to disrupt an established system.

34 - NIKOLAI: Things are going to become very difficult for writers.

The Great Purge (see "Nikolai Yezhov" above)

35 - NIKOLAI: Never confess.

Babel "confessed" after three days.

According to Babel's 2nd wife (common law), Antonina Pirozhkova, this was actually the advice given to Babel by Genrikh G. Yagoda, who told Babel, "Deny everything, whatever the charges, just say no and keep saying no. If one denies everything, we are powerless." Yagoda was replaced by Yezhov and killed.

39 - Babel was married to Yevgenia at this time. Yevgenia moved to Paris with their daughter, never to return to Moscow.

41 - ISAAC: You play ... Daria. You are speaking to Gashpar ...

These are not characters in any of Babel's published plays.

50 - NIKOALI: What is your cover?

VOVA: Translator and interpreter.

This was, indeed, Putin's cover in Dresden. (see above)

52 - VOVA: Doing judo.

Putin is known to have been practicing judo and sambo (Russian wrestling) since he was 12.

55 - Putin was not born in a brothel in Moscow, but in Leningrad to two parents, including his father who was a veteran of the NKVD.

59 - Era headphones:



63 - URZULA: Babcia, he doesn't want any Qureshi.

"Babcia" means Grandma. ("Bahb-chya")

Qureshi is a leech soup that does not exist. ("Kur-reh-shee")

89 - ISAAC: These are stories I wrote about my hometown of Odessa!

Odessa Stories is a collection that does, in fact, include stories of gangsters in his hometown.

92 - ISAAC: We will teach her the Russian preparation of tea.

Russians didn't drink their tea by itself, adorning it with sweets, usually with sugar, lemon, jam, orange juice, syrup or cakes.

95 - VOVA: ... Fluent in German, English and Chinese.

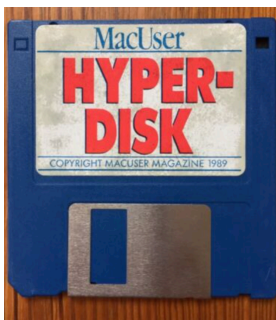
There is no record of Putin being fluent in Chinese.

95 - VOVA: ... I hear Sochi is nice.

Sochi is a Russian coastal town on the Black Sea, on the southeast corner of Russia. It's very much the Miami of Russia. Sochi hosted the 2014 Winter Olympics. It is roughly 700 miles southwest of Odessa.

Not far from Sochi, to the north, is the famed "Putin Palace," a billion-dollar personal residence that has been at the center of many of the corruption charges against the Russian president. It is 190,424 square feet.

96 - Floppy disk:



97 - NIKOLAI: ... This is why we built our wall in Berlin.

The Berlin Wall, built in 1961, was a 93-mile long wall that separated East Berlin from West Berlin and, ostensibly communist East Germany from democratic West Germany. It's fall in 1989 was a monumental symbol of the fall of communism, uniting Germany once again.

97 - NIKOLAI: ... it was about Gorbachev ... and his childish progressive notions of Glasnost!

Gorbachev was the Russian leader, in various capacities, from 1985 - 1991. He ushered in social democracy and opened up a new era of transparency for the Russian government - and Russian foreign relations - using "Glasnost" as the slogan of the renewed policy of openness.

111 - VOVA: ... a monster named Nikolai Yezhova, proclaimed that "It would be better that ten innocent men die than one traitor go free" ...

The phrase "It is better that ten guilty persons escape than that one innocent suffer" is often referred to as Blackstone's ratio, and attributed to the great jurist William Blackstone in his Commentaries. This dates from the 1760s. But it isn't original to Blackstone. In 1692, the New England minister Increase Mather wrote, "It were better that Ten Suspected Witches should escape, than that one Innocent Person should be Condemned." In that situation, the phrase was directed to the government officials regarding the Salem witch trials, urging the rejection of spectral evidence.

113 - VOVA: You work for the Gazeta!

The Novaya Gazeta ("New Gazette") is an independent Russian newspaper that began operations in 1993. Published out of Moscow, the paper is known for its investigative and critical coverage of the Russian government. Seven Gazeta journalists have been assassinated since 2000. <https://novayagazeta.eu/en>

(To note: "Following the start of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, editor-in-chief Dmitry Muratov stated that the newspaper would publish an edition in both Russian and Ukrainian in solidarity. On 4 March 2022, the newspaper said it would remove materials and cut reporting on the war, after receiving an official warning from Roskomnadzor (Russian bureau overseeing mass media). It published materials from occupied Kherson and other Ukrainian cities. On 28 March, the newspaper announced that it would suspend its online and print activities until the end of the "special military operation" after it received another warning from Roskomnadzor. - [Reuters, March 28, 2022](#)

117 - MARIYA: I don't like Nazis, but they didn't ... It was Russia. Gorbachev admitted as much ...

The USSR claimed the Nazis had killed the victims, and it continued to deny responsibility for the massacres until 1990, when it officially acknowledged and condemned the killings by the NKVD, as well as the subsequent cover-up by the Soviet government.

117 - VOVA: I have been looking for it for twenty-one years.

1989.