Anna Seidel*

How to narrate urbicides? Lidija Ginzburg’s and Miron Białoszewski’s portrayals of urban destruction

Abstract: Cities are relationally produced social spaces and in constant flux due to the ever-changing everyday spatial practices that produce and condition them. At the same time, they can become concepts abstracted into symbolic, monolithic ideas, pawns in political or historiographic narratives. Consequently, their death or survival in states of exception can become a substitute for the victorious or unsuccessful struggle for certain values or political orders. In this article, I explore how such symbolic connotations of death or survival of a city relate to the concrete experience of losing personal urban spaces and communities and how this interrelation can be represented in literature. In two case studies, Lidija Ginzburg’s Notes from the Blockade (1984) and Miron Białoszewski’s A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising (1970), I show how literary texts have the potential to turn away from an abstracting view on cities and how they show the complexity of urban life in a state of exception. Consequently, I demonstrate how Ginzburg’s and Białoszewski’s texts narrate the death of a city not as the death of a specific concept, but as an irreversible loss of concrete urban spaces and practices, bringing to the fore the relational aspect of urban space and its decay. Implying such a relational understanding of urban space, these texts constitute apt representations of urbicides – a term which also presupposes the Lefebvrean notion of space being a relational product of building fabric, spatial practice and symbolic spatial attributions. The article thus shows how both Ginzburg’s and Białoszewski’s texts, through their specific perspectivization and narrative structure, subvert the institutional, abstracting memory discourses about the events they address by focusing on the concrete, subjective experience of spatial alienation during the Blockade of Leningrad and the Warsaw Uprising.

Keywords: urbicide; literary space; Blockade of Leningrad; Warsaw Uprising; relational spatial theories; Miron Białoszewski; Lidija Ginzburg.

Cities constitute areas of high population density, social centers “where

* Humboldt-Universität; Germany.
people walk around, find themselves standing before and inside piles of objects, experience the intertwining of the threads of their activities” (Lefebvre, *Urban Revolution* 39). They are spaces which are in a constant state of flux due to the everchanging everyday spatial practices they generate and condition. At the same time, they can be abstracted into static concepts, “totalizing and almost mythical landmark[s] for socioeconomic and political strategies” (de Certeau 95). Then, everyday urban life recedes into the background and the city becomes a pawn in political or historiographical narratives, a symbol of specific values, the city’s death or survival in warlike states of exception a substitute for the victorious or unsuccessful struggle for those very ideals.

But how do such symbolic connotations of a city’s death or survival relate to the concrete experience of losing personal urban spaces and communities? And how can the latter be represented in literature, a medium that uses language as a means of expression, that is, a sign system that translates empirical reality into an artistically ordered, linguistic construct and often itself resorts to abstracting stylistic devices? In this article, I address these very questions by analyzing the literary representations of two uricides, namely of Leningrad and Warsaw during World War II. Based on relational theories of urban space, I trace the possibilities of literature to represent the death of the city between its symbolic meaning and concrete experienceability, using two case studies: Lidija Ginzburg’s *Notes from the Blockade* and Miron Białoszewski’s *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising*.

**Introduction: Remembering Urbicides**

Although military and political violence against cities is far from a recent phenomenon, the term ‘urbicide’ is a relatively new one. It was coined by science fiction writer Michael Moorcock in the 1960s (Etaywe 65), then adopted in the field of U.S.-related urban planning in the 1980s, when it was used to criticize the highly invasive nature of urban planning decisions (Herscher 18; Henckel 400-1).

About a decade later, in the 1990s, the term was contextualized differently, when the destruction of Sarajevo during the Bosnian War, which according to

---

24 As Awni Etaywe and Robert Bevan rightly point out, cities were a target of military violence already in Roman antiquity, when the Romans demolished the entire city of Jerusalem and Carthage (Etaywe 65; Bevan 31).
historians could and can be seen as a systematic annihilation of multicultural urban heritage (Calic 131; Kebo 297), was classified as an urbicide. This gave the term a slightly different level of meaning, as it now focused less on decisions made by urban planners, but on the systematic destruction of cities during military conflicts (Henckel 404-5; Coward). In the course of this recontextualization, the term was also applied to describe past urban destructions, especially those during World War II – a war in which a new system of warfare emerged aimed at the eradication of the foundations of urban social life (Henckel 410). Events, such as the Warsaw Uprising and the Blockade of Leningrad were thus classified as urbicides only recently, which also, in my opinion, is related to the way these events were commemorated on an institutional level – an aspect, to which I will return shortly.

In both definitions of the term, however, it denotes an active, destructive intervention in the material structure of the city and in what Martina Löw calls the urban "Eigenlogik" (77), namely a routinized practice that emerges at a specific urban site in relation to historical events, material products, cultural practices, and economic or political figurations. Urbicides therefore imply the destruction of, or at least the aim to destroy, not only the city’s building fabric, but also its spatial symbolisms as well as the spatial practices of its inhabitants. Urbicides, thus, as Andrew Herscher sums up, pose as "the target of destruction […] the city itself – as an ensemble of architecture, a community of citizens, a medium of collective memory, or even the site of civilization as such" (18). Consequently, the term entails a relational understanding of space, as introduced by the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre, who defines space as a product of the interaction of three spatial moments: the conceived, experienced, and lived space, meaning building fabric, spatial practice, and spatial symbolic attributions (Lefebvre, Production of Space 38-9).

The official memory narratives about the Blockade of Leningrad and the Warsaw Uprising, however, rarely consider this relational dimension of destroyed urbanity. They are marked by a tendency to abstract the respective cities and transform them into static symbols of a nation’s death or struggle for independence, and less as urbicides, a term that implies an understanding of the city as a multilayered, fluid spatial creation, or, as Lefebvre would call it, "perpetual œuvre and act" (Lefebvre, Writings on Cities 106). Rather, these memory narratives generate, as another French sociologist, Michel de Certeau, writes, “fiction[s] that [create] readers, [make] the complexity of the city readable,
and [immobilize] its opaque mobility in a transparent text” (92). They take a bird’s-eye perspective on the city, turn it into an abstract concept and either disregard the actual, concrete everyday life of individuals living in an urban state of exception or homogenize it into one common experience.

The destruction of Leningrad during the Blockade of the city between 1941-1944, for example, was embedded in an institutionalized memory narrative that abstracted the city’s population into a homogenous entity, which, as a monolithic Hero City, bravely fought the German troops by staying and continuing life in the besieged city (De Bruyn and De Dobbeleer 59). Later, the event also became an important set piece in the overall heroic narrative of the Great Patriotic War in the Soviet Union, although the everyday reality of the city’s inhabitants had been precarious, as around 750,000 people died, mainly of hunger and cold (Reid 497; Bidlack and Lomagin 1), with confirmed cases of cannibalism, theft, and murder.

The same applies to Warsaw. Memory narratives about the Warsaw Uprising of 1944 stylized and still stylize Warsaw as a city that fought as a unified entity against the German (and Soviet) enemy and offered its inhabitants as sacrifices for specific abstract ideas, such as the nation or even, as Tzvetan Todorov argues, the whole civilized world:

It is a question of saving not the people of Warsaw but the idea of Warsaw, not individual Poles or Polish territory but an abstraction called Poland. [...] But even Poland the abstraction is not always enough; Poland must itself be offered up to an even more distant ideal – that of the West, which, in its turn, comes to stand for civilization, or even ‘humanity.’ The Russians are the forces of barbarism and Poland the last line of defense against them. Thus it becomes possible to sacrifice the lives of any number of people in the name of defending humanity. (7-8)

This “master narrative” (De Bruyn and De Dobbeleer 56) that sublimates the city’s death into national martyrdom dominates Uprising-related memory politics until today, finding its most obvious manifestation in the permanent exhibition of the Museum of the Warsaw Uprising in Warsaw (Kobielska 323-41). But the narrative does not remain unquestioned, as the city’s inhabitants had and indeed still have quite ambivalent views regarding the decision to conduct the
An abstracting perspective on Warsaw during the Uprising and Leningrad during the Blockade is also evident in literary texts about the two events. For example, many Soviet authors refrained from discussing the Blockade altogether, since the depiction of any military weakness and a lack of emphasis on the political and military abilities of the Soviet leadership would have had direct personal consequences (McMillin 20). Others bowed to the genre imperative for Blockade texts that had evolved, which demanded the creation of autobiographical testimonies and a rejection of literary fictionalization techniques (Schmid 268). Regarding the Warsaw Uprising, on the other hand, a different genre imperative dominated for a long time. As Maria Janion notes, based on the Polish Romantic tradition, a literary commonplace developed that emphasized the political-military dimension, fetishizing the Uprising as a fight of absolute good (the insurgents) against absolute evil (the occupiers) (155).

Against this background, Lidija Ginzburg’s Notes from the Blockade and Miron Białoszewski’s A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising constitute texts that break with existing literary traditions. Ginzburg fictionalizes and thereby depersonalizes her individual experiences during the Blockade. Białoszewski, on the other hand, leaves out everything political and institutional and relentlessly describes civilian everyday life in a disappearing, dying city during the Warsaw Uprising. In the following, however, I will pay less attention to these aspects and interpretations, since they have already been sufficiently addressed by other scholars (Thun-Hohenstein; Janion; Bojarska; Van Buskirk). Rather, I will focus on the analysis of the representations of (destroyed) space in the texts, an aspect which has been largely neglected so far, and examine whether these spatial representations imply a perspective that understands the city as a relational product of building fabric, spatial practice, and symbolic attributions or one that, like the corresponding official memory narratives, comprehends it as a homogeneous, static entity.

---

25 This ambivalent view on the Uprising is pointed out not least by Białoszewski himself when he writes: “Some women were cursing out some partisans who happened to be passing by. Because of what they had done” (Białoszewski, Memoir 68) [“Jakieś baby wymysłały jakimś przypadkowym powstańcom. O to, co oni w ogóle narobili” (Białoszewski, Pamiętnik 67)].
Miron Białoszewski’s *A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising: Urban Space and its Concrete Experienceability*

*A Memoir of the Warsaw Uprising* by the Polish writer Miron Białoszewski was published in 1970 and, at the time of its publication, it provoked controversy because, unlike literary representations of the event until then, it completely ignored the military dimension of the Uprising. Instead, it adopted a purely civilian perspective on the events. Moreover, the text was perceived as subversive on a linguistic level, as it was written in colloquial language and thus broke with the highly literary style common in Polish literature (Janion 16; Bojarska 41).

However, looking at the representations of urban space(s) in the text, another subversive aspect becomes apparent. In contrast to the military-centered memory narratives, which stylize Warsaw as a homogenized entity and thereby suggest that a general Uprising experience exists, Białoszewski’s text implies a deeply subjectivized perception of space. The narrator emphasizes this when he writes: “I was not in Mokotów nor in Żoliborz. Others were. They survived or they didn’t survive. Those who experienced their own emotions, hells, and reality there know what it was like. And have already described it.” (Białoszewski, *Memoir* 220) Consequently, the aim of the text is neither to generate an overview of all events and experiences during the Uprising, nor to create a kind of pars pro toto Uprising text. Rather, it focuses on the individual urban experience and constantly reflects on it as such, resulting in a specific perspective on space that narrates it not in an abstract way but in its concrete experienceability.

This perspective becomes particularly evident in the constant references to what is beneath the narrator’s feet: At the beginning of each episode, these are mostly the typical Warsaw “[c]obblestones” (Białoszewski, *Memoir* 94), the “kocie łby” (Białoszewski, *Pamiętnik* 226). Later, descriptions of “[j]agged fragments, earth, obstacles underfoot” (Białoszewski, *Memoir* 201) become more frequent. Finally, when leaving Warsaw after the end of the Uprising, the ground changes again when “tracks under foot” (241) are described. In the end, the narrator no longer knows what is under his feet: “Under our feet, who knows what” (241). This shift from frequent references to the familiar Warsaw cobblestones to conceding that the ground beneath one’s feet is entirely unfamiliar not only illustrates the text’s individual-centered spatial perspective, but also marks the narrator’s final alienation from a city he had previously known so well.
The autobiographical narrator thus not only figuratively, but literally describes the vanishing city from below, making the subjective perspective as well as the resulting concrete spatial experience the spatial-aesthetic program of his Memoir. He rejects objective, abstracting notions of Warsaw that are the focus of memory politics and literary Uprising narratives. Rather, he presents urban space as something that cannot be surveyed from above but must be experienced and remembered individually and from below.

Lidija Ginzburg’s Notes from the Blockade: Echoing the Collective in the Individual

In Notes from the Blockade, first published in 1984, by the Russian writer and literary scholar Lidija Ginzburg, there is a different spatial perspectivization, namely one that oscillates between a collective and individual experience of the city. N, the text’s protagonist, serves as the paradigm of this textual characteristic. As a “conventional composite” (Ginzburg, Notes 31), N is introduced as an individual who can draw on a unique experience of everyday life in besieged Leningrad, and simultaneously as pars pro toto for all Leningraders who stayed in the city during the Blockade.

This oscillation between an individual and collective perspective on urban space is also manifested in the positioning of the subject between an individual ‘I’ and a collective ‘we’. Ginzburg’s text frequently alternates between these two, thereby addressing both the singular and collective Blockade experience. In places, it even depersonalizes the narration by using ‘people’ (люди) or ‘man’ (человек) as subjects, as in this quote: „In their apartments people battled for life, like perishing polar explorers . . . The typical siege day would begin with a man going into the kitchen or onto the dark staircase to chop the daily ration of splinters and small pieces of wood for the little stove.“ (Ginzburg, Notes 54-5) The subject in Ginzburg’s Notes thus oscillates between a collective and individual, on the one hand, and an identifiable and impersonal, general subject, on the other.

In fact, Ginzburg’s text even suggests a subordination of the individual to the collective during the Blockade. The narrator states: “Moreover, the individual was subsumed into the group, into the typical reactions of the various strata of the population to the food tragedy” (Ginzburg, Notes 151). This abstraction of the individual experience into a collective one manifests itself also in a substitution of Leningrad’s inhabitants with composites, resulting in a kind of bird’s-eye view on the city. “In April” it is, for example, not the Leningraders but “the city [that] disinterred its tramlines” (131). Thus, the inhabitants become, just as in the
institutional memory narrative, a monolithic mass that collectively participates in the “common purpose” (31), namely in resisting the German enemy by maintaining everyday life in the city.

And yet the text also depicts individual fates and singular experiences, sometimes supporting the typification implicit to the master narrative of the Hero City, and sometimes contradicting it. It combines the description of a general Blockade experience with anecdotes of specific people, who, although named only with abbreviations, are nevertheless described as concrete individuals, as can be well understood in “the story of M., a middle-aged woman” (Ginzburg, Notes 96). M. is a typist, whose experience is taken as an example of the absurdities of continuing to work during the siege. Even though the reader never learns M.’s full name, M. is not substitutable, her story remains a very concrete, personal one. Emily Van Buskirk interprets this aspect most aptly when she writes that the text shows how in Notes the experience of each individual has historical relevance, but, at the same time, it is unimportant who exactly this individual is (304). In this sense, it is true, as Franziska Thun-Hohenstein notes, that the autobiographical I in Ginzburg’s text depersonalizes his/her own individuality (71). However, he/she does so only to gather the experiences of multiple individuals into a singular, cohesive text. Ginzburg thus creates a holistic, polyphonic structure out of many individual set pieces (Ramdas 225). Thereby, she reveals the complementary character of the individual and collective urban experience and makes it visible on a material level by merging disconnected notes into a coherent textual structure.

A correlation between the individual and collective experience of the city is also foregrounded through the repetition of certain episodes, when first a generalized version of a situation is narrated, followed by a corresponding individual anecdote. This narrative technique is already introduced in the first paragraph of the text. It begins with the description of the collective practice of reading Tolstoy’s War and Peace during the blockade using ‘we’ and ends with a repetition of the same practice in singular:

During the war years, people used to read War and Peace avidly, comparing their own behaviour with it . . . The reader would say to himself: right, I’ve got the proper feeling about this. So then, this is how it should be. Whoever had energy enough to read, used to read War and Peace avidly in besieged Leningrad. (Ginzburg, Notes 30)
In the original Russian text, the oscillation between collectivity and individuality becomes even more obvious. The first sentence of the paragraph says „В годы войны люди жадно читали ‘Войну и мир’“, whilst the paragraph concludes with the sentence: „Кто был в силах читать, жадно читал ‘Войну и мир’ в блокадном Ленинграде“ (Ginzburg, Zapiski 311). The parallelization of “жадно читали ‘Войну и мир’” and “жадно читал ‘Войну и мир’” performs a kind of echo of the collective in the individual and thereby introduces the idea of the abstract, collective and the concrete, individual Blockade experience being each other’s complements already at the very beginning of the text.

Ginzburg’s Notes, thus, does not openly oppose the institutional narrative of the Hero City, for the text does not negate the existence of a certain common Blockade experience. But, through its specific perspective, it demonstrates that this shared experience implies differences. Notes thereby turns away from an abstract notion of Leningrad as a heroic ideal and show a spectrum of concrete spatial experiences of the city.

**Concretizing Abstractions: Representing the Irreversibility of Urbicides**

Both texts, Białoszewski’s *Memoir* and Ginzburg’s *Notes*, thus, move away from taking (only) an abstracting view of the city. Białoszewski does so maybe even more radically than Ginzburg by constantly focusing on the personal, individual perspective. Ginzburg, on the other hand, points to the complementary character of the individual and the collective urban experience. Both, however, place a focus on the concrete, heterogeneous experience of space in the context of spatial destruction and thereby subvert the abstracting, mythologizing narratives about the Blockade of Leningrad and the Warsaw Uprising.

Moreover, both texts find diverse ways to reflect the spatial alienation evoked by the cities’ destruction in their narrative structure. In Białoszewski’s *Memoir*, the movement of the autobiographical narrator Miron from one district to the next results in a spatial spiral that moves between order and normality on the one hand, and chaos and destruction on the other (see Fig. 1).
Figure 1: Helical narrative structure in Białoszewski’s Memoir

Miron always stays in one district until it is too dangerous. As soon as he leaves that district, however, and finds himself in a safer one, the next spiral circle pointing towards destruction begins. Using this helical structure, the text illustrates the transformation of urban space from its former nature, symbolic valence and corresponding practice to the loss of just that, with its climax coming after the Uprising’s capitulation, evident in the description of Miron’s and his friend Swen’s walk through the city:

Only Swen and I went farther, to the square, to Szpitalna and, via some other street, left to Jasna . . . Ruins after ruins. Mounds after mounds. I don’t know what we expected. After all, it was known, I think, that these stubs of Krucza or Wilcza – were just that and nothing more. But still something here and there – half a building, one and a half buildings. So that they no longer held any meaning. (Białoszewski, Memoir 225)

Swen and Miron realize that the remains of the city are no longer relevant to their practice. They walk the streets, or what is left of them, but they cannot integrate the remaining building fabric into a new practice or spatial order. The buildings and streets have lost their “meaning” and, with it, the city its specific practice and urbanity, its “Eigenlogik” (Löw 77).
Figure 2: Spatiotemporal Structure in Ginzburg’s Notes

In Ginzburg’s text, in turn, there is a three-part spatiotemporal division between the pre-Blockade period, also referred to as “former life” (Ginzburg, Notes 185), the Blockade winter of 1941/42, and the “respite” (147), meaning the spring that follows (see Fig. 2). Based on this spatiotemporal triad, the urbanity of besieged Leningrad is depicted in an oscillating relationship between old and new, known and unknown, which not only makes the urbanity during the Blockade appear as something foreign but makes this urbanity perceptible at all. Moreover, the triad functions as a means of connecting the fragmented spaces of the note-like text, as it is used to contextualize and contrast elements of urban space between the specific spatiotemporal levels. This narrative technique can be well understood, when the narrator describes the meaning of N’s furniture as trapped in an oscillatory relationship between the three spatiotemporal levels, transforming the respite into a liminal period between the state of exception of the Blockade winter and a pre-war normality:

Things and gestures intersected, belonging as they did to different planes . . . That winter in the enveloping chaos it seemed that the vase and even the bookshelves – were something in the nature of the Pogankino Palace or the ruins of the Colosseum, in that now they would never have any practical

26 “от передышки” (Ginzburg, Zapiski 316); in the English translation of the text this period is sometimes also referred to as “breathing space” (Ginzburg, Notes 49).
significance again . . . Later on, things began slowly to return to their significance . . . [N] had scarcely read anything yet, but now the shelves . . . were suggesting they should carry out their function once more. (Ginzburg, Notes 49)

Here, the respite is described as a gradual return to normality in which the practice of the winter months no longer exists but is not yet completely obsolete either. To illustrate this liminality, Ginzburg employs a spatial metaphor that implies visual obfuscation on the one hand, and permeability on the other: she refers to the aftermath of the spatial experience during the Blockade winter as a “dystrophic haze” (Ginzburg, Notes 152), which does not allow urban practice and spatiality to return to normal. According to Ginzburg’s notes, the Blockade person cannot get rid of this haze, and, in fact, remains trapped in it, even after the Blockade:

Perhaps [the Blockade person] will again be able to sit in a restaurant after lunch, morose after a too-ample meal, which has induced a mood of cheerlessness and a disinclination to work. Perhaps while waiting for the bill, his eye lights on the bread basket, with its dark and white slices. And this almost untouched bread galvanizes his dulled brain with a shudder of recollection. (Ginzburg, Notes 188)

Consequently, the respite is not simply a pause, but rather an infinitely expanding state of trauma.

Both texts, on the level of their narrative structure, thus indicate an irreversibility of the respective urbicide: Ginzburg’s Notes through spatio-temporal fragmentation, pointing to a trauma that cannot be overcome; Białoszewski’s Memoir through an urbicidal spiral, which points not only to the destruction of the city’s building fabric and symbolic order, but ultimately to the dissolution of an urban community.

By being less concerned with a symbolic, abstracting interpretation of the events they describe, neither of the texts creates a “fiction that makes the complexity of the city readable, and immobilizes its opaque mobility” (92), as de Certeau states. Rather, both texts try to show the complexity of urban life in a state of exception, both in their specific perspectivization and structure. In doing so, the two texts represent breaks not only with existing literary traditions, but
Disaster Discourse: Representations of Catastrophe (I)

also with the abstracting way of representation implied by their respective memory narratives. They subvert the official memory discourses of these cities by seeking to reanimate the concrete perception of space and by showing the heterogeneity of urban experiences. Thus, they represent the death of the cities not as the death of specific concepts, but as urbicides, demonstrating the irreversible loss not of an idea, but of concrete urban spaces and practices, thereby bringing to the fore the relational aspect of urban life and its decay.

Works Cited:


