



Nina Kosterina was born in a revolutionary camp as the Bolsheviks took over Russia in 1920s. She beat the odds of survival during the harsh early years and emerged in the 1930s as a young Communist woman in love with her country, her family, her city, her friends, politics, art and life. Even when Joseph Stalin's regime tore apart her family and imprisoned her father, she remained loyal to her country and joined an elite group of young women turned guerilla soldiers when the Germans invaded Russia in 1941. Nina perished in a Nazi ambush behind enemy lines. After the war, her family found her diary hidden in a wardrobe. Years later, the diary was released as a book and became an international bestseller. Written from ages 15 to 20, the diary revealed a teenager transforming into an adult juxtaposed against one of the most dangerous and tumultuous periods in world history.

Nina accepted a life without many of the freedoms taken for granted in other places and eras, and she faced extraordinary circumstances with intelligence and courage. She privately chronicled her teen years at the heart of a fascinating and frightening political era while living within walking distance of one of the world's most brutal dictators. And she strove to do her best even while struggling with friendship, romance, family, nationalism and patriotism.

Nina's biography opens a window into 1920s and 1930s Russia through the eyes of someone who considered herself just an "ordinary girl."

## Discussion Questions

*It felt like Nina had a front seat to critical historical events throughout her short life.*

What's happened during your life so far that you or others might look back on and say the same?

*Journaling and keeping diaries is still popular today. In some cultures, it's a routine part of daily life.*

What's different about keeping a journal or diary today from when Nina was alive? How might release of a personal diary to the public differ?

*Nina, her family and other citizens were forced to find their courage if they were to successfully weather Russian life in the era covered by this biography.*

Have you had to tap your courage to stand up for your beliefs or survive a dangerous situation? How did it turn out and what did you learn?

*Nina never intended for her diary to be published and she truly saw herself as just a regular girl.*

What do you think? Was she an ordinary girl living through extraordinary times, or something more?



Early Soviet art and propoganda that factored into Nina's life have become collector's items. Some books and websites to check out:

- Cullerne Bown, Matthew. *Art Under Stalin*. New Jersey: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1991.
- Zander Rudenstine, Angelia. *Russian Avant-Garde Art: The George Costakis Collection*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1981.
- Gamburg Gallery, [www.russianart.dk](http://www.russianart.dk), select Exhibitions
- The State Tretyakov Gallery-The National Museum of Russian Fine Art, [www.tretyakovgallery.ru/en/](http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru/en/). Select the website's English version, go to Collection, then search by Periods, selecting "art from the first half of the XX century."

## A Few Suggested Links and Readings

### Stalinist Russia, World War II, Researching

- Ginsburg, Mirra (translator). *The Diary of Nina Kosterina*. Various editions released 1968-1973.
- Figes, Orlando. *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*. New York: Picador, 2008. Listen to a National Public Radio Weekend Edition interview with Figes about how citizens coped in Stalin's Russia at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17376494>.
- Oz, Tracey. Teacher Oz's Kingdom of History. *World War II. World War II First Person Accounts, Letters Home, Diaries, & Journals*, [http://www.teacheroz.com/WWII\\_Oral\\_History.htm](http://www.teacheroz.com/WWII_Oral_History.htm).
- DoHistory. <http://dohistory.org>. Includes interactive case study based on research for the book and film *A Midwife's Tale*, which both drew upon the 200-year-old diary of midwife/healer Martha Ballard. Learn basic skills and techniques for interpreting fragments that survive from any period in history. Site organizers: Film Study Center, Harvard University, and Center for History and New Media, George Mason University.

### Keeping Journals and Diaries

- <http://www.diaryproject.com> Managed by a non-profit organization, this web site encourages teens to write about their day-to-day experiences growing up. There are thousands of entries in 24 categories posted on the site.
- <http://www.your-life-your-story.com> (check out *How to Tell*, *Research is Fun* and *Articles* sections)
- [www.journalforyou.com](http://www.journalforyou.com) (helpful articles on homepage and in archives)