Russia Eternal: Recalling The Imperial Era In Late- And Post-Soviet Literature And Culture

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Abstract
The return of Tsarist buildings, narratives and symbols has been a prominent facet of social life in post-Soviet Russia. My dissertation aims to explain this phenomenon and its meaning by tracking contemporary Russia's cultural memory of the Imperial era. By close-reading both popular and influential cultural texts, as well as analyzing their conditions of production and reception, I show how three generations of Russian cultural elites from the 1950s until today have used Russia's past to fight present-day political battles, and outline how the cultural memory of the Imperial epoch continues to inform post-Soviet Russian leaders and their mainstream detractors. Chapters One and Two situate the origin of Russian culture's current engagement with the pre-Revolutionary era in the social dynamic following Stalin's death in 1953. I first discuss how the pre-Soviet past was inherited by the post-Stalin liberal elites and amplified by the expansion of a mass 'technical intelligentsia,' the burgeoning of media, and the growth of political and affective links between the educated masses and the cultural elites who would represent them. I then examine how late Soviet conservatives used the pre-Soviet past to dispute the liberal hegemony and to forge anti-liberal alliances with state power. Chapter Three shows how the memory of the late Imperial era and its Revolutionary terminus has informed the capitalist, liberal-conservative 'homo faber' rhetoric of the anti-Soviet intelligentsia coalition that brought first Yeltsin and then Putin to power, and legitimated an undemocratic and increasingly repressive post-Soviet state. Chapter Four examines several vectors of a more thoroughly liberal humanist counter-discourse on the pre-Soviet past. I claim that this counter-discourse was always productively skeptical of Soviet liberal and conservative models of historical inheritance, and that it arose simultaneously with the Perestroika and proceeded to reappear for two decades, though more in a potential, rather than a fully articulated way. I conclude by suggesting that in the wake of the 2011-2012 mass protests, the pre-Soviet past has lost its consensus appeal, indicating the end of a sixty-year-long Russian discursive trend and the beginning of a new, more future-oriented form of mainstream liberal politics.

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RUSSIA ETERNAL:
RECALLING THE IMPERIAL ERA
IN LATE- AND POST- SOVIET LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Pavel Khazanov

A DISSERTATION
In Comparative Literature and Literary Theory

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

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Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2017

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RUSSIA ETERNAL:

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IN LATE- AND POST- SOVIET LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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Pavel Khazanov

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In memory of my grandfather Yakov Khazanov (1922-2017), who answered every question and always expected me to ask more.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The initial inspiration for this dissertation took place in Rossen Djagalov’s and Kevin Platt’s seminar on contemporary Russian culture. One of the readings from that course, Ludmila Ulitskaya’s “Queen of Spades” made it into the present manuscript. The other major brainstorm moment took place on the sidelines of “After Censorship, Before Freedom,” a workshop on post-Soviet literature at Princeton University in 2014—special thanks to Serguei Oushakine for inviting me to participate in this event and others, all of which were extremely productive for my work. Kevin could not have been a better supervisor and mentor all these years. I am also very grateful to Mark Lipovetsky and Ilya Vinitsky for serving on my committee on this project. Additionally, Gabriel Rockhill’s suggestions at the prospectus stage greatly helped crystalize my thinking. Thanks to the presenters, discussants and organizers at ASEEES and AATSEEL over the last few years, where I tried out arguments for this dissertation: Maria Sidorkina, Fabrizio Fenghi, Jane Sharp, Irina Anisimova, Beach Gray, Nancy Condee and Chloë Kitzinger. Thanks also to Sibelan Forrester for inviting me to speak about What? Where? When?—much of the material for that lecture ended up shaping Chapter Four of this dissertation. A special shout-out to Hammam Aldouri, who has served as a philosophical therapist for this project over the course of the last year, when the argument of the dissertation was finalized. The Mellon Council for European Studies graciously funded the dissertation during my last year of graduate school. Julia Verkholantsev, Peter Holquist, Ben Nathans, Maria Alley, Peter Steiner, Emily Wilson, Mitchell Ornstein and Alina Yakubova provided enormous support, advice and patience during my graduate career.

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Gabriela Caroline Kattan Khazanov gets a special line. I think you know why.

Noemi too.

But the last line goes to my grandfather. May his memory be a blessing.
ABSTRACT

RUSSIA ETERNAL:
RECALLING THE IMPERIAL ERA

IN LATE- AND POST- SOVIET LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Pavel Khazanov
Kevin M. F. Platt

The return of Tsarist buildings, narratives and symbols has been a prominent facet of social life in post-Soviet Russia. My dissertation aims to explain this phenomenon and its meaning by tracking contemporary Russia’s cultural memory of the Imperial era. By close-reading both popular and influential cultural texts, as well as analyzing their conditions of production and reception, I show how three generations of Russian cultural elites from the 1950s until today have used Russia’s past to fight present-day political battles, and outline how the cultural memory of the Imperial epoch continues to inform post-Soviet Russian leaders and their mainstream detractors.

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I conclude by suggesting that in the wake of the 2011-2012 mass protests, the pre-Soviet past has lost its consensus appeal, indicating the end of a sixty-year-long Russian discursive trend and the beginning of a new, more future-oriented form of mainstream liberal politics.
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**General Introduction**

"Как в прошедшем грядущее зрет,
Так в грядущем прошлое тлеет
Страшный праздник мертвой листвы.

*Just as the future ripens in the past,
So too in the future, the past smolders
A frightful feast of fallen leaves.*

Anna Akhmatova, *Poem Without a Hero*¹

In the 1990s, the Tsarist double-headed eagle replaced the Communist hammer and sickle, and the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow replaced the world’s largest swimming pool. At the time, many Russian cultural and political elites celebrated the country’s return to ‘normalcy’ after a seventy-year-long Soviet utopian experiment that they perceived as having been misguided. This story of historical and political ‘normalization’ was just one of many narratives that were generated during this decade, as most ordinary Russians struggled to make sense of a reality in which the country’s basic social institutions were collapsing. ‘Normal’ social life never quite arrived in Russia, but the nineteenth century has maintained a privileged foothold in state imagery and mass culture. Today, Putin’s ideologists promote the pre-Revolutionary era as a glorious moment from Russia’s past. Meanwhile, many prominent opposition liberals continue to imagine social life in terms inherited from Tsarism, such as a ‘Westernizing’ intelligentsia, a despotic state, and the ‘folk’ (*narod*). The apparent longevity of such terms has led Russian cultural figures like the celebrity author Dmitry Bykov to claim that Russian history is a theatrical play set to repeat *ad nauseam.*² Bykov’s formulation indicates the need to look for origins of the ‘post-Soviet era’ long before the events of
1991. The precipitous fall of the USSR took place against a background of continuous Russian cultural processes that are still not fully understood. At the same time, as scholars of cultural history and as those who wish a better future for Russia we must insist that nothing in social life is ever fated or perennial. With that in mind, my dissertation aims to answer two broad questions: when did the Tsarist past start acquiring its present-day cultural value and authority? And how does the continuity of this cultural discourse underpin Russia’s post-Soviet social order and political institutions?

To begin to understand how the discourse on the pre-Soviet past took shape, it is necessary to understand the political matrix within which it has been operating over the course of Russia’s recent history. How should we define the ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ poles in this discourse, and what is their origin? How did Soviet ‘liberalism’ and ‘conservatism’ transform as a result of Gorbachev’s Perestroika and the advent of post-Soviet Russia? The task of this introduction is to clarify and give a historical overview of these definitional concepts, and also to show how a discourse on the pre-Soviet era influenced the formation of both Soviet and post-Soviet liberalism and conservatism.

My dissertation’s account begins in the 1950s, with destalinization. Until not so long ago, it was a mainstay of Soviet historiography, and with good reason, that Stalin’s death on March 5, 1953 initiated a process of ‘liberalization’ of the Soviet cultural sphere. Between the Leader’s burial and Khrushchev’s famous denouncement of Stalin’s “cult of personality” at his not so Secret Speech at the XX Party Congress in 1956 there transpired a number of very noticeable developments that gave everyone the unmistakable feeling of a new wind blowing in the Soviet Union. Even so, it was quite obvious to many people at the time that the change of tone in the immediately post-Stalin
Soviet public sphere had limits. More recently, there have been convincing arguments about the Secret Speech as an important part of the state’s post-Stalinist trajectory of enforcing those limits. Khrushchev’s performance crystallized what had de-facto already been Soviet discursive policy with respect to the “disavowal” of Stalin. The actual practice of the half-secret enunciation and dissemination of the Secret Speech inaugurated the complicated system of State-officiated silences and censorship that would go on to be part and parcel of destalinization throughout the 1960s and also more generally of Soviet practices of dealing with the Soviet past all the way until Perestroika.

Meanwhile, on the level of the Soviet state’s mechanisms of social control, as Oleg Kharkhordin has argued, post-Stalinist society was actually subjected to more effective and methodical state repressions than we have generally been led to believe. The veneer of society’s apparent liberalization hid beneath it complicated mechanisms of mutual surveillance, which were all the more effective due to their subtlety. Bearing in mind all of these caveats, ‘liberalization’ is still an important word for thinking about late Soviet culture, for at least three reasons: 1) due to the recommitment to liberal subjectivization practices in post-Stalinist cultural discourse; 2) due to the de facto liberalization of discursive power in late Soviet society; and 3) due to liberalization through consumer modernity, a trans-national post-War force that also penetrated Soviet boundaries.

Firstly, late Soviet cultural discourse liberalized in a humanistic sense of the term. As Jochen Hellbeck has argued, Stalinist culture had been characterized by a strong top-down and grassroots mass commitment to the forging of a new Soviet person with “Revolution on her mind,” and this person’s subjectivity was to be essentially “illiberal.” The ideal Stalin-era Soviet subject pursued a process of personal becoming that was
about merging all personal thoughts with the ‘general line.’ Unvocalizable depth of subjectivity was viewed as a threat to the Soviet project, and Soviet men and women sought to expurgate as much of that interiority as possible, by filling it up with the discourse of the Party. To be sure, this form of subjectivization did not actually reign supreme in Stalinist culture, which, due to its partially Thermidorian nature, was caught up in profound bad faith about its aims, and as a result ended up producing what Andrei Siniavsky coyly called the “half-classical half-art of (not particularly) socialist (and definitely not) realism.”\(^7\) Even so, illiberal subjectivization constituted the core of the image of a Stalinist.

In contrast, post-Stalinist culture was born out of the discourse of “sincerity,” which rejected the Stalinist form of illiberal subjectivization. This dynamic appeared as early as 1953, in Vladimir Pomerantsev’s bombshell *Novy mir* article, “On Sincerity in Literature,” which took Zhdanovite “conflictless” literature to task not so much for the poverty of its ideological content, but for the implausibility of its characters and its narration, in which “we do not feel the soul of the author […], we do not recognize his own thoughts. We are reading only that which is too well known, that which is not permeated by an emotional origin, and which is on top of that also fertilized with the protagonist’s cult of personality.”\(^8\) We can observe another powerful argument for post-Stalin liberal humanist subjectivity in the late 1950s writings of the early television critic Vladimir Sappak. Both Pomerantsev and Sappak offered models of subjects for emulation that were diametrically opposed to the kinds of ‘true Soviet men’ that abounded in officially sanctioned literature. Sappak, more explicitly than Pomerantsev, tied his anti-Stalinism to a commitment to humanist subjectivization according to a depth
model taken from Stanislavskian realist theater, in which genuine, honest people and television personalities would be expected to perform and project an unspoken “secondary plane,” carefully letting their audience in on the existence of emotional depth within their ‘souls,’ and thus assuring us of their humanity.⁹

Secondly, through the work of Claude Lefort, Alexei Yurchak and George Faraday we can observe how the death of Stalin initiated an implicit liberalization of discursive power in Soviet society. Using Lefort’s analysis of the “genesis of ideology” in totalitarian societies, Yurchak has argued that Stalin’s death initiated a “performative shift” in Soviet ideology, where the solipsism of the Party’s totalitarian control of discourse on social reality met the post-Stalinist Party leaders’ enlightened self-interest.¹⁰ Khrushchev and his coterie didn’t want a return to terror, but neither did they want to lose power in the frenzy of anti-Stalinist denunciations. In order to skirt either possibility, they proliferated clear rules of performative utterances through which all Soviet social circles would know “how to sing from the same hymnal,” to borrow Natalia Baranskaia’s expression.¹¹ Then, in return for a correct performance of ‘Sovietness’ all participants would be assured of their relative inviolability. Thanks to the latter development, a whole social order with diffuse holders of social power emerged and crystallized. On the one hand, this order remained unrepresentable within USSR’s ideological discourse; on the other hand, it was omnipresent not only in USSR’s cafes and kitchens, but also in the country’s officially policed mass media and the non-media public sphere, both of which were full of influential late Soviet celebrities and their mass audiences.¹² Self-defined groups of social and political elites fought over cultural capital, as well as collaborated in
the general rules governing that capital’s circulation within the Soviet public sphere and also through non-public networks of socialization.13

Thirdly, post-Stalinist Soviet society underwent certain trans-national transformations having to do with the growth of mass consumer societies in the industrialized world. There exists a well-known narrative of the Soviet Union losing the ‘peaceful competition’ to a more enticing Western post-War modernity. The Soviet demise was at least partly a result of industrial socialism’s inability to keep up with the West in a new ‘information economy’ and its attendant social structure of educated professionals with growing consumer demands. The output of raw tonnage of steel was no longer a reliable measure of national success among the industrialized powers.14 However, scholars like Kristin Roth-Ey have also told a story of Soviet demise that was, in a way, a case of defeat through its own success. In her study of the Soviet “prime-time” film and television empire’s explosive growth in the 1950s-1980s, Roth-Ey concludes that this entertainment behemoth ‘lost the cold war’ precisely because it became indistinguishable from its Hollywood counterpart, in that both industries ultimately ended up being driven by a de-ideologized logic of consumer demand and satisfaction and, as a result, by the 1980s they were churning out very similar kinds of products.15 Moreover, perhaps the most significant mass social development of the Soviet 1960s-1980s was the rise of private living space as a result of late Soviet urban residents moving into first Khrushchev’s gloriously ugly pre-fabricated concrete apartment boxes, and then Brezhnev’s slightly less ugly ones.16 These apartments installed a notion of privacy as an inalienable attribute of late Soviet socialist off-brand modernity, which in turn enabled the growth of the late Soviet culture industry, especially television. Private
accommodations also enabled the rise of other consumer electronics, leading to the growth of *samizdat* and *magnitizdat*—“extra-Gutenberg” modes of circulating dissident, semi-dissident and even officially tolerated cultural products among far-reaching social networks, which were further expanded by post-War urbanization.\(^ {17}\)

The Thaw era’s combination of the advent of Soviet consumer modernity, structural liberalization and also humanist liberalization altogether posed the era’s central political question: what kind of discourse would make sense of Soviet Russia’s new situation, empower a new generation of leaders and forge links between the leaders and their audiences? The late Soviet liberal versus conservative divide originates precisely out of this problematic. At first it was not yet obvious that a liberal/conservative split would take place. What was immediately obvious, however, was that the Thaw-era creative elite (“the last Russian intelligentsia,” to borrow Vladislav Zubok’s terminology) was particularly well-positioned to take advantage of the post-Stalinist ‘liberalization.’\(^ {18}\)

The elite’s extant independent networks of socialization had not been entirely snuffed out by Stalinist purges and in the case of the hard sciences were actually supported by the Stalinist establishment; quite often those independent networks included the golden youth of the Soviet high political cadre.\(^ {19}\) For another thing, the *intelligentsia* by virtue of their official Soviet definition as creative elites, had the best access to the networks of information production and exchange. Finally, the official policy of destalinization itself privileged the Soviet elites, rather than the many other victims of Stalin’s rule. After all, the denunciation of the ‘cult of personality’ had been initiated by the top party echelon in order to take the possibility of further purges of *themselves* off the table. As a result, Stalin’s “gross violations of revolutionary legality” were largely defined by his Great
Terror campaign, which had mostly been directed at the Soviet political, technical and cultural class. The repressions against the peasantry, the aggressive industrialization and de-kulakization campaigns that were accompanied by devastating mass starvation—the Party did *not* wish to discuss these examples of Stalin’s doings, and neither was the Party interested in rehabilitating the ‘deviationists’ Bukharin and Trotsky, who had been repressed precisely for proposing alternatives to the bloody general Party line that initiated the Great Break of 1929 and all of its attendant consequences. Eventually, by the early 1960s, topics pertaining to the sorry state of the Soviet countryside began to be broached by the Village Prose writers, but the state really preferred to constrain its policy of official post-Stalinist reckoning to the task of rehabilitating the victims of fabricated political conspiracy trials, which was as much the story of the party avant-garde as of the cultural intelligentsia.

The empowered intelligentsia at first did not perceive itself as split along liberal and conservative flanks. If a question of political positioning were posed, it would be answered in terms of Stalinist vs anti-Stalinist value systems, and given the official neo-Leninist, ‘socialism-with-a-human-face’ rhetoric of the Khrushchevan state, social unity on the anti-Stalin front seemed self-evident, as did consensus on what seemed like core anti-Stalinist values. The widespread rhetoric of sincerity and subjective depth combined to celebrate the humanist ideal of an independent personality, an integral person with her own thoughts, emotions and—more often than not—a rich inner world composed of post-war trauma.\(^20\) That humanist ideal was also tightly associated with valorization of pre-Revolutionary Russian literary canon, with special emphasis on Russian classic literature’s tradition of psychological realism.\(^21\)
However, while some level of commitment to humanist rhetoric was universal in the post-Stalin era, political divisions soon emerged and had to do with the question of linkage between destalinization and political empowerment. During the Thaw and especially towards its end, it became clear that the divide between late Soviet liberals and conservatives would turn on the potential for mass impact that official humanist rhetoric and late Soviet urbanization and professionalization trends afforded specifically to the *liberal* side of the Soviet intelligentsia. Perhaps the clearest expression of this feeling was encapsulated by the liberal dissident Grigorii Pomerants in the late 1960s. In a polemic with the conservative dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Pomerants argued that Soviet urbanization had eradicated the authentic folk [*narod*] as it had been originally understood by pre-Soviet intelligentsia ideologists. For Pomerants this was good news, because it meant that Soviet cultural elites could continue their enlightenment mission by concentrating on the ‘*new narod*’—the urbanized, educated, professional masses, who were far closer in their worldview and comportment to the liberal intelligentsia than the peasant masses of yesteryear. The millions of college educated individuals who would now comprise the by-now substantial cadres of the class of Soviet ‘Engineering and Technical Workers’ (*inzhenery i tekhnicheskie rabotniki*, collectively referred to by their acronym, ITR), were well positioned to be the Soviet liberal intelligentsia’s junior partners. Values like freedom of speech and freedom of association, and most importantly creative and intellectual freedom—all attributes of what Zubok has called the “intelligentsia ethos”—would percolate down from the intelligentsia elites to the mass ‘technical intelligentsia.’ Most importantly, the mass ‘technical intelligentsia’ would *also* think of itself as a kind of spiritual elite, distinguishing itself from the unenlightened,
brute, repulsive and for those reasons inherently Stalinist ‘working masses’ so extolled by Soviet dogma and discursively referenced by Soviet nomenklatura as the ‘real narod’ who didn’t much like the liberals.

Anti-Stalinism thus became a liberal political matter—love of Russian canon, love of free expression, love of the human individual personality, and a form of elitist comportment would define the post-war educated collective, and it would be juxtaposed to the collective of the ‘philistine’ Stalinist nomenklatura and the similarly philistine narod, who were all presumed to hate all such spiritual refinements. The liberal elites and their junior partners in this way acquired an ideology of power. They were certain that the full measure of destalinization would only be achieved by the enfranchisement of the intellectually and spiritually superior creative and scientific class, over and against the existing holders of power—namely, the philistine Soviet apparatus and the presumably philistine worker and peasant masses, among whom the apparatus supposedly drew its cadres.24

At first, the enormous state bureaucracy, ideology and security apparatus was disoriented in the battle over cultural hegemony, which the liberals seemed to be winning. However, it had the discursive options and ample state resources to contest the rise of late Soviet liberalism and to make a case for the state’s continuing rule—which is precisely what the state’s representatives began to do as the liberal-dominated discussion of destalinization began to look more threatening. A state strategy of maintaining discursive power while initiating destalinization had already been articulated at the XX Party Congress. The scapegoating formula of “gross violations of revolutionary legality” attributed almost entirely to just Stalin and Lavrentii Beria was combined with slogans
like “a return to Leninism,” “the struggle for world peace,” and a pivot towards
inaugurating a comfortable socialist consumer modernity. All of these proclamations and
policies were designed to burnish the moral and political authority of the Party and the
Soviet state, both domestically and internationally. However, this strategy was still
proceeding within the frameworks of the official Soviet totalitarian view of the social
field, even as the liberal challenge to state power was gaining steam on the level of the
de-facto liberalized Late Soviet public sphere.

A different tactic would be necessary to challenge liberal hegemony over
destalinization on its own discursive grounds. Some of that tactic appears in
Solzhenitsyn’s response to Pomerants. Solzhenitsyn argued that Pomerants was a typical
privileged toady working in a state-sponsored NII (Scientific Research Institute), too
cowardly to stand up to the state, but deluded enough to cover his cowardice up with
hifalutin claims of enjoying an ‘inner freedom.’ Moreover, Solzhenitsyn was skeptical of
Pomerants’ belief in the world historical mission of the new educated professional class,
which he derisively called an ‘obrazovanshchina’—a neologism meant to get at these
people’s self-satisfied, privileged and unreflective semi-educated philistinism. Soviet
petty bourgeois consumers were, in Solzhenitsyn’s view, simply too morally suspect to
take on the role of a new culture-bearing ‘folk.’ In short, the likes of Pomerants were not
the prophetic, unblemished moral leaders that Solzhenitsyn believed the Russian nation
required, and the ITR masses—‘new narod’—were also hardly representative of the
authentic Russian nation.

Solzhenitsyn was, of course, a dissident thinker; however, the general line of
ascribing moral culpability to liberals and spiritual emptiness to their educated mass
audience did become a centerpiece of both official and unofficial Soviet conservative discourse. The basic argument took shape as an accusation that the Soviet liberals’ desires for enfranchisement were not being articulated in good faith vis-à-vis the Russian nation. Meanwhile, under conservative editorship Stalinism would be re-read as a fatally flawed liberal idea—a reign of tyranny by a westernization-and-modernization-obsessed intelligentsia against the Russian peasant masses. The Western leftist ideology at the heart of the Soviet project would in this way be condemned. Meanwhile, the Soviet Union in its present, post-War form would appear as another iteration of a ‘Russia Eternal,’ the continuation of a civilization that had for centuries been defined by its perennial opposition to the imperializing West and its Russian liberal dupes.

The major claim of my dissertation is that a discourse on the pre-Soviet past was a crucial component of the liberal and the conservative ideological formations described above. In Chapter One, I show how nineteenth-century terms of the social imaginary, such as ‘intelligentsia’ and ‘narod,’ were inherited by late Soviet liberals within their new social context. I begin Chapter One with the figure of the poet Anna Akhmatova, a representative of the old, pre-Soviet intelligentsia who survived well into the Thaw and became the new era’s living embodiment of the reestablishment of the reign of the ‘empire of poets’—that is, a conceptualization of the creative intelligentsia as culture-bearing and culture-producing body that is independent from the state and that is answerable only to a body of cultural tradition that it itself creates. Next, I consider the figure of Yuri Lotman, the famous Soviet semiotician who was on the one hand a ‘citizen’ in the ‘empire of poets,’ but on the other hand tried to think about how inheritance and transmission of the intelligentsia’s cultural values would work,
overcoming both state censorship and temporal distance. Third, I engage with Natan Eidel’man, a late Soviet popular historian, who in his works allegorically articulated the possibility of inheriting the nineteenth-century intelligentsia’s liberal political ideals and conceptions—especially, their never fully realized dream of a legalist society with ‘liberal institutions,’ as well as their conceptualization of Russia’s social conflict as a struggle between autocrats on one side and democrats on the other. Fourth, I track the deployment of the pre-Soviet past in the films of Vladimir Motyl and El’dar Riazanov. I argue that these filmmakers instinctively responded to the social transformation outlined by Pomerants and were for this reason able to bring Akhmatova’s ‘empire of poets’ to the middle-brow educated masses, in the process turning the classic cultural canon into an intellectually easy and emotionally appealing Gestalt image of Imperial Russia.

I round out Chapter One with the figure of Bulat Okudzhava, who in my reading marks out a critical limit of late Soviet liberal discourse. Bulat Okudzhava was the consummate late Soviet liberal intelligent. As a poet from Moscow’s historic Arbat district he promoted himself as belonging to the ‘empire of poets.’ As a historical fiction writer, Okudzhava had the historical-allegorical liberal sensibilities of Eidel’man. As a singer-songwriter with a mass technical intelligentsia following he was attuned to the semiotics of transmission of intelligentsia values in the context of state censorship. And lastly, as a late Soviet celebrity who wrote a number of wildly popular songs for films (including Motyl’s Star of Captivating Happiness) Okudzhava was well aware of the dynamics of mediatized mass consumer appeal. With all of this in mind, I argue that Okudzhava’s 1971 historical fiction novel, A Gulp of Freedom both displays a mastery of late Soviet liberal intelligentsia discourse and also critiques the model of liberal
heritability of the pre-Soviet category of ‘intelligentsia.’

Chapter Two examines how the pre-Soviet past was used by late Soviet conservatives in order to dispute the liberal discursive hegemony and to forge various kinds of tactical anti-liberal alliances. I open with the early Thaw era and discuss the case of Vasilii Shulgin, an ‘evil twin’ of Akhmatova, discursively-speaking. Shulgin was an octogenarian monarchist who in the 1950s and 1960s managed to forge a tenuous conservative alliance with the KGB, thanks to security and censorship apparatus’s suspension of parts of the official narrative regarding the late Imperial and early Soviet past, so as to re-style itself into a late Soviet conservative institution. I then switch attention from the state to the more independent anti-liberal intelligency of the 1960s cultural sphere and examine how the painter Ilya Glazunov and the writer Vladimir Soloukhin articulated a vision of a late Soviet conservative concept of ‘culturedness,’ understood in terms of the need to reconstruct and preserve Russia’s unique, authentic national aesthetic heritage, which reached the peak of its development in the late Imperial era. Together, Glazunov and Soloukhin create the late Soviet discourse on ‘the Russia that we have lost’—the pre-Revolutionary era as an appealing, glittering wonderland that can be recovered aesthetically and pitched as a spiritual antidote to the drab aesthetics of both Western and late Soviet modernity.

I conclude Chapter Two with an investigation of the way in which a reading of the pre-Soviet past informed the late Soviet conservative conceptualization of politics as a perpetual stalling of evil and pointless liberal desires. To that effect, I examine how the neo-Slavophile critics Vadim Kozhinov and Iurii Loshchits, as well as the widely popular filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov, inventively re-interpreted the late nineteenth-century
literary canon in order to articulate notions of conservative political subjectivization that would dispute the moral value of future-oriented collective action driving the liberal discursive hegemony. I focus in particular on the reinterpretation of the figure of Ilya Oblomov, the famous protagonist of Ivan Goncharov’s 1859 novel. I argue that Loshchits re-reads *Oblomov* as a story of Russian conservatism’s perennial quixotic battle against liberal Western modernity, personified by Oblomov’s best friend and now definite villain, Stolz. Then, Mikhalkov’s adaptation of *Oblomov* for the screen marks out a kind of limit case of Soviet conservatism. With his mastery of the neo-Chekhovian style that informs his mass-appeal cinema, Mikhalkov instinctively recognizes the dynamic described by Pomerants, in which the *new narod* are the urbanized middle-brow masses who find much in common with Chekhov’s puttering aristocrats. In this way, Mikhalkov *almost* appears as a late Soviet liberal (and at the time was often mistaken for one).

However, Mikhalkov is not interested in his audience’s political empowerment. For this reason, his interpretation of *Oblomov* follows Loshchits and highlights the powerlessness of individuals like Stolz and his friend Olga, and ipso facto the evil and pointlessness of westernizing designs for Russia, whose unique national essence (symbolized by a sublimely lazy quasi-Buddhist Oblomov) perennially returns, and must be enjoyed and loved, rather than overcome.

Chapters One and Two of my dissertation deal with the late Soviet decades; Chapters Three and Four move on into the post-Soviet era. In between lies Perestroika and the early Yeltsin transition. The major question for this watershed moment is: what happened to the liberal and conservative discursive matrix at this time?
To address this question in brief: firstly, the late Perestroika marked off the political defeat of the Village Prose variety of Soviet conservatism. Scholars like Yitzhak Brudny and Nikolai Mitrokhin, and to some extent Stephen Kotkin have all shown how the processes unleashed by Perestroika revealed the profound lack of broad social support of the Soviet nationalists, despite their systemic and cultural influence. When the last General Secretary made a move to what he thought would be a soft parliamentarianism by allowing competitive elections to the 1989 Congress of People’s Deputies (Съезд народных депутатов—SND), most conservative intelligentsia figures and also most apparatchiks failed to win elected seats in the new body. Meanwhile, the liberals who got elected or who ended up in the SND by way of various Soviet corporate bodies very quickly started organizing against Gorbachev and for more decisive reforms, through initiatives like the Interregional Deputy Group (Межрегиональная депутатская группа—MDG), which soon became the backbone of Yeltsinism.

Was the Yeltsin coalition liberal or conservative? His supporters thought of themselves as anti-Soviet ‘democrats,’ and the Yeltsin coalition engaged in a lot of talk about European values, transition to Western liberal democratic institutions and social mores, ‘living in a normal country,’ and so forth. At the same time, the new wave of leaders preferred to describe themselves as conservatives, in distinction from the ‘commu-nazi’ hordes perennially at the gates of the new order. Moreover, the new regime also carried out a number of concrete reconstructionist projects, especially the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, which had been the hobbyhorses of Soviet conservatives, such as Glazunov and Soloukhin. Later in the 1990s and the 2000s the Yeltsin and the Putin administrations invested state funds into ‘patriotic’ mass media projects, such as
high-budget cinema, which depicted glittering images of a beautiful pre-Soviet Russia ‘that we have lost.’ The aesthetics of these films had been prefigured by both liberal and conservative Soviet cultural production, Moreover, the post-Soviet products looked ‘liberal’ in the sense of their slick Western-style means of production and ‘conservative’ in the sense of their nationalist messaging.

Altogether, then, the post-Soviet state appeared as a “liberal-conservative” ideological amalgamation for a long time, and in some ways still promotes itself as such today. However, today it is also manifestly obvious that there is a left and a right to the mainstream political matrix, and that the supporters of the state occupy the latter pole, while those in opposition identify with the former. In order to understand both the assemblage of the Yeltsin-Putin consensus, and its subsequent divergence (which has clarified since the 2012 wave of protests), we have to return to Perestroika and analyze the discursive transvaluations that this period initiated.

Without a doubt, the most important transvaluation of the Perestroika era was the point at which the wholesale transition to capitalism came to appear as the leading modernization project among the anti-Soviet ‘liberal democrats.’ This did not necessarily have to be so—there were late Soviet social democrats, such as Boris Kagarlitsky who had hoped that Perestroika would result in the replacement of the corrupt Soviet ruling elites by a new generation of leaders committed to broad democratization, but without scrapping Soviet socialism tout court. The social democrats lost. Meanwhile, the “anti-Soviet” liberal democrats, despite their ostensible commitment to overturning ossified regime hierarchies, ended up incorporating a great deal of existing Soviet government cadres into the new regime. Ultimately, even though some mainstream Soviet
conservatives were made irrelevant by the 1991 Putsch, many (perhaps most) of the actual members of the Soviet power elites managed to maneuver their way out of their Soviet positions and straight into post-Soviet ones. Sometimes, they managed to do so without even leaving their office, as happened between August and September of 1991, when the Soviet government class defected en masse to Yeltsin’s Russian administration, even as Gorbachev nominally remained President of the manifestly defunct USSR.29 Other former apparatchiks, like Yeltsin himself, or the 1990s mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov, had to put in some effort to rebrand themselves. But rebrand themselves they did, by becoming exceptionally proficient at ‘pro-democracy’ and ‘anti-Soviet’ discourse.

The ascendant democrats’ discourse was the outcome of Soviet liberal ideology, which was in fact quite conservative. After all, this discourse was primarily interested in *righting* the hierarchy rather than disrupting it. As Corey Robin, a scholar of Anglo-American conservatism would say, the Yeltsinist turn was anticipated by his supporters as a moment in which “genuine excellence [would be] revealed and rewarded, true nobility [would be] secured.”30 ‘Democracy’ was posited as a value by the MDG and then the pro-Yeltsin parliamentarians, but it was understood in Soviet liberal terms, as a commitment to the end of censorship and expansion of civic freedoms. However, all of these freedoms were being enunciated from the perspective of an elitist comportment, in which the ascendant educated technical intelligentsia class saw itself as wrestling power from the undeserving Party philistines, preventing the coming to power of the philistine proto-Stalinist narod, and installing social and economic power in the hands of the worthy, creative and for all those reasons capitalist-oriented individuals. As a result, Yeltsin’s and Putin’s “liberal-conservative” discourse has consistently appealed to the
well-to-do, decision-making segment of Russia’s populace, telling them that the post-Soviet regime is a consensus outcome of the empowered capitalist *homo faber* ‘class’ (I take the term *homo faber* from Viktor Pelevin, as I explain in Chapter Three). At the same time, since the 1990s there have been various attempts to formulate a discourse of resistance to both Yeltsinism and Putinsim among the empowered, urbanized, educated Russians. For the purposes of my dissertation, the polarity of the post-Soviet political matrix is one in which the ‘liberal-conservative’ consensus predominates and occupies the post-Soviet political right. Meanwhile, the discourse of the post-Soviet well-to-do mainstream political left (which is ultimately not *that* left in the absolute sense) appears more as a possibility than a *fait accompli*—though the left side of the matrix has received a substantial boost since the 2012 protests.

Just as in the late Soviet half of my dissertation, I argue that the discourse of the post-Soviet *homo faber* and also its critical counter-discourse both turn on a political imaginary in which the pre-Soviet past plays a significant role. Chapter Three tracks the development of the *homo faber* from the late 1980s until today, by way of the hegemonic historical imaginary of the late- and post-Soviet intelligentsia. The chapter starts by considering how the rhetoric of Stanislav Govorukhin’s nostalgia for “The Russia That We Have Lost” ended up informing the political discourse of the late Perestroika and the post-Soviet transition. I highlight Govorukhin’s new imaginary ideal subjects of post-Soviet history, a “we” comprised of educated people of action, who are legitimated by “our” inheritance of the political and social ideals of worthy *ancien régime* aristocrats, most emblematically Petr Stolypin. After Govorukhin, I discuss the proliferation of an Imperial kitsch aesthetic among several marquee post-Soviet capitalist establishments,
focusing in particular on Russia’s ‘first business newspaper,’ Kommersant. Pushing beyond the manifest narrative of new Russian capitalism as a noble affair and a spiritual return of “The Russia That We Have Lost,” I focus on the social imaginary of the homo faber subject empowered by the post-Soviet transition and represented by institutions such as Kommersant. In this imaginary, the homo faber is part of a numerically small, but valiant and united collective of the “upper hundred thousand,” who had originated in the late Imperial era, were then killed off by the Bolsheviks, and have now returned to steer Russia towards necessary reforms and away from populist, neo-Bolshevik temptations.

The middle section of Chapter Three discusses the “new normal” Imperial retro aesthetic that was practiced by Yeltsin’s state and also by Yuri Luzhkov (the mayor of Moscow) in the 1990s. The return of state symbols such as the Imperial double-headed eagle and the tri-color flag, as well as the reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, originated out of the aesthetics of late Soviet conservatives and liberals alike, who together had created a Gestalt image of pre-Soviet Russia as an appealing mass consumer object. I argue that it was particularly necessary to orchestrate this return in the 1990s, in order to generate an aesthetic of aspirational “normalcy” in Russia, without which consumer capitalism cannot function. The fourth section of the chapter transitions from ‘Imperial retro’ state projects and examines the subjective discourse of the people behind them. The rightist, etatist essence of post-Soviet homo faber discourse becomes apparent as I examine the appropriation of the figure of Stolypin as a symbol of post-Soviet governmentality, especially in the Putin era. I argue that thanks to the late-Soviet efforts of Solzhenitsyn and his post-Soviet student Sviatoslav Rybas, Stolypin becomes the embodiment of a “competent manager” [krepkii khoziaistvennik], the ideal ego of all
confident and powerful post-Soviet leaders—Putin first and foremost. Stolypinism becomes the ideology of the *homo-faber*-in-charge: a powerful leader committed to aggressive reformist state action in the interests of economic modernization, mass enlightenment and the creation of effective institutions. Most importantly the post-Soviet Stolypinist leader is in principle committed to the rhetoric of transition to democracy, but with the caveat that this transition should be permanently delayed. A dual fear of populist revolutionary barbarians and Western vultures at the gates means that the democracy-to-come must be deferred until the undetermined future date when all of Russia will finally be comprised entirely of capable *homo faber* citizens.

I conclude Chapter Three with a discussion of the hybrid Westernist/Nationalist “Russian Idea” for the masses, produced by the rightist post-Soviet state. Specifically, I examine how Nikita Mikhalkov’s 1999 film, *The Barber of Siberia* formulates this conception by depicting a nostalgic image of Imperial Russia rendered through the finest Hollywood techniques. I argue that this image is desirable not only because it trades in nationalist nostalgia, but precisely because it appears as a quality product that is ‘good enough for the West,’ the epitome of what the writer Viktor Pelevin at the time called “Not-Cola for Nikola”—a desirable object that exists in the shimmering space of being both ‘Western’ and ‘our own.’ Importantly, this means that nationalist appeals to the Russian masses in the post-Soviet era happen not so much on the level of narrative, but on the level of means of production. Putinism’s omnivorous propagandistic historical imagination, with its appeals to a panoply of thoroughly incongruent moments of Russian greatness throughout the ages, only works as long as the objects of patriotic investment are rendered lavishly, in an effective consumerized Western style. Mikhalkov anticipates
this insight in the late 1990s; by 2014 it becomes the centerpiece element of Putinism’s capstone mass communication project, the Sochi Olympics.

Chapter Four concludes the dissertation by marking out how the pre-Soviet past has informed four lines of critique against the *homo faber* discursive consensus described in Chapter Three. The first line of critique appears during the Perestroika and early post-Soviet era of capitalist transvaluation. I examine how Alexander Pushkin’s classic story and Petr Tchaikovsky eponymous opera, “The Queen of Spades” was deployed in the 1990s in Vladimir Voroshilov’s high-brow quiz show, *What? Where? When?* in order to sell the transition to capitalism as consistent with the liberal humanist ideals of the late Soviet intelligentsia. I then consider how the same classic story figures in Ludmila Ulitskaya’s 1990s short story, “The Queen of Spades.” In both Voroshilov’s and Ulitskaya’s cases I argue that this classic of the Russian canon ends up enunciating the repressed acquisitive bourgeois drive of the late-Soviet-turned-post-Soviet intelligentsia, whose liberal humanism was less about communion with Russia’s cultural traditions and more about using the canon to burnish cultural capital and maintain elite social status.

The second critique of *homo faber* discourse belongs to Viktor Pelevin, the writer who coined this term in his 1993 essay, “John Fowles and the Tragedy of Russian Liberalism.” I first highlight this essay’s enunciation of the subject position of Pelevin’s ideal ‘*homo non-faber*,’ who satirizes post-Soviet reality from the standpoint of his withdrawal from the vanity of the world in general and from circular Russian history in particular. I then examine Viktor Pelevin’s 1998 novel, *Chapaev and the Void* and cross-read this text against the writer’s overall oeuvre, arguing that Pelevin’s ideal Buddhist speaking subject’s critique is the result of a ‘false consciousness’ of someone who
perceives himself as an elite, even though this form of social identification is neither fully justified nor in any way preordained. I claim that Pelevin never fully clarifies this critique, but that it does arise from the “repetition compulsion” of his post-Soviet texts.

The third critique of homo faber discourse is to be found, implicitly, in the writings of Boris Akunin. Akunin, who came to national bestseller prominence in the 2000s epitomizes the comportment of the post-Soviet sislib (‘systemic liberal’), an individual who on the one hand wants to maintain oppositional footing vis-à-vis a far-from-ideal regime, but on the other hand wants to participate in the work of righting that regime from within (and also at times from without). Akunin’s 1999 “political detective” novel, State Counsellor shows how the conflicted self-conscience of the post-Soviet Russian moderate liberal is informed and also greatly hampered by an inherited ‘future-past’ of his imaginary late Imperial ancestors, who perished in the Revolution. I argue that through two subtle deus ex machine devices Akunin’s text comes to the threshold of realizing that fear of future chaos is not a good enough justification for the sislib’s collaboration with the semi-odious regime. In this way, the text (half-heartedly) disrupts the ‘liberal conservative’ consensus regarding the Revolution as the eternal telos of overly left-leaning politics in Russia.

I conclude the chapter and the dissertation with the fourth, and thus far the most culturally successful post-Soviet critique of the historical imaginary underpinning homo faber discourse—namely the disruption of the conception of historical inheritance that underpins the “we” of Govorukhin’s influential affective formula, “the Russia that we have lost.” I first examine Alexander Sokurov’s 2002 art-house cinema masterpiece, “The Russian Ark,” a film that opposes the Mikhalkov/Putinist glittering patriotic
treatment of Russia’s past by creating a different state-of-the-art aesthetic that serves to highlight the difficulty of inheritance. Sokurov’s film deploys the Gestalt cultural image of Imperial Russia formulated by Soviet liberals and conservatives; however, this image is presented not as an object of nostalgia, but as an object of *culture* understood as a “site of memory.” On one hand, Sokurov’s cultural encounter with the past of St. Petersburg’s Winter Palace emphasizes this site’s temporal and social foreignness for “us” today, but on the other hand it celebrates the possibility of ‘us moderns’ encountering the foreign past, making it newly meaningful, and thus *preserving* the cultural cycle. I then read a similar message, though this time pitched to a much wider audience, in the popular TV documentarian Leonid Parfenov’s 2013 film, “A Nation in Bloom.” I argue that Parfenov crystallizes the formula of ‘a Russia that *they* have lost’ as a counterpunch to the historical imaginary of the *homo faber*. I claim that Parfenov returns the image of the glittering Gestalt Imperial Russia back to its rightful owners, the Imperial elites who had produced it, and whose lifeworld and comportment cannot in any easy way be inherited as “our” own today. In this way, the contemporary influence of Russia’s Imperial past—with its revolutionary terminus *and* its social imaginary (comprised of terms like “intelligentsia,” *narod*, and ‘power’)—is demystified. “We’re not from” this Russia, Parfenov concludes, “we’re from the Soviet one.” Meanwhile, my dissertation concludes that Parfenov’s post-2012 stance regarding the pre-Soviet past is indicative of a tectonic shift in the cultural discourse of Russia’s liberals, who today are increasingly capable of resisting the hegemony of the Putinist ‘liberal-conservative’ consensus.
Endnotes for General Introduction

2 For instance, see Dmitrii Bykov, Khrmoniki blizhaishei voiny (Moscow: Amfora, 2005).
3 In the words of Anna Akhmatova, spoken to Lydia Chukovskaya on March 29, 1956 (one month after the Secret Speech), “it seems that the border of the permissible has been drawn on the new ideological map with great precision. They guard it keenly. But we haven’t yet studied it” (Lidiia Chukovskaya, Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi, Tom 2: 1952-1962 [Paris: YMCA-Press, 1980], 148).
4 See Kevin M. F. Platt, “Secret Speech: Wounding, Disavowal and Social Belonging in the USSR.”
5 Critical Inquiry 42 (2016), 647-676.
7 See Jochen Hellbeck, Revolution on my Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2009). Many years prior to Hellbeck, Claude Lefort theorized the solipsistic political imaginary of the state ideological apparatus, within which this kind of “totalitarian,” “militant activist” subject operated. See Claude Lefort, The Political Forms of Modern Society, 221.
11 See the uncensored version of Natalia Baranskaya’s A Week Like Any Other—Natal’ia Baranskaia, Nedelia kak nedelia (Columbus, OH: Slavica, 1989).
16 There is a long bibliography on this topic. For example, see Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia, Lewis H. Siegelbaum, ed. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); see also Susan E. Reid. “Makseiff Modernity: DIY, Craft and the Virtuous Homemaker in New Soviet Housing of the 1960s.” International Journal for History, Culture and Modernity 2 (2014:2).
Perhaps the best encapsulation of these model anti-Stalinist characters can be found in two impactful films of the late Soviet era: Marlen Khutsiev’s *I am Twenty* (alternate title: *Ilyich’s Gate*, 1965) and Nikita Mikhalkov’s *Five Evenings* (1978, a film adaptation of Alexander Volodin’s eponymous 1958 play).

The mixture of late Soviet humanism and stylized Chekhovianism comprises the core of Nikita Mikhalkov’s filmic aesthetic.


Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children*, 26


For a semi-memoiristic, semi-historical blow-by-blow account of this process, see Roi Medvedev, *Sovetskii Soiuz: Poslednie gody zhizni*, 559-564.

Chapter One
Pushkin is Our Everything:
Russia’s Golden Age in Late-Soviet Liberal Cultural Production

In the present chapter, I will examine the rendering of the pre-Soviet past by the ‘liberal’ vector of Late Soviet intelligentsia. I put ‘liberal’ in scare quotes because the term is quite obviously problematic. To start with, it has been observed that in the early stages of the Thaw, Soviet elite cultural producers were not yet split into nominal liberals and conservatives, and that this split began occurring only later, in the 1960s. However, this claim should come with the caveat that in a certain sense late Soviet cultural producers were all liberal, because of the ‘liberalization’ of late Soviet subjectivization and socialization (see General Introduction, above). As for the appearance of self-identified ‘liberals’ and ‘conservatives,’ this division did begin to take place among the intelligentsia in the early 1960s, and was characterized by a general split between those who thought of themselves as Western-oriented cosmopolitans and the others, who thought of themselves as Russian nationalists. As Zubok has pointed out, this split was encouraged by the Soviet security and ideology apparatus, which viewed both sides with suspicion and cynically manipulated them in order to ensure social fragmentation. Even so, however, one could pass back and forth between the self-declared liberal and conservative poles and still have the ear and respect of the other side (the cross-over cases are too numerous to count, but just briefly, we might mention the Tarkovsky family, or the Mikhalkov brothers, or many Village Prose writers like Shukshin, or even someone like Yuri Trifonov). Moreover, both the liberals and the conservatives could often point to common ancestors, such as Anna Akhmatova, who anointed not only the elitist
‘internal immigrant’ poet Joseph Brodsky, but also the neo-Slavophile dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Nevertheless, with all due caveats, let us for the moment accept the existence of heuristically distinct ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ late Soviet camps of cultural producers, and begin with examining the use of the pre-Soviet past among the former.

In what follows, I consider the use of pre-Soviet past in the works of six liberal late Soviet cultural producers: Anna Akhamtova, Yuri Lotman, Natan Eidel’man, Vladimir Motyl’, El’dar Riazanov, and Bulat Okudzhava, in that order. And again, for heuristic reasons, I examine just one kind of pre-Soviet past—a cultural Golden Age that marked the birth of Russian intelligentsia, spanning roughly the period between the Decembrist revolt of 1825 and the late 1840s (both boundaries here are quite artificial and are dictated by my specific examples of late Soviet cultural products, rather than by any logic intrinsic to 19th century historical developments; it is also not by any means my intention here to confirm or deny either the existence or the ‘goldenness’ of this period as a coherent cultural epoch). I choose this particular part of Russian history for two reasons—one is because the story of the Decembrists appealed to many liberal intellectuals, including the dissidents and the semi-dissidents who often spoke of themselves as latter-day Decembrists; and the other reason for my choice is that the Golden Age of Russian culture appealed to specifically liberal cultural producers because they were the ones who often claimed to be heirs of the pre-Soviet intelligentsia. Moreover, they were tasked by the Soviet state with the business of educating the broader masses in ‘cuturedness,’ which was particularly characterized by a Sovietized knowledge of the classical Russian canon, with pride of place for Pushkin and his time.
Moving from Akhmatova to Okudzhava, I will show an evolution in the deployment of the pre-Soviet past across a wide swath of late Soviet culture. By starting with an elitist author like Akhmatova and ending with mass culture artifacts, like Riazanov’s and Motyl’s 1970s and 1980s films, as well as Okudzhava’s popular 1971 historical fiction novel, I draw an arc of inheritance of the pre-Soviet past, which follows the arc of late Soviet social developments, namely—the expansion of the ranks of those who called themselves an intelligentsia, as well as the related burgeoning of Soviet mass media culture and consumer society.
I. The Empire of Poets: 
Anna Akhmatova, Pushkin, and Structural Liberalism

“She might be thought of as the first lady of the Empire, isn’t it true? Isn’t it true that many of her expressions have a memoir-like character?”

‘D.’ to Lydia Chukovskaia, May 1 1953

The first case for our examination of pre-Soviet past in late Soviet culture is that of Anna Akhmatova. Akhmatova, more than anyone else in the Thaw era, performed an imaginary linkage to the pre-Soviet past with her own person. Having been fortunate enough to survive (not unscathed) all of the waves of Stalinist purges, Akhmatova during the Thaw took on the role of embodying a direct connection to a by-gone culture. Most obviously, she was one of the last remaining representatives of the turn-of-the-century Russian modernist literary tradition. Less obviously, but more importantly, Akhmatova was also a prominent member of the group of the intelligentsia’s ‘elders’ [‘starye’], to borrow Lydia Chukovskaya’s term, whose networks of socialization had come about prior to Stalin’s rise. That ‘creative intelligentsia’ network had its own economy of prestige, its own way of determining cultural rank of its various participants—a notion that another surviving ‘elder,’ Viktor Shklovsky had described back in 1928 with the idiosyncratic term, “the Hamburg Score.” These ‘objective’ assessments were not always clear and unequivocal—for instance, Akhmatova kept her own ‘Hamburg Score,’ according to which she found Shklovsky wanting. However, the phrase itself expresses the presumption that cultural prestige should be determined within the circles of cultural producers themselves, as opposed to being controlled by outside influences, especially the state. In other words, ‘the Hamburg Score’ is what we might call, following Claude
Lefort, a *structurally liberal* idea. As Lefort has shown, the notion of the existence of an independent locus of discourse on reality—with reality in this case being the ‘objective’ quality of literature—runs quite counter to totalitarian logic, in which the Party is the only agent allowed to make these sorts of decisions. This is why Akhmatova saw her own poetic existence as quintessentially anti-Stalinist. And Akhmatova deployed the pre-Soviet past along the same lines—to reinforce this notion of the baseline reality of cultural value, of poetic greatness, whose determination stands apart from the state and whose independence ultimately declares triumph over the history of Russia’s political power.

To think about Akhmatova’s belief in the structural anti-Stalinism of her poetic existence, we might consider the following excerpt from Lydia Chukovskaya’s and Akhmatova’s conversation in late 1962, arguably at the apex of the Thaw (after the XXII Congress and the removal of Stalin from the Mausoleum in 1961, but *just before* Khrushchev’s colorful critique of non-figurative art at the Manége exhibition in December 1962):

> We discussed whether or not 1937 can repeat. “No,” Anna Andreevna said firmly, “and you know why? There is no background [*fon*] against which Stalin was whipping up all that horror. Here is some indirect evidence: the present young generation understands you and me, don't they? They are our pets, they’re our own [*ruchnye, svoi*] for us, but back then in 1929, 1930, there was a generation who didn’t even want to know me. ‘What! She’s also writing some kind of poetry!’ It was the kind of generation that had passed right over me, like over a shadow. Some old hags [*tëtki*] once used to like her diddles [*stishki*]! —and everyone kept waiting for a new poet to appear out of the blue and to speak his new Word, they even kept trying to slot Dzhek Altauzen into that role.”

In this encounter, we see a concatenation of Akhmatova’s sense of her own importance to Russian literature, her awareness of what forces crown her with this sort of glory, and her
understanding of the way in which both of those circumstances determine post-Stalinist society. For her, the very fact that she is now, in the 1960s, being admired and searched out by young new poets and writers like Joseph Brodsky, Bella Akhmadulina, Andrei Siniavsky, Iulii Daniel, and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, as well as young actors like Alexei Batalov (all of these people, and others too, are mentioned by name in Chukovskaya’s *Notes on Anna Akhmatova*), indicates that the underpinnings of Stalinism have been defeated. Akhmatova’s startling image of her sovereignty, in which she views herself as a queen and her young admirers as her “pets,” enunciates her belief in a structurally liberal intelligentsia that is a kind of ‘empire of poets,’ with its ruling writers and servitor critics, and with links of tradition that preserve the works of previous generations for new heirs, independently and in spite of political pressures from the state. Insofar as this empire exists, it presents an impediment to Stalinism, and Dzhek Altausen here serves as the ultimate foil to this notion, as a poet who launched into fame in the 1930s only thanks to his Bolshevik verses and cheerfully totalitarian politics.

The notion of the existence of an ‘empire of poets’ is a major theme of Akhmatova’s mature verse, particularly *A Poem Without a Hero*—the most important and multiply rewritten text of her late life, whose new versions run like a leitmotif throughout Chukovskaya’s *Notes*, paralleling the leitmotif of the anti-Stalinist denouncements of the Thaw. *A Poem Without a Hero*’s central theme is the maintenance of memory of former members of Akhmatova’s poetic coterie, who are now long gone, lost to wars, emigration and repressions. But even prior to the advent of the Thaw, Akhmatova was already expressing a similar poetic ideology through her writings and verbal comments on Pushkin. Akhmatova’s personal poetic strategy of self-identification with Pushkin is well
known and not particularly unique to her. But Akhmatova’s writings on Pushkin go a bit beyond the question of self-identification. Chukovskaya called it her “newborn prose”—“newborn” because Akhmatova really didn’t write much prose, and “prose” because Chukovskaya strongly felt that Akhmatova’s ostensibly scholarly writing on Pushkin’s Decembrist sympathies, as well as the courtly intrigues that forced him into a tragic duel with Dantes, transcended the boundaries of boring academic style. We can bring many examples of Akhmatova’s affected treatments of Pushkin, which in Chukovskaya’s notes go back to as early as 1952. For our purposes, let us take a look at one of the most extreme such cases—Akhmatova’s “A Word on Pushkin,” originally published in 1962, in the journal Zvezda. On its face, the very brief article celebrates Pushkin’s posthumous historical triumph over his murderers from the court of Nicholas I, and there is nothing particularly radical about this notion, which converges both with Akhmatova’s belief in the ‘empire of poets,’ as well as with the doctrinaire Soviet myth of Pushkin as a spiritual proto-Revolutionary nemesis of the Tsarist regime. But the emotional rhetoric through which Akhmatova makes her point reveals something beyond this basic understanding.

Consider the penultimate run-on sentence of Akhmatova’s short essay:

The Sovereign Emperor Nikolai Pavlovich in his white tights flaunts his stuff so grandly on the wall of the Pushkin Museum; the manuscripts, diaries, and letters become valuable as soon as the magic word ‘Pushkin’ appears within them, and what is scariest for them [i.e. Pushkin’s enemies- PK]—is that they could have heard from the poet [ot poeta]:

Don’t you worry, you won’t answer for me,  
Have yourselves some restful sleep for now.  
Might is right, and only your own children  
Will be cursing you on my behalf.  

Just who exactly is “the poet” from whom “they could have heard”? The genre of this
essay gives the expectation that Akhmatova would sign off with Pushkin’s words, ideally some familiar and often-quoted ones. Moreover, it seems terribly immodest to refer to one’s self as “the poet,” especially when writing on Pushkin. But this bothers Akhmatova not at all—the essay’s only quatrains of poetry is her own. What gives her the right to do this? Akhmatova does not merely use a variant of ‘Aesopian language’ to speak about her own present-day situation vis-à-vis the Soviet state through the figure of Pushkin. With this rhetorical insertion of her own poetry in this article she actually reaches quite beyond what we normally think of as ‘Aesopian language.’ Akhmatova inserts her verse to speak on behalf of “the poet.” Which is to say that given the rhetorical framing, it’s really Pushkin here, who speaks on Akhmatova’s behalf, in her words. She is Pushkin, and Pushkin is her.

In her “Word on Pushkin,” Akhmatova not merely self-identifies with Pushkin, but merges with him, and this happens thanks to the ideology of the ‘great poet,’ in which she believes. To use her own words, a great poet is not just some lady “who also writes some kind of poetry”—she is a representative of a poetic tradition, and as such she is a symbolic representative of all great poets. That is what gives her the right to make poetry on Pushkin’s behalf. Which is to say that Akhmatova’s empire of poets is not only a structurally liberal ideology, but it is also an ideology shot through by the appeal to a past, whose significance is viewed as perennial. This is not say that the past simply and easily speaks to the present, and neither is it to claim that Akhmatova’s notion of the past is ahistorical. The point is only that an essential function of the intelligentsia in Akhmatova’s sense of the word (a word which, by the way, both Akhmatova and Chukovskaya prefer not to use) is to preserve the past’s importance, and to insist on the
need to preserve it via the mechanism of cultural tradition, in which all great writers are, in a sense, always contemporary, because they are always assumed to be spiritually relevant.
II. Soviet Intelligentsia and the New *Narod*:
Yuri Lotman’s Decembrists and the Heritability of Culture

*This ability to relate in a natural and completely unaffected manner to visitors in a drawing-room, to peasants at the market and to children, constituted the cultural specificity of a Decembrist’s everyday behavior. It is akin to Pushkin’s poetry and it ranks among the greatest ever manifestations of Russian culture.*

Yuri Lotman, “The Decembrist in Everyday Life” (1975)\(^1\)

As mentioned above, Zubok claims that the return of the pre-revolutionary heritage and its representatives to prominence was made possible by the survival into the 1950s of a significant number of people who had been weaned on pre-Revolutionary humanist traditions. These older educated individuals—i.e. Chukovskaya’s “elders”—“had […] been brought up in the nineteenth-century traditions of liberalism and humanism” and “could not help passing on to their students their manners, habits, ethical standards, and aesthetic attitudes—while keeping their political views to themselves.”\(^1\)

Zubok at times makes this transference of the pre-Soviet intelligentsia ‘culturedness’—what he calls the “intelligentsia ethos”—seem easy. In truth, the heritability of such an ethos was much more of an open question for the people of the 1960s and 1970s, for a number of reasons pertaining to factors quite apart from the blunt force of Stalinist repressions. The most problematic issue was that the social structure of the Thaw period was radically different from the past in which the “intelligentsia ethos” had originated. Indeed, twentieth-century social transformations were, for better or worse, marked within official Soviet parlance, in which the word ‘intelligentsia’ denoted a social ‘stratum’ that included just about all educated professionals and managers. It has been argued that the introduction of this concept into Marxist-Leninist cosmogony was a sleight of hand,
designed to obfuscate the existence of the Soviet bureaucratic class. \(^{14}\) Be that as it may, it is nevertheless the case that Soviet Russia’s social world in the wake of industrialization and urbanization was vastly different from its pre-Revolutionary ancestor, and this fact was not lost on the intellectuals of the 1960s and 1970s, who were trying to come to terms with the role of an ‘intelligentsia’ in Soviet society.

This was precisely the topic of the debate between Grigorii Pomerants and Alexander Solzhenitsyn, that I introduced in the General Introduction, above. To recall, Pomerants argued that Soviet urbanization had eradicated the authentic folk [narod] as it had been originally understood by pre-Soviet intelligentsia ideologists. Instead, there now existed a ‘new narod,’ the intelligentsia’s collective junior partner in the urban professional class. Solzhenitsyn, meanwhile, was skeptical of both the moral fiber of the likes of Pomerants and of the spiritual quality of the soulless ‘new narod’ that was to be enlightened by the new crop of liberals. Despite their opposed positions, both Pomerants and Solzhenitsyn shared an anxiety regarding the applicability of traditional, pre-Soviet Russian cultural terms to the present situation. The intelligentsia and the folk are not who they used to be, so what is there to inherit, and for whom, and in what way, and to what end? These questions apparently didn’t concern Akhmatova, because her notion of cultural continuity was predicated on the existence of a perennial empire of poets that spoke for a system of essential, unchanging values and maintained its own enduring Hamburg Scorecard of cultural importance. In truth, it doesn’t even make sense to speak of ‘inheritance’ in Akhmatova’s view of the cultural system, because on some level no one ever really dies in it. Her great poets are like medieval monarchs with their two bodies—the body royal may come and go, but the body politic exists forever. The famous
semiotician and nineteenth-century historian Yuri Lotman, on the other hand, did worry about the question of inheritance. Lotman did not live in the empire of poets—he lived in the elite academic strata of a late Soviet social world in which he found some structural parallels to the repressive authoritarian social world of nineteenth-century Russian autocracy. In that situation, he was interested in studying the question of culturedness—namely, this notion’s social effect and historical importance in a situation in which direct political engagement is proscribed. And with that in mind, I think it is not an accident that he wrote his most famous work on this issue, “The Decembrist in Everyday Life,” after the quashing of Prague Spring in 1968.

Ludmilla Trigos in her study of “The Decembrist Myth in Russian Culture,” has grouped Lotman into a section entitled “The Decembrists and Dissidence.” Lotman’s engagement with Decembrist history was a typical semi-dissenting stance, which we usually assume to be the sine qua non of just about any late Soviet liberal intellectual. Lotman’s dissent, in Trigos’s reading, is marked by his decision not to rehearse Decembrism’s relationship to Bolshevik revolutionary pre-history. Moreover, we should point out that Lotman’s concentration on the “everyday” cultural semiotics of Decembrism resonates particularly strongly with the question of ‘semi-dissent’ in the Late Soviet social system. Lotman’s premise is that the Decembrists were able to communicate a sense of belonging to their circles through far more subtle and comprehensive means than direct speech. In fact, Lotman’s gambit is to claim that even though the Decembrists did speak (maybe even to the point of excess), their greatest impact on Russian culture was not actually in the realm of spoken ideas, but in the realm of establishing the ‘cultural type’ of the dissenting elite member of society, a ‘type’ that
was emulated by a great many people, most of whom were not at all involved in the events of December 14, 1825. The Decembrists established certain behavioral mores that set them apart from the rest of high society, and that also greatly empowered them in that society. In that story, the actual event of the (unsuccessful) Revolt takes a back seat.

It doesn’t take much erudition to see how this idea tracks with late Soviet sociopolitical developments. On the night of the 21st of August of 1968, when news of Soviet troops’ entry into Prague came on the airwaves, the dissident singer-songwriter poet Alexander Galich wrote his famously despondent song, “Dare You Come Out to the Square?” Through a very unsubtle Aesopian allegorical reading of the past, Galich communicated in not so veiled terms the idea that present Soviet elite society was too cowardly to come out and openly revolt against the odious state. On the face of it, Galich was right—only a small handful of people ‘came out to the square’ the following morning, and they were promptly carted off to prisons and psychological wards. Zubok has described the Prague Spring as a moment of complete demoralization for the Thaw era intelligentsia—in his view, this episode actually spelled the end of this whole late Soviet socio-ethical formation, which was then followed by internecine conflict such as the debate between Pomerants and Solzhenitsyn. Lotman’s study of “Decembrism in everyday life’ responds directly to this situation. For Lotman, the willingness and ability of particular Northern and Southern Society members to ‘come out to the square’ is quite beside the point when considering the Decembrists’ cultural impact. Far more powerful than such direct actions was the Decembrists’ capacity to generate a coherent habitus of morally upstanding citizenship. Moreover, Lotman makes a case for the possibility of heritability and mass proliferation of this “school of citizenship.” And this conclusion
is interesting not only because of its late Soviet significance, implying optimism about the efforts of late Soviet repressed liberal elites, but also because it is a gambit of making the past directly relevant, of searching out in the past certain modes of social self-creation that are directly transferable.

We can observe this point in the emotional epicenter of Lotman’s writing, when he discusses the Decembrists’ behavior in exile in Siberia, as well as the cultural impact of their return to European Russia in the reign of Alexander II. Lotman points out that the princes, counts and other noblemen who ended up thousands of miles away from all significant Russian population centers were so well-bred that they were able to converse comfortably with peasants at the bazaar, without making the latter feel inferior, because “truly good breeding of the cultured part of Russian nobility implied simplicity in conduct, as well as an absence of that feeling of social inadequacy and frustration that was the psychological basis for Bazarovite plebian antics.” He then goes on to declare more emphatically that “this ability to relate in a natural and completely unaffected manner to visitors in a drawing-room, to peasants at the market and to children, constituted the cultural specificity of a Decembrist’s everyday behavior. It is akin to Pushkin’s poetry and it ranks among the greatest ever manifestations of Russian culture.” Finally, Lotman mentions Leo Tolstoy’s memory of encountering a Decembrists and says that

…speaking about Tolstoy’s relationship to Decembrist ideological traditions is a complicated, subtle matter, but what is absolutely obvious is the unmediated human continuity of the historico-psychological type of personality and type of behavior. […] Tolstoy’s conceptualization is very interesting. His thoughts were constantly drawn to the people of December 14—but precisely the people, who were nearer and dearer to him than the actual ideas of Decembrism.
At this point, Lotman’s text has a line break, followed by a conclusion that signs off with a quote from Ryleev “breathing liberty” on the cobblestones of Senate Square on December 14, 1825. In my view, this conclusion is, to use the infamous Russian word, kazennoe [official]. With mention of Ryleev, Lotman safely ties his project back into the familiar Soviet ground of orthodox historiography about gentry revolutionaries who woke up the later raznochintsy radicals, and so forth; his real interest, I argue, lies in passage quoted above. Its emotional tenor speaks for itself. At no other point in the article would this meticulous researcher with fairly boring diction allow himself the luxury of claiming that the Decembrists’ behavior in Siberia is as important in the grand scheme of things as “Pushkin’s poetry.” Nor would Lotman otherwise allow himself so vehemently to denigrate “Bazarov’s plebian antics” [bazarovskie zamashki raznochintsy] in light of the noble Decembrists. With such open derision for Turgenev’s infamous fictional 1860s nihilist revolutionary, Lotman is actually implicitly condemning the Bolshevik in everyday life. Which is to say that Lotman argues for the ultimate historical and cultural superiority and cultural effectiveness of the politically ineffective noble Decembrists-in-exile, over and against the far more politically effective but culturally inferior late-nineteenth-century radicals, some of whom lived to see their projects bear fruit in the 1917 Revolution. And Leo Tolstoy provides the gold standard of proof of the cultural effectiveness of the Decembrists’ “school of citizenship,” for Tolstoy’s placement here mirrors Lotman’s own. The writer was born after the Decembrist revolt, in 1828 (Lotman is born in 1922), and encountered former Decembrists only in the 1850s, when they were pardoned. After thirty years of Siberian exile and almost total disconnection from the Russian public sphere, nearly all of these returnees were out of touch in their political
views. But even so, Tolstoy believed he could inherit their behavior, if not their ideas. History had moved on, but Decembrist culturedness remained perennially relevant—that is the lesson that Tolstoy’s example holds for Lotman.

Through the power of semiotic systems Decembrist mores affected a circle of people far beyond the Decembrists themselves. Lotman points out that even individuals who by force of circumstances had ended up on the opposite sides of the revolt in 1825 nevertheless shared certain ideals that the Decembrists had put into cultural circulation years earlier. The Decembrists’ cultural impact also prepared the ground for Tolstoy’s veneration of them as people, decades later. It is precisely this mechanism that, according to Lotman, can be applied in the late Soviet situation. Culturedness, far more than concrete actions of political dissidence, ultimately can give the Soviet liberal elites the semiotic tools through which to come together and recognize each other, the tools to cultivate a sense of post-1968 ‘inner freedom’ from the impositions of the repressive neo-Tsarist late Soviet state, as well as the tools through which to exert their influence on the late Soviet masses. Which is quite an optimistic message to take out of the Decembrist story in the conditions of Brezhnevite reality.
III. The Past as Liberal Political Message: Natan Eidelman’s Lunin

A history of one is a history of all. But that is why everything is connected far more than we usually imagine...

Natan Eidel’man, Lunin (1970)²⁴

In the two sections above, I describe the deployment of the past by two elite members of late Soviet society who are quite different from each other, but who are both similar in the sense of not really being concerned with the question of mass reception of their ideas. Akhmatova, as I have argued, saw herself as belonging to the empire of poets, and though she saw the existence of such a structurally liberal institution as an inherent affront to totalitarian Stalinist logic, she nevertheless did not seem to have a theory of influence that would explain how the empire of poets would impact the masses, which is somewhat ironic considering that Akhmatova was a celebrity with a wide audience, who willingly sought out and participated in mechanisms of maintaining her celebrity status, particularly at the end of her life.²⁵ Lotman, on the other hand, did have a theory of influence of ideas, which was similar to Pomerants’ conceptualization of late Soviet intelligentsia, in which notions of culturedness would radiate at the top and percolate down to the urbanized masses, and thus slowly but surely—and most importantly bloodlessly, without unnecessary disturbances!—establish the ground conditions for overcoming the Soviet repressive state, which would basically whither in the face of everyone’s triumphant ‘inner freedom.’²⁶ But Lotman was not a celebrity with a public audience in the way of Akhmatova in the 60s-70s, and he did not attempt to produce writings at this time that would appeal to a mass audience. “The Decembrist in Everyday
Life” was an academic text, designed for circulation among other academics (it was published in an academic collection, by an academic publisher, with an academic print-run), and though a generalized liberal belief in the salvific role of culturedness is quite evident in it, this message is not designed for mass consumption, even though it is expected to reach the masses eventually, through the power of semiotic magic. Thus, Akhmatova’s and Lotman’s approaches to the past differ as a result of their differences as social actors. Akhmatova the poet believed in the past of poets; Lotman the educator believed in the past of educators.

In the present section, we will examine the case of Natan Eidel’man, who is in some ways a synthesis of Akhmatova’s and Lotman’s social positions, but in another way is cardinally different from either of them. Eidel’man was similar to Akhmatova in the sense that he was a little bit of an intelligentsia celebrity, and he was similar to Lotman in that he was also a historian of the nineteenth century. Crucially, however, Eidel’man was a popular historian, which made his intelligentsia status quite different from that of Akhmatova, and his scholarly status quite different from that of Lotman. Eidel’man did not want to claim something like an empire of poets for his self-legitimation—he wanted mass public demand. Similarly, he did not (and could not) claim to be an elitist initiator into culturedness and citizenship like Lotman—he wanted the status of a public intellectual and thus a public civic educator. For all of these reasons, Eidel’man’s use of the past was different from that of Akhmatova and Lotman. Eidel’man could not simply assume that his audience would believe the past to be relevant, he had to make it relevant—and he did so by making it both aesthetically and discursively appealing. With that in mind, let us now turn to Eidel’man’s earliest major monographic work with a
sizeable print run—his 1970 long-form piece of historical nonfiction on the life and times of the Decembrist Mikhail Lunin, published through the Lives of Extraordinary People publishing line at Molodaia Gvardiia.28

Aesthetically, Lunin strives to make the past feel palpable and vibrant by providing extensive, full-length citations of free-wheeling letters from all involved and peripherally involved parties in the Decembrist’s biography. These letters are full of nicknames and references to seemingly irrelevant everyday-life events, such as news of travels of relatives, births of cousins, and so forth. Eidel’man injects clarifying footnotes to translate the French, or explain some antiquated diction, or to point out the historical context, but he almost never paraphrases his sources or abridges them, as one might expect in a scholarly article. This is because Eidel’man’s goal is to produce as much ‘local color’ as possible, to make his popular text appealing to consume. As is well known, the 1960s was a time of burgeoning fashion for the pre-Soviet past among Soviet urban masses.29 I will speak about the matter much more further on, but for the moment let me just say that this fashion needs to be understood in the context of the growth of Soviet consumer society, in which, just as in the West, existing fantasy images could get repackaged and resold to consumers, satisfying and generating consumer demands. The difference between the consumerism of late Soviet urban professional classes and those of the consumer capitalist West described by Jean Baudrillard was only one of scale. In short, in the 1960s the past was acquiring consumerist desirability and the aesthetics of Eidel’man’s popular history speak to that desire.

But Eidel’man’s Lunin is hardly all just a bunch of fancy names and pretty tidbits from a time long gone. It is rather a text whose popular accessibility depends on the
direct applicability of its cultural models and scripts to the present late Soviet moment.

As scholars and eyewitnesses have pointed out, such a dynamic was unavoidable, because there was pressure from the state ideological apparatus in the 1970s to generate historical fiction that would both reinforce ossified official ideological narratives and garner a mass audience. The two goals quite obviously had the potential to run at odds with each other. Moreover, combined with elements of a de facto liberal social structure, the potential for political ambiguity and negotiation compounded. Thus, Gary Hamburg has observed how Eidel’man’s Lunin abounds with easy parallels between the Decembrists and present-day Brezhnevite political repressions and show-trials. Why were such obvious subtexts allowed into press, Hamburg wonders, and suggests an answer by pointing to a curious bit of Eidel’man’s diary, which discusses the clearing of Lunin past the censorship of Militsa Nechkina, the long-standing doyenne of Soviet orthodox Decembrist scholarship, in charge of the industry since the High Stalinist 1930s:

Eidel’man’s account of Lunin's judicial process was so transparently applicable to the Soviet system that Nechkina [...] felt obliged to ask Eidel’man to cut the discussion of Lunin's trial from his book. Remarkably, Eidel’man rejected her request, telling her that he had accurately reported the facts of the case [...] Nechkina yielded to Eidel’man’s judgment—an outcome that caused him to remark: “Militsa loved me, she loved me; otherwise, one word from her and she could have destroyed my book, but she chose not to.”

Eidel’man’s ability to maneuver his Aesopian reading past an establishment figure like Nechkina would not have been possible in earlier, more totalitarian times. The culture industry in the late Soviet period was enabled by a social dynamic in which the guardians of permissible speech were diffuse and subject to all sorts of pressures, including, in Eidel’man’s case, a combination of insistence on historical accuracy before a highly qualified (albeit orthodox) historian, and the deployment of personal charm.
Steering between the relatively flexible censorship of a *de facto* liberalized late Soviet social structure, ossified official ideological requirements, and consumer demands for contemporary relevance, Eidel’man had quite a bit of leeway to say what he wished to say, and he used that leeway to tell the story of a Decembrist who *does not*, as it were, “come out to the square at the appointed hour,”\(^{32}\) nor does he even support the idea of the revolt because he believes that “an untimely rebellion reinforces despotism.”\(^{33}\) Lunin is nevertheless apprehended, but then continues to shine with incredible moral resolve in the face of Nicholas’ investigative commission’s proceedings, and then, while in Siberian exile remains fearlessly committed to the cause of providing opposition to autocratic power. Moreover, it quickly becomes clear to the reader of Eidel’man’s work that he admires Lunin not *only* for his exemplary humanity, or for his culturedness (as Lotman might have), but for his *actual liberal political platform*. Eidel’man argues that all of Lunin’s political activity is rooted in his personal liberal-humanist ideal of “Man” standing above all.\(^{34}\) And Eidel’man clearly admires Lunin’s political activity, especially his legalist dissident tactics. Hence, while under interrogation Lunin essentially declares the creator of the secret society to be none other than… Tsar Alexander I, and directly points to his speech at the Polish Sejm, where he had spoken of the gradual preparation of Russia for lawful liberal institutions. Even this very term is from the tsar’s speech. It had included the words “institutions libérales.” […] In his forthcoming answers Lunin will not stop citing the dead tsar: “lawful liberal… lawful liberal…” […] He is playing a dangerous game with power, as if testing it to see if he will be judged for actions that are not formally criminal? As if he doesn’t know—though of course he knows very well—one of the essential principles of authoritarianism [*samovlast’*e], later formulated by Shchedrin: “I tell him reason, and he tells me—hooey!..”\(^{35}\)

It is hard to read these words without thinking of someone like Alexander Esenin-Vol’pin, the 1960s legalist dissident, who coined the basic premise of his resistance as ‘respect
your own constitution.’ Indeed, Eidel’man’s personal deference to that legalist dissident position becomes all the more clear in his earlier, 1966 writing on the 1860s radical publicist Serno-Soloviev, in which he points out that

> Of the 32 prisoners only Serno knows his rights and demands that he be given the record [of the criminal accusations against him - PK]. And they give it to him. The other prisoners, who have since their childhood been conditioned to think that the authorities are allowed to do anything while their subjects are allowed to do nothing, do not even suspect that they too are allowed to examine their files.³⁶

Between these characterizations of Eidel’man’s historical heroes, we can see a dynamic of appropriation of the past that is significantly different from Lotman’s. Whereas Lotman would approach the past from the standpoint of possibly inheriting some abstract ideas of conduct from it, Eidel’man is willing to import actual useful political scripts. In his popular history of Lunin, and also of Serno, Eidel’man essentially writes an encomium for liberal rights. The question of the legitimacy of such a direct marshaling of history doesn’t seem to occur to him. In any case, he has no choice about the matter, because this style of reasoning is inherent in the genre of popular history, which can only be popular if it feels relevant, and it can only feel relevant if it erases distance between past and present by making the former into a straightforward lesson for the latter.

Before we move on to our next case, let us close our discussion of Eidel’man with a curious case of reception. In 1966, just a few months after “Serno” was published in the journal Znanie-sila, an abridged version of the story appeared in a one-off issue of a monthly periodical, called The Russian Word [Russkoe slovo], founded by a certain Ryleev Club. The Club was promptly shut down and the only issue of its only publication was quashed, but not before it made it out to the West, where it was published as part of the anti-Soviet émigré thick journal, Grani. It is unclear if Russian Word simply
reproduced a version of “Serno” without Eidel’man’s knowledge or permission, but either way, it is fascinating to see how unabashedly bluntly this journal takes up the whole disposition of obvious contemporary relevance that enables Eidel’man’s historical nonfiction.37 First off, there are Russian Word’s first words, printed on the inside of the front cover, in all capital letters, stating that “THIS ISSUE OF THE LITERARY AND PUBLIC JOURNAL RUSSIAN WORD IS NOW RELEASED AFTER A HUNDRED-YEAR HIATUS.” Then comes a letter from the editorial board, extolling the need for a “CULTURAL REVOLUTION.” After that comes Eidel’man’s story, which, aside from extensive abridgements, also features a subtle, but telling addition to the Znania-sila original. Describing Serno’s imprisonment and interrogation, and the pressures on him to give up his friends, the text lauds Serno’s impressive grace under pressure with a one-liner set apart as a separate paragraph: “What’s essential is to be and to remain a human being!!!”38 In the 1966 Znanie-Sila version, this line occurs as part of the preceding paragraph and has just one exclamation point. In the later 1980 version the line disappears entirely.39 The additional exclamation marks in Russian Word may be Eidel’man’s own, or they might be an injection on the part of Russian Word’s editors, but either way this sort of extremist inflection fits Russian Word’s agenda perfectly. After all, this is a publication by two nineteen-year-olds.40 They’re inspired, fairly naïve readers, and their placement of Eidel’man’s essay at the front of the journal speaks to the way in which they think his popular history actually provides a concrete program for present-day action. In their rendering, Eidel’man’s popular history becomes a counter-myth of glorious origins for contemporary late Soviet liberalism. The nineteenth century here becomes not just a site of inheritance of behaviors, but of actual liberal political practice
and discourse as well—so much so that the journal’s creators can happily (and entirely unironically!) claim that their publication originated a hundred years earlier. And Eidel’man’s mass-appeal historical nonfiction is perfectly positioned to support this gesture.
IV. Mass Market Soviet Cinema and The Imperial Era: Motyl’s *Star* and Riazanov’s *Poor Hussar*

“For me, overall, it is the music, the French language, the feeling of an endless road, it is Trubetskaia and Tseidler, it is the Annenkovs—the son and the mother. And Pauline! It’s the sorrow, and the overall undeclared but palpable feeling of history, which reaches far beyond 1825-1828. Did I like the film? Yes. No. Three times a tear caught my eye…”

Natan Eidel’man, “A Feeling of History”

The past three sections have tracked an arc of appropriation of the past among Late Soviet liberal cultural producers. I have examined how in the case of Akhmatova’s empire of poets, the past is contemporaneous with the present because it has perennial relevance, and I have pointed out how this gesture reinforces the empire of poets as a structurally liberal social institution, while also considering the limitations of this kind of political imaginary by pointing out Akhmatova’s lack of interest in considering the way in which her empire should project its influence on greater popular culture (even though in practice Akhmatova attempts just that, especially in the 1950s-60s). In the case of Lotman, I have considered another elitist approach to the past, which underlines the mechanisms of its heritability and potential social efficacy—specifically, I have pointed out Lotman’s interest in certain notions of culturedness that had been generated by early nineteenth-century cultural elites, that had impressive influence in their time and may very well continue to have such impact in the present day. And with the case of Eidel’man, I have shown a more mass-culture approach to the past—one that, far more than Akhmatova’s and Lotman’s, relies on key late Soviet social developments—the exigencies of the ossified Soviet ideological apparatus, the growth of the urban educated consumer society (Solzhenitsyn’s ‘obrazovanshchina’), and the *de facto* liberalization of
structures of censorship and control—and uses all of these transformations to tell and to sell the story of a past that is directly discursively, politically relevant to the present. I will now continue our set vector towards more mass-market liberal deployments of the pre-Soviet past, by considering two works of mass entertainment with far greater reach than Eidel’man could have ever dreamed of: Vladimir Motyl’s slick Decembrist tear-jerker feature film, *The Captivating Star of Happiness* (1975), and El’dar Riazanov’s made-for-TV ironic tragicomedy, *Say a Word for the Poor Hussar* (1980). I will examine the way in which both of these films are able to package the past as lyrical, desirable consumer objects, and the discursive effects of such a repackaging. With Motyl’s *Star* I will show how the past-as-lyric becomes almost a fully de-ideologized object of consumer exchange, which for that very reason already points beyond the limits of Soviet off-brand consumer modernity; With Riazanov’s *Say a Word* I will show a more complicated dynamic, in which the film both ironizes the Russian Golden Age’s status as a present-day consumer object, but also subtly critiques the viewer’s implicit ideology of emotional investment in the past’s mythical status.

**The case of Motyl’s Star**

In her book on the representation of the “Decembrist Myth in Russian Culture,” Ludmilla Trigos is generally right to be dismissive of Motyl’s “Star of Captivating Happiness” (1975), a movie released to mark a 150-year anniversary of the Decembrist revolt, which happened to coincide with the peak of the Brezhnevite period of cultural censorship, later referred to as the epoch of Soviet decadence [*epokha zastoia*]. Official press for the anniversary capped off with a missive from Militsa Nechkina, the doyenne
of ossified Soviet historiography of the Decembrists’ place in the Revolutionary movement; Motyl’s film happily obliged. Trigos sees *Star* as the case of a “smash hit” director being commissioned by the Soviet state to celebrate the Decembrists and International Women’s Day together, thus “deflect[ing]” the Decembrists’ “subversive potentiality by valorizing the wives’ traditional feminine images.” In that regard, it is useful to compare Trigos’ recent appraisal of the movie to that of Eidel’man’s contemporary review, which partly criticized the film for its historical inaccuracies, but was generally positive about the “feeling of history” that it renders on screen. It should be obvious that Eidel’man’s sense of the film’s ‘truthiness’ is the flipside of the discursive banality rightly noted by Trigos. The film supplements its discursive lacuna with emotions and aesthetics. By investing so much weight into a lyrical rendering of the Decembrist story, it produces a “feeling of history” that Eidel’man enjoys. In what follows, I will briefly show exactly *how* Motyl’s film turns the Decembrist story into a lyric, as well as the cultural ideology that authorizes Motyl to make such an interpretation.

The two-part biopic follows the famous story of the Decembrist uprising and its aftermath, focusing in particular on the travails of Maria Volkonskaia and Ekaterina Trubetskaia, the wives of the rebelling princes Sergei Volkonsky and Sergei Trubetskoi, as well as Pauline Gueble, the fiancée of the cavalry lieutenant [poruchik] Ivan Annenkov. Part One of the film’s chronology is anchored by the revolt in St. Petersburg on December 14, 1825 and the verdict on July 13, 1826, while Part Two begins after the verdict and concludes with the wedding of Pauline Gueble and Annenkov in Siberia, where the latter is still condemned to hard labor in the spring of 1828. Both parts abound with minor and moderate historical inaccuracies; Eidel’man surmises that “the director,
the screenwriter and the historical consultants all know very well” that none of these things happened, but that they made the changes because “the authors needed them” in order to represent “the brutality and inhumanity of power” and so forth.\textsuperscript{44} Eidel’man’s observation seems on point, but we should add the caveat that in at least one of his listed cases of inaccuracies—that of Alexander Bestuzhev’s interrogation—the film is so thoroughly unclear that it seems misplaced to judge it by any bar of historical accuracy whatsoever. As non-specialist viewers we have absolutely no idea who the character Eidel’man assumes to be Bestuzhev actually is. He is never referred to by name in the movie, he says only a few lines, in the last of which he calls Tsar Nicholas a pig, and after that we never hear from him again.\textsuperscript{45} This is because the film is fundamentally uninterested in history per se. Rather, it aims to present a “feeling of history,” by inundating viewers with a certain depth and richness of images that makes us believe in the story’s authenticity, without actually engaging with the events on a discursive level.

Yet Star’s “feeling of history” plays second fiddle to the film’s main goal, namely unrestrained, pure “feeling” itself. The film’s central goal is to make the audience cry. And the film was apparently effective enough that even Eidel’man complied. Stylistically, Motyl’ pursues this tear-jerker effect by a combination of prodigious cutting and a luscious stylized Romantic classical music score by Isaak Shvarts. Shvarts’ score throughout Star is so omni-present and engrossing that at times the film feels like a music video. Along those same lines, Motyl’s montage is so aggressive as to make it very difficult to understand what is really being said about the politics of the revolt, as well as its timing. There are, depending how one counts, between 63 to 75 cuts going backwards and forwards in time in Part One alone, which is only 81 minutes long, and which
features at least 25 different settings, 10 of them from different, unidentified chronological points prior to December 1825. Motyl is also enamored of introducing new plotlines with a one-second flash of the forthcoming footage as the preceding scene is being tapered off—there are at least four prominent cases of this in Part One, and more in Part Two. Conversations often continue off-screen from the preceding scene, even as the picture moves on to the next, and vice versa. Speech is very often muted and supplanted by music—particularly in the early scenes of Part One, during Prince Volkonsky’s flashbacks to prior conversations with Pestel and other Decembrist leaders. Moreover, when speech is not muted, it often takes place in French, with only an occasional Russian voiceover. All of this has a disorienting effect vis-à-vis the scenes’ discursive content, but no disorientation is actually felt by the viewer of Star, because Motyl’s montage comes along with so much music that we interpret the juxtaposed images’ emotional plane, rather than the words spoken in them. And the fact that some exchanges are spoken in a romantically-coded, untranslated foreign language further emphasizes the lyrical effect.

The other part of Star’s lyrical strategy pertains to its engagement with the Russian literary canon. Star assumes from its audience a secondary-school knowledge of Russian literary canon from or about the ‘Age of Pushkin.’ This much is apparent from the film’s title. But the film also makes some interesting unreflective deployments of canon, which betray its authors’ implicit ideological positions. We can observe this dynamic in the way the film deploys Nikolai Nekrasov’s Russian Women, a long-form two-part poem dedicated to the travails of Ekaterina Trubetskaia and Maria Volkonskaia, written in 1871.46 There is no point at which the film makes clear that Nekrasov is its main source text, which is why even a viewer as astute as Eidel’man does not understand
some of Star’s visual turns. For instance, there is a point where, while already in Siberia, Trubetskaia has a flashback to earlier happy times in Italy. “Why Italy? What is Italy for?” Eidel’man the viewer wonders, because Nekrasov’s poem is not on his mind. For the same reason Eidel’man thinks there is a brief quote of Pushkin in the film, showing Volkonskaia running away from a sea wave—he doesn’t realize that this moment too is plucked not from Pushkin, but from Nekrasov’s citation of Pushkin. We can tell that this is the case because Pushkin is actually there in the shot (see Figure 1, below).\textsuperscript{47} In this twelve-second segment, Pushkin doesn’t say anything, stands in the background, and hardly even looks like himself, but it’s certainly him, and we know it must be him because Nekrasov stages this exact scene in his poem:

\begin{quote}
And Pushkin was here… I recognized him…  
He was our childhood friend […]  
Our whole family traveled to Crimea,  
And Pushkin came along with us. […]  
Leaving my family, I flew like an arrow  
After the curly-haired poet; […]  
I jumped and I played with the sea […]  
And Pushkin looked on… and laughed that I  
Got my shoes wet.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

The fact that even a watcher as astute as Eidel’man doesn’t catch this ‘Easter egg’ makes one wonder—just exactly why is it there and who is it for? Star deeply believes in the existence and a priori power of the literary canon from which it draws its images. Motyl assumes that he can move us with the image of Volkonskaia running in and out of seawaves, whether or not we know this image’s literary source. He assumes this because he believes that ‘the greats’ have produced a timeless emotive vocabulary, that the works of great poets have some kind of ontic, transcendent power to move people. Motyl’s film assumes that lyrical imagery is timeless. It is assumed to be effective forever.
Figure 1: Pushkin appears for a split second in Motyl’s film, behind Volkonskaia’s parents, looking on.

Which brings us to the final issue, the question of the timelessness of Star. As Trigos has argued, Star is ‘timeless’ partly in its choice of subject matter. The story of the Decembrists’ wives stands outside of history, because it is underpinned by patriarchal social mores that have mostly dominated Russian culture for at least the last 200 years. And though it is certainly possible to point out, with Lotman, that the dekabristki really did commit a political act by following their husbands to Siberia, we do not have to think like Lotman. We can simply tell the story of the dekabristki to confirm all of our existing chauvinist cultural fantasies about good loyal women, which is precisely what Motyl’s film does. But there is another level on which Star believes in ‘timelessness’—namely, it believes in the ‘timelessness’ of the emotional appeal of Russia’s Golden-Age past. And
nowhere is this particular ideology more obvious than in Star’s use of Okudzhava’s “Song of the Cavalier Guard” as the leitmotif for the Annenkov-Gueble love-story. In Eidelman’s view, Okudzhava’s song is a “wonderful, sad, Decembrist, ‘truly our own [нашеный]’ romance.” How can that be so? How can a text by a famous 1970s singer-songwriter (about whom we’ll speak at length shortly) be both “Decembrist” and “truly our own”? Okudzhava’s text is “Decembrist” because it is stylized according to nineteenth-century language, mentioning “cavalier-guardsmen,” “young maidens,” “swords” and so forth. Moreover, its deployment in the film interlaces with so much glittering, fairytale nineteenth-century, full of untranslated French-language horseplay between the beautiful Pauline and Annenkov in his glistening white cavalier-guard uniform, that we are not left any room to doubt the song’s ‘authenticity.’ But what makes it “truly our own”? I think it is the assumption that this stylized, mass-market image of the nineteenth century is our own. It belongs to “us,” to the 1970s, having been created according to processes of consumer demand for de-ideologized rom-com fantasy. Which is to say that Motyl’s cautious Brezhnevite refusal to engage in any kind of discursive, politicized reckoning with the Decembrist narrative ultimately yields a product that is structurally anti-Soviet, precisely because it is motivated by the forces of liberal consumer modernity that are the same as the ones at play in twentieth-century Western capitalist entertainment industry. Motyl, together with Okudzhava produces timeless emotion, to satisfy late Soviet consumer demand. The past as de-historicized lyrical fantasy can be consumed by anyone. It acquires the status of widely exchangeable, fetishized currency, and so too do its lines from Pushkin and its visual quotes of Nekrasov. In short, the past in Motyl’s Star becomes thoroughly aestheticized,
thoroughly mass culture.

**Riazanov’s *Say a Word for the Poor Hussar***

Many of the dynamics of Motyl’s *Star* appear in El’dar Riazanov’s *Say a Word for the Poor Hussar* (1980). However, this film’s satirical nature makes for a more complicated rendition of the consumerized image of the pre-Soviet past. Whereas *Star* produces a “feeling of history” as a slick formal component of its lyrical brew, Riazanov makes his “feeling of history” play a thematic role in his film. *Say a Word* quite consciously presents a stereotyped past for the viewers’ ironic enjoyment, but at the same time the film so skillfully manipulates that same image’s emotional impact that it becomes difficult to tell just where exactly the viewers stand with respect to it: outside, as knowing and wise (maybe even cynical and post-modern) consumers?—or inside, as the unwilling and unknowing actors in Riazanov’s multi-tiered game of satirical critique?

To start with, let us consider *Say a Word for the Poor Hussar* in light of Riazanov’s far older film, the 1962 operetta *Hussar Ballad*. The differences between the two films are, of course, vast. *Hussar Ballad* is a campy operetta, whose characters spontaneously burst into song, clank swords in even rhythm, and knock out bad guys with occasional help from a burly Russian peasant armed with a very large sofa. The operetta’s plot revolves around a 17-year-old tomboy noblewoman pretending to be a man in order to serve as a fearless hussar in the War of 1812 (supposedly, her character is based on Alexander Alexandrov / Nadezhda Durova, a cavalry officer in the Napoleonic wars, who was born anatomically female). In the process, she strikes up a homoerotic friendship with the equally valiant, but somewhat undomesticated hussar Lieutenant
[poruchik] Rzhevsky—a relationship which almost ends in a duel, but which the power of rhyming quatrains magically transforms into true love and a marriage proposal (with absolutely no room for discussion of the gender complexities involved in such a turn of events). *Say a Word* is a film of an entirely different tenor. This much is apparent already from the film’s opening shots—three minutes of extended bird’s eye flyovers of Russian nature, and Petrine and Catherinian palace grounds, with manicured French gardens and neoclassical facades (see Figure 2). *Say a Word*’s story is not the stuff of musical operettas—it is a comical but generally naturalist tale of the tragic end of a provincial theater actor Afanasii, as a result of an intrigue by a Tsarist political security agent, count Merzliaevo, who had been sent to test the loyalties of a hussar regiment that is garrisoned there. And sadly, Merzliaevo ultimately more or less succeeds in his mission—the film’s other protagonist, the valiant but hapless cavalryman Pletnev, ends up failing Merzliaevo’s test and thus loses his rank and his regiment (though not his friends’ respect). The film has no swash-buckling scenes, no burly patriotic peasants, and no silent cardboard enemies. And yet *Say a Word* is undoubtedly related to Riazanov’s 1962 operetta, and the relationship is both explicit and implicit. Explicitly, *Say a Word* opens with one minute of credits that look exactly like those of *Hussar Ballad*—with words rolling over a stylized 19th century military novel frontispiece background (See Figures 3, below). And implicitly, *Say a Word*’s cavalryman Pletnev is undoubtedly the offspring of *Hussar Ballad*’s Rzhevsky. It is not that the two are similar characters. It is rather that Pletnev *is* Rzhevsky—except he’s not the Rzhevsky of Riazanov’s original film, but the Rzhevsky of extremely popular late Soviet urban jokelore that evolved *out* of Riazanov’s film.

As is well known, the late Soviet period saw a vibrant burgeoning of the urban
folkloric genre of the narrative joke (*anezd*). The reasons for this growth are various, but the most important one for our purposes is the expansion of late Soviet mass media, which provided the stock characters for nearly all of the jokes.\textsuperscript{50} Skirting past the whole

*Figure 2*: Extensive flyover sequences set in the palatial outskirts of St. Petersburg book-end Riazanov’s film.

*Figure 3*: Compare the Napoleonic era stylized background for *Hussar Ballad* (left) and *Say a Word* (right) Lenin-Brezhnev oeuvre of late Soviet political humor, as well as Soviet ethnic jokes
(most of which are far too offensive for the pluralist American ear), we can use Russian
Wikipedia’s hive mind to point to four other major late Soviet jokelore cycles based on
USSR’s culture industry sources: 1) the adventures of Soviet master spy Stielriltz from the
highly popular 1970s miniseries, Seventeen Moments of Spring; 2) the adventures of the
Civil War hero commander Chapaev and his sidekick Pet’ka, familiar from the Vasiliev
brothers’ famous 1934 adaptation of Furmanov’s 1923 novel; 3) the antics of Sherlock
Holmes and Doctor Watson, from the acclaimed 1978-1986 made-for-tv Soviet
adaptations of Conan Doyle’s novels; and 4) the encounters of Poruchik Rzhevsky and
Natasha Rostova, in which the former originated from Hussar Ballad and the latter from
Sergei Bondarchuk’s adaptation of Tolstoy’s War and Peace. This list of stock jokelore
characters confirms a key dynamic—that late Soviet urban culture was permeated by
mass media stock images, that some version of a pre-Soviet past had already become one
of those stock images, and that this development happened thanks to the burgeoning of
film and television. To put it another way—Natasha Rostova did not make it into jokelore
as a result of mass readership of Tolstoy’s famous novel (even though it did have mass
readership); it was Bondarchuk’s film that did the job, and we know this partly because
we can trace the joke to its origins in the late 1960s and partly because jokelore Natasha
interacts with Rzhevsky, who is from another fictional universe, but one that is also from
the movies, and also from the 1960s. Having said this, we should also add that jokelore
Rzhevsky only distantly resembles Riazanov’s 1962 protagonist, and certainly does not in
any way resemble his real nineteenth-century prototypes. Rzhevsky/Natasha jokes
juxtapose the Tolstoyan heroine’s dainty aristocratic manner to Rzhevsky’s glorious
uncouthness and libertinism. Aside from his freewheeling sexual exploits (which include
women, men, prostitutes, children and farm animals), jokelore Rzhevsky defines himself through a triumphant embrace of unculturedness [nekul’turnost’]—a combination of aesthetic and socio-moral ignorance. None of these traits define Riazanov’s 1962 protagonist, whom we might characterize instead as a relatively valiant hussar with a bit of unwarranted braggadocio about military prowess and romantic success. But the power of modern urban folklore is such that this fairly tame personage, thanks to fifteen years of relentless efforts by Soviet schoolchildren, transformed in popular imagination into a blithely obnoxious permanent brothel-denizen and womanizer. And in Say a Word, Riazanov happily embraces this new version of his hussar, who returns to him as a prodigal son. The jokelore Rzhevsky, reincarnates into Say a Word’s Pletnev—who is a regular with the prostitutes, can’t behave himself in the theater, has never read a book, and spends most of his mental efforts in pursuit of Afanasii’s daughter Nastia (which sounds fairly tame, but Say a Word is a made-for-TV New Year’s special, after all).

Riazanov’s deployment of jokelore Rzhevsky to create Pletnev points to the film’s playful dynamic vis-à-vis its image of the past. With Rzhevsky, Say a Word winks at popular culture, indicating that it is aware of the existence of a ridiculous late Soviet stock-image of a pre-Soviet past. We know to laugh and we know that the film laughs with us, as we watch our pseudo-nineteenth-century hussar actually serve as the protagonist of this otherwise naturalist period piece. And the film also employs other techniques, to achieve a similar effect. For instance, as the film’s opening flyover shots of summery Peterhof and idyllic Russian natural settings transition into the telling of the plot (starting with showing Merzliaev on his way to the town of Gubernsk), we hear a storyteller’s playful off-screen narration which, combined with the images on screen,
conjures up a sort of Gestalt pop-culture image of pre-Revolutionary Russia. Unlike Motyl’s *Star*, however, Riazanov’s *Say a Word* wants us to approach this composite image ironically, as opposed to purely lyrically—Riazanov wants us both to enjoy his “feeling of history” and to laugh at it. And so the offscreen narration is suddenly interrupted by a quick image of a duel taking place outside count Merzliaev’s moving carriage. “What’s going on out there?” the narrator interrupts, while the camera pans Merzliaev’s briefly concerned face. “Ah, a trifle”—and the narration continues (See Figure 4). And shortly thereafter, after the carriage comes to a stop, we see the excessively well-dressed count enjoy his scenic lunch for one:

Merzliaev: How will you be treating me today, my dears?
Egorych (his servant): Pardon me, your excellency, but it’s caviar again.
Merzliaev: Again caviar? What a scandal. Well then.

With just a few lines of this dialogue we begin to hate Merzliaev, but the film makes us reach this conclusion ironically, by comically exaggerating all Soviet clichés about *ancien régime* fatcat noblemen. So too with the duel outside Merzliaev’s window—it is us, the late Soviet audience who tend to think along the lines of ‘Tsarist-Russia-Therefore-Duels,’ so of course we happen to ride past one of these “trifles.” A similar effect is also achieved with Merzliev’s incessant quotation of classic Russian poets during his cloying and disingenuous courtship of Nastia. Merzliev’s quotations, comprised entirely of first lines from famous poems by Pushkin, Lermontov and Tiutchev, are all famous to the point of triteness for *us*, the late Soviet audience. Merzliev’s effusive use of these texts expresses not only the historicist irony of a cynical gendarme citing the verses of anti-government sympathizers (*sans* Tiutchev), but also the irony of a ‘real’ nineteenth-century man citing clichéd *Soviet* nineteenth-century literary canon.
However, for all of Riazanov’s ironic deployment of a mediatized, mass-culture version of the pre-Soviet past, he also plays a far subtler game. For instance, the long scenic flyovers that frame the film are only *sometimes* paired with humorous text. Other times—and there are *many* other times—these long flyovers are coupled with highly lyrical performances of songs written in the nineteenth-century romance style, using nineteenth-century sources. The opening of Part Two is a three-minute flyover shot of the same gardens and neoclassical facades as in Part One, but now these are coupled with a moving minor-key musical rendering of Peter Viazemsky’s 1861 poem, “To Friends.” One of the poem’s quatrains reads:
I drink to the health of the faraway,
Faraway, yet wonderful friends,
Friends who are lonely as I am
Among those who are strange to their hearts.

The lyrical performance of these verses alongside the flyover shots produces a feeling of nostalgia vis-à-vis Russia’s beautiful pre-Revolutionary past, full of “distant, but sweet friends.” On the one hand we can poke fun at the late Soviet Gestalt of it all, but on the other hand the film genuinely wants to move us with that same image, by making us feel like it is somehow, in some greater sense, really true and pertains to a “Russia that we have lost” (to borrow the title of Govorukhin’s Perestroika-era documentary, which will be discussed at length in Chapter Three).

When watching Riazanov’s film, we end up in a curious position, which seems to hold no matter how well-informed we are. If we are very well informed, then we might happily take apart the film’s strategy of authenticity here and elsewhere, by noting the anachronism of accompanying action set in the 1840s with Viazemsky’s verse from the 1860s. In that same vein, we can call out Nastia’s performance of a poem by Marina Tsvetaeva, about 1812, but written in 1913. But even if we know this, it still bothers us not at all. Even if we know that there is no distance in this film between Pushkin, Tiutchev, Viazemsky and Tsvetaeva, even if we know that 200 years of aesthetic culture (if we include the Petrine neoclassical settings) combine into a single image of a bygone era—even if we know all of this, and even if we are expected to laugh about the fact that this era is a construction of our time, it still for some reason feels good. It is still effective. We know it is a fantasy, and yet we still enjoy it.

But can we? Or should we? To what end? Maybe the self-awareness about the
Sovietism of Riazanov’s fairy-tale past, which we are expected to bring to his film, should help us find its contemporary Aesopian allegorical meanings? If that is really the case, then we are in luck—the film makes the drawing of allegories pretty easy. It is not very challenging to read Brezhnevism into lines like, “it was a time when the best minds were thinking, but kept quiet, because their mouths were being muzzled, while the worst minds spoke, even though, to be sure, they could have kept quiet.” It is also quite easy to read the whole Soviet political censorship apparatus into Merzliav, the image of a well-educated but thoroughly disingenuous and cynical apparatchik. Indeed, if we were to look for Merzliaev’s real-life equivalent, we might consider Gosteleradio’s infamous gendarmist chief, Sergei Lapin, who happened to have made Riazanov’s work on the film particularly difficult. But on the other hand, Say a Word’s pre-Revolutionary setting is much more than just a stage for contemporary satirical caricatures. It is an emotionally appealing place in its own right, thanks to Riazanov’s cinematic techniques and Andrei Petrov’s stylized nineteenth-century military wind-ensemble film score. No matter how ironically we watch it, Golden Age Russia in Riazanov’s film always feels like more than just a game. Which brings us to the film’s central narrative trope, its *fabula*, as it were, which revolves around dramatic irony and the question of who is acting and who is not.

The film’s plot revolves around a number of increasingly high-stakes cases of dramatic irony, all of which are initiated by Merzliaev. First, Merzliaev enlists the actor Afanasii to play a revolutionary ‘carobonari’ ringleader and arranges for the hussar regiment to execute the traitor. The firing squad will not know they are using blank bullets, and thus any hesitation on their part will reveal them as politically unreliable. The hussar regiment is appalled at their assignment, and so its commander, the Colonel,
hatches a scheme to spring Afanasii from jail by having Pletnev accompany him and then pretend to be ambushed by Afanasii’s revolutionary comrades. Afanasii realizes that his game is about to get some good people into trouble and so at the last moment tries to get Pletnev to understand that he is only acting, but Pletnev is too uneducated to catch the hint. However, Pletnev’s mock ambush ends up accidentally looking so convincing that even Merzliaev himself is somewhat confused. Afanasii actually tries to escape in order to help Pletnev, but Merzliaev catches him, and then, as a last ditch effort to protect Pletnev from a terrible fate Afanasii decides to tell Merzliaev that he really is a carbonari and that his revolutionary comrades really did try to spring him from prison. Merzliaev is unconvinced, but decides to call Afanasii’s bluff and has him believe that now he really will be shot. At the film’s emotional apex, we arrive to the execution grounds, where Afanasii tells the hussar firing squad that all the guns are blank (even though he thinks they are loaded). Merzliaev calls his bluff again and tells him to shoot himself “to save the soldiers from sin.” Afanasii hesitates, but ultimately takes the gun and shoots himself. As it turns out, the gun is also blank, but tragically Afanasii dies anyway, from a heart attack. All throughout this plot of fluctuation between play and reality, we also witness a series of running jokes that function according to the same dynamic, with Merzliaev asking various people around him to act like carbonari and to insult him with political outbursts. Predictably, even his most loyal underlings do this job so well that Merzliaev himself begins to suspect that they might really mean it.

With the film’s explicit *fabula* in mind, it becomes clear that it is also reflected on the picture’s formal level. As consumers of the film’s fairytale nineteenth century, we sometimes stop being able to tell—or even worse, we sometimes willfully ignore—that
this setting’s emotional effect is constantly being constructed, that we are players in this mass media simulacrum. We might observe the main plot with an all-knowing ironic smirk, but we do not have such a luxury of smug knowledge about our own participation in the film’s double-dealing with the pre-Revolutionary past. Moreover, this film double-deals not only to maintain a space of pleasant ironic ambiguity, but also to hoodwink us. The film, like Merzliaev, ultimately wants to win at its game of play versus reality. To that effect, there are points in the picture that feel like Riazanov’s private jokes, not meant for our discovery. The biggest such point takes place in the latter third of Part One, when we witness a morning in the hussar camp after a night at the brothel. As we shift through a series of coy images of cavalrymen dragging themselves suggestively out of rumpled hay (with no actual women being present—this is family television), we hear a playful song, with lyrics from Mikhail Svetlov’s 1928 poem, “The Great Road.” The film renders Svetlov’s poem in a light-hearted way, by using only the first half of it, which seems to extol the sexual exploits of dashing nineteenth-century military men. But such a reading does tremendous violence to Svetlov’s text, for two reasons. For one thing, the second half of the poem expresses serious skepticism about the ethic of reckless sexual violence that underpins the seemingly idyllic hussar lifestyle. And secondly, the second half of the poem is not about the nineteenth century at all, but about early Soviet revolutionary anxiety with respect to the dangerous possibility of willy-nilly inheriting Tsarist traditions and tainting the socialist dream. Svetlov’s poem’s final quatrain reads:

Forgive us, our wives!
Forgive us, our epoch,
Our hussar traditions’
Accursed lechery!\(^{53}\)
Svetlov’s poem is not a case of nostalgia for ‘the Russia that we have lost.’ It is rather a
text of genuine social critique, a poem about the difficulty of overcoming a tradition of
glorifying violence, from the perspective of a communist true believer. None of that
context comes through in Riazanov’s rendering.

This little example of a well-covered ‘Easter egg’ is, in a way, the polar opposite
of Motyl’s techniques. It reveals a very different ideology of canon. If for Motyl,
Nekrasov’s lyrical images are believed to have a kind of *a priori* lyrical effect, whether or
not their source is recognized, for Riazanov Svetlov’s images have this lyrical effect only
when he does conscious violence to them and we the viewers do not recognize it. Motyl
believes in canon’s demiurgic power; Riazanov believes in *his own* demiurgic power to
manipulate canon. Motyl’s position is, at the end of the day, contiguous with the liberal
cultural tradition; Riazanov’s position is aggressively post-modern. Perhaps his position
corresponds to a further step in the evolution of late Soviet liberal discourse on the past.
Or perhaps it is the harbinger of post-Soviet cynical pragmatics of manipulation of that
past, dictated strictly by contemporary aesthetic and political exigencies. Motyl in 1975
was still trying to produce a mass-market version of his liberal fantasy, in which he still
believed, even though he seemingly accidentally turned it into a de-ideologized consumer
product. Riazanov in 1980 knows that *his audience* still believes—and so he happily
supplies a desirable simulacrum of a past, while knowing himself that this simulacrum
depends on a strategy of conscious manipulation of culture.
To conclude this chapter’s overview of the use of pre-Soviet past in late Soviet liberal cultural production, let us consider the case of Bulat Okudzhava, and in particular his 1971 historical fiction novel, *A Gulp of Freedom*. I turn to Okudzhava because of his social standing as a late Soviet liberal mass celebrity. Whereas Akhmatova’s celebrity status had been assured by her empire of poets, with little interest in the linkages between that elite coterie and the actual mass audience reading her work, Okudzhava consciously staked his celebrity strategy on a Soviet mass audience and the structural mechanisms that held it together—namely, mass media and the late Soviet urban lifestyle. Okudzhava used the mechanisms of late Soviet mass culture quite successfully. He appeared on television, he made records, and he placed his songs in extremely successful Soviet mass-market film productions—the most prominent of these is probably Vladimir Motyl’s *White Sun of the Desert* (1970), a smash hit in its own time and a cult classic to this day, whose lead song by Okudzhava, “Your Excellency, Lady Luck” has been on the lips of millions of inebriated guitar-playing Russians for 45 years and counting (in passing, we might mention that the character singing that song is an old Tsarist has-been). As for late Soviet urban lifestyle—without delving too far into the matter, we should keep in mind perhaps the most impactful mass social development of the 1960s-1980s: the growth of private living space as a result of late Soviet urban residents moving into first Khrushchev’s gloriously ugly pre-fabricated concrete apartment boxes, and then
Brezhnev’s slightly less ugly ones. These apartments installed a notion of privacy as an inalienable attribute of late Soviet socialist off-brand modernity, which in turn enabled the growth of the late Soviet culture industry, especially television. Private accommodations also enabled the rise of other consumer electronics, leading to the growth of samizdat and magnitizdat. The latter in particular greatly aided the spread of recordings of late Soviet singer-songwriters—the so-called ‘bards,’ among whom Okudzhava was prominent. The late Soviet notion of privacy also directly impacted the thematics of Okudzhava’s self-presentation. His poetic self-image as a private intellectual, musing about his “little patria” of the historic central Moscow Arbat district, played to the fantasies of his urban middle class listeners.

The issue of late Soviet privacy naturally leads us to Yurchak’s anthropology of svoi. Yurchak’s description of late Soviet urban society as a bunch of groups of svoi perfectly fits the social self-image of Okudzhava’s listeners, a kind of private, self-organized in-group, encouraged by Okudzhava to “grab each other’s hands, friends!” and thus unite in mutual recognition (Yurchak himself uses the example of another bard, Vladimir Vysotsky). The svoi were adept at commandeering Soviet solipsistic and now fully “performatively shifted” (but still officially totalitarian) state discourse in order to thrive as de facto de-centralized social circles. However, this dynamic also made it very difficult for Yurchak’s supposedly de-politicized svoi to draw discursive boundaries around their communities. How would one really know who truly belongs in one’s circle? Where are the limits of each group of svoi? In other words, we are looking at the problem of forging a structurally liberal community under conditions of late Soviet repressions. On the one hand, I think it was an article of faith among liberal elites that such a
community existed—Okudzhava’s “Let’s grab each other’s hands, friends!” certainly expresses that ideology. Through a semiotics of semi-dissidence, which could include a great deal of behaviors enumerated by Yurchak, as well as through discursive moves like the ones we’ve already been discussing, especially Aesopian allegory, one was supposed to recognize who was in and who was out. But the larger a social circle becomes, the less clear the signals that one can afford to send, the more one has to assume everyone else’s belonging on faith. But if one is standing in the crowded hall of a Palace of Culture and Okudzhava asks the audience to “grab each other’s hands, friends!”, how does one know they are really friends? Is it just because they are at the same concert?

Okudzhava’s semi-dissident liberal celebrity status presents a certain limit case of the liberalization of late Soviet society. On the one hand, he and other bards were semi-dissidents as a result of Soviet ideological institutions that rewarded them for not passing into fully articulated dissenting positions and could also punish them if they did. On the other hand, the bards by their sheer existence expressed a kind of structural dissent. Their celebrity status was based on a de facto liberal social organization, which ran counter to albeit solipsistic and ineffective, but still official Soviet totalitarian ideology. This conundrum did not immediately become clear to the originally idealistic ‘people of the sixties,’ such as Okudzhava himself. In the early Thaw years, Okudzhava and his peers were inspired by the Party’s supposed promise of de-Stalinization, purification, and the rhetoric of a return to Leninist ideals. They all assumed that everyone was in this project together, that there was supposed to be no daylight between their civic position and that of the state. As the Thaw progressed and post-Soviet ideological mechanisms took on clearer shapes, it soon became obvious that the erstwhile idealists had been mistaken. The
final crushing of their hopes took place in Prague Spring, when the split between the
liberally-minded ‘society’ and the state became too obvious to ignore (though in truth
such a split had already been all but ensured ten years earlier, at the very advent of the
state’s de-Stalinization policy). And significantly for our purposes, Prague Spring was
also the point when the disillusioned ‘sixtier’ Okudzhava began to write historical fiction,
starting with the account of the lowly provincial nobleman Ivan Avrosimov, who gets in
way over his head when he begins to serve as a note-taker for the 1826 Imperial
Commission’s investigation of the Decembrist ringleader Pavel Pestel.

The thick-journal novel *Poor Avrosimov* (1969), which two years later was turned
into Politizdat’s smash hit *A Gulp of Freedom (A Taste of Freedom* in the American
translation), sits at the crossroads of many developments of which we have already been
speaking. Just like Eidel’man’s *Lunin*, as well as Motyl’s and Riazanov’s films,
Okudzhava’s historical fiction appears at a time when a pop-culture image of pre-Soviet,
nineteenth-century Russia has already coalesced through film and television. Thus, the
stylization of Okudzhava’s novel is designed to make its past feel authentic in exactly the
same way as the off-screen narration in Riazanov’s *Say a Word*, or the ‘local color’
details in Eidel’man’s *Lunin* (moreover, it is my suspicion that Okudzhava’s racy
decision to set much of his novel in a bordello is influenced by Rhzewsky jokelore).
Additionally, just like *Lunin*, Okudzhava’s novel was being sponsored by a state push to
retool its ossified ideology for a consumer audience. The story of the Decembrists stood
at the beginning of the Leninist pre-history of the Russian Revolutionary movement (“the
Decembrists woke up Herzen,” went the famous 1912 Lenin cliche), and the period’s
cultural ‘Age of Pushkin’ reigned supreme in Soviet canon, so Okudzhava’s manuscript
seemed to be a perfect fit for Politizdat’s lineup of safe, but exciting historical fiction. Politizdat’s mass-market pressure to make the text ‘relevant’ authorized Okudzhava, just like Eidel’man, to import lessons from nineteenth-century history into the present day. And the fact that late Soviet censorship was diffuse and subject to all sorts of pressures as a result of social liberalization allowed Okudzhava to get away with quite a bit of semi-dissenting ambiguity in this text. However, the author’s social position as a celebrity also made the thematics of his novel different from those of Eidel’man’s Lunin. Eidel’man, as we recall, used the story of Lunin to show the relevance of nineteenth-century liberal humanist (and legalist) ideals for the present late Soviet moment; Okudzhava, as a result of his own social position, decided to turn story of the fictional Avrosimov into a self-critical parable about the futility of resistance against an adept authoritarian system.

* A Gulp of Freedom * has one main trans-historical moral—that even though ‘everyone’ in the informed social circles ‘already knows everything’ about the authoritarian state’s ideological dead end, the state is nevertheless perfectly capable of making most of its all-knowing elites continue to obey orders and rules, no matter how discredited they might be. Hence, we see the evolution of Avrosimov, who starts out in Petersburg as a freshly arrived provincial, who at first does not ‘already know everything,’ but then encounters Pestel during the interrogations and after hearing him very quickly loses his faith in the divine mandate of Nicholas’ rule. Along the way, however, Avrosimov also gets educated into the ways of Petersburg’s cynical *beau monde*. Petersburgers such as Avrosimov’s new friend, the guardsman Pavel Buturlin simply do what they have to do to get ahead, ideally without getting anyone else hurt, but also willing to bite the bullet on this matter, particularly when there is no other way out.
Hence Buturlin tells Avrosimov at the beginning of the novel that had he been given the order to strike down his own comrade-in-arms Bestuzhev on Senate Square on the day of the revolt, he would have done it: “I would have said to him, ‘forgive me, brother,’ and I would have struck him down. And he wouldn’t have taken pity on me either, obviously…”\textsuperscript{59} And such is the \textit{fabula} of Okudzhava’s story—on the one hand Avrosimov naively continues to evolve in his discursive opposition to the regime, but on the other hand he rises higher and higher in Petersburgian society as a result of his successful service during the course of the interrogations. This duality comes to a head when on the exact same night that Avrosimov is planning to spring Pestel from jail he is also offered the Order of St. Vladimir by General Tatishchev for his excellent service. And here the farce ends. Within the space of a few pages, Avrosimov’s plans are revealed to Tatishchev by the former’s courtly love interest, Avrosimov is promptly thrown in jail, where he has a mental breakdown and then the very next day goes back to his village, never to return. Appropriately, the man sent to arrest him is his friend Buturlin, whose last words in the novel are, “forgive me brother, but I have to arrest you…”\textsuperscript{60}

The social dynamics in the story of Avrosimov clearly relate to Okudzhava’s own. The general principles of elite Petersburg society come down to Buturlin’s declaration that “everyone thinks only of himself,”\textsuperscript{61} but with the caveat that one also should avoid hurting others, so long as it is possible. Buturlin won’t \textit{volunteer} to strike down his friend on Senate Square, for instance, while the novel also has us despise the character of Captain Maiboroda for volunteering to report on Pestel. This morality underscores the distinctness of the elite’s interests from the state—one should strive to maneuver between both forces, as opposed to deferring to one of them. In his early 1970s samizdat essay,
“Quadrillion,” Pomerants formulates the exact same principle with respect to late Soviet society with the pithy one-liner, that “decent people screw over their neighbors [gadiat blizhnemu] only out of necessity, without enjoyment.” We can draw a similar parallel between the corruption of Nicholas’ state and that of Okudzhava and his peers in the so-called ‘creative intelligentsia.’ Avrosimov receives the Order of St. Vladimir for his services; Okudzhava receives a nice house in Peredelkino and plenty of trips abroad, especially to France. The late Soviet state was, as we know quite adept at operating a complex system of carrots and sticks, through which it could ensure compliance from entire strata of only nominally loyal servants. It was precisely this social contract that Solzhenitsyn decried in his polemic with Pomerants, when he argued that the Soviet ‘semi-dissidents’ claiming to cultivate ‘inner freedom’ were all just a bunch of cowards, unwilling to stand up for fear of losing their bourgeois perks. And so we might interpret the story of Avrosimov as an expression of Okudzhava’s own despondence as a disillusioned ‘sixtier’ who has agreed to keep his mouth relatively shut in exchange for state-sponsored privileges. But A Gulp of Freedom is more than just an allegory of late Soviet semi-dissenting intelligentsia cynicism. I think a subtler reading of the text also reveals a level of self-critique of the very premise of the combination of ‘semi-dissent’ and liberal celebrity, and thus marks a point of recognition of the place where real intelligentsia politics might begin. Ultimately, Okudzhava actually crossed that point in 1993, with tragic consequences for himself.

To get at the point of the text’s self-critique, we will have to read more closely into Avrosimov’s foil, the despicable Captain Maiboroda, who on closer inspection has far more in common with Okudzhava the celebrity than might otherwise meet the eye.
The subplot concerning the Captain begins at Avrosimov’s uncle’s house, in which the protagonist encounters a charming Ukrainian man, whose “whole image […] called forth sympathy, and it was hard to say why: maybe it was his gypsy eyes, or maybe his sudden, dazzling smile, that was nevertheless somehow a little childish, or maybe it was something else.” After a few hours of day-drinking, Maiboroda and Avrosimov leave the uncle’s place and make their way to the brothel (the logic of jokelore about Rzhevsky informs Okudzhava’s text here, I think) and during the course of their scenic walk, Maiboroda relates the cloak-and-dagger story of how he acquired Pestel’s confidence and then betrayed him to the authorities. As a result of the account, Avrosimov begins to have doubts about Maiboroda’s moral fiber, but he doesn’t say much about the matter at the time. The two then arrive at the brothel, and after a few rounds of drunken stupor we rejoin reality to find Maiboroda telling his story again, word for word, but this time to Avrosimov’s friends, which include Buturlin, among others. At this point, things get a bit confusing for Avrosimov. He seems to believe that his friends are enjoying the Captain’s narrative, so it takes him by surprise to see Buturlin’s “ashen face” when the latter asks him, “where did you find this guy?” Soon after this point, we catch a confusing exchange between the Captain and the brothel audience, in which nothing apparently unpleasant is said at all, until suddenly we see Buturlin slap Maiboroda across the face and say, “Dear sir, you have just insulted me by using an obscenity to refer to my lady…” Maiboroda does not understand what is going on, and does not defend himself, but slowly the whole brothel seems to catch on to the subtext of Buturlin’s action and the scene ends with Maiboroda getting shamefully kicked out of the premises. After this point we encounter Maiboroda a few more times and in each instant he looks more and
more cloyingly pathetic, until finally he disappears entirely, only to reappear as a byline in the epilogue, where we learn that he has shot himself, somewhere in Central Asia.

What is it that transpires in the brothel that makes Maiboroda end up in such a bad way? Buturlin’s actions make clear that his insulting slap pertains not at all to some “lady,” but to Maiboroda’s cowardly betrayal of Pestel. But why does Maiboroda not understand this, and why doesn’t Avrosimov either, at first? Why does it seem the whole time like the audience is enjoying Maiboroda’s narration, only to turn on him so suddenly? Because Maiboroda is a bad storyteller. The problem is not that his story is badly told; it’s rather that Maiboroda misjudges the political sympathies of his audience. Consider how Buturlin and an attending Grenadier Lieutenant respond to the Captain’s claims about the treasonous intent of Pestel’s written constitution, Russian Truth/Justice [Russkaia Pravda], which the Captain had supposedly seen “with his own eyes”:

“Why do you keep harping on this: with my own eyes, my own eyes,” the Grenadier Lieutenant growled.

Meanwhile, the strangers in the half-shadows, the gentlemen unknown to our hero, continued to remain calm and motionless, and only their half-filled glasses, raised over the table, swayed in their hands.

“Yes,” said Buturlin quickly, “it is a bit odd, isn’t it: he says one thing, and you say another. Why should I have any faith in you?

“Gentlemen,” said Seriozhen’ka, “why not let Arkadii Ivanovich tell it. He recounts it so well, as if he’s reading a novel. What difference does it make to you?

Then Arkadii Ivanovich laughed, flattered by Seriozhen’ka’s words.

“Gentlemen, I am ready to recount it all. I feel even lighter, since I am among my own kind [svoi], among those who had the occasion to do justice… So, let us try, shall we.”

Here we can observe the whole crux of the Captain’s problem as a failing narrator. He thinks he is “among his own kind” (note the very Yurchakian use of “svoi” in the original), even though he has just met this group of people, and plus there are strangers in
the background, whom no one has ever met—they’re an anonymous attending public, whose positive disposition the Captain can only take on faith. He also thinks everyone present is on equal terms vis-à-vis their ideas about “justice,” and soon he pays dearly for this lack of social acumen. But how was he to know otherwise? It is not as if he can simply ask his audience to tell him of their pro-Decembrist sympathies, especially at this time, when Nicholas’ ruthless investigation is just heating up! The Captain simply should have known not to assume what he thinks is common knowledge, but there’s no one explicitly to tell him so. Maiboroda should have realized that his fellow brothel attendees are not “’svoi,” but he does not, and no one will let him in on this secret.

The Captain’s narrative failure is Okudzhava’s nightmare scenario, allegorically speaking. It expresses the potential of failure that is inherent to the social structure that supports a singer-songwriter like Okudzhava. Maiboroda, to put it bluntly, is a bad bard. He fails because he assumes that ‘everyone already knows everything,’ but then suddenly realizes that they do not. In the situation of semi-dissent, of maintaining unverbalized unity by “holding each other’s hands,” it is actually quite easy suddenly to become a bad bard. A social group of “svoi” might hold together through a complicated semiotic field of non-verbal or partially verbal signals, but at the end of the day those signals do not attain to the level of coherent discourse. Such is the limit of a partially liberalized social field in the conditions of authoritarianism. Without saying clearly who we are and what we want, we cannot tell if we really should be ‘holding each other’s hands,’ and neither can the bard who is holding us together. Which brings us back to the main message of *A Gulp of Freedom*, as well as the question of the use of pre-Soviet past in late Soviet liberal cultural production. Before examining the case of Okudzhava, we assumed that
pre-Soviet past could simply and easily serve as allegory for present-day discourse, but with Okudzhava we learn two important caveats about that dynamic. One is that the liberal makers of this allegorical discourse, the late Soviet intellectuals themselves, are flawed vessels—so flawed, in fact, that perhaps we should not take their claims seriously. And two, the whole Aesopian gambit works only through the assumption of a shared view of the present, the assumption that ‘everyone already knows everything.’ But what if that assumption is wrong? It is one thing to use the past as allegory in conditions where it is possible to clarify what the other side of the allegory should be; it is quite another thing to try to access the past when there is no way to clarify the explicit terms on which it should intersect with the present. The conditions of late-Soviet censorship created precisely the latter, more dangerous situation. At the end of the day, the point of censorship was to preclude actual politics, to keep celebrities like Okudzhava at the threshold of politics but not let him cross it. The point of Brezhnev’s infamous “little deal” with the intelligentsia was to create two risks for verbalized, public disobedience—the risk of losing one’s livelihood, of course, but also the risk of losing one’s comfortable group of “svoi.” Okudzhava as Avrosimov is keenly aware of his cowardice in the face of the first risk; Okudzhava as Maiboroda balks in the face of the second one.

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As a denouement to this story and this chapter let me just say briefly that Okudzhava took the risk of crossing into overt politics towards the very end of his life, in 1993, as a result of which he tragically ended up in a bind reminiscent of Maiboroda’s. In the heady days of October of that year, when newly post-Soviet Russia looked to be on the brink of civil war between the supporters of Yeltsin and those of the Russian

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Federation’s Communist Party, Okudzhava added his name to the now infamous “Letter of the 42”—a newspaper missive to Yeltsin, declaring the undersigned liberal intelligentsia members’ unequivocal support of his cause. From its first lines, the letter feels like a typical late Soviet liberal production: “There is neither the will nor the necessity to comment in detail on what took place in Moscow on the 3rd of October. What happened could have been avoided, if it weren’t for our irresponsibility and stupidity—the fascists resorted to their guns in an attempt to take power.” Notice the insistence on the principle of ‘everyone already knowing everything,’ as well as the ease of labeling Yeltsin’s enemies “fascists” (we might recall here the Thaw-era liberal binary cosmogony of society as the good guys, the intelligentsia, versus the bad guys, the philistines/Stalinists). The letter goes on in a similar vein for a few more paragraphs and concludes with the declaration that “History has once again given us a chance to make a great stride towards democracy and civilization. Let us not miss this chance again, as we have already done on more than one occasion!” The insistence on “History” as a mythic framework for action, the self-flagellating declarations concerning “our responsibility and stupidity”—all of these elements suggest precisely the kind of pathologically vague formulation of the liberal wing as an “us,” without actually clarifying who “we” are and what “we” stand for, beyond the obvious “against fascism.” And in the end it turned out that there wasn’t such a clear “us” as the letter’s signatories assumed. Yeltsin’s brutal usurpation of legislative power in 1993 split the liberal wing of Russian society. Most of these people weren’t particularly sad to see the Communists lose power, but quite a few civic leaders were dismayed at their peers’ readiness to endorse Yeltsin’s budding authoritarian tactics. Among those people were many of Okudzhava’s erstwhile fans, and
Dmitry Bykov’s account of Okudzhava’s life begins with the tragedy of Okudzhava’s signing of the letter, which led to a feeling of alienation that, in Bykov’s view, ended up cutting Okudzhava’s life short. Meanwhile, in today’s Russia, the “Letter of the 42” tends to earn retrospective ignominy from contemporary liberal intellectuals, who see their predecessors’ decision to support the authoritarian actions of Yeltsin’s nominal ‘democrats’ as the first brick in the future edifice of Putinism.


2 Examples of this are numerous, but to take one particular indicative case, one might consider the aging dissident Liudmila Alexeyeva’s enduring affectation for the use of “Decembrism” as an explanatory trope, even to this day. For an overview of this dynamic, see See Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children*; see also Ludmilla A. Trigos, *The Decembrist Myth in Russian Culture* (New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2009), 141-160.

3 On the making of the Pushkin myth in Soviet culture, see Stephanie Sandler’s chapter on the 100-year jubilee of the poet’s death in 1937, as well as a selection of fascinating and entertaining primary sources, in *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda*, David Brandenberger and Kevin M. F. Platt, eds. (Madison: Wisconsin UP, 2006), 193-232.

4 Lidiia Chukovskaia, *Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi*, 19 (emphasis in the original; ‘D.’ is anonymous)

5 Ibid., 7; See also Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children*, 26.


7 “A complete zero. Once Meyerhold told me about Liubov’ Dmitrievna Blok: ‘I’ve never seen a woman more unfit for the stage.’ I can say the same about Shklovsky: I’ve never seen a man more unfit for literary work.” Lidiia Chukovskaia, *Zapiski ob Anne Akhmatovoi*, 134

8 Ibid., 456

9 Ibid., 403-404


13 Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children*, 26


16 Ibid., 144


18 She published in journals, she released anthologies of poetry printed with fairly significant print runs, she recorded her own voice on vinyl. Unlike her biographer’s father, the famous fellow ‘elder denizen’ Kornei Chukovsky, Akhmatova did not make it onto television, perhaps because she never fully overcame the Soviet official ban on her writing, extant since Zhdanov’s decree in 1946. Still, the urbanized late Soviet professional classes whom Solzhenitsyn derides as the morally bankrupt ‘obrazovanshchina’ were undoubtedly aware of her existence and probably had come across at least some of her poetry, either via samizdat or via officially printed editions from the 1920s or the 1960s-1980s. On Akhmatova’s voice recordings, see Pavel Kriuchkov, “Zvuchashchaia literatura,” *Novyi Mir* (2005:12): http://magazines.russ.ru/novyi_mi/2005/12/kr18.html.

19 It is perhaps ironic that in Alexei Yurchak’s conceptualization of the matter, this dynamic actually *did* take hold of ‘the last Soviet generation’ and thus augured Soviet Union’s demise.
Eidel’man’s *Lunin* was originally released in 1970 with a print run of 65,000 copies. It was then republished in 1988. As such, it is hardly the most widely circulated late Soviet monograph by Eidel’man—that distinction probably belongs to *Apostle Sergei*, a historical fiction tale of another Decembrist, Sergei Muraviev-Apostol, published through the *Fiery Revolutionaries* line at Politizdat in 1975, with a print run of 200,000, then republished in 1980, with a print run of 300,000 copies, and then again in 1988, in 200,000 copies—see Natan Eidel’man, *Apostol Sergei* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1975), ibid. 1980, 1988. From the recent memoiristic testimony of the *Fiery Revolutionaries* editor, Vladimir Novokhatko it is evident that Eidel’man had been on the edition’s radar for quite some time, and that the success of *Lunin* assured Eidel’man’s contract with Politizdat. See Vladimir Novokhatko, “Belye vorony Politizdata,” *Znamia* 5 (2013), http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/2013/5/n8.html.


See the brief mention of Alexander Galich’s 1968 poem in Section 2, above.

Natan Eidel’man, *V’evarum. Lunin*, 476

Ibid., 502

Ibid., 397-402


*The fact that no mention of this publication or the editors is ever made in Eidel’man’s diaries is suspicious, thought it also true that Eidel’man only began keeping his diary in September 1966, while Russian Word’s “Serno” had been published that July. For the diaries, see Natan Eidel’man, “Iz dnevnikov,” *Znamia* 1 (1999): http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/1999/1/eidel-pr.html. For a bibliography of Eidel’man (in which the abridged version of “Serno” does not appear), see http://vivovoco.astronet.ru/VV/PAPERS/NYERATNER.HTM.

Russkoe Slovo, 14, reprinted in *Grani* 66 (Frankfurt: Possev-Verlag, 1967), 3-34


Zvezda Plenitel’nogo Schast’ia, dir. Vladimir MOTyL (1975; Lenfil’m, 1975); O bednom gusare zamolvite slovo, dir. El’dar Riazanov (1980; Mosfil’m, 1980)

Trigos, *Decembrist Myth*, 158


Vladimir MotyL, Zvesda plenitel’nogo schast’ia, Part 1, 15:00-17:30

See Nikolai Nekrasov, Russkie zhenshchiny, in N. A. Nekrasov, Sobranie sochinenii v semi tomakh, t. 3 (Moscow: Knigovek 2010), 23-84

Vladimir MotyL, Zvesda plenitel’nogo schast’ia, Part 2, 52:00

Nikolai Nekrasov, Russkie zhenshchiny, 67

Gusarskaia ballada, dir. El’dar Riazanov (1962; Mosfil’m, 1962)

51 See the “Anekdot” entry in the Russian Wikipedia: https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%90%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BA%D0%B4%D0%BE%D1%82.


54 Note that Vladimir Motyl’s *The White Sun of the Desert* (1970) was a smash hit also because it was produced at Grigorii Chukhrai’s Experimental Film Studio (ETK), whose “experimental” nature lay in its avowedly capitalist model of film production and distribution that was explicitly based on consumer demand. As such, it was an offspring of the abortive Kosygin reforms. On the creation of ETK see Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime-Time*.


59 *A Taste of Liberty*, 37

60 Ibid., 222

61 *A Taste of Liberty*, 37


63 See Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, “Obrazovanshchina.”

64 *A Taste of Liberty*, 66

65 *A Taste of Liberty*, 98

66 *A Taste of Liberty*, 99

67 *A Taste of Liberty*, 94


Chapter Two
Patriotic for Their Time:
Conservative Destalinization and the Pre-Soviet Past

Nikolai Mitrokhin opens his study of the late Soviet nationalist “Russian Party” with the post-War Stalin years, a time when a vast new cohort of apparatchiks had been recruited against the background of Stalin’s anti-Semitic campaign against “rootless cosmopolitans.” This cohort was predominantly ethnically Russian, it was specifically selected for chauvinist sensibilities, and it also never went through a purge. The rising power cadre at the advent of the Thaw had a less tainted Stalinist experience than the previous 1930s generation and was particularly inclined to understand the Soviet project in terms of a zero-sum struggle between a neo-imperial Russia and its Western enemies, both within and without. When Khrushchev charted a course for destalinization, this cohort and also many of their elder superiors were strongly inclined to view the de-montage of the ‘cult of personality’ as a threat to themselves and *ipso facto* the state. It was easy for the members of the Soviet apparatus to believe that the destalinizing liberals were either unconsciously or consciously doing the bidding of anti-Soviet Western enemies; at the same time, it would take considerable inventiveness to re-interpret the new post-Stalin era in a way that could contest the liberal hegemony over this period’s social meaning. Official Soviet ideology would be of little help because its totalitarian premise entirely elided the possibility of even acknowledging, much less contesting the dynamics of the new cultural hegemony. Instead, the state apparatus went looking for people in the cultural milieu with whom they could forge an alliance of sorts. This relationship would be premised not on the diktats of ossified Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy,
but rather on tactical common ground with various cultural producers who for their own various reasons began to view some of their destalinizing peers with suspicion. Scholarly accounts regarding this period usually point to the rise of Village Prose, as well as the aftermath of Khrushchev’s memorable 1962 visit to the Manége exhibition of neo-avant-garde art as watershed moments for conservative differentiation. But it is possible to reach slightly earlier, and discover much stranger allies in the new era of anti-liberal struggles. I begin Chapter Two with such a case, examining the role of Vasilii Shulgin (1878-1976), a monarchist and member of the Imperial Duma, then a White Army ideologist, then a prominent émigré figure, then a quiet Serbian resident, then, a Soviet political prisoner, and then finally a Vladimir region retiree after his 1956 amnesty. Given his storied biography, Shulgin was a rather surprising, but nevertheless quite symptomatic conservative ally of the post-Stalin state. I will argue that in his positioning vis-à-vis the Thaw-era Chekist apparatus it is possible to perceive the origins of the symbolic groundwork on which the Russian pre-Revolutionary legacy would later be rehabilitated in late Soviet conservative cultural discourse.
I. The Chekist Thaw and Vasilii Shulgin

“History has a memory, but it doesn’t bear a grudge.”


The case of Shulgin is a harbinger for the kind of dynamic that the pre-Soviet past would undergo during the course of the late Soviet years, because through him we can examine how the Soviet security apparatus, in search of allies, could establish certain trans-ideological tactical relationships with individuals and with historical narratives that from the perspective of official orthodoxy were inimical to the Soviet project. In the process of this reinterpretation, pre-Soviet conservative and sometimes outright monarchist symbols, narratives and values could be salvaged and renovated for the purposes of ideological struggle against late Soviet liberals.

Throughout the second half of his exceptionally long life, starting with his emigration from Crimea in 1920 along with the White forces stationed there, Shulgin was always at the very least curious and sometimes even partly laudatory vis-a-vis Soviet power and its achievements. Towards the end of his life, Shulgin mystically captured this ambivalence bordering on partial admiration in a diary entry describing his dream about Lenin, sometime in the 1950s:

I saw some kind of theater, entirely empty of an audience, with a court on the stage. To the left of the judge, a prosecutor, to the right, an empty place for a defender. [...] Then Lenin enters. I ask him, ‘have you got a defender?’ No, he says. I say, ‘that’s no good, to go to trial without a defender. If you like, shall I defend you?’ He says, ‘Defend me!’ The scales of judgment hang in the air. The prosecutor speaks: ‘Lenin created the ChK [...] How much blood it spilled. [...] Then they killed the tsar, the tsaritsa, the whole family, the dynasty… they killed everyone who didn’t manage to get away abroad.’ The cup of the accuser is overflowing with blood. [...] The prosecutor fell silent. The chairman says, ‘the defense has the word.’ My speech consisted of only two words, ‘Brest. NEP.’
‘Look, prosecutor, look, judges, the cups of good and evil have balanced. [...] Is Lenin guilty? He is guilty. Is he innocent? He is innocent. Has he been acquitted? Not acquitted. But also not convicted. He shall face God’s judgment, and only God, who knows of good and evil, will sentence him.³

This dream was part and parcel of Shulgin’s attempt to find a way of conversing with Soviet power in the wake of his amnesty. Though he ultimately did not feel comfortable with the KGB’s solicitation of his pro-Soviet Letters to Russian Emigrants (1961), Shulgin nevertheless did feel like he had valuable political advice to share with his state handlers. ⁴ For their part, the Soviet “guardians of the [nuclear] genie’s bottle” could expect collegiality from the old monarchist because of his strongly held “conviction” that “even the worst regime is better than anarchy,” and also that “in the second half of the twentieth century, the Party does many things correctly.”⁵

Even more interesting, however, is the attitude of the various KGB operatives who worked Shulgin’s case during the Thaw, and who were not only fascinated with their mark, but were also convinced that as a result of the new era in which they ended up, Shulgin was now a political ‘friend’ of sorts, irrespective of his avowed monarchism. This positioning comes through in KGB agent V. Shevchenko’s account of traveling the country with Shulgin in preparation for the penning of the Letters. In his memoiristic piece, written at the apex of Perestroika in January 1991, Shevchenko recalls that the “unifying origin” that formed the basis of his “alliance” with Shulgin was “the newness of the days of that epoch”:

Shulgin back then had caught and understood the beginning of great changes, whose reverberations we feel today. We didn’t speak with him then about the past that divided us, a past that in my view did not conform to his understandings, a past from which Shulgin couldn’t abdicate. We also didn’t start to speak about a dividing future, which we imagined differently. We spoke with him about the present. About that present, in which we had ended up— people from different
epochs, from different generations. Shevchenko’s focus on the present as standing apart from the “divisive” past reveals what the scholar of Anglo-American conservatism, Corey Robin would call an ‘activist conservative’ attitude driven by the political exigencies of the Thaw, which our KGB operative retrospectively rhymes with the ensuing chaos of 1991. With the state under threat from liberalization proceeding in possible cahoots with the West, Shulgin’s past in some ways no longer counts—Shevchenko’s communist moral judgment of Shulgin’s monarchist and White Army activity is rendered inactive. As a result, Shevchenko can observe that Shulgin had always been “a true patriot of Russia.” Indeed, even Shulgin’s participation in the White movement cannot be morally judged as outright evil anymore—it was “fate” that made him do it, Shevchenko observes:

> It was fate’s will that Shulgin should receive the abdication of Emperor Nicholas II. That is why, due to his views, Shulgin did not accept the October Revolution, just as it was not accepted by the Cossacks, who rebelled virtually en masse, as well as a part of the officers whose epaulettes were taken, and a part of the intelligentsia, which refused to countenance the shame of the Brest peace agreement.

Shevchenko here doesn’t quite clear the White movement as such of moral turpitude, but he certainly presents an encomium according to which the White “rebellion” can be understood not in terms of class interests, as Marxism-Leninism would have it, but in terms of patriotic indignation in the face of capitulation to the Germans. Shulgin and his peers took arms against Soviet power out of a worthy sentiment, however misplaced it might have been.

> In a word, the adamant anti-Communist right-winger had been “patriotic for his time,” to paraphrase the old Stalinist formula for reinterpreting Russian Imperial
history—though with one important difference. Shevchenko’s rhetorical move does not actually exonerate Shulgin vis-à-vis the Soviet official master narrative of History. Rather, the move *suspends* the moral status of those who are still viewed as outright enemies of Soviet power, quite like Shulgin himself in his dream suspends his own moral judgment of Lenin. This gesture of suspension is made possible by Thaw-era temporal magic, according to which the present moment is in an essential way disconnected from the past. To clarify further how this dynamic works, let us now consider what was Shulgin’s one and only major gambit to acquire a mass Soviet audience—the staged documentary *Before the Judgment of History* [*Pered sudom istorii*] (1965-67).

**Shulgin Before the Judgment of History**

Directed by Fridrikh Ermler, himself a committed Soviet Communist and former Chekist partner-turned-filmmaker, *Before the Judgment of History* had a surprisingly complicated production and release history. A staged, pre-scripted documentary comprised of conversations between Shulgin and an unnamed ‘Historian,’ the film on the one hand seems like an officially calibrated and properly censored Thaw-era cultural product. On the other hand, memoiristic recollections from Ermler himself, as well as from Shulgin’s friends, all point to a great deal of conflict between the monarchist and the filmmakers. Shulgin made very few ideological concessions and refused all lines in the script that he himself didn’t write. Ermler, for his part, was absolutely fascinated by the charming “grandpa,” but despite his own staunchly pro-Soviet convictions was either too ill or too scared to play the part of Shulgin’s opponent, handing the role to an actor. As a result, the few producers and viewers who saw *Judgment* came away with the
impression that Shulgin carried himself much more convincingly than the Historian. In short, “the judgment of History had failed”— and presumably it is for this reason that the film was quashed a few days after going to screen and would have to wait until the late 1980s to resurface again.\textsuperscript{11} Leaving aside the question of who ‘really won’ the contestation, \textit{Before the Judgment of History} is valuable because it clarifies the late Soviet conservative discursive frameworks through which Shulgin could be rehabilitated as a peculiar ‘friend’ of contemporary Soviet society. The film manages to do so by a temporal intervention— the new post-Stalin era posits an insurmountable distance between Shulgin’s monarchism and Khrushchevan modernity. Thanks to this radical distancing, elements of Shulgin’s pre-Soviet past are divested of their dangerous anti-Soviet context and are instead allowed to float freely and even assume a new, vaguely friendly relationship vis-à-vis what the film cheerfully renders as a harmoniously destalinized and therefore unquestionably ‘historically victorious’ late Soviet state.

\textit{Before the Judgment of History} is a thoroughly presentist film. Its investment in its own present era isn’t merely the stuff of typical historical documentaries with retrospective eyewitnesses. Rather, the contemporary mid-1960s moment constantly recurs in the film in an inexplicable, fetishistic fashion. This film about the life and times of a monarchist politician in the 1910s and 1920s opens with the shot of a commercial jet landing on the Leningrad tarmac (see Figure 5, below) and proceeds onwards with gratuitously interspersed shots of Yuri Gagarin, the 1964 Monument to the Conquerors of Space, the Kremlin-based Khrushchevan international-modern-style Palace of the Congresses, and then finally the XXII Party Congress (that Shulgin in real life had attended as a specially invited guest). The emphasis on the present is capped off by the
Old Bolshevik Petrov speaking with Shulgin in the halls of the Congress. The Bolshevik recalls how even back when he had been a young student in the early 1900s he had already been a Marxist, “and if we were to judge by the results, we studied pretty well.” The “results,” of course, are intimated by Petrov’s gesture to the windows overlooking Moscow, followed by the splicing of a reel of Gagarin walking to the Soviet Airmen’s March. All of these fetishistic deployments of Khrushchevian modernity are designed to depict the present as so magnificent, so manifestly correct, that the past—in this specific case Shulgin’s own pre-Revolutionary past—is rendered somehow morally irrelevant. Now that Shulgin apparently supports the incontrovertible achievements of Soviet power, Petrov can say to him that “history has a memory, but it doesn’t bear a grudge.” The film’s musical score further amplifies Petrov’s concluding statement—the agitated, percussive leitmotif of history’s judgment, associated with Shulgin, is finally overcome by the radiant, major-key leitmotif associated with Khrushchev’s modernity, culminating with a choir ecstatically singing “Veni!” as the camera focuses on a profile portrait of
Lenin hanging behind Petrov’s podium at the XXII Congress (see Figure 6, below).\textsuperscript{13}

The ‘suspended grudge’ allows viewers to approach Shulgin with a generally congenial attitude. Throughout the film, Shulgin is given ample opportunity to present himself as a jolly old man, a kind of living relic. \textit{Judgment}’s ‘promise of the premise’ involves Shulgin wandering the streets, squares and palaces of Imperial Petersburg, and also visiting a perfectly staged train car in which he had received Nicholas II’s resignation. All of these scenes are supplemented with various ghostly audiovisual effects to recall the bygone times (see Figure 7, below). Everywhere he goes, the monarchist wears a 1910s-style suit, with an upturned white collar and black tie. At one point Shulgin even gets to show off his refined \textit{ancien régime} manners and French language skills to a group of attractive high school girls (see Figure 8, below). It is precisely this congenial image of Shulgin that wins out over the film’s substantive presentation of the monarchist as an implacable ideological foe. This is the case because even when direct engagement with Shulgin’s anti-communist views and activities \textit{does} take place, it is always cognitively hampered by the Historian’s inability to speak clearly about early Bolshevik atrocities and the decades of Stalinist rule.

After several sniping exchanges about Civil War culpability, in which Shulgin is in fact perfectly able to defend himself and his side, the film moves on to its most devastating engagement. Shulgin claims that the White idea had never been ideologically or morally defeated, without being given a chance to explain exactly what it was. At this point, the Historian grows visibly apoplectic, accompanies Shulgin to a screening room and plays fascist Italian and German documentary reels, complete with Mussolini, Hitler, Goering, Vlasov’s pro-Nazi Russian Liberation Army and footage of World War II.
Figure 6: At the end, "Veni" is sung triumphantly, to match a backdrop of Lenin at the Kremlin Palace of Congresses.

Figure 7: The ghost of Nicholas II appears in the doorway of the traincar where Shulgin received his abdication.

Figure 8: Shulgin shows off his French to graduating highschoolers in Leningrad.
devastation, including the Leningrad Blockade. As we watch the ‘documentary
evidence,’ we are being convinced that the “White Idea,” whatever it is, is guilty by
association. However, this condemnation is non-narrative, non-rational, and takes place at
a considerable distance from the person of Shulgin. Even if his avowed sympathies for
Mussolini mark him as hopelessly misguided, he is not actually directly tarred by World
War II’s atrocities. In any case, Shulgin takes the opportunity to say that only a small
minority of the White émigré community joined Vlasov’s troops and that they are
anathema to the authentic White movement. Shulgin then ends the heated discussion by
saying that today he no longer considers himself an emigrant, now that “the white dove of
peace has started to circle over Russia.” With that, the Historian suddenly puts on a
cheerful smile and says,

I’m happy, I am very happy, Vasilii Vladimirovich! I just want to say that this idea had appeared in Russia long before you recognized it. It had been spoken in
Lenin’s decree on peace on the day after the October revolution. That is, in those
days when a new, Soviet Russia was born—the Soviet Union, the union of
laborers bringing to life the great ideas of Lenin, and the ideas of the XX
Congress of Lenin’s Party, and the ideas of the XXII Congress, where you were a
guest.14

The Historian’s palpable elision of the Stalinist decades between Lenin’s peaceful
program and its Khrushchevan reincarnation makes a coherent “judgment” of History
over Shulgin impossible. On that note, we might conclude our reading of this film with a
story told by Shulgin’s friend, N. N. Lisovoi, who recalls how the old monarchist once
suggested to the filmmakers that the film end not with the Old Bolshevik Petrov, but with
another former émigré, Alexander Kazem-Bek, who in the 1920s and 1930s had been an
ideologist of a ‘red-brown-white’ amalgamation of fascism, socialism, and then
eventually returned to the USSR in 1957:
“I’ll say, ‘Kazem-Bek! You’re a genius! A while ago you came up with a slogan, ‘The Tsar and the Soviets’- and Stalin immediately made your slogan a reality.’ After these words the authors of the film for some reason immediately decided against the idea of a meeting with Kazem-Bek.”

**Operation: Trust**

With the case of Shulgin, we can see how the post-Stalinist erasure of ‘historical grudges’ untangles the old enemy from wholesale moral opprobrium. It’s not that any of the specific official Soviet narratives about him and the White cause have been explicitly invalidated, but rather that those grand narratives have lost their judgmental power. Meanwhile, Shulgin’s interaction with his KGB handlers and filmmakers displays the potential for realigning his social value in the post-Stalin era along the lines of patriotism, in light of which the amnestied émigré monarchist manages to come off as good, in a word. A similar dynamic appears in *Operation: Trust* [*Operatsiia: Trest*] (dir. Sergei Kolosov, 1967), a successful, well-known four-part television miniseries that actually featured Shulgin’s footage from *Before the Judgment of History* and was thus, as far as I know, the only widely available cultural product through which the late Soviet masses could have become familiar with the old monarchist (the fact that some of them did become familiar with Shulgin through *Trust* is confirmed by a witness account of Soviet school children singing the film’s White Army theme song as Shulgin was being escorted past them at a Leningrad court-house in 1969).

Scholars have contextualized *Trust* in terms of a whole trend of late-1960s Soviet filmic depictions of the Civil War, in which the White side no longer comes off like a bunch of cartoon villains. I would add that *Trust* is also interesting because the Red side in it is no longer quite as Red. On the surface, the film seems like the stuff of doctrinaire
Soviet propaganda—brave early Chekists work to prevent White émigré terrorists from carrying out their evil designs. Beyond this veneer, however, the film poses an interesting engagement with the question of why one should support and fight for Soviet power and what makes one into an admirable protagonist—and Marxist-Leninist convictions are hardly the answer to either point.

Based on Lev Nikulin’s 1965 documentary novel The Swell of the Sea [Mertvaia zyb’], which was itself based on authentic classified Chekist documentary evidence, Trust tells the almost completely true story of Alexander Yakushev (1876-1937). A former member of the service nobility, Yakushev (Igor Gorbachev) works for the transportation ministry in the early Soviet state, under the aegis of Felix Dzerzhinsky, while being involved in a secretive monarchist revanchist organization. As a result of a Chekist intervention, Yakushev decides to turn on his erstwhile activities and instead to help the Soviet state in the task of combatting anti-Soviet plots. To do so, Yakushev and a Chekist cell led by Artur Artuzov (Armen Dzhigarkhanian) create an underground political association called the Trust [Trest]. Yakushev then uses his official Soviet credentials to travel around the world and raise the Trust’s prestige among the émigré communities. As a result, the Trust for years manages to intercept and delay possible anti-Soviet plots originating from by General Kutepov in France and Baron von Wrangel in Yugoslavia. After a series of harrowing encounters and close calls, the miniseries concludes with a dramatic shootout—the film’s main villain, Kutepov’s alleged niece Maria Zakharchenko-Shul’ts (Liudmila Kasatkina), finds out about Yakushev’s betrayal, plots an unsuccessful bombing of the Chekist headquarters at Lubianka, gets chased to the Finish border and is shot down by Artuzov himself just as she is about to get away.
To emphasize the truth value of its story, *Trust* employs a number of both on- and off-screen means. For one thing, the whole miniseries is framed by a narrator, an aging “Professor” Leonid Makar’ev, (1892-1975, a professor of theater acting in real life, though the film never specifies his field of study). Makar’ev not only interjects with historically important tidbits, but actively contributes his own memories about the period under discussion, which include personal memories of Artuzov. The film also includes a television-style microphone-in-hand interview with Toive Viakhe, an ethnic Finnish Soviet border guard who had been secretly involved by the Chekists in the Trust and then spent four decades living under an assumed identity (see, Figure 9, below). Meanwhile, off-screen the filmmakers went through considerable efforts to gather authentic facts about the Trust and the people involved in it. Kolosov received wide-ranging help from old Chekist consultants who had personally known Artuzov and also worked undercover in the émigré communities. Moreover, Kolosov and Kasatkina tracked down Shulgin, who in 1925 had secretly traveled to USSR with the Trust’s help and thus personally knew nearly everyone involved. Kasatkina credits the old monarchist for giving her a genuine sense of the “heroic nature” of Maria Zakharchenko.\(^\text{18}\) As a result, scholars, filmmakers and the mass viewers of *Trust* have all noted the refreshing authenticity of Maria’s character. The potential for moral confusion on this point was such that at the bequest of the KGB censors, the filmmakers actually were forced to delete Maria’s final line (pulled by Kolosov from her casefile): “behold how Russian people die for Faith, Tsar, Fatherland and Russia!”\(^\text{19}\)

There is a measure of typical Thaw-era irony about the Chekists’ overall energetic and excited participation in Kolosov’s project—after all, virtually every protagonist
involved in the Trust had been executed by the Chekists in the 1930s (aside from Viakhe, who survived solely thanks to his cover identity). The film, of course, is never allowed to point this out explicitly, but its poetic concluding shots clearly make a statement on the matter—Yakushev walks across a forest being mowed down for construction wood, and then joins Artuzov at a riverbank. The two exchange heavy, silent gazes, while the camera cuts to a flyover shot of them sitting in an enormous expanse of knocked-down, bundled trees (see Figure 10, below). In short, we are presented with a visual pun, illustrating one of two possible Russian sayings—‘they’ve sure chopped a lot of firewood,’ or ‘when they chop down a forest, the chips fly’ (i.e., ‘they’ve sure made a mess of things,’ or ‘you can’t make an omelet without braking eggs’).20 Quite appropriately, then, this shot seamlessly transitions into a flyover shot above a modern 1960s city. The film’s final image is the 1964 Monument to the Conquerors of Space. In
this way, *Trust* ends with the same Soviet post-traumatic ritual of fetishistic invocation of contemporary magnificent modernity that we have already observed in *Before the Judgment of History*.

![Figure 10: The final shots of Operation: Trust. 'They've sure chopped a lot of firewood,' as the Russian saying goes.](image)

But there is yet another, subtler irony involved in *Trust*, which has to do with the specific kind of image of the protagonists that this film depicts. On the Chekist end, Artuzov and his underlings come off in *Trust* as highly educated, well-spoken, erudite types. From Kolosov’s memoirs, we know that this was not at all a foregone conclusion—it required an explicit alteration of Nikulin’s source text by Kolosov’s Chekist consultants:

Our people didn’t roll their own ciggins out of shag and newspaper strips. [...] So where did the shag come from? From standard literary depictions of the Chekists
of that era. Shag is typical of Civil War films, with their dugouts and bearded front-liners. [...] Artur Khristianovich [Artuzov] studied music with his mother from childhood, he was an excellent pianist as an adult, and he sang very well, he had a beautiful voice... He also painted well, and was a sculptor, and knew French, English and German perfectly, and was also an excellent sportsman—a skier, a figure-skater, an equestrian... [...] Artuzov wasn’t some factory worker, he was a metallurgical engineer with a Petersburg education. He wasn’t some underground man, he joined the Party only in 1917, he never talked like this. This language might crawl from the book to the film, and then we’ll have a lie instead of History.21

Artuzov the Chekist spymaster, in other words, is an intelligent quite like his asset, the nobleman Yakushev, and the two of them are in this way no different from their White foes. Which is to say that in the 1960s, after putting in two decades of considerable effort to obliterate the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia, the Chekists decided that they themselves now wanted to be intelligentsi. According to their idea of a destalinized capital-H “History,” the Soviet Chekist image would now conform not to standard depictions of the good guys solely defined by humble class origins, but rather claim a Thaw-era image of hegemonic anti-Stalinist intelligentsia values. The effect of this disposition on the film’s character development is similar to that of Shevchenko’s transformative relationship to Shulgin—these illustrious men of high pre-Revolutionary origins, with all of their palpable intelligentsia ethos, are no longer simply consigned to oblivion as a result of their class nature and concomitantly incorrigible anti-communist ideologies. Their life-world and even their misguided opinions are now again in some sense valuable; the dividing line between good and evil now lies elsewhere.

Like Shulgin, Yakushev and other protagonists of Trust all ultimately make their choice to support Soviet power not because they’ve suddenly become Marxists-Leninists, but rather because they are nationalist patriotic allies—in contradistinction to Kutepov
and Wrangel, who in this film wish to sew chaos in Soviet Russia with foreign assistance. Indeed, the Trust handlers’ sense of patriotic duty may be so thoroughly decoupled from any interest in the official ideology of the Soviet cause that even half-way into the film, despite having already co-masterminded the Chekist deception for several years, the ex-nobleman Yakushev still isn’t quite sure whether or not he is a monarchist: “what, are you trying to explain to me what Monarchists are like? What, I’ve never seen monarchists? I’m myself a monarchist… well, a former one.”\textsuperscript{22} Meanwhile, from the archetypes of Trust’s Chekist intelligenti one can see a straight line to Max Otto von Stielrlitz (Seventeen Moments of Spring, dir. Tatiana Lioznova, 1973)—by far the most famous fictional late Soviet spy, who comfortably acts the debonair Nazi German nobleman, and who is played in real life by a Soviet actor (Viacheslav Tikhonov) made famous by his role as Prince Andrei (War and Peace, dir. Sergei Bondarchuk, 1965-1967).
II. Glazunov, Soloukhin and the late Soviet conservative discourse on art

...it is somehow hard to believe that [Vasnetsov’s] ‘A Knight at the Crossroads’ didn’t exist before 1882 [...]. It is as if it has always existed, like the steppe, like Kiev, like the Volga, like Russia...

Vladimir Soloukhin, *Letters from the Russian Museum*23

Section One presented several cases of how the Thaw-era security apparatus was able to establish and make explicit a certain kind of alliance with pre-Revolutionary conservative persons, narratives and values. As we have noted, this alliance was fraught with difficulties—in the case of Shulgin, the Chekists, sensing a more cautious Brezhnevite change in the winds, ultimately decided to cease and desist in their promotion of the octogenarian monarchist. In the case of Trust too, a certain measure of censorship, particularly vis-à-vis the character of Maria Zakharchenko, proved necessary so as to adhere to the official bounds of orthodox negative characterization of the White cause. We should also mention that at about the same time, the conservative wing of the Russian dissident movement was for its part also starting to examine the possibilities of an alliance with the national security state along revamped nationalist ideological grounds. In the process, some conservative intellectuals were writing political agenda letters to the Politburo,24 while others were re-discovering the origins of “National-Bolshevism”—the syncretic practice of Bolshevik statecraft, thanks to which former Tsarist conservatives and other nationalists joined early Soviet leaders to defeat the Whites and win the Civil War.25 However, I will now switch my attention to another area of culture and examine how two prominent *official* late Soviet conservatives working in the field of late Soviet aesthetics articulated a discourse that would contest liberal cultural
hegemony and in the process recuperate pre-Soviet aesthetic forms and cultural values.

As is well known, in the wake of the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, the Soviet state apparatus was quite skeptical about the course for cultural liberalization and was looking for openings through which the trend could be counteracted. One such opening took place in the wake of Khrushchev’s infamous tour of a small display of non-realist art at a 1962 young artists’ exhibition at the Manege. The aesthetics of Thaw-era neo-avant-gardists did not intrinsically demand that they be tarred with an enemy brush—after all, these painters and sculptors were claiming to be resuscitating early Soviet Revolutionary artistic traditions. The problem was that a great deal of members of the state hierarchy wanted to turn the tide of Thaw-era liberal cultural hegemony, and the arena of art appeared to be good a place to drive a wedge, in large part thanks to Khrushchev’s personal repulsion vis-à-vis non-figurative art. Thus, in December of 1962, in the wake of Khrushchev’s visit to the Manége, the Ideological Commission of the Communist Party organized a series of meetings with the ‘creative intelligentsia,’ which weren’t simply about clarifying the boundaries of allowable artistic and cultural production in the USSR, but also contributed to the marking out of a new zone of ‘liberal’ versus ‘conservative’ contestation of late Soviet cultural discourse.

Il’inskii, the chairman in charge of the meetings, inadvertantly put his finger on the problem in his opening speech, noting that

The party sees the positive results of your work. Of course, this did not come about on its own. It’s a result of remarkable transformations in our life, it is a clear expression of the productive course of our party. And maybe the most important feature of young art is its active support of the Leninist party course in the battle with the old and in the affirmation of new, truly communist, Leninist principles of our life.26
Note how the course for destalinization has already been normalized and universalized under the aegis of the “true newness” of the epoch— to be an adherent to the vaguely-defined, vaguely Stalinist “old” seems patently ridiculous here. And yet in the same speech, Il’inskii affirms the new site of struggle: the “peaceful,” but therefore all the more “ideological” battle between communist Russia and the Western bourgeois world now defines the poles along which one should argue about good and bad art. On the side of the good, Il’inskii unsurprisingly proposes Socialist Realism, which he defines in very normative, supposedly self-explanatory terms as the art of “healthy common sense”; meanwhile, on the side of the bad is “formalism and abstractionism,” which is not the empty dalliance of fools, but an explicit fallback from socialist realism and simply a fallback from healthy common sense, precisely from those principles on the basis of which our art has grown and continues to flower. Formalism and abstractionism are not a searching for new forms, but a capitulation to bourgeois ideology, a ceding of our ideological positions.\(^{27}\)

Il’inskii, conforming to Corey Robin’s observations about conservatism’s rhetorical predilections, proposes a vitalist, agonistic framework for parsing cultural production—Soviet versus Western art is understood in terms of “health” versus “rottenness,” common sense versus “negligent ugliness,” and the battle is zero-sum, with the enemies of common sense really desiring to make “abstractionism and formalism into a leading and only direction in art.”\(^{28}\) At the same time, Il’inskii’s insistence on “healthy common sense” makes for a rather open-ended aesthetic criterion, and it is precisely on this point that Ilya Glazunov intervenes with his proposal to ground contemporary art in pre-Revolutionary conservative aesthetic values.
Ilya Glazunov

At the time of his participation in the 1962 Ideological Commission meetings, Ilya Glazunov was living in a strange gray zone of semi-favor vis-à-vis the Soviet state bureaucracy. The young painter had already won international competitions and had a solo exhibit in 1957; however, his art was deemed ideologically dubious by the high Soviet art establishment, which then decided to reprimand Glazunov by giving him a bad final grade for his studies and consigning him to the deep provinces, to teach drawing. Glazunov very quickly returned to the capital despite his official banishment and lack of propiska (Moscow residency documents), and built up a reputation as a good portraitist among an elite international clientele. In this era of “peaceful competition,” the Soviet state saw good money in letting Glazunov travel and paint foreign leaders, while Glazunov for his part made friends with some powerful people, like the eminent Soviet poet, Secretary of the Writers’ Union and closeted monarchist nobleman Sergei Mikhalkov, as well as the ‘Pavlov group’ at the Komsomol, in charge of the “Young Guard” [“Molodaia gvardiia”] publishing house. Leveraging all of these connections, Glazunov managed to stay and successfully work in Moscow without actually having been admitted into the Artists’ Union, and it is likely thanks to those connections that he was invited to attend and speak at the Ideological Commission’s gathering.

Positioning himself as an independent voice in the Soviet art establishment, Glazunov managed to make a discursive innovation at the 1962 gathering that the official ideologist Il’inskii was unable to make, but that actually put the young conservative painter well in line with the efforts to invent a conservative version of destalinization. Namely, Glazunov proposed that Stalinism and contemporary neo-avant-gardism, as well
as its historic modernist forebears, were all in essence one and the same: “both the ‘left’ and the ‘right’ characteristically have one thing in common: the eclipse of interest in the internal world of man, which is directly contrary to the foundational ideas of Russian art, which has already existed for millennia.” The notion of ‘healthy common sense’ that Il’inskii had such trouble defining thus transforms in Glazunov’s speech into a notion of nationalist authenticity as the proper benchmark for artistic production. Meanwhile, a taste for authentic Russian art can only be developed through rigorous patriotic educational engagement with the entire history of Russian culture:

It is impossible to love what you do not know. That is why after the tiring demagogy, after all the painted chocolate candy illustrations, after all the lying about life, the youth inevitably searches for the new—because they are disconnected from their roots and cannot, like Antaeus, draw strength from their native mother land. That is why these sickly and unhealthy events and tendencies take place in our art. That’s all I wanted to say. These facts are, unfortunately, endless. We could fresco all the walls, just as there had once been names of soldiers who died for their fatherland on the walls of the destroyed Cathedral of Christ the Savior.

Zubok has interpreted Glazunov’s final line as a call for the reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, which would eventually be rebuilt at breakneck speed in the 1990s, a subject I will discuss at length in Chapter Three. For the moment, I would like to stress specifically the ‘reconstruction’ aspect of Glazunov’s call. By framing his idea of the need for patriotic aesthetic education in terms his vociferous support of the nascent cultural preservationist movements of the 1960s (most prominently VOOPIK and the “Rodina” club), Glazunov emphasizes a reconstructionist, reinventionist approach as the only path that can properly challenge the nefarious, nihilistic anti-Russian cultural forces. By associating Stalinism within a greater anti-Russian ‘left-right conspiracy,’ Glazunov offers a way of interpreting neo-nationalist cultural values as an alternate path.
forward in the state project of destalinization. Glazunov’s suggested path for Soviet society would surely involve a lot of difficult ideological renovation, as well as expensive physical renovation vis-à-vis the historic monuments left in disrepair or rubble, but in a typical activist conservative fashion, such a path would protect the most essential thing—the existing state order—from the liberal barbarians at the gate.

Several years after participating in the Ideological Commission meetings, Glazunov would be given a chance by his friends at the “Young Guard” to present a long-form exposition of his aesthetic and political views—in 1965 and 1966 the painter published his 200-page essay, *The Road to You* in four issues of *Molodaia gvardiia*. Glazunov’s long tractate is too scattershot and meandering to read as a fully structurally coherent piece of writing—it is part memoir, part patriotic travel guide, part aesthetic education. Biographically, it starts from Glazunov’s birth in Leningrad and ends with his’s arrival in Moscow—the Leningrad blockade, life in the countryside and travels to historic Russian cities on the Volga and Siberia are spliced in the middle. Thematically, each of the four issues of *Road* has its own hue and stand-alone feel. Part I is driven by memory of the War and its total destruction, juxtaposed to images of authentic Russia, from Petersburg to Ulgich. Part II highlights Glazunov’s coming of age as an aesthetic thinker and painter. Part III is a paean to the late nineteenth century as an ideal time in Russian national aesthetic development. This part also involves meeting some living relics from the pre-Revolutionary era, including Prince Leonid Obolensky, whom Glazunov finds in Siberian exile, and who teaches the artist how to look at icons. Part IV is mostly an exposition of Glazunov’s conservationist agenda regarding Russian national cultural monuments, culminating with a lament about the sad state of disrepair at the
World of Art movement’s village of Talashkino. Across all of these parts, Glazunov’s text consistently expounds the principles of Glazunov’s aesthetics, the political divisions that those aesthetics expose and amplify, and those aesthetics’ conservative reconstructionist utopian potential.

On both a formal and a thematic level, Glazunov is enamored of sharp Manicheanism. Throughout the text, Glazunov constantly juxtaposes a vitalist image of art as a bulwark against the nihilist forces of violence and destruction. This juxtaposition takes various stark visual shapes throughout the essay— in Part I, the painter studies ancient Greek and Egyptian art in the midst of bombed out Leningrad in the immediate wake of the blockade. In Part II, Glazunov recounts the legend of the city of Kitezh, which for him is an expression of authentic Russian aesthetic folk sensibilities, “the most beautiful of all historic Russian folk legends” in which a beautiful holy city waits to reemerge once evil is gone from the world. In Part III, Glazunov juxtaposes the wanton Soviet state-sanctioned destruction of Russian icons and churches to the “miraculous” work of icon restoration. Part IV concludes with Glazunov’s ultimate image of destruction of art— the destitute state of Nikolai Roerich’s World of Art ‘temple’ in Talashkino. Throughout the text, Glazunov also explicitly theorizes his aesthetic principles, focusing in particular on the notions of narodnost (the discourse on nationality in art) and realism. Nationality in art, for Glazunov, is a supreme aesthetic value, which takes shape in counter-position to the nihilistic cosmopolitan sensibilities of modernity-obsessed avant-gardists past and present. And realism too, is interpreted as a perennial Manichean aesthetic doctrine— Glazunov, following Dostoevsky, claims that all high art must depict a pitched battle between good and evil, and that realism should be understood
in an “eternal” sense, as the perennial call to express “the grand movement of time, with its eternal, fierce battle of good and evil, in which the battlefield is the heart of man.”

Glazunov’s theory of art, his historiosophical understandings, his politics and his aesthetic practice all turn on the fulcrum of the late nineteenth century—the fifty or so years preceding the revolution, beginning with the work of Viktor Vasnetsov and ending with the World of Art movement, especially Nikolai Roerich. What appeals to Glazunov most about this time period is its nationalist renaissance disposition, with a special emphasis on the prefix. The examples of Vasnetsov and the World of Art exemplify how Russian nationalist forms of art could be invented under the sign of reclamation of pre-Petrine aesthetic values. With their interest in Russian icons and churches, legends, tales and folk craft, the members of the World of Art claimed that they were restoring authentic traditions and breaking out of the mold of the bland post-Petrine Western knock-off modernity surrounding them. Such an artistic disposition allegorically aligns with Glazunov’s own stance vis-à-vis Soviet modernity.

Glazunov, unlike the Chekists in charge of Judgment and Trust, is aesthetically appalled with the Khrushchevian international modern style, he draws no inspiration whatsoever from the Conquerors of Space monument or any other visual symbol of triumphant post-Stalinist ‘modernity.’ For him, all of these symbolic mainstays are aesthetically boring and politically evil—they represent the nihilistic, cosmopolitan, anti-Russian forces of destruction, and Glazunov tends to sum up all of them in the demonic image of Tatlin’s Tower, which recurs throughout his paintings. These ideas come through starkly in most of Glazunov’s “monumental” paintings, such as, for instance, “The Prodigal Son” (1977) and “Kitezh” (1986), “Eternal Russia” (1988) and “The
Mysterium of the Twentieth Century” (1977). In “The Prodigal Son,” shirtless teenager wearing Western jeans returns to the beautiful light of his native Russian culture after a long, bloody red debauch. He begs forgiveness from an iconographic Russian saint, with the luminaries of a thousand years of Russian culture in a ghostly cloud overlooking the saint’s shoulder. In “Kitezh,” a glittering fairytale Russian holy city stands submerged under a lake, while above the surface stands a faceless international-modern business district, with tiny black-clad faceless crowds waving red flags along the riverbank.

“Eternal Russia” and “Mysterium” amplify Glazunov’s insistence on maximal depiction of the forces of good and evil to a paranoid extreme: both works are encyclopedic amalgamations of just about everything and everyone that comes to Glazunov’s mind in the context of the paintings’ telling names. Comic-book-like color distributions and arrangements on the canvas make short work of having to interpret just what and who Glazunov thinks is good and evil.

Glazunov likes to think of his art as an expression of true realism, according to which “an artist must understand and express most of all his own era, with its arrangement of forces, with its understanding of good and evil.” That is, the painter thinks it is incumbent upon him to reveal the underlying spiritual Manichean struggle behind the everyday reality. Except, with his attempt to put out such self-explanatory iconic “thought images,” Glazunov forecloses on the possibility of really making sense of Russian history. All narratives pertaining to Russia’s complicated past are collapsed into emotionally charged icons, but they do not actually explain anything. Glazunov’s art performs a kind of placebo of politics, it renders an emotionally compelling picture of friends and enemies, but stops short of engaging in a realist critique of its own premises.
As a result, Glazunov’s aesthetic ideals end up yielding themselves rather easily to cynical instrumentalization by the post-Soviet Russian state. Perhaps the best example of this turn of events has to do with the theme of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior.

In 1962, in his speech at the Ideological Commission, Glazunov had likened the creation of a new Cathedral of Christ the Savior to a commemorative practice that would recall all of the monuments of Russian culture destroyed by the ‘Stalinist’ state. In 1977, the painter inserted a small image of the toppling Cathedral on the left-most side his “Mysterium” (just next to the satanic theater curtains). In 1988’s “Eternal Russia” the Cathedral would also recur submerged in a pool of blood underneath Tatlin’s demonic tower, while in 1990 it would stand in the idyllic pastoral turn-of-the-century upper corner of “The Grand Experiment,” awaiting its imminent destruction along with the Romanov family. In 1999, just as Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov’s men were putting the finishing touches on the reconstructed Cathedral, Glazunov would paint a second part to his “Mysterium,” placing the rebuilt Christ the Savior at the far right edge, underneath a heroic embodiment of “Holy Rus.” So it seems that all is well that ends well? Except in the same year, Glazunov paints another enormous canvas, titling it “The Market of Our Democracy.” This work continues Glazunov’s method of sweeping accrual of all symbols of ‘everything wrong in Russia today.’ And the rebuilt Cathedral of Christ the Savior is positioned in the center, at the top of the canvas, standing just behind a poster of Mickey Mouse, next to a risqué advertisement for Canadian Snow-Scooters and a detail from Zurab Tsereteli’s widely-despised 1990s monument of Peter the Great. The Cathedral thus appears as just another element in “the market of our democracy.” Moreover, the area in the top left corner that Christ the Savior used to occupy in “The Grand
“Experiment” has now been replaced by a giant Masonic pyramid from the US $1 bill, made up of international flags. This symbol has an Israeli flag below it, but the whole thing is anyway a stand-in for the Star of David, because in the Russian nationalist imagination Jews and Masons (and the ‘West’) are always a part of the same nefarious cosmopolitan collaborative collective. Meanwhile, on the left half of the painting, towards the bottom, stands the beautiful Russian fairytale maiden from “The Prodigal Son,” except now she is wearing stripper clothes and selling a “Russia” cake.

In short, by the late 1990s, Glazunov seems to have recognized the hollow cooptation of his late Soviet reconstructionist fantasies by a despicable post-Soviet state, but there is not much he can do in the way of imagining something different. The forces of evil, never really analyzed beyond their arrangement in a paranoid fashion along the Manichean spectrum, have triumphed here completely. As a result, the painter just ends up repeating himself— that same year Glazunov paints yet another “monumental” canvas, “The Sacking of the Temple on Easter Night.” But here everything is comfortably clear and familiar— it’s a story from the 1920s or 1930s, with the same old friends and enemies, the godless, possibly Jewish Communists/Stalinists with a Trotsky look-alike at the head, coming to plunder religion from the pious, humble Russian folk. Ten years later, yet another enormous canvas appears, this time called “Dekulakization” (2010) and again it depicts the same old politics. Neither of these paintings even attempt to speak about “today” anymore— which is to say that in the post-Soviet era, Glazunov’s whole allegorical mechanism finally seems to have failed him. His hopeful late-Soviet reconstructionist utopian ideals that had inspired him not only to paint his paintings, but also to become a prominent semi-political figure in cultural preservationist movements,
have failed to deliver, and all the painter can do now is endlessly return to the familiar old scene of the crime, with its self-explanatory and banal heroes and villains.

Vladimir Soloukhin

As Glazunov finished off the publication of his *Road to You* in *Molodaia gvardia* in 1966, Vladimir Soloukhin immediately began publishing his *Letters from the Russian Museum* in the same journal, releasing them in two parts that same year. Just a few years earlier, according to Zubok, the young Soloukhin had arrived to the Writers Union restaurant and was deciding where to sit. In Zubok’s telling, Soloukhin joined the ‘anti-Thaw’ crowd out of a vague feeling of ethno-national belonging, because the ‘other side’ had been comprised of quite a few Jews.40 By 1966, however, Soloukhin had a much clearer idea of his own ideological predilections, thanks in great part to his friendship with Glazunov. The closeness of thinking regarding politics and aesthetics between Glazunov and Soloukhin is palpable. Throughout the *Letters*, Soloukhin, like Glazunov, extolls Russian iconography and frescoes, laments the destruction of pre-Revolutionary historic buildings, especially churches (including the Cathedral of Christ the Savior), and waxes poetic about the late nineteenth century. The difference between the two is less on the level of expressed convictions and more on the level of argumentation. Glazunov’s *Road* is ungainly and multivaried; Soloukhin’s *Letters* are tight, conceptually coherent. As a result, while it is difficult to whittle Glazunov’s text down to a single take-away message, Soloukhin’s *Letters* happily oblige in this matter.

Published in two parts, *Letters* tell a story of ‘Stalinist’ (read: Communist) usurpation of Russia’s nationalist legacy, set against a populist revenge fantasy in which
the Russian *narod* shall rise up, reject both the dull Soviet and liberal cosmopolitan modernity, and pledge allegiance to Russia’s nationalist Sonderweg. Meanwhile, the art hanging in the Russian Museum will guide the people in their quest for national renewal, thanks to its mid-brow common-sense traditionalist appeal. Within this general narrative arc, Soloukhin on the one hand clarifies Glazunov’s ideas to the point of vulgarization (Glazunov is a subtler thinker regarding the question of *narodnost* and aesthetic ‘common sense’), but on the other hand also pins down in a more clarified and popularly accessible format a late Soviet conservative myth of the late nineteenth century as a time of aesthetic harmony. Piggy-backing on Glazunov, Soloukhin renders an aesthetic ideology of late Soviet reactionary utopianism, in which the pre-Revolutionary past becomes a site of splendorous, vibrant order, where social hierarchies are acknowledged, while the possibility of social conflict goes entirely ignored. Moreover, Soloukhin’s vision solidifies the myth of 1917 as an absolute aesthetic watershed, and in this way reinforces the stark divide between a vision of traditional, Russian popular authenticity versus a monolithic enemy Communist-Stalinist-liberal vision of anti-populist modernization.

Soloukhin puts his anti-modern sensibilities on the table from the very beginning of his *Letters*— taking as his model Radishchev’s classic anti-Catherinian travelogue, *A Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*, Soloukhin starts the first part of his *Letters* with a lamentation of the destruction of Moscow’s unique nationalist likeness, both in the 1930’s and more recently, and marks out Leningrad/Petersburg as a place of refuge—a city that is still spiritually intact thanks to its peripheral status vis-à-vis the new Soviet capital. The theme of refuge from evil further amplifies in *Leningrad*—the Russian Museum is presently overshadowed by a wildly successful, lavishly funded exhibition of
anti-humanist, foreign, offensive American architecture. Meanwhile, the icons in the
Russian Museum are for the most part held in the reserves, where, like medieval Russian
kenotic martyr saints, hiding out from evil desolation:

The beauty that had been thinly distributed throughout the whole of Russian land
is now scratched off like gold plating, and gathered into piles. A pile in the
Tretiakov storage… A pile here… a pile perhaps, in the Yaroslav museum… A
pile in the Vologda museum. […] As for the land where it had been scratched of
and peeled off, or even simply washed off, there remained just piles of rubble,
weeds, maybe dead and headless brick buildings, where they keep kerosene, oats,
feed for pigs, sheep and cow hides.41

Worse yet, even at the Russian Museum things aren’t so safe—a special fresco exhibit
may be under pressure to close down because of some “sharp” (read: anti-Semitic)
formulations in the exhibit’s book of audience comments.42 The pathos of Part I comes to
a head at the end of its final, eighth letter—after a long, emotional discussion of the
Russian Museum’s underfunded program of icon salvage and restoration, Soloukhin
 zeroes in on the famous medieval icon of St. George trampling a serpent:

A white horse, a flaming background, a vanquished serpent, and a spear of
retribution along the diagonal. […] I love this symbol very much […] Retribution
is one of the most understandable and inspiring feelings for human beings. The
monster is all-powerful, hundred-headed, ravenous and hateful. Every day it eats
a beautiful maiden, it ruins a pure human soul. And it seems like there’s no respite
from it, there’s no redemption, but a youth rides in with a fluttering red coat on a
blindingly white horse and raises his spear, which cannot be repulsed.
Retribution! What can be more righteous than this feeling!43

The direct quotation from Radishchev emphasized above crystallizes Soloukhin’s point.

For Radishchev, the hundred-headed beast had been the repressive, anti-Russian
Catherinian state; for Soloukhin it is all of anti-human, anti-Russian, evil modernity,
whether Stalinist, or early Soviet, or Khrushchevan, or American— they are all parts of
the same monster, and the hour of Russian national vengeance is well nigh.
If Part I’s overall aim is to designate a problem, Part II offers a solution, of sorts. After briefly walking through the halls of boring eighteenth and early nineteenth-century classicist Russian art, Soloukhin picks up with the work of Venetsianov, who quits the academy, goes to his countryside estate and paints his serfs: “And are they slaves? Maidservants? Maidservants with the poise and gaze of Tsaritsas!” The Russian Emperor Alexander I, for his part, does his patriotic duty and buys Venetsianov’s paintings: “He decided to organize at the Hermitage a gallery of paintings from the Russian school of art. […] Thus for the first time under a single glittering roof with the Venuses, the Heracles, the Flemish and Spanish masters, there appeared the peasants from the little village of Tronikha in the Tverskaia region.” Soloukhin admires Venetsianov, in other words, because he sees this painter as the first one to participate in a kind of splendorous, harmonious national social system, in which there is no aesthetic difference between serfs and queens, in which the good king likes to look at beautiful paintings of his “Olympian” peasant subjects. For Soloukhin, such a view of the nineteenth century stands in sharp contrast to the “official” Soviet history of pre-Revolutionary art with its emphasis on the socially-minded realists of the period, especially the Peredvizhniki group. Soloukhin derisively regards the Peredvizhniki’s project of social critique as “genre painting” and “feuilleton art,” in which “if there’s a wedding, then it’s got to be either a witch at a village feast or an unequal marriage. It’s as if there were no successful weddings and equal marriages at all. We were no longer able to speak of anything with each other without aiming to pinch somehow.”

After Venetsianov and an interlude with Fedotov and Nesterov, Soloukhin finally gets to Vasnetsov’s paintings of Russia’s fairy-tale past. Following Glazunov, Soloukhin
views Vasnetsov as a spiritual father of the World of Art group, whose members re-discovered, re-birthed an authentic Russian nationalist aesthetic. In this age of “invented traditions,” Russia’s nationalist-minded artists invented their style by peering beyond the Petrine divide into Russian medieval iconography, as well as by looking for authenticity in peasant fairytales, folk legends, crafts and so forth. As a result, Soloukhin claims that painters like Vasnetsov managed to create an image that, despite its origin in a particular moment in history, feels eternal:

‘A Knight at the Crossroads’ is at the Russian Museum. Maybe this steppe is as dear to us as a dream, as if we are children and flying again, or maybe the fairytale is tied up here so tightly with the real history of a people— but either way, it is somehow hard to believe that ‘A Knight at the Crossroads’ didn’t exist before 1882 and that the entire preceding generation of Russian people, of children at least, did not grow up with the image of Vasnetsov’s “Knight” in their minds. It is as if it has always existed, like the steppe, like Kiev, like the Volga, like Russia, like the legends and the fairytales about it.

Soloukhin has a similar take on Surikov. And most importantly, both of these painters, as well as Nesterov and Fedotov, all depict the vibrancy of a Russia that emphatically ended with the Revolution:

Russia, shortly before the cataclysm, had been multifaceted and varied in images. There was the Russia of servitors… the Russia of mutineers… The Russia of explorers… The Russia of science… the Russia of art: hundreds of names. There was a student Russia and an officer Russia, a navy and a taiga Russia, a dancing and drinking Russia, a tilling and a wandering Russia. But there was also a praying Russia.

Indeed, Soloukhin concludes the Letters on a similar sentiment, quoting Nesterov’s description of the Russian Museum, written already after the Revolution: “There are the famous Smolianki, the best Rokotov, and everything tells us of the past of the people, the mores of the life that has disappeared.”

With his poetic descriptions of a “Russia shortly before the cataclysm,” and also
of Russian archetypal images depicted by Vasnetsov, Soloukhin forms a myth of a symphonic pre-Revolutionary lifeworld in which the people, the intellectuals, the alcoholics, the mutineers all played their harmonious role. It’s a vision of a vibrant past order in which intensity of color is emotionally designed to cut off and outright deride the possibility of critical social analysis as a viable way of connecting with this past. And the coherence of this image of a pre-Revolutionary “Eternal Russia” holds together thanks to the radical divide of the Soviet new time that is assumed to have eradicated it. In this framework, the Soviet regime is assumed to have appeared out of thin air as some kind of parasitic usurper. Hence, Soloukhin notes that “Vasnetsov’s nationalist activities were so varied and wide that, for example, military helmets, called at first Bogatyrki, and later Budenovki, had been prepared for the Tsar’s army according to Viktor Mikhailovich’s sketches, and we have inherited them from the Tsar’s military warehouses.”52 Except the truth is a little stranger than this bit of fiction. Namely, Vasnetsov really did design the Red Army’s military hats, but he didn’t do it for the Tsar— he did it specifically for the Red Army, on the orders of none other than Trotsky, himself a major protagonist of Mikhail Agursky’s study of “National-Bolshevism.”53 For that matter, Nesterov too didn’t stop painting in 1917— he continued to make art well into the Stalin era, and the post-Soviet aesthetic philosopher Victor Arslanov, following his teacher Mikhail Lifshitz, has argued that it is precisely Nesterov’s 1930s portraits of creative intellectuals that reveal the painter in his prime.54

Whatever we think of Arslanov’s aesthetic judgment, what is obvious is that Soloukhin’s myth of a radical break of 1917 operates by playing down the continuities that survived past the “cataclysm,” and by ignoring the complicated social narratives that
brought about the Revolution in the first place. And with his anti-political, anti-rational image of an always righteous, always right-thinking Russian narod squaring off against the faceless forces of cosmopolitan modernity, Soloukhin and other conservative intelligentsia figures end up failing the political tests of the late 1980s, when, as Yitshak Brudny points out, the ‘Russian Party’ proved quite incompetent at representational politics. But in one sense they were successful: like Glazunov, Soloukhin contributed to turning late-nineteenth-century Russia “before the cataclysm” into an aesthetic image with an easily instrumentalizable symbolic value. Just as the cynical post-Soviet state happily rebuilt the Cathedral of Christ the Savior so beloved by Glazunov, the state also happily coopted Soloukhin’s love of St. George, returning him (or, to be precise, his look-alike) to Russian state insignia. The post-Perestroika Yeltsin state did all of this not because they thought deeply about the symbolic meaning of these objects, and neither was the state interested in bringing the conservatives who had created these symbols to actual political power (after all, many of the conservatives had aligned themselves with the anti-Yeltsin putschists in 1991 and then again with the anti-Yeltsin Parliament in 1993—see Chapter Three). Rather, a reconstruction and reclamation of these fetishized symbols promised to burnish the new state’s legitimacy at no political cost. At a time when any political legitimacy was in very short supply, the late Soviet conservative aesthetic legacy proved to be as good a site to poach as any. And so, to borrow their own mythic language, we might say that Soloukhin’s and Glazunov’s conservative reconstructionist ethos ultimately never managed to slay the hateful hundred-headed beast—indeed, they might have given it a new lease on life.
III. The Neo-Slavophile Critique of Political Action: 
Or, How Oblomov Became a Late Soviet Conservative

*His demands, directed to the future, are the most minimal ones: let everything calm down, settle down. [...] It is true that some things need to be updated in this settlement, but just the tiniest bit.*

Iurii Loshchits, about Ilya Oblomov

All of the cases of conservatives discussed above have touched on the question of political agency. The late Soviet liberal view of political agency might be summed up in the following shorthand—maintain cultural hegemony, attract a mass following (though some segments of the masses would ‘count’ more than others), and demand a liberal democratic political overhaul through the public sphere. With the conservatives, the question of political agency was more problematic. After all, in the conservative politics of alliance, it wasn’t quite so much state power that was to be contested, analyzed or critiqued, but rather the liberal long-standing strategy of cultural hegemony. How long have the liberals been in charge? “since, depending on who’s counting, the French Revolution or the Reformation,” Corey Robin jokes, speaking about Anglo-American conservatives. Late Soviet conservatives have a similar sort of maximalist historiosophical tendency. Thinkers and political practitioners like Glazunov, Soloukhin, Shulgin, and the KGB proposed to interpret the post-Stalin era as a new time, which would offer an opportunity to exact a cultural revanche against an anti-Russian ‘modernist-Stalinist-liberal conspiracy’ that has been in charge for decades, if not centuries, possibly including the entire post-Petrine era. The point of this imaginary wasn’t so much to peddle grand historical paranoia (though there was plenty of such paranoia, particularly of the anti-Semitic kind), but rather to dispute the value of
transformative social action *toucourt*, be it understood as enlightenment, or modernization, or progressivism, or liberalism. All variants of these future-oriented activities are always viewed as a threat; the affirmation of a vision of a nationalist ‘special path’—the Sonderweg in which future-oriented agency is unnecessary is the conservative antidote.

Belief in the ‘special path’ entails a de-coupling of one’s participation in the social sphere from the future-oriented, emancipatory imperative. To be a Sonderweg-minded conservative subject, one should somehow strive harmoniously to participate in culture without engaging in such destabilizing activities. It is partly the search for this form of harmonious nationalist practice that brought Glazunov and Soloukhin to admire the World of Art movement, which they viewed in opposition to the politically engaged “feuilleton art” of the Peredvizhnik group. A similar disposition also brought some conservatives of the 1960s to reexamine the post-Decembrist era and the nineteenth-century Slavophile heritage.

**Vadim Kozhinov**

In 1968, the Russian scholarly journal, *Issues in Literature* [*Voprosy literatury*] published an article by the prominent conservative critic Vadim Kozhinov, entitled “Towards a Methodology of History of Russian Literature (On the Realism of the 1830s).” Though the paper focused on the period between 1825 and 1842, it launched a heated discussion of the 1840s Slavophile current in Russian nineteenth-century cultural thought, to the point that official ideologists had to step in and set the record straight. In his first paper, Kozhinov argued that Soviet scholars of the nineteenth century have been
unfair in describing the epoch following the failed Decembrist revolt of 1825 as a time of cultural decline, just because the regime of Nicholas I’s was repressive. As a counterargument to this (strawman) position, Kozhinov focused on the examples of Petr Chaadaev’s *Philosophical Letters* and Gogol’s *Dead Souls*, both of which were penned and circulated in this period.

According to Kozhinov, the 1830s were a “remarkable time of outward slavery and inner freedom” an epoch that allowed Chaadaev to formulate the need for a Sonderweg [*samobytnost*] as a central Russian Idea. For Kozhinov, such a thought marked the beginning of Russia’s cultural “world significance.”\(^{58}\) Gogol, meanwhile, delivered on Chaadaev’s challenge by writing *The Dead Souls*, which “is not satire, it is an art close to art of the ‘renaissance’ type,” because it “reveals Rus in its indivisible wholeness.”\(^{59}\) Getting more ecstatic with every page, Kozhinov would finally conclude his article with the bombastic summary claim that “The common understanding of the 1830s as a time of ‘decline’ is getting in the way of objective research of what is in my opinion one of the greatest literary epochs.”\(^{60}\) Kozhinov’s article was followed by a number of others, including refutations of his claims by orthodox literary historians, a set of articles on the Slavophiles of the 1840s and 1850s, and finally Kozhinov’s own response, published in October 1969, entitled “About the Most Important in Slavophile Criticism.” Following up on his earlier piece, the critic continued to emphasize the idea of the Sonderweg (*samobytnost*) as the crucial value and ultimate measure for Russian cultural production. Tactically defending it from accusations of being a politically “reactionary” concept (the word being understood here in the narrow official Marxist-Leninist ideological sense), Kozhinov claimed that Russia’s special path was actually
responsible for bringing about the Russian Revolution, in which the nation rose up
against the encroachments of Western capitalism. Whatever we make of this (Stalinist)
claim, the “Most Important” part of Kozhinov’s article for our purposes occurs when it
explains the Slavophile special path’s relationship to ‘modernity’:

The Slavophiles [weren’t] interested in some kind of resurrection of ancient
‘foundations’ or much less ancient everyday life or mores. In no way did the
Slavophiles wish somehow to ‘archaize’ modern life and culture; they strove only
to make sure that life and culture would more fully, more thoroughly be
permeated by that nationally unique [samobytnyi] content, which, in their view,
had been much more strongly expressed in the life of pre-Petrine and especially
pre-Mongolian Rus. The ‘Europeanization’ of Russia forced this content inward,
into the depths of folk life. But the Slavophiles felt that this content is fully
capable of living within modern (sovremennye) forms of existence and
consciousness, that it can be combined with railroads and with the newest science
and philosophy.61

In Kozhinov’s rendering, Russia’s special path clearly has trouble with “modernity.” On
the one hand, there seems to be some modernity that the Sonderweg can countenance—
be it in the realm of technology, science, philosophy or everyday habits. On the other
hand, there is the rest of modernity, which Kozhinov understands as an anti-Russian,
“Europeanizing,” homogenizing force. Elsewhere in the text, Kozhinov also uses the term
“nihilism” to describe it. Altogether, this force is actually worse than outright political
repression—hence the critic’s ire at the “Western-oriented nihilists of the 1860s, “who in
their desire to dethrone Pushkin from his supreme cultural status sinned worse than
Nicholas’s state that had merely censured the poet during his lifetime.”62 I think this issue
of “nihilism” points to a resistance of political modernity in Claude Lefort’s sense—that
is, the kind of modernity that negates the notion of a trans-rationally, traditionally
grounded order of the social world and thereby opens the door for that social world’s
rationalizing, “nihilistic” obliteration.
The idea of the Russian Sonderweg, therefore, is an idea of a conservative cultural activity that contests modernity’s imperative to engage in transformative socio-political actions on the grounds of such actions being anti-Russian. And this is precisely why Kozhinov emphasizes the period of the 1830s for his reflections. By highlighting the decade and a half after the failed Decembrist revolt as the “greatest era” for Russian art, Kozhinov wishes to dispute the official Soviet account, inherited from pre-Revolutionary liberal thought of the 1840s “Westernizers,” according to which art acquires value only insofar as it serves a project of political liberation. For Kozhinov, art becomes truly ‘grand’ only insofar as it does not attempt to act politically at all. Great “art of the renaissance type” has to express the nationalist Sonderweg in some paradoxically inactive sense. This is an inherently contradictory formulation, because it claims that properly conservative “renaissance” art somehow has to both renovate and resist renovation. Whether or not such a view of aesthetics makes sense, what is undeniable is that it tracks well with the late Soviet conservative political stance of critique of the very notion of political agency, which they closely associate with liberalism and modernization. To understand better how this stance works, let us examine the case of classic Russian writer Ivan Goncharov’s character of Ilya Oblomov, who in the late Soviet era was very provocatively transformed into a kind of conservative political hero.

**Iurii Loshchits’s Oblomov**

In 1977, the conservative writer and critic Iurii Loshchits released a monograph biography of the Russian novelist Ivan Goncharov (1812-1891) via the “Lives of Extraordinary People” book series at the “Molodaia gvardiia” publishing house, which
was by then run by junior members of the “Pavlov group.” Brudny views Loshchits’s biography as part of a trend at “Lives,” which at this time also published the biographies of other classic authors, like Alexander Ostrovsky and Nikolai Gogol. All three of these, as Brudny notes, “criticized the nineteenth-century radical intelligentsia’s interpretation of the works of these writers,” ipso facto challenging the Marxist-Leninist canonical interpretations of this period and its politics. Moreover, the challenge didn’t go unnoticed— in 1979, official ideologists at the journal Communist went after Loshchits, accusing him of misinterpreting the nineteenth century. Loshchits’s (mild) trouble with the state is hardly an exception— because of its ideologically activist nature, Soviet conservatism always had the potential to worry its handlers in the state bureaucracy. Even so, Loshchits’s interpretation of Goncharov’s life, oeuvre and most famous novel, Oblomov (1849-1859) is emphatically anti-liberal. Goncharov explicitly critiques the very idea of a moral imperative to engage in the ubiquitous process of Western modernization. Such a critique denies the validity of all liberal political action as such, and presents in its stead a peculiar form of Sonderweg-minded, anti-political Russian conservative subjectivization.

Loshchits’s biography of Goncharov is structured around several key moments in which the writer realizes fully the threat that Russia faces from modernity. Stylized nineteenth-century language is particularly heavy in the book’s early parts, describing Goncharov’s idyllic upbringing in Simbirsk and likening it to that of his most famous protagonist, Oblomov. Goncharov then attends Moscow University, where he watches Alexander Pushkin argue against a “haughty” Russian medievalist professor trying to disprove the authenticity of the Igor Tale. A short while later, Goncharov fails to write
a first novel, because, according to Loshchits the writer realizes that a romantic Rousseauian plot would no longer be appropriate for the epochal challenges of the “iron nineteenth century.”

Goncharov’s modernity skepticism then takes a mature form as a result of his almost-around-the-world sea voyage on the frigate Pallada (1852-1855). During the journey, Goncharov watches the installation of the first steam engines on British ships and observes the sprawling capitalist network of the British Empire, which imposes foreign rule, erases national particularities and constitutes a direct threat to Russia, culminating with the Crimean War, which cuts Goncharov’s voyage short. This historical turning-point crystalizes the grand confrontation between Russia and Western modernity:

The mid-century commenced in 1855 in Russia- the year of Nicholas’s death, the year of the fall of Sevastopol, the year when hundreds of villages cried over the dead and hoped for soon-to-come land and liberty… A little land and a little liberty. Meanwhile the werewolf steam train puffs in the snowy corridor of forests, whistles riotously, and keeps an eye on the trees: it’s no problem that I’m little, I will eat all of you soon, I will turn you into black, hot dust… In the mid-century Russia suddenly ‘grew up.’ Capitalism finally arrived to its limitless, tantalizingly rich expanses— through the power of English rifles, through the hot power of steamships and steam trains, through the beguiling and sweet power of comforts (still available only to the select).

As a critic, Loshchits argues that Goncharov’s oeuvre aims to address this epochal confrontation, on both a formal and a substantive level. Formally, Goncharov has to invent a “mythological realism” and a “pure novel” form in order to answer the challenge of the times. Hence, Loshchits emphasizes the many Biblical motifs peppering Goncharov’s works, and also constantly highlights his texts’ “polyphony,” such that its conflicting parties get to speak their minds honestly: “the author himself […] does not attempt to pass a final word on the side of either ‘truth.’” In Loshchits’s treatment, both
of these aspects reach their apex by the end of Goncharov’s career, when the writer assumes a God-like presence in his last novel, *The Precipice* (1869):

> He ‘knows’ ahead of time that the course of the events is irrevocable […] But he cannot limit the inhabitants of [the novel’s setting, the country estate of Malinovka] in their freedom of actions. […] He is sick with the catastrophes, pains and ‘sins’ of his future heroes. But he also knows that the temptations cannot but come in their time. In the end he can only hope that all sicknesses and woes will not conquer them, that the human heart will not split from pain, that it will survive the pressure of evil…”

Loshchits emphasizes the ambivalence and the mythological charge of Goncharov’s texts not only to render Goncharov into a ‘deep’ Russian thinker, but also to suggest a kind of model for conservative intellectual engagement with the ever-threatening modernizing world.

Instead of taking up a forward-looking, coherent political platform, so characteristic of mid-nineteenth century Russian publicists and authors like Alexander Herzen and Nikolai Chernyshevsky, the model conservative author strives to avoid any such resolute gestures and instead renders the contradictions of his age in a kind of harmonious, even-handed fashion. The disjointed, complicated world passes through the “pure” novel form, where it acquires a kind of aesthetic balance. In the conservative novel, social contradictions aren’t resolved, but rather coexist within a unifying text. We should note that we have already seen a similar gesture take place in Soloukhin’s depiction of the nineteenth century. But Loshchits goes a bit further than Soloukhin. In his reading of Goncharov’s oeuvre, the gesture of conservative aesthetic unification of contradictions comes along with a moral injunction against action. In the epochal confrontation between Russia and modernity, with modernity posing the quintessential Chernyshevskian question, ‘what is to be done?’, Loshchits has Goncharov respond by
saying ‘nothing.’ This attitude comes through in the critic’s reading of Oblomov, which forms the centerpiece of the biography.

For Loshchits, Oblomov formulates a Russian Sonderweg response to encroaching modernity’s totalizing injunction to “do.” Ilya Oblomov “[does] not wish to do. […] [He] quit[s] your grandiose game of noble doing,”71 and the critic insists that this refusal is morally valuable. Loshchits reads Oblomov as a kenotic amalgamation of Eastern Buddhist and Russian saintliness, in which the saint aims to save himself from evil through a kind of righteous inaction:

Ilya Ilyich’s ‘old’ truth cannot withstand the rush of civilization. It can only hide in the chrysalis of nonresistance. It is impossible to stand in the way of evil. But there is hope that one can somehow suffer through it, to quietly come out on the other side. There’s no strength to go directly against it. But it is possible—at least in thought—to refuse the evil’s right to reality.72

Conversely, Oblomov’s enemy in his difficult, doomed task of principled anti-modern inaction is his best friend, Andrei Stolz. The critic’s reads Stolz in a resolutely negative fashion, downplaying the ambivalences with which the novel presents him. For Loshchits, Stolz is none other than the devil, in a Faustian and a Western Capitalist sense. The critic likens Stolz’s constant restlessness to that of Goethe’s Mephistopheles.73 Moreover, Stolz also apparently deploys a Mephistophelean tactic to beguile Oblomov into his service by recruiting the help of a beautiful maid, Olga, who for her part doesn’t necessarily realize that she is a weapon of evil. Olga, the “new woman,” is being manipulated to do the devil’s work through the cardinal sin of pride—“she likes very much to think of herself as [an enlightener]: after all, she, a woman, leads a man behind herself! What strength she has been given [by Stolz], what force?! How can she not be proud of herself, how can her glorious head not spin!”74 Lastly, and most damningly,
Loshchits observes Stolz’s colonizing, Western capitalist plans vis-à-vis the idyll of Oblomovka. Reading *Oblomov* alongside the *Frigate Pallada* travelogue, Loschits argues that Stolz is quite like the European colonists who seek to conquer all of the world’s defenseless Oblomovkas:

As long as the ‘sleeping kingdom’ exists, Stolz somehow feels out of sorts, even in Paris he tosses and turns at night. He is tormented by the thought that the Oblomovka peasants have been sewing their bit of land since time immemorial and have been collecting rich harvests without reading any agronomic brochures. And that the excess bread just stays around among them, without getting sold off by rail— to Paris, for example. […] Thanks to Stolz’s will, the ‘sleeping kingdom’ will turn into… a railroad station, and the Oblomovka peasants will go ‘work the embankments.’ So there they collide at full speed, [the Russian fairy-tale fool’s] cumbersome brick-oven and the hot steam train, the fairy-tale and reality, the ancient myth and the sober reality of the mid-19th century.\(^75\)

In the face of such wanton, violent, totalizing evil embodied by Oblomov’s best friend, all the protagonist is left to do is pursue a kind of quintessentially conservative political non-practice. Oblomov, for Loshchits, turns into a peculiar, “purely Russian” kind of Don Quixote. For Oblomov, just as for Don Quixote, “his fanatical faith in the absolute reality of his dreams is contrasted against the practicalities of his human surroundings.” However, whereas Don Quixote would engage in “militant frenzy” on behalf of his faith, Oblomov “prefers the goal of conservatism [okhranitelstvo] to the goal of propaganda, a defense, rather than an attack.”\(^76\) This “philosopher of ‘absolute rest’”

…may be considered the shiest and most unassuming of all utopians ever known to man. His demands, directed to the future, are the most minimal ones: let everything calm down, settle down. Oblomov’s ‘plan’ includes only the village settlement, dissolved in surrounding nature. It is true that some things need to be updated in this settlement, but just the tiniest bit.\(^77\)

Using the Russian calque for “conservatism,” Loshchits rather explicitly articulates his political ideals.

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\(^{75}\) [Original text](#).

\(^{76}\) [Original text](#).

\(^{77}\) [Original text](#).
The love of a gloriously passive utopia in which “some things need to be updated […] but just the tiniest bit” encapsulates the late Soviet conservative ethos of resistance to the modernizing “action” that is doomed to occur anyway, but that can at the very least be denied its “spiritual reality.” If one is to become a conservative political subject along these lines, all one can do is insist on one’s own spiritual special path, to cultivate a kind of “inner freedom”\(^7\) in the face of a liberal modernity that will, substantively speaking, always be in charge, but whose moral hegemony can at least be denied. Perhaps, thanks to principled moral resistance some local, specific instances of modernization can be stalled or repealed. Or, perhaps through a conservative resistance on the symbolic plane of national values, some essential attributes and relationships of the existing order can be strengthened and renovated, so as not to be entirely crushed by the liberalizing tide. Regarding this last point, we should note that the post-Soviet afterlife of critics like Kozhinov and Loshchits and their Party backers turned out relatively alright. Despite the late Soviet liberal party’s ideological triumph in the Perestroika, the members of the Pavlov group and its descendants either maintained or improved on their old niches in the new order, quite like the many late Soviet power elites that used to curate them.

**Nikita Mikhalkov’s *Oblomov***

To conclude my examination of the late Soviet conservative interpretation of Oblomov, I would like to turn now to Nikita Mikhalkov’s 1979 film, “A Few Days from the Life of Oblomov,” which builds on Loshchits’s conservative reading, but also appending it with a powerful neo-Chekhovian twist.\(^7\) Coming from the family of aforementioned Sergei Mikhaklov, Nikita was closely connected to the late Soviet
conservative creative intelligentsia circles. In the 1990s, the filmmaker would make his monarchist predilections clear, while at one point even signaling his eligibility for the Russian throne.\textsuperscript{80} Meanwhile, as a filmmaker Mikhalkov has spent a lifetime cultivating a mastery of Chekhovian melodramatic cinema, in which both protagonists and antagonists are enmeshed in a world in which clear action or an uncompromised moral compass are impossible. In her study of the “Imperial trace” in late- and post-Soviet Russian cinema, Nancy Condee has pointed out parallels between Mikhalkov’s melodrama and his politics, highlighting in particular his “melodramatic” triad of “impossibility, irrevocability, inevitability” as a counterpoint to the Western nationalist emancipatory triad of “liberty, equality, brotherhood.”\textsuperscript{81} For Condee, Mikhalkov’s characters inhabit a private subjective existence that negates the very possibility of effective political subjectivization. Through the exquisitely dead-locked incoherence of their lives, Mikhalkov’s heroes render incomprehensible and pointless the various political ideologies in which they are embedded and that they might espouse. Mikhalkov’s preferred chronology for his stories further amplifies this dynamic—nearly all of his films are set in the waning years of the Russian Empire or the early Soviet years just prior to Stalin’s purges. The inhabitants of this complicated historical period live a private existence that is too complex for ideology—like Mitia from \textit{Burnt by the Sun} (1994), they “stand in for too many contradictory ideological positions simultaneously.”\textsuperscript{82} Moreover, on this “buckle of history,” “things” like the Chekhovian-Mikhalkovian noble summer country house, “outlive people.”\textsuperscript{83} The continuity of this favored setting underlines the frailty of its human inhabitants.

Clearly, Mikhalkov’s thoroughgoing melodramatic emphasis on the always already
doomed private existence within Russia’s tumultuous history matches Loshchits’s sensibilities. Indeed, Mikhalkov’s *Oblomov* incorporates and builds on Loshchits’s reading. Most importantly, Mikhalkov accepts the critic’s claim of a staunch moral dichotomy between Oblomov and Stolz. Just as in Loshchits’s reading, Mikhalkov’s film marks out Andrei Stolz as the antagonist, a cold-hearted betrayer of his kind-hearted, naïve friend. The antagonism is revealed, however, in typical Chekhovian realist theatrical style, via an emotional ‘secondary plane’ that belies Stolz’s innocent words and expressed intentions. We first glimpse a sense of Stolz’s antagonistic nature about two thirds into the first part of the film, when the two attend a bathhouse. To make a point about his steely willpower Stolz runs out of the bathhouse and rubs himself in snow, and then tries to force a handful of snow onto Ilya’s body, while repeating, “now or never.” After several repetitions, the intonation passes from joking to threatening, while naked Andrei’s grasp of naked Ilya turns violent. With a final whimper from Ilya, the scene takes on an unmistakable tenor of rape (see Figure 11, below). This violent grasp rhymes with a flashback scene ten minutes later, in which Stolz’s father lovingly, but violently shakes a stoic, silent Stolz as the latter departs the house of his youth forever, riding off on horseback and looking quite like a medieval German knight (see Figure 12, below). Then, finally, at the end of the film, Stolz’s violent nature comes full circle. After having initially introduced Ilya to Olga, Andrei returns after several months of absence and, despite having noticed the love that has developed between his two friends, he is now interested in Olga and will betray Ilay to have his way. This scene (and the whole film) culminates with a confrontation in which, first, Stolz calmly tells Oblomov that Olga has revealed to him every last detail of their relationship, including all of the
Figure 11: Ilya Oblomov struggles under Stolz's cold grip.

Figure 12: Young Stolz is violently shaken by his father as he is about to depart for Petersburg forever.
private symbols of their affection: “I know everything […] About the lessons, and about the strolls, and about the bush. And about the letter, and about the cup, and about the lobster.” In shock, Oblomov responds, “My God, but how…” The whole conversation takes place extradiagnostically and the striking absence of the characters in the shot amplifies Stolz’s cold-blooded revelation about his intentions. This point is then immediately followed by one last expression of borderline physical violence, in which Stolz tries to get his friend to ride a brand new prototype bicycle along with him and Olga. With the camera placed behind Ilya, all we see is Stolz’s face as the latter says, rather incongruently with his angry expression, “do it for me Ilya, I will help you. It is so happy and pleasant” (see Figure 13, below).
The scene of Stolz’s betrayal of Ilya epitomizes the melodramatic transformation that *Oblomov* has undergone in Mikhalkov’s hands. No such scene ever takes place in Goncharov’s original. There, Ilya and Olga’s relationship blossoms, plateaus and sours on its own, driven by a narrative engine in which dialectical, forward-moving confrontations of characters constantly transform their relationships until all characters manage to express their inner truth. In Mikhalkov’s *Oblomov*, this forward movement is tampered down. Character development in this film happens not through reconsultation, but more through understatement and under-interpretation. Mikhalkov’s characters never know what they are really saying and doing, even in such moments as the poignant encounters between Oblomov and Stolz described above. Thus, even after the two friends’ last, culminating confrontation, they run off and enjoy themselves, taking turns on the bicycle along with Olga, as a voiceover explains the events of the following years. For a whole two minutes, the off-screen narrator tells us that Olga will soon break up with Ilya and marry Stolz, while Ilya will move to a small countryside house outside Petersburg, marry his housemaid, have a child and die soon afterwards. In other words, what happens in the novel gradually, over hundreds of pages of dialogue between, first, Olga and Ilya, and then Olga and Stolz, is entirely skipped. Mikhalkov’s film is not at all interested in tracking and resolving his characters’ travails in such a forward-moving dynamic. Quite the contrary, the filmmaker renders precisely those “Few Days From the Life of Oblomov” when neither Ilya, nor Stolz nor Olga realize what will happen to them, when none of them know that all of their hopes and relationships are already doomed.

And then, to highlight Stolz’s and Olga’s ultimate doom, Mikhalkov adds one last scene.

Just after the voiceover narration, Mikhalkov’s story picks up a few years after
Goncharov himself had ended it. By now, Stolz and Olga are living in a particularly splendid summer house and we see them calmly discussing Stolz’s successful bourgeois social life while sitting in different rooms. Olga, however, is quite nonplused, takes various neurasthenia medications, and finally breaks down sobbing because she cannot tolerate life with her ever-calm, subtly violent German bourgeois husband. Meanwhile, Oblomov’s son Andrei, whom Olga and Stolz have adopted, runs out excitedly across a long, rolling green field to meet his birth mother. The film then concludes with three minutes of very long, steady shots of Andrei running across the gorgeous countryside, shouting “mommy has arrived,” along with an extradiesgetic choral performance of the Song of Simeon (Nunc Dimmitis) from Rachmaninoff’s Vespers (see Figure 14, below).  

![Figure 14: Oblomov's child runs off to see his mother, to the tune of Rakhmaninov's Nunc Dimmitis](image)
By projecting Goncharov’s story forward a decade, Mikhalkov blends his Chekhovian treatment of *Oblomov* with Loshchits’s conservative nationalist one. Stolz and Olga’s relationship is ruined (as was to be expected in a Mikhalkov film). Meanwhile, Little Andrei Oblomov’s repeated call for his peasant “mommy” rhymes with the film’s beginning, in which Ilya Oblomov had recalled in his dreams how he as a little boy ran to greet his beloved mother in Oblomovka. The somber tone of Rachmaninoff’s Song of Simeon now reads like a dirge for an Oblomovka that is gone, forever conquered by Stolz’s insufferable German modernity. But on the other hand, the actual words of the Song of Simeon (“Now Thou dost dismiss Thy servant, O Lord, according to Thy word in peace; Because my eyes have seen Thy salvation”), which come through clearly in Church Slavonic, suggest that Oblomovka has been resurrected within little Andrei. Indeed, such an interpretation is quite in line with Ilya Oblomov’s musings earlier in the film. In the bathhouse, Ilya had spoken about thousand-year-old trees, which grow new leaves every spring, and “a part of each leaf exists in the forthcoming years, and it was also there in years past. So then us too, whoever we are, if we’re alive, then there’s some kind of purpose.” The film’s conclusion, then, seems to suggest both that the saintly Russian Oblomovka has on the one hand been defeated by encroaching Stolzian evil, but on the other hand that “a part of it” somehow continues to exist and to redeem. The running child is both a symbol of a foreclosed future for this particular past, but he is also a symbol of that past’s enduring and salvific power.

Mikhalkov’s pre-Soviet, late Imperial Russia, both in this film and in others, always comes off as historically doomed, but at the same time in *Oblomov* it promises to return anew, again and again. The only thing is, the return will not come about through
any form of activity *at all*, not even of the kenotic sort advocated by Loshchits. This is an essential, albeit nuanced difference between Loshchits’s perspective and that of Mikhalkov. Loshchits’s Oblomov, as a Russian saint, with his “quixotic,” principled refusal “to participate in your noble game of doing,” is still someone we might think of as an individual subject. He may be out of options vis-à-vis the evil that he combats, but his kenoticism is at least a self-aware act. In Mikhalkov’s treatment of this character, however, this form of active self-awareness is entirely absent. Oblomov here is far more like the “leaf,” than the saint, and Stolz too, for that matter, is far more a deluded Chekhovian bourgeois than the grandiose Mephistophelean Subject of modernity. When Goncharov’s characters undergo the Mikhalkovan-Chekhovian treatment, they lose their self-awareness. Their truth-seeking realist subjectivity is replaced by an opaque, stagnant, melodramatic *non*-subjectivity. Mikhalkov’s Oblomov and Stolz (and also Olga) are *not* aware, they *misrecognize* the truth about their relationship with each other, as well as regarding their function in epochal confrontation of Obolomovka and modernity.

I interpret the move from Loshchits’s reading of *Oblomov* to that of Mikhalkov as a passing from the perspective of an elite late Soviet conservative to the condition of the late Soviet de-politicized masses. Loshchits’s Oblomov, as I have already shown, is an allegory for a form of conservative subjectivity that takes up an always already doomed, but nevertheless principled “quixotic” defense against the liberal onslaught. Mikhalkov’s Oblomov, on the other hand, is an allegory for a private, regular late Soviet individual, who has no access to political subjectivization at all because he is entirely disconnected and foreclosed from all possibilities of viable social action. Read this way, Mikhalkov’s late Soviet conservatism comes full circle with Condee’s observation of the function of
the silent, “demotic identity” of the folk (narod) in the Russian cultural imaginary going back all the way to the Imperial era. Condee points out that the elites in charge of Russian symbolic production have always spoken for the narod, even as they have constantly articulated their inherent distinction from it, thereby “annulling” the creation of “autonomous, horizontal ties” with the masses. Moreover, speaking about the depiction of the late Imperial narod in Mikhailov’s post-Soviet Barber of Siberia (1998), Condee has pointed out how in this film, set in the 1870s, the masses celebrating Shrovetide come off as a “staged […] demotic kabuki” of “the Russian folk” and in this display bears no resemblance to Western notions of “nationalism with the usual associations of newly empowered egalitarian agency, liberationist collective expression, or the independent civic life of nationhood.” I would like to suggest that two decades prior to The Barber, Mikhailov was already allegorically staging a similar non-egalitarian, non-liberationist enactment of narodnost— indeed, he was doing so throughout his neo-Chekhovian oeuvre. It is just that in Mikhailov’s films the idea of the narod had been updated to conform to late Soviet realities.

In Chapter One, I discussed the argument between Pomerants and Solzhenitsyn as to whether or not the narod exists in the wake of Soviet Russia’s forced industrialization. Pomerants had claimed that in late Soviet conditions old peasant identities have been destroyed and the new narod is the urbanized, educated consumer class. Speaking from his position as a liberal intellectual, Pomerants had suggested that these masses, officially dubbed the “technical intelligentsia,” would be the ideal junior partners of the liberal elites in the task of maintaining cultural hegemony and enacting political change. Solzhenitsyn, as we recall, refused Pomerants’ terms. Mikhailov, I think, accepted
them, because as a writer, director, actor and producer of late Soviet melodramatic
tearjerkers, he must have understood perfectly well that his mass audience identified far
more with Chekhov’s melodramatic high society, than with the mythical peasant folk.
The new late Soviet “folk,” the engineers, the masses of mid-level professionals and
managers living in their private Khrushchevan high-rises and spending summers in their
dilapidated summer country houses felt themselves more at home in *The Cherry Orchard*
than in the Village Prose writers’ peasant huts. At the same time, all of these masses
could go in either direction with respect to the question of enfranchisement and political
subjectivization. Hence, Nancy Ries, in her anthropological study of “Russian talk”
during the Perestrovia, observed how some of her Muscovite informants could identify
themselves with the narod, thereby drawing a distinction between themselves and those
with real political power, while other Muscovites, from basically the same social circles,
could denigrate the narod as an ignorant pack of sheep (the proverbial bydlo) and thereby
declare their belonging to the liberal “intelligentsia”— the class partaking of political
subjectivization.\(^{93}\)

Mikhalkov, too, works within the conceptual framework outlined above by
treating his audience as a mass reincarnation of Chekhov’s ineffective intelligentsia. In
other words, to put it bluntly, he is making films for people who like to think of
themselves as elites, but who also suspect that they are a pack of sheep. His melodramatic
 cinema panders to his audience’s ideal ego— Condee points out that the audience can
easily self-identify with Mikhalkov’s neo-Chekhovian pre-Soviet and early-Soviet upper
classes.\(^{94}\) But at the same time, Mikhalkov also invites his audience to identify with the
absolutely dead-ended powerlessness of those elites. Even when they think of themselves
as the new rulers of the world, like Oblomov’s Stolz, they are merely pawns in fate’s game. Or, to refer to another key Mikhalkov film, these supposed elites have the same level of agency as players of the Mechanical Piano, which really plays on its own and no human action has any bearing on it. In this way the late Soviet conservative use of the pre-Soviet past comes full circle. Deployed by some during the Thaw to counter the liberal cultural hegemony’s quest for the enfranchisement of the creative elites and their junior partners from the urbanized educated masses, in Mikhalkov’s films the pre-Soviet past pulls off the seemingly impossible— it becomes a way of projecting those educated masses *in an appealing way* as powerless, private, apolitical, elite non-subjects, while any attempt to claim power gets marked as Stolzian—evil, but more importantly, pointless.
Endnotes for Chapter Two


2 *Pered sudom istorii*, dir. Fridrikh Ermler (Leningrad: Lenfil'm, 1964), 1:35:45, available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EvbmdbfI1Ck


4 See V. Kolesnikov, “Vladimirskii uznik,” in *Vladimirskie dni i gody V. V. Shul’gina*, M. Konshin, ed. (Vladimir: Kaleidoskop, 2007), 37.

5 V. V. Shul’gin, “Opyt Stolypina,” in *Vladimirskie dni i gody V. V. Shul’gina*, 540-541

6 V. Shevchenko, *Vladimirskie dni*, 48


8 Ibid., 46

9 On Stalinist historiography’s use of “progressive for his time” as a code for whitewashing the legacy of Imperial autocrats like Peter the Great, see David Brandenberger, Kevin M. F. Platt, eds. *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* (Madison: Wisconsin UP, 2006).


11 See V. Kolesnikov, “Vladimirskii uznik,” in *Vladimirskie dni*, 12

12 *Pered sudom istorii*, 1:33:15-1:34:15

13 Ibid., 1:36:45-1:37:55

14 Ibid., 1:29:15-1:30:06

15 Cited in N. L. Lisovoi, “Poslednii ochevidets,” 12

16 *Operatsiia: Trest*, dir. Sergei Kolosov (1967; Mosfil’m, Telefil’m 1967); Vladimir Zhetlov, Nikolai Braun, “Lichnyi vrag Lenina,” interview, in *Vladimirskie dni i gody V. V. Shul’gina*, 16

17 Aleksandr Fedorov, *Evoliutsiia obraza Belogo dvizheniia v otechestvennom i zarubezhnom igrovom kinematografie zvukovogo perioda* (Moscow: MOO “Informatsiia dlia vsekh,” 2015), 30

18 Liudmila Kasatkina, Sergei Kolosov, *Su’d’ba na dvoikh: vospominaniia v dialogakh* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2005), 251

19 Ibid., 254

20 *Operatsiia: Trest*, directed by Sergei Kolosov (Moscow: Mosfilm, 1967), Episode 4, 1:21:20 to end, available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yH1l73i5Bis

21 Liudmila Kasatkina, Sergei Kolosov, *Su’d’ba na dvoikh*, 238-239

22 *Operatsiia: Trest*, Episode 3, 30:00

23 Vladimir Soloukhin, *Pis’ma iz russkogo muzeiia*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v 4kh tomakh*, t. 3 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura 1984), 76


25 See Mikhail Agursky, *Ideologia natsionalbol’shevizma* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1980). Though the dissertation-turned-monograph was written in Jerusalem and France, Agursky started on this project prior to his emigration in 1975. While Argursky’s personal politics are too idiosyncratic to ascribe him fully to the late Soviet conservative cause, it is safe to say that he was at the very least ‘conservo-curious,’ and it is certainly the case that contemporary Russian conservatives like Alexander Dugin read and value his work— for instance, see Aleksandr Dugin, *Tampliery proletariata* (Moscow: Arktogeia 1997), especially the chapter entitled, “V komissarakh dukh samoderzhav’ia”: http://arcto.ru/article/76.

26 “Iz stenogrammy zasedaniia Ideologicheskoi komissii TsK KPSS u chastiem molodykh pisatelei, khudozhnikov, kompozitorov, tvorcheskikh rabotnikov kino teatroy Moskvy, 24, 26 decabria 1962 g.,” *Kul’tura i vlast’ ot Stalina do Gorbacheva. Ideologicheskie komissii TsK KPSS 1958-1964. Dokumenty*, E. S. Afanas’eva, V. Iu Afiani et al., eds. (Moscow: 1998), 296, my emphases
27 Ibid., 295
28 Ibid., 296; on agonistic struggle as a central dynamic of the conservative disposition, see Corey Robin, *Reactionary Mind*, 29.
30 “Iz stenogrammy,” *Ideologicheskie komissii*, 326
31 Ibid., 330
32 Ilya Glazunov, “Doroga k tebe,” *Molodaia gvardiia* 10 (1965), 119
33 Ilya Glazunov, “Doroga k tebe,” *Molodaia gvardiia* 12 (1965), 208
34 Ilya Glazunov, “Doroga k tebe,” *Molodaia gvardiia* 2 (1966), 231
36 Ilya Glazunov, “Doroga k tebe,” *Molodaia gvardiia* 10 (1965), 132
37 For high-resolution renderings of Ilya Glazunov’s paintings, see the painter’s personal professional website, www.glazunov.ru.
38 Ilya Glazunov, “Doroga k tebe,” *Molodaia gvardiia* 12 (1965), 239
40 Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children*, 226
41 Vladimir Soloukhin, *Pis’ma iz russkogo muzeia*, 37-38
42 Ibid., 34
43 Ibid., 59
44 Ibid., 67
45 Ibid., 68
46 Ibid., 69
47 Ibid. In his appraisal, Soloukhin is quite like Glazunov, who thinks of the Peredvizhniki as the art of “vulgar sociologism”—see Ilya Glazunov, “Doroga k tebe,” *Molodaia gvardiia* 10 (1965), 132.
48 See *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm, Terrence Ranger, eds. (Cambridge, UK, 1983).
49 Vladimir Soloukhin, *Pis’ma iz Russkogo muzeia*, 76
50 Ibid., 74
51 Ibid., 97
52 Ibid., 77
53 The legend alluded to by Soloukhin originated during the late Soviet era, because disproving it would have required referring to Leon Trotsky’s original decrees regarding the creation of Red Army uniforms, and Trotsky’s name could never be mentioned in print. See Boris Sopel’niak, “Budenovka—liubimyi golovni ubor krasnoarmeitsev, Vecherniaia Moskva July 10, 2010: http://archive.li/xhy5P.
56 Iurii Loschchits, *Goncharov*, (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1977), 188-189
57 Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, 25
58 Vadim Kozhinov, “K metodologii istorii russkoi literatury (o realizme 30-kh godov XIX veka,” *Voprosy literature* 5 (1968), 65, 68
59 Ibid., 77
60 Ibid., 81
62 Ibid., 118
63 Nikolai Mitrokhin, *Russkaia partiia*, 267
64 Yitshak Brudny, *Reinventing Russia*, 176
65 Iurii Loschchits, *Goncharov*, 52
66 Ibid., 64
67 Ibid., 130
68 Ibid., 169; Ibid., 89
69 Ibid., 193
70 Ibid., 282
Note that this notion is very different from the “inner freedom” proposed on the liberal side by the likes of Pomerants that we have examined in Chapter One. Pomerants’s “inner freedom” meant keeping publicly quiet regarding one’s liberal anti-regime thoughts, while also cultivating likeminded friends, in a bit to eventually gain enough strength to overthrow the repressive dictatorship. For Loshchits, “inner freedom” is entirely hopeless in the discursive-hegemonic sense.

Neskol’ko dnei iz zhizni I. I. Oblomova, dir. Nikita Mikhalkov (1979; Mosfil’m, 1979)


Nancy Condee, Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 97

Nancy Condee, Imperial Trace, 99

Nancy Ries, Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation During Perestroika (Ithaca: 1997), 27-30

Nancy Condee, Imperial Trace, 100
Chapter Three
The Russia That We Have Lost: Post-Soviet Liberal-Conservatism and Consensus on the Imperial Era

In the spring of 1989, widely published and officially promoted Soviet nationalist writers found out that almost no one liked them. They thought that ‘the people’ had been with them. They did not realize that their print runs had no correlation to the size of their readership—incidentally, this was one of many typical Soviet supply-demand problems that Gorbachev’s Perestroika policies were designed to fix. Scholars like Yitzhak Brudny and Nikolai Mitrokhin, and to some extent Stephen Kotkin have all shown how the processes unleashed by Perestroika demystified the source of Soviet nationalists’ apparent cultural influence. To put it briefly, their high positions in the Soviet cultural establishment were secured as a result of an alliance forged between themselves and the Soviet nomenklatura class, and Gorbachev’s reforms—especially his appointment of Alexander Yakovlev as the lead curator of the Soviet public sphere—ended up torpedoing this arrangement. However, for every late Soviet cultural conservative figure and obtuse political hardliner failing at the polls and eventually hitching his hopes to a harebrained 1991 military coup (the August Putsch attempted by the GKChP, or the State Emergency Committee), there were many more others who stayed in power, by learning to ‘speak in Anti-Soviet tongues.’ How did they make such a transition? And why did the democracy movement that appeared in Russia in the late 1980s allow so many of the power elites into their leading ranks? How did Perestroika’s political discourse allow Party-men like Boris Yeltsin and Yuri Luzhkov to become the faces of post-Soviet Russia? And what role did the pre-Soviet past play in this discourse? These are some of
the main questions motivating the present chapter, which tracks how the discourse on the pre-Soviet past was deployed by the post-Soviet state and the statist conservatives aligned with it, since the late 1980s until today.

As I have outlined in Chapters One and Two, late Soviet liberal and conservative discourses on the past were both born in the wake of Stalin’s death. As a result of processes launched by cultural institutions like Novy Mir in late 1953 and then eventually backed by Khrushchev in 1956, as well as transnational developments like urbanization and the growth of mass media, the liberal intelligentsia took charge of destalinization during the Thaw. The more conservative Soviet political class felt threatened by the creative projects and growing political involvement of the intelligentsia liberals. The power elites were wary of sharing power and possibly also destabilizing the state; however, they were now operating in a new political-discursive reality, defined by the course for destalinization, and they could not simply ignore it. And so, even as liberal discourse pressed to reveal the massive wounds inflicted on the Soviet body politic by Stalin’s regime, focusing in particular on the late-1930s purges of intellectuals, the Soviet nomenklatura came up with their own versions of destalinization.

The more familiar version of nomenklatura-driven destalinization was associated with intense celebrations of Gagarin and baby Lenin, as well as slogans of world peace and peaceful economic competition between the capitalist and the socialist system, all of which dominated the Soviet public sphere throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The sheer zeal with which space flights, television sets, private apartments, and other socioeconomic achievements would be celebrated in official press and public gatherings between the 1950s and the mid-1980s would in it of itself communicate that a radical
break with the gloomy past has been achieved, that the party had reformed itself, and that now it would competently lead the whole Soviet bloc to the long-promised socialist utopia. This discourse would predominate in the Soviet public sphere, peaking around the time of the Kosygin reforms, but then continuing until well into Gorbachev’s tenure.2

Meanwhile, a collaboration between the nomenklatura and key conservative intelligentsia figures was yielding another, more historically conscious, conservative-revisionist discourse on destalinization. This narrative essentially argued that Stalin’s 1937 purges were a rightful comeuppance for the hubris of the leftist modernization project, especially as it manifested itself during the Great Break, but also during the Civil War, the Russian Revolution and possibly going all the way back to the birth of Russian liberalism, sometime in the mid-nineteenth century. The basic point of this intervention, as I have discussed in Chapter Two, was to strike a defensive pose against late Soviet liberal hegemony by contesting the moral fiber, political motives, and visions of the future that were espoused by the liberal writers, poets and scientists who strove to lead the Soviet mass ‘technical intelligentsia’ class towards further political modernization.

As we have seen in our discussions of Soloukhin, Glazunov, Kozhinov, Loshchits and Mikhalkov, these conservative figures’ narratives generated a historical imaginary of Russia that was defined by the dichotomy of ‘traditional versus modern,’ which would not always neatly line up with the historical watershed of 1917, but was certainly informed by it. For instance, late Soviet conservatives condemned the Soviet Leninist project as the brainchild of an age-old liberal drive for enlightenment, resulting in elitist violence against the Russian people, particularly the peasantry, culminating in Stalinist collectivization. Village Prose, the leading conservative literary movement in USSR,
reflected such ideological positions in its scathing critique of Soviet industrialization—these ostensibly anti-Stalinist texts were *ipso facto* assaulting what Soviet conservatives saw as the liberal essence of the Soviet project. Meanwhile, the Tsarist era would be treated as a lost epoch of national concord, of peaceful, harmonious and culturally autonomous (*samobytnoe*) Russian existence that was ruined by the nefarious Westernizing, modernizing liberals.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, the ideology of late Soviet conservatism had an activist core to it—various exponents of the Russian Sonderweg, from insiders like Soloukhin and Glazunov, to occasionally dissenting writers like Valentin Pikul’, to out-and-out dissidents like Solzhenitsyn and Agursky, were all trying to convince state servitors to jettison official Marxist-Leninist ideology in favor of a revamped and purified version of late Imperial Russian nationalism. The clearest example of this sort of rhetoric is, undoubtedly, Solzhenitsyn’s 1974 “Letter to Soviet Leaders.”³ The nomenklatura chiefs’ response to this activist conservative rhetoric was limited enthusiasm, sometimes boiling down to ‘thanks, but no thanks.’ Mitrokhin and Brudny have both shown how the state, with Suslov at the helm, would crack down on overly ambitious conservative rhetoric in the 1970s and early 1980s. A glorification of pre-Soviet ‘inactivity’ *could* get past canonized and ossified Marxist-Leninist ideology. For instance, as we have seen in Chapter Two, the premise of rehabilitating former Whites like Shulgin was that ‘they too loved Russia.’ What *could not* be openly extolled was Shulgin’s activist, counter-Revolutionary alternative for Russian development—censorship simply would not allow it. Moreover, ideological functionaries like Suslov who patronized late Soviet conservative intellectuals conceived of themselves more as anti-liberal spoilers and
stallers, rather than as proactive creators of ideology, despite occasional failed attempts to do the latter.⁴ They felt almost as concerned about their ostensible allies’ activist conservative credo as they did about the liberalism of their intelligentsia opponents.

Then came the Perestroika. In brief, economic stagnation, a geriatric power elite, near-universal cynicism with regards to Soviet official ideology, and a culturally and sociologically triumphant, but politically frustrated liberal intelligentsia, combined to push Gorbachev towards reforms. The new General Secretary decided to look to the cultural and political liberals as his allies, rather than the conservatives, and this did not have to be so.⁵ Nationalist discourse had permeated throughout the Party ranks and another leader could have chosen to adopt it and dress up the necessary structural reforms accordingly. Gorbachev, however, felt that his reforms required mass buy-in and participation, and the liberal intelligentsia had a much more convincing story about their relationship to the masses than the conservatives. While many (though not all) widely-published Village Prose books collected dust on store shelves, the liberal figures mentioned in Chapter One, such as Riazanov and Okudzhava, among many others were making successful box-office hits, performing in packed houses, selling out copies of their novels, and recruiting the children of nomenklatura officials as their fans and followers.⁶ Moreover, Gorbachev was himself a true believer in the humanist rhetoric embedded in the orthodox Marxist-Leninist oeuvre. After all, as Vladislav Zubok and more recently Grigorii Revzin have argued, Gorbachev’s worldview was a product of the early Thaw—the last time that large numbers of Soviet citizens actually took Marxism-Leninism seriously. Remarkably, the USSR’s last General Secretary had actually retained his faith in the USSR’s official discourse at a time when everyone else had lost it.⁷
As is well known, Gorbachev decided to support a new wave of Soviet modernization with the policy of *glasnost*. He and others in the near-state technocratic circles believed that in order to solve the USSR’s ills, particularly in the economic domain, the boundaries of the public sphere would have to be opened up and various voices independent of the Party apparatus would then speak truth to power and thus allow the Soviet state to grasp the complex challenges facing the country. To put it in Claude Lefort’s political-philosophical terms, Gorbachev’s *glasnost* officially recognized the existence of discursive centers other than the state. The need to do this was evident to Gorbachev for at least two reasons: 1) because of the remarkable economic success of the post-War parliamentary-democratic West, and 2), again because of certain fundamental tenets of the 1960s Marxism-Leninist creed, which valorized Lenin’s NEP-era pronouncements that staked the success of the Soviet project on ‘culturedness’—that is, the growth of a culture of informed, politically conscious speech among the heretofore ignorant proletarian masses.

As *glasnost* intensified, Gorbachev made a move to what he thought would be a soft parliamentarianism, by creating the Congress of People’s Deputies (*S’ezd narodnykh deputatov*—SND) in 1989. For a while it was unclear what specific powers the SND would have, but clearly it did not bode well for late Soviet conservatives and their nomenklatura handlers. Most conservative intelligentsia figures and also most apparatchiks failed to win elected seats in the SND. Meanwhile, the liberals who got elected or who ended up in the SND by way of various Soviet corporate bodies very quickly started organizing against Gorbachev through initiatives like the Interregional Deputy Group (*Mezhregional’naia deputatskaia gruppa*—MDG), which would
eventually become the backbone of Yeltsinism.\textsuperscript{10} The losing conservatives got increasingly worried and eventually many of their most prominent figures came to support the failed anti-Gorbachev August Putsch. The Putsch’s failure, for complex political reasons, ended up destroying Gorbachev’s legitimacy and paved the way for the official fall of the USSR and Yeltsin’s takeover of the Kremlin that December.

Altogether, the electoral failure of the late Soviet ‘patriotic party,’ coupled with the very public failure of the Putsch revealed the true basis of these individuals’ cultural prominence and political clout prior to the Perestroika, and also to some extent the true sociological state of the Soviet masses (or at least the masses that ‘counted’—namely, the Soviet citizens who were eager to participate in the political process). To return to the terms of Grigorii Pomerants and Alexander Solzhenitsyn (see Chapter One), both mainstream and also dissident Soviet conservatives had thought they were representing the will of the otherwise silent ‘people’ \textit{[narod]} against the treacherous, westernizing, self-centered \textit{inzhenerno-tkhnologicheskii rabotnik} (ITR) class of engineers, low-level scientists and managers, Meanwhile, liberal thinkers like Pomerants had surmised that after several decades of forced industrialization the ITR workers were the ‘new narod,’ in terms of both demography and political potential. In a sense, Perestroika proved Pomerants right. It was precisely the managers, engineers and other urbanized members of the Soviet ‘middle class’ who supported and grew the clout of the MDG parliamentary coalition. It was also them who turned out for the anti-Putsch barricades, who massed on Lubianka Square (the KGB headquarters) to demand the removal of the statue of Dzerzhinsky, the Soviet security services’ infamous founding father. And it was them who most consistently supplied Yeltsin with votes throughout the 1990s.
Meanwhile, the Perestroika revealed how the prominence of conservative nationalist discourse in the Soviet public sphere was in fact premised on a conversation with the Soviet power elites. The conservatives (particularly compliant ones) and the late Soviet nomenklatura had needed each other. On the one hand, this need was strategic—as Zubok and Brudny have argued, Suslov and his coterie were happy to use conservative discourse to drive a wedge within the relatively independent intelligentsia milieu. But on the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, this need was ideological—as Mitrokhin’s account has shown, the nomenklatura wanted to hear a plausible narrative of their own usefulness and legitimacy, at a time when almost no one in the country was able to believe in the official Soviet account on this matter.

Once the nomenklatura-nationalist alliance was broken up by Yakovlev and Gorbachev, many mainstream late Soviet conservatives suddenly discovered that no alternative source of support was immediately forthcoming. Thus, Brudny concludes his study of the Late Soviet anti-liberal press with the massive electoral and cultural market failures of Soviet nationalists. However, many (if not most) of the actual members of the Soviet governing class managed to maneuver their way out of their Soviet positions and straight into post-Soviet ones. Sometimes, they managed to do so without even leaving their office, as happened between August and September of 1991, when the Soviet government class defected *en masse* to Yeltsin’s Russian administration, even as Gorbachev nominally remained President of the manifestly defunct USSR. Other former apparatchiks, like Yeltsin himself, or the 1990s mayor of Moscow Yuri Luzhkov, had to put in some effort to rebrand themselves. But rebrand themselves they did, by becoming exceptionally proficient at ‘pro-democracy’ and ‘anti-Soviet’ discourse.
The extent to which loud anti-Soviet speech easily re-legitimated scores of former apparatchiks might seem surprising. After all, in its original appearance on the political scene in the late 1980s, engagement in ‘anti-Soviet’ political activity seemed to mean a continued growth of ‘people power’ against the existing illegitimate ruling elites. The liberal-led turn of the Perestroika seemed to signal a broad commitment to thorough democratization and a complete replacement of the ruling elites with a new generation of leaders. However, already in the late 1980s it was clear that the ostensible ‘democrats’ espoused rather conservative ideas: they valorized the market and free enterprise, and most importantly, they were deathly scared of a return to early-twentieth-century mob rule and revolutionary violence. So, whereas a more democratically-committed version of anti-Soviet discourse left little room for existing power elites to rebrand, the ‘American libertarian,’ anti-populist version of anti-Soviet discourse made such a maneuver possible. And contrary to the hopes of a few Perestroika-era social democrats like Boris Kagarlitsky, it was the libertarian version of anti-Sovietism that won the day.

Mark Lipovetsky has surmised that “the political agendas […] of U.S. Republicans” predominated in Russia due to the substantive content of the ITR group ideology. Since their inception within the Stalinist ‘priviligentsia,’ the growing Soviet urbanized technical intelligentsia masses collectively espoused a variety of scientific positivism with an “organic resistance to complexity,” which resulted in the valorization of the idea of a virile male individual as the prime mover behind all social existence, an uncritical acceptance of the notion of eternal social and cultural values, and an eschewing of self-critique as an intellectual value.12 Keeping this general understanding in mind, I would also highlight the specific political anxieties of the late 1980s, in which the ITR
masses found their political voice—namely, I would suggest that the people who brought Yeltsin to power were, over and above their proto-libertarian comportment, also rather ambivalent about continuing democratization, and that it was their ambivalence regarding the political process that they themselves had initiated that led them to forge common cause with former members of the nomenklatura. Interestingly, this foundational anti-democratic anxiety was framed by a discourse on the pre-Soviet past. And to get a better sense of it we will now take a look at two cornerstone political-cultural documents of the very late Perestroika era—Stanislav Govoruhin’s well-known documentaries, Can’t Live Like This (1990) and its sequel, The Russia that We Have Lost (1992).13
I. Govorukhin and the Pre-Revolutionary Style of Post-Soviet Conservatism

Stolypin was hated equally by the left and the right. Such is human nature—those who are brave, who go against the wind, they are hated even more than cowards!”

Stanislav Govorukhin, *The Russia That We Have Lost*14

Cultural historians and eyewitnesses of the late 1980s often point to several films as important catalysts and symbols of Gorbachev’s deepening Perestroika. For example, Roy Medvedev has suggested that much of the culture of *glasnost* proceeded under the sign of Tengiz Abuladze’s *Repentance* (1984-1987)15—an allegorical film about Stalinism and its consequences, framed as a universalist moral statement thanks to its Antigone-esque plot device and its whimsical Italian Renaissance aesthetic. As such, *Repentance* was consistent with Courtney Doucette’s recent argument concerning the early Perestroika model of reformist discourse, that sought to put the Soviet project back on the right track by infusing it with a moral sensibility—that is, by engaging with collective historical trauma and honestly speaking about contemporary social ills.16 I would also add that *Repentance*’s appeal to antiquity spoke particularly well to ITR sensibilities, given the technical intelligentsia’s belief in eternal cultural values. By 1990, however, when Govorukhin released *Can’t Live Like This*, universalist moral stories were being superseded by real organized politics. The intelligentsia was in ascendancy, on the cusp of taking power by way of the MDG, and by now they had an increasingly clarified anti-Soviet platform in the offing. *Can’t Live Like This* (1990) and *A Russia That We Have Lost* (made in 1991, released in 1992) were as symbolic for this time as *Repentance* had been in 1987 because these two documentaries were attuned to the political
transformation that had taken place during the intervening years. Namely, both of Govorukhin’s films spoke for the class that was both leading the post-Soviet revolution and was also eager to foreclose the possibility of further revolutionizing.

*Can’t Live Like This* is ostensibly a documentary about late Soviet crime and “the worldwide experience of combating crime.” As such, this film is part and parcel of the trend towards moral panic that characterized many public and private “laments” during the era of glasnost. But Govorukhin’s documentary is not only a lament; it also has a clear political organizational trajectory. We can observe it in two related moves: 1) past crimes of the Soviet regime are supposed to explain the contemporary social malaise; and 2) the film imagines its audience as a political class uniquely capable of transcending this malaise and ‘repenting in full’ by inheriting a pre-Soviet political order that had been destroyed by either foolish or evil leftists and the invariably evil “lumpen” masses. Both of these messages come through in the film’s hearth, when we see a montage of late Soviet alcoholics and various other subhumans, played over a background of Vladimir Vysotsky’s song, “What is This Silent House [Chto za dom pritikh].”

As Vysotsky intones lines like “show me a place where holy candles burn brightly!” as we see images of ruined churches (see Figure 15, below). We hear about dilapidated group “barrack” whose denizens have been “eating grass for ages” and turning “sour of soul” from having gotten “used to living in darkness.” Shortly after, we are shown disgusting, intoxicated village idiots as Govorukhin dwells on the mass crimes of the Soviet regime, singling out executions of high-profile aristocrats: the Tsar’s family, the extended Romanov clan, and the poet Nikolai Gumilev. What follows these grisly crimes, Govorukhin concludes, is the “degeneration of the nation [vyrozhdene strany].”
Ostensibly, this argument is very close to the message of Abuladze’s *Repentance*—
“everything is so bad with us” (to quote a common lament recorded by Nancy Ries)
because we have killed our tsar, lost our faith, our Russian national consciousness, and so forth.²⁰ At the same time, Govorukhin’s use of *eugenic* rhetoric is striking: “the main task of society is to start recreating the human breed, which has suffered a tremendous loss. And one should remember that an incorrect genetic path of seventy years can’t be altered over the course of one five-year plan.”²¹

How do ‘genetics’ so easily follow from ‘repentance’? The answer has to do with the self-conceptualization of Govorukhin’s audience. The filmmaker’s use of Vysotsky provides a hint in this regard. Vysotsky (who by now had been dead for a decade) appears in Govorukhin’s montage not as mere background music, but as a symbol of the politically disaffected late Soviet ‘middle class’ studied by Aleksei Yurchak.²² Yurchak’s

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Figure 15: One of a series of long shots of ruined churches and drab goings on of an unspecified provincial town in Central Russia, all shown as examples of the contemporary degraded state of the Russian people.

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anthropological subjects positioned themselves snobbishly as different from the masses of ‘regular Soviet people,’ who supposedly credulously bought into Soviet official discourse. At the same time, Yurchak’s informants distanced themselves from the dissidents, preferring to adopt an attitude of detached disdain vis-à-vis the Soviet state, rather than the dissidents’ attitude of engaged conflict. And of course, Yurchak specifically singles out Vysotsky as a favorite singer-songwriter of his informants. It is quite obvious that an elitist self-perception works at the core of this positioning between the odious but largely ineffective state on the one hand and the dumb Soviet masses on the other. A similar elitist perception comes through in the ITR masses’ penchant to describe themselves as a latter-day “intelligentsia.” Chapters One and Two have shown how during the late Soviet era, a whole lot of urbanized, relatively well-educated individuals started thinking of themselves as spiritual inheritors of pre-Soviet Russia’s aristocratic high culture and its political consciousness.

Due to a combination of Soviet official cultural and industrial priorities, as well as the nature of the peculiar late Soviet censorship regime, literally millions of people started thinking of themselves as elites, and imagined their own existence as juxtaposed to the existence of a vaguely-defined, but hostile pro-Soviet narod. This ideation underlies Govorukhin’s late-Perestroika documentaries. His viewers listen to Vysotsky, they appreciate Gumilev’s poetry, and they want to repent for the crimes of the Soviet project by taking power from the Soviet state and its fiendish nomenklatura. In the meantime, they are also acutely aware of the stinking hordes. Hence, Can’t Live Like This repeatedly runs images of mobs of alcoholics in line to buy their daily allotment of liquor, or a mob hawking cheap wares. The concluding shot of the film’s main body is a flyover
of an enormous flea market in Odessa, with the statement that “the whole country has turned into an enormous flea market [tolkuchka]” (see Figure 16, below).24 Presumably, politically empowering this “degenerate” horde is futile. Govorukhin aims to condemn them as “genetically”—i.e. entirely, biologically beyond redemption, and to convince his audience to perceive itself as a “we” who are capable of leading the “regeneration” of the “nation” precisely in lieu of the wholly defective narod. This general message then intensifies in The Russia That We Have Lost.

Released two years after Can’t Live Like This and filmed just after the failure of the 1991 August Putsch, The Russia That We Have Lost presents a highly idealized memory of pre-Soviet Russia as a fulcrum around which “we,” Govorukhin’s post-Soviet political subjects, should cohere. As such, this film draws on the same social ideology as

Figure 16: “The whole country has become an enormous flea market.”
Can’t Live Like This. Explicit laments for the loss of aristocratic ideals are present in the first documentary, but only briefly. For example, Govorukhin inveighs that after the death and exile of aristocrats like Gumilev, “society lost and stopped valuing concepts like honor, nobility, worthiness. And when society stops treating these concepts with worship, that’s it. A fertile environment for the growth of crime is ready.”25 It is quite obvious in this lament that “values” like “honor, nobility, and worthiness” are not, in fact, “lost.” On the contrary, Govorukhin presents these values as eternal; he presumes that “we” should start practicing them today. Practicing such values is seen as authentically anti-Soviet, precisely because they are presented as aristocratic. Can’t Live Like This, following the typical Manichean logic of Anti-Soviet discourse, emphasizes fin-de-siècle aristocratic Russia as an imagined point of “loss,” as the last point in Russia’s historical record in which the fullness of aristocratic ideals may be found and reclaimed. The lament for the loss of aristocratic excellence, as well as the hope of its recovery, then goes on to comprise the core of the message of The Russia That We Have Lost.

According to this film, “we” the post-Soviet Yeltsinist political subjects who have just rebuffed the 1991 coup, must now finalize the regime change by recognizing ourselves as inheritors of the Imperial aristocrats murdered by the Soviets.

The basic premise of The Russia That We Have Lost is that “we” have “lost” it. The film opens with an off-screen monologue from Govorukhin, as we watch archival film footage and leaf through photos of everyday life of Russia before the Revolution:

Russia—a mysterious, unknown country. It so happens that we know nothing about it. That’s why we live with so much difficulty and so stupidly. Where is the path to rebirth? People without a lineage [rod], without a tribe, without roots or parents, without history and historical experience, can never find this path. So, we must recall, who are we? Who are our parents? What is our mother, our land?
That’s what our film is about. Of course this is not objective research. The more you get to know this country, the more you fall in love with it, whether you will it or not. […] What we will show is like the impressions of a man who has started to learn about his country already as a mature person. And everything I’ve found out while making this film has unsettled my soul—how did it happen? Why did God allow people to lose their minds? How was it possible to rob such a rich country? And why, why didn’t we know anything about it, about our motherland? The history of Russia that we learned in school was written by servile lackeys, who were in a rush to satisfy their masters, precisely those who trampled and robbed this country, its murderers. The history of Russia has been written by its murderers. So, that is how we should call our thankless genre—a casefile regarding the murder of Russia.26

As we get into the film, the claim that we “do not know anything” about pre-Revolutionary Russia because of Soviet “servile lackeys” takes on a clear post-1991 political meaning. The very late Imperial past has literally been hidden from us under lock and key, in restricted archives [Spetskhran]. But after 1991, Spetskhran is open. Indeed, Govorukhin explicitly shows himself culling through these secretive archives, pulling up dossiers on the likes of Stolypin, Nicholas II, Lenin, and so forth, and examining them carefully (see Figure 17, below). At one point he states that “we are now in the Party, a.k.a. the Lenin archive. It’s winter, so as you can see this is taking place after August 1991, which released the secrets of the most secretive establishment of our country.”27 In other words, thanks to the heroic actions of pro-Yeltsin protestors during the Putsch, when formerly all-powerful Party citadels like the Central Committee headquarters, were stormed by the incensed and victorious public, we are now free to see everything that those institutions had been hiding from us—namely, the beautiful footage of pre-Revolutionary Russia, and the evidence of the Bolsheviks’ criminal destruction.
“Falling in love” with pre-Soviet Russia is possible because it is no longer secret, thanks to “our” recent anti-Soviet political mobilization. The film burnishes the political imaginary in which “we” and pre-Revolutionary Russia are on the same side, by logic of having vanquished the “them” who hid the past from us. But who are these “them,” especially now, after 1991? Who are “our” political enemies now that “we” appear to have won? And how does memory of pre-Revolutionary Russia fit into the new post-Soviet political imaginary? To clarify this problem, consider the way in which Govorukhin draws an analogy between the winter of 1992 and February of 1917. As we watch archival footage from the February Revolution, Govorukhin opines:

Look at happy they are—Freedom! Meanwhile, Stolypin himself used to warn, I will give you freedom, but I will add that first we have to create citizens. […] A demonstration sign: ‘may the blood spilled by you be the last’—nooo! […] this is only the first trickle of blood. […] The lawful outcome of any revolution is poverty [razrukha]—no one works, the peasants don’t plow. […] The films being shown—they’re bacchanales of filth [poshlosti]. […] But it’s not necessary to
explain to us what this was like. We have poorly learned the lessons of the February Revolution, and so we have repeated it, entirely, down to the tiny details. […] It looks quite a bit like our tomorrow. 28

“The lessons of the February Revolution” in Govorukhin’s rhetoric, are that freedom is dangerous. The masses are not ready to act as “citizens,” they are a horde with vulgar tastes, and they are out to get us. Govorukhin uses the ‘no-longer-secret’ footage of raving anarchy and violence of 1917 to emphasize that today, in 1992, order must be had. And to show how order must be had, Govorukhin brings up the figure of Stolypin.

Govorukhin’s account essentially paraphrases Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s encomium of Stolypin from the Soviet dissident author’s expanded and re-published August 1914. 29 Listing Solzhenitsyn as a consultant in the credits, Govorukhin presents the tsarist Prime Minister as an all-powerful servitor who forcefully but prudently put a stop to the Revolution in 1905, and who then vigorously worked to re-establish order on new, re-legitimated, reformed, Western capitalist social foundations: “The ‘reactionary Stolypin,’ as he was depicted in schoolbooks, was actually a true revolutionary and reformer—everything he did, he did for one reason, to lift Russia up, to make it truly free. Free of penury, ignorance and lack of rights. […] Stolypin was hated equally by the left and the right. Such is human nature—those who are brave, who go against the wind, they are hated even more than cowards!” 30

Govorukhin valorizes Stolypin so that “we” today can emulate him. “We” have to recover a Stolypinist kind of sensibility, we have to recognize ourselves as elites like him, as activist conservative defenders and reformers of the state like him, as believers in anti-communist, pro-capitalist modernizing values like him. We have to organize our politics not around some utopian notions of perpetually democratizing ‘people power,’ but
around those lost pre-Revolutionary Stolypinist ideals mentioned in *Can’t Live Like This*—“honor, nobility, worthiness,” which we imagine ourselves to be well-positioned to inherit. Govorukhin’s Stolypin, then, becomes a symbol of the ideal ‘liberal conservative’: he embodies righteous, effective, aristocratic, hierarchical—and for all those reasons also free-market capitalist—order.  

It is quite evident that this Stolypinist myth of a “Russia That We Have Lost” is strikingly different from the myth of pre-Soviet Russia as a time of national concord, which had been officially celebrated by Late-Soviet Slavophiles. In Govorukhin’s image of the past, there is certainly no concord; on the contrary, Russia on the eve of the Revolution is a time of exciting, agonistic political struggle, in which the sides and the stakes are clear, and the conservatives are finally ready for a showdown. By mythologizing Stolypinist Russia and embodying Stolypin, “we” today can subjectivize ourselves as his rightful inheritors. To borrow Corey Robin’s formulation, Govorukhin’s *fin-de-siècle* Stolypinist “Russia that we have lost” appears as the ideal site of “the conservative’s […] good life,” a “reactionary utopia he hopes one day to bring into being,” in which “genuine excellence is revealed and rewarded, true nobility is secured.”  

Now that “we” are in charge, this is the kind of *active* and *modern*—rather than passive and feudal—order that we should seek to bring back into existence. In short, Russia on the eve of the Revolution appears as a particularly fitting allegory for Russia of today: it is a nation pursuing an activist conservative modernization project, it is an incredibly successful country that had been “shot down” by the Bolsheviks “like a bird just as it was taking flight.” And today, we can modernize once again, by picking up where Russia’s successful, but interrupted conservative modernity had left off.
II. Capitalism in Tsarist Dress-Up: *Peresvet, Bank Imperial, Kommersant*

“This public was called the upper hundred thousand back then. That sounds like the print run of a newspaper—one hundred thousand copies. So it was, and so it has remained.”

Leonid Parfenov, *With a Hard Sign on the End* 34

*Peresvet*

Govorukhin’s documentaries present Russia’s late Imperial past as an appealing lost object to be recovered by a presumed post-Soviet activist, elitist, capitalist ruling group. We are no longer in the territory of Oblomov-like ambivalence about Western modernity; on the contrary, Russia on the eve of the Revolution now appears as an alternate, non-Soviet modernization project, with rejuvenated, capitalist *homo faber* aristocrats like Stolypin at the helm. This message was particularly appropriate for the early 1990s, when Yeltsinist intelligentsia figures tended to promote the libertarian capitalist “*homo faber*” as an ideal post-Soviet subject (to borrow Viktor Pelevin’s term). 35 A similar conception of the very late Imperial era comes through in many 1990s advertisements of businesses, often financial ones, pitched to an implied audience of successful post-Soviet capitalist elites (whether or not such individuals actually existed). One of the most inventive and revelatory billboards in this regard was put up in central Moscow by the “trading firm” Peresvet, in 1993 (see Figure 18, below).

Through a multifaceted symbolic play created by the juxtaposition of a preexisting Soviet propaganda mural and Peresvet’s billboard, the advertisement communicates the idea that post-Soviet Russian capitalism is an admirable, honest, authentic utopian endeavor that has come to replace the failed utopian project that
preceded it. The old Soviet mural, done in a stylized 1970s modernist idiom, states that “we are building communism.” Below it is Peresvet’s logo, in stylized old orthography, complete with the holy warrior saint Peresvet carrying a post-Soviet Russian flag, with the tagline, “and we are building a new Russia.” On one hand the violence of communist construction; on the other hand the redemptive violence of the early capitalist trading firm, struggling against the tyranny of the Soviet Red legacy weighing down on it. On the one hand, a grandiose statement of faith in an utterly discredited communist project; on the other hand, a statement of faith in a capitalist project, presented as equally grandiose. On the one hand a rigid, avant-gardist counter-aesthetic; on the other hand a script in pseudo-Slavonic style, itself a mass-appeal product of the late-nineteenth-century age of invented traditions. Indeed, the fact that the old orthography is misspelled (the banner correctly uses the ё, but incorrectly puts a е instead of a ѫ in ‘светъ’) only proves the
point that the stylization is not about getting history right, but about eliciting vague feelings of nationalist authenticity. On the one hand a generic representation of the prototypical builders of communism, namely workers; on the other hand a generic representation of the prototypical post-Soviet capitalist business—a “trading firm.” Peresvet’s banner, in other words, elicits the simplistic early-1990s conceptualization of what capitalism is: it must be something having to do with ‘the market,’ ‘marketing,’ ‘trading,’ et cetera. Firms that engage directly in these prototypically capitalist activities therefore take on a kind of patina of capitalist authenticity. And lastly, on the one hand a “we” spoken on behalf of the Soviet collective; and on the other hand a “we” spoken on behalf of “our” new post-Soviet totality. Peresvet’s holy capitalist work is precisely our own. We are united with Peresvet in our task of building Russia by participating in capitalism, by engaging in the market, by trading, using banks, falling for marketing campaigns and shuffling money.

But of course, the advertisement is also not without irony. The response “…and we’re building a new Russia” is both serious and playful, it is at least partly a kind of stiob, an ironic appropriation of the old Soviet ideological grand style (“we’re building” is difficult to take seriously in the 1990s after all of the similar Soviet-era locutions). Which might lead us to suspect that the post-Soviet capitalist project might itself be stiob, a playful, overwrought parody of our own imagination of capitalism. In other words, the unseriousness implicit in Peresvet’s banner suggests that we all know that its business is make-believe. We are expected to know that post-Soviet capitalism is a performance rather than a real social fact. At a time when Russian politics and business activities are overseen by an unholy union of Mafiosi, corrupt officials, and various men with guns,
“we” are asked to put our critique aside and play at capitalism, as if it is a game of fin-de-siècle dress-up. Russian capitalism here is less a grand Project and more a fairy-tale.

“World History, Bank Imperial”

The message of playful suspension of disbelief with regards to post-Soviet capitalism also comes through in the extremely popular 1990s commercials for Bank Imperial. Here, however, the game is less about Russian Stolypinists, and a bit more cosmopolitan—Bank Imperial’s capitalism is the purview of eternally debonair noblemen, a trans-historical, international elite. Shot between 1992 and 1998 by Timur Bekmambetov, who a decade later would go on to create Post-Soviet Russia’s first international blockbuster (Nightwatch, 2004), the Bank Imperial commercials break down into two taglines: “world history, Bank Imperial” and “precision is the courtesy of kings.” The first category retells colorful tidbits, mostly gathered from Russian domestic and international historical canon. The second category, gives several examples of “precision” on the part of its illustrious characters—Julius Caesar arrives just in time to the Senate, Louis XIV pedantically corrects a restaurant bill, and Napoleon narrowly dodges death by cannonball. The message of Bekmambetov’s commercials is three-fold: first, we are expected to pat ourselves on the back for recognizing most of the characters in the commercials. As such, the commercials trade in mid-brow mass intelligentsia cultural capital. Then, we are expected to identify with Bekmambetov’s fantasies regarding the heroic aristocratic ethos throughout history. Bank Imperial positions itself as a kind of eternally illustrious institution, in which we belong by virtue of thinking of ourselves as elites. And last but not least, we are expected to enjoy the
medium itself—at a time when Russian cinema is massively losing out at the box office to slick Hollywood productions, Bekmambetov manages to demonstrate his Hollywood-like mettle by shooting upbeat, humorous, and slickly edited commercials, and in that way making *Bank Imperial* feel like an authentic Western capitalist product.

On the other hand, however, just as in the case of *Peresvet*, we are also expected to take *Bank Imperial*’s performance of Western competence with a grain of salt. The stories of *Bank Imperial* are overly grandiose and playful in a fairy-tale-like fashion. For instance, one of the most famous commercials involves Catherine the Great chiding her legendary general Suvorov for not eating. Suvorov responds that he’s fasting and won’t eat until the first star is out. “A star for Alexander Vasilievich,” Catherine commands, and in the next cut we see Suvorov dining with an enormous Imperial order on his chest (see Figure 19, below). Quite obviously, such a thing never actually happened, and I very much doubt any viewers thought otherwise. But the wittiness of the commercial depends precisely on our own playful suspension of disbelief, and I would suggest that Bekmambetov expects us to extend the same kind of attitude to *Bank Imperial* as an institution. At a time when prominent Russian banks are constantly being denounced in the news as Ponzi schemes, *Bank Imperial* essentially tells its audience, ‘yes, you and us both know that our supposed “Imperial” provenance is dubious and tomorrow we might steal your money, but wouldn’t it be better for us to pretend like we really exist as this respectable institution?’
Figure 19: “A star for Alexander Vasilievich!”

**Kommersant**

The culmination of the mode of use of Russia’s Imperial past in post-Soviet advertisements is without a doubt evident in the design and concept of *Kommersant*, post-Soviet Russia’s first “business newspaper,” which in fact predated the fall of the Soviet Union by about two years. Like the ads, *Kommersant* also engages in an ironic, make-believe aesthetic of Russian capitalism and it also participates in the myth of Stolypinist Russia as a historical model for the post-Soviet *homo faber*. But more importantly this newspaper, both on its pages and especially behind the scenes, constructs an image of political fusion between the post-Soviet state and its ‘new Russian’ stakeholders, in which the latter are expected to misrecognize the dubious nature of their collective identity as well as their political interests.
On the subject of eliciting vague feelings of historical authenticity, Kommersant outdoes both Peresvet and Bank Imperial. The hard sign not only is included at the end of the paper’s title, коммерсантъ, but figures as its very logo. Moreover, the newspaper makes an explicit play at inheritance by stating in the header of each issue that “between 1917 and 1989 the newspaper was not published due to circumstances beyond the editors’ control.” In other words, just like in the case of Peresvet, Kommersant communicates its simplistic, Manichean version of Soviet historiography—before the Revolution, there was capitalism and today we are reconnecting to that legacy and thus skipping over the seventy years of the Soviet ‘historical detour.’ At the same time, just as in the case of Peresvet, Kommersant’s tag-line quite obviously comes with a wink and a nod. It expresses a make-believe stylization of continuity, rather than literal claims of inheritance. It is for this reason that Leonid Parfenov, the creator of a 2009 documentary about Kommersant, entitled With a Hard Sign on the End, catches the paper’s initiator Vladimir Yakovlev grinning at the camera while stating that, “funny as it might be, there was such a pre-Revolutionary newspaper, Kommersant, which was aimed at the businessmen of that era.” Yakovlev is grinning because it is absolutely obvious both to him and to everyone else that there could not be any institutional or personal connection between the original Kommersant and its modern-day ‘heir.’ Moreover, the use of ‘кommersant’ to describe contemporary Russian businessmen is also a fairy-tale gesture. As Parfenov quips, there is only one man at Kommersant in the 1990s who actually (and somewhat bizarrely) has “the face of a pre-Revolutionary kommersant.” Parfenov is referring to Maksim Sokolov’s big, bushy, black beard—a typical look of pre-Revolutionary kommersanty, many of whom belonged to Old Believer sects in which it
was forbidden to shave. Of course, 1990s businessmen didn’t look like that and they certainly had nothing culturally in common with the late Imperial merchant class.\textsuperscript{42}

For Kommersant, recalling the past is a limited matter—“inheritance” is never presented as real by this newspaper, it is always just stylization. Indeed, the designer of Kommersant’s logo makes precisely this point, saying that “I was categorically against having the Hard Sign simply be a part of the regular font. […] I wanted it to be a purely graphic end for the logotype, a purely drawn thing.”\textsuperscript{43} In other words, the Imperial past is first and foremost a logo rather than history. It is a marketing ploy, and it is to be consumed only half-seriously. Though to be sure, Kommersant’s signature ironic tone—evidenced not only by the hard sign and the tagline, but also by its many humorous 1990s headlines and sometimes inappropriately silly pictures—is itself ideologically loaded. It is anti-Soviet precisely because it is playful.\textsuperscript{44} In the 1990s, to choose to fall into the post-Soviet ironic mise en abyme was itself a political statement, reflecting one’s rejection of the clichéd blandness of Soviet official discourse.

All jokes aside, Kommersant was very much aware of its political organizing mission, and also of the thinness of the line separating this consummate pro-Yeltsin newspaper from the post-Soviet state (in recent years, this thin line has almost entirely disappeared).\textsuperscript{45} Parfenov’s informants insist that these were two sides of the same coin, and they show little ethical concern about it. Thus, during the 1991 Putsch the paper ran the pure anti-Soviet headline “Nightmare, Yazov Is On the Street” (a wordplay on the Russian title for Nightmare on Elm Street, the 1984 American horror film that circulated widely in Russia in the late 1980s-early 1990s). Yakovlev recalls that it was “extremely easy” for them to “self-identify with the reader” because “Nightmare, Yazov Is On the
Street was how the newsroom felt, how the journalists felt, and the readers felt exactly the same.” Yakovlev’s statement simply assumes that there could be no daylight between the newsroom, its audience, and the emergent anti-Soviet political elites. In essence, he claims that ‘every sane person must have felt the way we felt.’ Similarly, during 1998 financial default Kommersant ran a billboard with a white black words against a white background, simply saying, “We’ll get through.” Recalling the ad, Kommersant’s chief editor Andrei Vasiliev states, “these are people, our people, let’s say, they look and they think, oh! It’s for us, it’s about us, it’s me who says so!”

Parfenov describes Kommersant’s ad campaigns as “headlines for our own svoi”—they are always pitched as insider-speak for an audience that is expected to recognize itself as a group through newspaper’s tone, its attitudes, and its perspective on the state. What is the nature of this presumed group consciousness? The slogan “we’ll get through” provides something of an answer to this question. At that moment, when the economy was again in freefall and public opinion was shifting sharply against Yeltsin once more, while the Communist party, from whom the 1996 election had been stolen, was still an active force in the political opposition, the newspaper communicated in its billboard the only possible way that a ‘normal person’ could feel. “We” know that the defense of the post-Soviet, Anti-Communist project is the only acceptable political position. “We” know this because “we” the readers of Kommersant are the only group of people in Russia who think rationally, who understand Russia’s challenges, who know that what Russia really needs is more undiluted Western liberal capitalist reforms. At the same time “we” also feel like we are in the minority, and that a whole lot of ignorant lumpen masses are still out there, and ‘they’ will have our heads if ‘they’ ever get the
chance. In short, “we” are the collective *homo faber*, the thin, tight, thinking and acting rational political class—and ‘they’ are the *narod*. This is the post-Soviet, pro-status-quo ideological discursive subject-position that was born out of the sociological background of the ITR mass intelligentsia, whose members had an outsized role in shaping *all* post-Soviet institutions, including *Kommersant*. And Parfenov’s documentary is remarkably well aware (but not especially critical) of this ideology of subjectivity. This is why the filmmaker opens and closes the film with an image of a 1901 poster (see Figure 20, below). Parfenov does not explain the poster's historical origin, or even give its original name. He simply describes it as a “famous caricature of tsarist society.” He goes on: “all of this public was distinguished from the rest of the people [narod] by the fact that it read newspapers. This public was called the upper hundred thousand back then. That sounds like the print run of a newspaper—one hundred thousand copies. So it was, and so it has remained.” Why does Parfenov claim that ‘nothing has changed’ in newspaper readership since 1901? At the end of the documentary, we find out the answer—because in 2009, at the time of the film’s release, *Kommersant*’s print run is about a hundred thousand copies. But of course, the readers of *Kommersant* are also the only ones that count. As Demian Kudriavtsev, the general director of Kommersant from 2006 to 2012 notes, “the print run has to do not with how many people live in a country, but how many well-to-do people, politically-involved people, business-involved people live in this country. *Kommersant* gets the entirety of those readers whom it manages to create, alongside the development of capitalism in Russia.” Shortly after Kudriavtsev’s statement, the film concludes with Parfenov’s monologue, stating that “the upper hundred thousand is a narrow slice. […] The circle of these writers and readers is narrow. But we
Лохов Н.Н. Пирамида самодержавия. Lokhov N. N. The Pyramid of autocracy.
Russia 1901

*Figure 20: "The Upper Hundred Thousand"*
can also empathize with them. How lonely they are. Good thing they’ve got a newspaper, to recognize each other.” And immediately after it, just before the credits, we see the 1901 caricature again.

The claim that Kommersant’s readership represents the totality of “well-to-do,” “politically-involved” true capitalists is, sociologically speaking, preposterous, but the point is not to get at a sociological truth. The point is, rather, to articulate the subject position of the audience to whom Kommersant is pitched. They should feel like they are the “upper hundred thousand,” staving off the hordes of anti-capitalist, possibly illiterate barbarians at the gate. This feeling of post-Soviet elitist cohesion, sustained by a pre-Soviet political imaginary, and first articulated by the likes of Govorukhin, is the fulcrum that motivates Kommersant’s political meaning. “We”—those who opposed the Putsch, those who are ‘pro-capitalist,’ those who vote for Yeltsin, those who are businessmen, those who feel ourselves to be our nation’s elites—“we” are all in this together.

The post-Soviet project is “our” project. But this myth of social cohesion is extremely problematic on two counts—it is both too narrow and too wide. On the one hand, it is manifestly anti-democratic. Insofar as the supposedly ‘democratic’ side’s discourse is staked on an elitist self-consciousness of those who are “politically involved,” trapped in an eternal battle with the silent, uncountable, malignant masses, it is difficult to see how such a discourse could result in anything but cover for authoritarianism. But on the other hand, this “we”—whom does it really include and should we all really think of ourselves as being ‘on the same side’? In that regard, it is indicative that in the 1990s, Kommersant initiated two kinds of projects, which should have been seen as contradictory. On the one hand, the daily newspaper ran a series of
cartoons featuring a certain Petrovich—a humdrum everyman struggling to make sense of Russia’s new sociopolitical reality. Most of the jokes were about Petrovich learning to speak ‘post-Soviet,’ and many of the cartoons involved Petrovich in various states of frustration, shock, and physical pain. Thinking back on him, Yakovlev notes that “it’s hard to say why Petrovich was needed, it was a genius find, absolutely, […] it was the kind of irony and humor that made it possible to live.” Meanwhile, even as Petrovich’s daily painful travails graced the newspaper, Kommersant launched another project, Russia’s “first glossy journal,” Domovoi. Parfenov claims that the glam women’s monthly Domovoi first coined the phrase “new Russians” (written in English), and the filmmaker explains who such a person would be: he is “a shock worker of capitalist labor, so to speak. In general, the idea is that the husband, a new Russian, reads Kommersant, and his wife reads Domovoi. And constructs their way of life according to it.” So whose journal is it, then? Petrovich’s? Or the glamorous new Russian’s?

To add more fuel to the fire, Parfenov also interviews Alisher Usmanov, the mega-billionaire Putinist oligarch and owner of Kommersant since 2008. Usmanov points out how happy he is to own this newspaper, because “I have always associated my self-consciousness as a businessman with the Kommersant paper.” It is very hard to believe that Usmanov required Petrovich’s dark humor “to make it possible to live” in the 1990s. It is also very hard to believe that Petrovich had a desperate housewife who read Domovoi. Yet the whole premise of the newspaper is for us not to feel this contradiction. If anything, “we” are expected to subsume it under an “upper hundred thousand” kind of elitist group consciousness. And to help us do so, “we” have a pre-Revolutionary myth of the “upper hundred thousand.” “So it was, and so it has remained,” Parfenov insists. But
there is an enormous sleight of hand implicit in this historical imaginary. The “caricature of tsarist society” quoted by Parfenov wasn’t meant to be taken literally. It was a revolutionary polemic device, drawn up by a Socialist Revolutionary cartoonist. Yes, from his radical standpoint it seemed like all of the Russian educated public was in cahoots against the spat-upon and disempowered narod, but the point of that polemic was precisely to empower the masses. The flattening of elite disunity was certainly not meant to valorize the elites or to convince them to unite against the masses—in fact, the cartoon was not talking to the elites at all. It wanted to do away with the whole hierarchy. But when Parfenov reads this image, he does so precisely in a counter-revolutionary way. He takes the revolutionary articulation of the vampiric few versus the powerless many, accepts these fundamental terms as true, and simply reverses the moral polarities. And as a result, “the upper hundred thousand” actually appear as real, as a coherent entity, even though politically or sociologically speaking they were and are nothing of the sort.

Parfenov’s historical imaginary sits at the core of the political discourse of the post-Soviet homo faber. But ironically, this historical imaginary remains entirely blind to the political tasks of a properly post-Soviet era. If “we” are indeed going to subjectivize ourselves as parliamentary democrats (rather than revolutionary bomb-throwers or counter-revolutionary authoritarians), then “we” are going to have to take political disagreement and class interests far more seriously. Petrovich and Usmanov cannot both be on the same side, just as the late Imperial reading public was not by any stretch of the imagination on the same side. To ignore divergent interests, to subsume discussions of meaningful social divisions in the interest of presenting a united front against a vague communist threat—to adopt Kommersant’s ideology, in short—is to blind one’s self
entirely from recognizing who is really in power and what it means for everyone else. And that ‘everyone’ includes not some imaginary illiterate and malevolent narod, but precisely “us,” the politically active, but still disempowered post-Soviet middle class.
III. A Normal Country:
The Aesthetics of the Post-Soviet State

“I want to live in a normal country.”

Russian liberal intelligentsia lament

The imagined cohesion of ‘pro-capitalist’ society, generated by outlets like Kommersant and marketing campaigns of Peresvet and Bank Imperial, among many other venues, was quite obviously an important pillar of the Yeltsinist state. Meanwhile, the state itself was trying to meet the ‘capitalists’ half-way, by engaging in the discourse of ‘normalization’ of Russia. The state’s solution to the very common anti-Soviet lament, “I want to live in a normal country,” was ideally supposed to be two-pronged. On the one hand, it attempted to carry out various transitionist plans, all ostensibly aimed at the building of competent and lawful institutions that would stem the chaos of the 1990s. On the other hand, post-Soviet executives like Yeltsin and Moscow’s famous city mayor Yurii Luzhkov at least tried to create a feeling of normalcy. In the 1990s a lot of effort was expended on orchestrating a look and feel of Russia in general and Moscow in particular as ‘normal’—as opposed to Soviet—social entities. Yet what, exactly, was ‘normal’ supposed to look like? Just as in the case of the banks and newspapers described above, the pre-Soviet aesthetic was central to this endeavor.

Russia’s 1990s, in the words of Stephen Kotkin, were a time of “democracy without liberalism,” which demonstrated

…a number of what should have been self-evident truths. That civil society and a liberal state were not opposites but aspects of the same phenomenon. That government was not the enemy of liberty but its sine qua non. That private property without good government was not worth what it otherwise would have been. In short, that good government was the most precious thing a people could
have. Russia’s challenge was not cultural or economic but institutional, a problem of governability, especially of its governing institutions. However, though ‘Yeltsin’s government’ was an oxymoron in an institutional sense, it was somewhat active in the realm of symbols. For instance, from its inception, Yeltsin and his supporters made sure to dress up their powerplay in an evocative Russian Imperial retro garb. It started with the return of the Imperial tri-color flag, which began appearing at MDG gatherings in the late 1980s. Then, during the 1991 coup someone in Yeltsin’s coterie made sure to unfurl the tri-color behind him as he posed defiantly on top of a loyal tank (See Figure 21, below). Similarly, in December of that year, when Yeltsin moved into Gorbachev’s office in the Kremlin and the USSR was declared no more, the tri-color replaced the hammer and sickle on the Kremlin spires that very night. By 1993, after another major political crisis, the set of state insignia was supposed to expand further, with the return of an Imperial double-headed eagle as the Russian Federation’s state seal, and also as the symbol of a newly revised Presidency. Meanwhile, a reconstructionist campaign began to take off in Moscow. Street and district names were returning to their pre-Soviet versions. Buildings that had been destroyed during the course of the Stalinist 1930s were now being rebuilt, “rising up from non-being,” to quote Luzhkov’s supernatural rhetoric.

There is an obvious and also not so obvious reason for why Yeltsin and Luzhkov devoted so much effort and resources to reconstructionist symbolism, at a time when the economy and basic social institutions were in dire straits. The simple answer would follow the lines of a “restorative nostalgia” argument articulated by Svetlana Boym. Post-Soviet rulers of dubious legitimacy were seeking easy consensus where they could
find it. Chapters One and Two of my dissertation have shown the extent to which various liberal and conservative versions of Imperial restorative nostalgia were a major component of the sensibilities of the urbanized mass technical intelligentsia that had brought the likes of Yeltsin and Luzhkov to power. However, there was also a deeper reason for investing so much into various reconstructionist projects, which had to do with the kind of solipsistic form of capitalism that took shape in Russia. As a result of cognitive distortions implicit in pro-Yeltsinist ‘democrat’ discourse, as well as systemic factors, post-Soviet capitalism was excessively consumerist and under-institutionalized. For this reason, those who called themselves capitalists were excessively fixated on simulating the image of themselves as capitalists. The very actions of buying, selling,
banking and marketing in Russia appeared as the \textit{sine qua non} of the capitalist self-image. However, such a level of solipsism was too unstable and caused many people in this decade to feel like their whole social world was a vast simulation, constantly threatening to disappear in a poof of smoke. The stories and novels of Viktor Pelevin from this decade put this feeling in writing, and that is why they—especially \textit{Generation P} (1999)—became bestsellers, often to the dismay of mainstream liberal “opinion makers” like Parfenov.\textsuperscript{57} So, the feverish intensity of post-Soviet performance of capitalism also had to be mediated, and the pre-Soviet aesthetic deployed by the state played this role by trying to create a feeling of normalcy, within which consumer capitalism would be able to thrive. The only problem was that ‘normalcy’ \textit{also} felt overdetermined.

Within the analyses of Jean Baudrillard and also Claude Lefort, among others, the feeling of normalcy serves as the central mediator for the consumerist process. Baudrillard himself doesn’t use this term, but it permeates his theorization of “hyperreality” in consumer objects, including films, and it is also present in Claude Lefort’s theorization of post-War liberal democratic capitalist regimes. Thus, while speaking about the “retro” aesthetic of post-war historical cinema, Baudrillard quips that it is successful because today, “the historical stake” has been “chased from our lives by this sort of immense neutralization, which is dubbed peaceful coexistence on a global level, and pacified monotony on the quotidian level.”\textsuperscript{58} Meanwhile, writing at about the same time, Lefort describes the foundational political ideology of the postwar West, in which regimes continue to wield power over the masses by representing an image of group cohesion, in which we are expected to “exclude […] the question of the origin, the
legitimacy and rationality of the oppositions and hierarchies” and instead celebrate “the very experience of socialization here and now.”

Lefort’s virtual space of maximal socialization is the flipside of Baudrillard’s hyperreality. They are both speaking about an *ideal* model of the Western postwar order, in which everything can be said and every symbol can be monetized, because words and symbols that formerly carried socially explosive potential no longer do so. After witnessing the dead ends of German Fascism and Russian Communism, everyone in the ‘free world’ has accepted the pact of living ‘normally’ and not engaging in social revolutions. As a reward for this acquiescence, formerly socially disruptive symbols get repackaged into retro aesthetics, for all to enjoy. Potentially, the very fabric of historical memory can undergo this treatment, such that old social conflicts would no longer have any relevance for today’s harmonious post-historical era, and so instead of reliving them meaningfully, we would enjoy them as perfectly and sometimes excessively reconstructed artifacts, like heritage films or steampunk or restoration hardwood.

Luzhkov and Yeltsin tried to orchestrate this fabric of anodyne social normalcy by means of the Imperial reconstructionist aesthetic. Consider, for instance, the return of the double-headed eagle to the state insignia. Though it is possible to read this event as a case of “restorative nostalgia,” I believe its operational purpose was different, and it is possible to see this difference in the legislative and design history behind the new coat of arms. The original law, introduced by the Supreme Soviet in 1992, simply wished to copy the old Imperial symbol. However, this law did not pass. An altered law, adopted through Yeltsin’s executive order in late 1993, this time with heraldic expertise, made some changes (see Figure 22, below). Colors were altered, the eagle’s design was stylistically
changed, and most importantly, the eagle’s breastplate was subtly, but significantly transformed. Whereas the original text described it as “the historic coat of arms of Muscovy,” the new law described it simply as “a knight striking a dragon with his lance.” Moreover, a careful examination of the design reveals subtle differences between St. George and the anonymous knight. Interestingly, this statute too was struck down in 1994, and the official insignia would only become law in 2000. The story of the legislative debacle surrounding the coat of arms reveals two things. On the one hand, it was indeed interpreted by many lawmakers as part of an agenda of “restorative nostalgia,” a “project […] about truth,” to borrow Boym’s words. That is, the lawmakers read the eagle as a symbol of returning to pre-Soviet Russia, and many were apparently suspicious of this proposition. On the other hand, however, we might ask another question—why were Yeltsin, Putin and their “Heraldic Council” so comfortable with altering the coat of arms, and why did they so doggedly pursue the official return of the eagle for almost ten years, even as they were ready and perfectly willing to deracinate

Figure 22: The coat of arms of the late Russian Empire (left), versus the coat of arms of the Russian Federation (right)
its potential “restorative” political meaning? In short, Because the eagle was not really about restorative nostalgia. It did not have to communicate a pre-Revolutionary political project. In any case, this was not its primary function. The point of the coat of arms was, rather, to orchestrate the look and feel of post-Soviet Russia as a post-historical normal space, in the Baudrillardian sense. The eagle was not supposed to be taken literally, even though many legislators did take it literally. It was always supposed to be a retro aesthetic, and that’s why significant alterations to it were acceptable.

Another, far more prominent example of pre-Soviet retro stylization is the post-Soviet plan for Moscow. The rhetoric that Luzhkov’s predecessor Gavriil Popov, and then Luzhkov and his urban planners have all used to describe their projects predictably tends towards ‘normalization.’ For instance, recalling a discussion regarding the restoration of pre-Revolutionary districting and street names in 1990, Luzhkov says,

Let us get back to the wellsprings. […] We invited specialists, circled the historic districts on the map. […] And we discovered a genuine Moscow, the very one that existed underneath an artificial net of Brezhnevite and Kirovite enclaves. We saw a city which, with some transformations, nevertheless had retained a memory of the past. We heard old, forgotten names: ‘Tushino,’ ‘Nagatino,’ ‘Troparevo’…

Less than a decade later, a similar sentiment appears in the rhetoric of Luzhkov’s chief city planner, Aleksandr Kuz’mín:

The maxim of Moscow’s new General Plan up to 2020 is ‘A city convenient for people’s lives.’ It simply and clearly discloses the purely humanitarian direction of this important document of urban planning. Probably for the first time in our country’s practice in the composition of a document of this type, its authors were neither subject to political dictation nor under ideological pressure. […] Now, at the end of the 1990s, we are saying that we simply would like to see our capital city as a comfortable and convenient city.

In Kuz’mín’s rhetoric, the idea of normalcy—here “comfort” and “convenience” predominates as the legitimating benchmark for his department’s ambitious urban plan.
In Luzhkov’s rhetoric, normalcy is presented in a historical sense, as “authenticity.” In both cases, post-Soviet normalcy is favorably juxtaposed to the terminated artificial Soviet project, which had committed crimes against authentic history in the case of Luzhkov, and against ‘normal’ urban development in the case of Kuz’mín.

This rhetoric of post-Soviet normalcy, which fuses together notions like “authenticity” and “convenience,” best explains the ideology behind Luzhkov’s infamous “Moscow style.” At the forefront of this style were marquee reconstruction projects which were, as the architecture critic Sabine Gölz has noted, “difficult to distinguish from new construction.” Beyond the marquee projects, Luzhkov also encouraged the construction of so many fin de siècle-inspired houses that one critic quipped that the city was being supplied with “two hundred architectural monuments per year.” Kathleen Smith has characterized the “Moscow style” as a “historical theme park” aesthetic, rather than a “museum” one. Moreover, Smith has also highlighted an apparent contradiction between Luzhkov’s self-styling as an ‘economic pragmatist’ and his investment of “significant state money” into projects like the grandiose reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. In Smith’s reading, this contradiction can be explained by a desire “to link larger civic goals to religious and nationalist views.”

I would suggest that just as in the case of the Imperial coat of arms, nationalist messaging was not entirely the point. Convenience, comfort, post-Soviet technocratic pragmatism and expensive retro all went together precisely because they were part of rendering the ‘normal.’ Normalcy in this case denotes the innocuous space of aesthetico-political consensus in which consumer capitalism can exist. Vladimir Resin, Moscow’s foreman-in-chief in the 1990s has put this matter remarkably clearly:
Where did we find the means to undertake restoration on such a massive scale? [...] The funds came from the contributions of those who had profited during the rapid privatization [...] of the early 1990s. [...] They wished to set up business in prestigious old buildings [...]. Throughout the world such structures are the most expensive and the most coveted for successful business people.68

Luzhkovian-Yeltisnist normalcy was about forging an agreeable lifeworld within which the stakeholders of the Yeltsin state—the New Russian businesses on the one hand and the amorphous urbanized capital-dwelling masses on the other, could feel themselves united, precisely in the way described by Lefort. That is to say, the post-Soviet ‘normal’ was supposed to be an ideological space that would obfuscate the real state of social divisions and make everyone in it feel somehow equal. _Homo faber_ ideology (we are all the “upper hundred thousand,” the inheritors of aristocratic culture and politics) was well-disposed to this kind of obfuscation. Yeltsin’s state simply met these ideas half-way. But just as with _Kommersant_, it was a devil’s bargain.

The state, its servitors, the intelligentsia, the new “biznes” community (to borrow Kotkin’s ironic take on it), are all stripped of their conflicts and particularities, and are re-imagined as a single, unified “New Russian” imaginary collective subject, over and against some equally imaginary _non_-subjects (be they the _narod_, or ‘the workers of Uralvagonzavod’ or the ‘red-browns,’ or ‘sheeple’ _bydlo_). The post-Soviet state reinforces this juncture by investing into collective spaces in which its collective subject can feel normal, as opposed to artificial. Vague feelings of nationalist authenticity, elicited by massive reconstructionist urban investments, push out and subsume the possibility of a more politically potent form of social discourse. And the post-Soviet condemnation of Marxism-Leninism also helps in this regard—the social-analytic toolbox that could help the so-called ‘elites’ sort out their real political interests and
divisions had been relegated to the dustbin of history, along with the failed Soviet project.

Looking back on the 1990s from the vantage point of 2017, the story of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior provides the most apparent example of the peripeteias of anti-political normalization through Imperial retro. At the time of its construction, the Cathedral was promoted as a national revival project, with a whole series of televised commercials that were supposedly pitched to the many citizens of Russia who would then fund the reconstruction with their small donations. Luzhkov played along with this story by claiming that Moscow provided no budget for the building and that it was being financed by various private, public and corporate donors. Of course, as Smith has pointed out, this was absurdly unbelievable and the Cathedral was actually being funded through a massive corruption scheme. And even beyond the scheme itself, it was quite obvious to everyone in the 1990s that the very idea of non-corrupt Russian private, public or corporate donors was absurd. Still, the Cathedral’s construction was no mere cynical ploy. Rather, Christ the Savior was welcomed by its stakeholders, who paid for it at least partly out of a sincere belief that it was what the people wanted, and also because this venue allowed them to pretend to be respectable, both in each other’s eyes, and also in the eyes of the urbanized Muscovites, with whom they claimed solidarity—in the words of Pelevin, this church celebrated “a respectable Lord for gentlemen of respect [solidnyi Gospod’ dlia solidnykh gospod].” The belief in the Orthodox ‘people’ who wanted to see churches rebuilt, as well as the desire to view one’s self as “a gentleman” were all parts of the same homo faber discourse that was used by Yeltsinists, including the wealthy ones. Moreover, this feeling of ideological consensus about the Cathedral could coexist with the general knowledge that its construction was both corrupt and state-
driven, because there was also consensus about the need to pretend that post-Soviet capitalism actually existed and that Russia was moving in a normal direction.

By 2012, a few months after mass Moscow protests against Putin’s third term, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior finally ‘bore the device’ of its existence. After the “Punk Prayer” art protest action of Pussy Riot at the church, and the subsequent state-led, highly publicized and extremely controversial repressive campaign against it, this religious venue and virtually all other Russian churches could no longer so easily appear as a sites of consensus between the state and ‘society’ broadly defined. It is thanks to Pussy Riot’s critical action and the fallout from it, as well as broader political trends, that today Christ the Savior feels as normal as the Lubianka—that is, it is increasingly only normal for the Putinist state officialdom. As such, the contemporary status of Christ the Savior in public discourse is one of many indicators that the consensus about the need for aesthetico-political normalcy in Russia that had underwritten both Yeltisnism and Putinism prior to 2012 no longer exists.
IV. The Competent Manager: Stolypin for the Post-Soviet Nomenklatura

“I am from the party of managers [khoziaistvennikov]!”

Yuri Luzhkov, 1990 speech at the Mossovet

As Yeltsin’s state struggled to meet the pro-Yeltsin “New Russians” half way in the task of forging a ‘normal,’ supposedly non-ideological, make-believe capitalist lifeworld, the state was also trying to solve an internal ideological problem, created by the fact that most of its bureaucrats originated in the late Soviet nomenklatura. Literally thousands of apparatchiks, who had climbed the ranks during the late Soviet era by diligently drilling and reciting Marxist-Leninist dogma suddenly had to make a case for why they could keep their jobs. One answer that made a lot of sense was that these were the only people who had governing competence. Luzhkov’s thoughts on this matter are paradigmatic. At a gathering of the Moscow City Council [Mossovet] in 1990, he was asked, “what platform do you embrace? Are you a democrat or a communist? Or, maybe an independent?” Luzhkov responded:

I have always embraced and continue to embrace the same platform. The managerial one [khoziaistvennoi]. […] I am from the party of managers [khoziaistvennikov]! […] This principle […] made it possible for us in Moscow government to have both clerks from the old system and also those who fought against this system, and also ones who came from other fields […] Such is the philosophy of executive power that we carried out from the very beginning of choosing cadres.74

Luzhkov’s post-historical “philosophy of executive power” in which wolves lie with sheep in the competent administration of a de-ideologized metropolis surely was meant to appeal to the Muscovites who brought him and Yeltsin to power by showing up to the demonstrations against the Putschists in 1991 and against the Supreme Soviet in 1993.
The ‘democrats’ campaigning against the communists liked to claim that they were against “ideology.” This notion was present in the typical lament mentioned earlier, of wanting “to live in a normal country.” It expressed a desire simply to get on with life in a technocratically administered city, without having to engage in further political organizing against the powers that be, because those powers would, through some magic, end up fully representing their constituents’ will. Luzhkov was an expert in appealing to this depoliticized political imaginary, which allowed a lifelong Soviet executive like himself to advance significantly in his job, even though the rhetoric of Soviet démontage was strongly aimed against USSR’s dubious hierarchy of excessive executive power.

Still, appeals to depoliticized managerial competence did not always work. There was no shortage of ‘states of emergency’ during the tenures of both Yeltsin and Luzhkov, during which the former nomenklatura, now reborn into post-Soviet bureaucrats, had to defend their positions from political assaults within and outside the legislature. So, the other constant presence in Yeltsin’s and Luzhkov’s politicking was the trope of staving off various populist barbarians at the gates. This rhetoric was coterminous with the *homo faber* ideology of the “upper hundred thousand,” but it was not quite the same, because the state’s sovereign calculus for forging friend-enemy distinctions did not always coincide with that of their presumed constituents. Namely, though a gamut of “red-brown” public firebrand figures (Zhirinovsky, Limonov and Ziuganov, roughly speaking) really did try to contest political power, there were also some well-respected liberal figures who were not content with Yeltsin’s decisions. Plus, of course, there were many figures in the public sphere who denounced the manifestly anti-democratic, election-rigging practices of the supposedly ‘democratic’ (because anti-‘red-brown’) Yeltsin
coalition. And the state had to answer to these critics as well—after all, they were more politically dangerous because they threatened to splinter the supposed consensus of those who not only voted for, but culturally legitimated and financially supported the post-Soviet state project of ‘democracy’ against the presumed commu-nazis. One of the most enduring answers that the post-Soviet state formulated was “Stolypin.”

Appeals to the Stolypinist legacy had originated in the Soviet public sphere by way of samizdat/tamizdat—as discussed above, Solzhenitsyn’s 1970s tamizdat encomium of the tsarist prime minister was taken up by Govorukhin in The Russia That We Have Lost. But positive treatments of Stolypin appeared in Soviet official literature as well, when in 1979 the popular historical fiction writer Valentin Pikul’ published the first edition of his somewhat scandalous novel Evil Force [Nechistaia sila]. The book essentially told the story of how a cabal involving Rasputin, wealthy Jews, and lecherous aristocratic women together ruined Russia and brought about the Revolution. The rather open anti-Semitic rhetoric, among other things, was enough to get Pikul’ into trouble with the Party (which was privately no less anti-Semitic, but had to maintain basic decorum). On the sidelines of the main storyline, however, Pikul’’s book presented a picture of Stolypin and late Imperial society that was in general so glowing that Stolypin’s son Arkadii was moved to write a special review of the book in the émigré press in 1980, entitled “Crumbs of Truth in a Barrel of Lies.” While claiming that a majority of the novel was so slanderously false that “in a rights-based country the author would have to answer not to critics but to the court,” Arkadii Stolypin nevertheless expressed hopes that the novel was popular precisely “thanks to [the] crumbs of truth” regarding late Imperial Russia, and that this work would allow all of the closeted anti-
communists in Soviet Russia “to lean on the still living pillars of the past, […] our still recoverable national statehood [gosudarstvennosti].”

By 1990, a positive myth of late Imperial Russia in general and Stolypin in particular, mostly sourced from Solzhenitsyn, was already a commonplace in Yelstinist anti-Soviet discourse. In the case of Govorukhin, this myth took the meaning of encouraging Russia’s ‘elites’ to cohere around a capitalist modernization project and to protect it from the “degenerate” lumpen masses. By 1994, with the release of his *Great Criminal Revolution*, evidently Govorukhin himself had evidently lost faith in the Yeltsin state’s version of that project. Still, myths of illustrious late Imperial servitors and loyal conservative intellectuals continued to circulate in the post-Soviet public sphere, and by the 2000s they became fully incorporated into the ideology of the Putinist state, peaking with Putin’s 2009 demonstrative laying of wreaths at the graves of several “state-minded men [gosudarstvenniki]”: Solzhenitsyn, the White general Denikin and the émigré rightist political thinker Ivan Ilyin. Though Stolypin’s name did not figure in the ceremony (he was buried in Kiev and still remains there), the others might as well have been surrogates for him. Either way, Stolypin Jr. would have certainly approved of Putin’s love of the “gosudarstvenniki” of yore. But what was the meaning of this notion of ‘state-mindedness’ that the once and future President was extolling, and how did Stolypin specifically figure into it? What could Stolypin mean for the post-Soviet state?

Thanks to the efforts of post-Soviet statist conservative intelligentsia figures who had been weaned on the late Soviet legacy of communicating with power, as well as late Soviet positive narratives about the late Imperial era, Stolypin came to embody the three central elements of post-Soviet state rhetoric: managerial competence, conservative
elitism, and excuses for authoritarian action today in the name of a democracy tomorrow.

To see how this rhetoric took shape, I will now consider several related post-Soviet sources on Stolypin. First, I will examine Sviatoslav Rybas’s 1991 biography, *The Reformer* [*Reformator*] coauthored with L. V. Tarakanova. Then, I will consider the republished 2003 version of this biography, released under a different title (*Stolypin*) through the *Lives of Extraordinary People* series, with slight but telling modifications, and this time with only Rybas’s name on the cover (it was subsequently republished four more times as of 2014). Lastly, I will examine the reception of Rybas’s book in the educational materials of the leading Putinist parliamentary party, United Russia.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the Soviet 1960s and 1970s produced two versions of conservative discourse, and though the passive ‘harmonious nationalist’ one ended up clearing past the hurdles of censorship, the activist conservative rhetoric forged by individuals like Solzhenitsyn remained influential. In 1974, as he was about to go into exile, and several years after having published in France his first encomium of Tsarist society, *August 1914*, Solzhenitsyn called on Soviet leaders to “carry out your duty soberly, responsibly and decisively” and “reject the dead letter” of Soviet ideology. Solzhenitsyn suggested that Soviet leaders take up Russian nationalism, as Stalin had done during the war, “for the sake of the living narod.” At the same time, he comforted the nomenklatura about the moral and practical possibility of preserving their authoritarian hierarchy by purifying it and making it more competent: “though freedom is moral, it is only so up to a certain point […] while order also, is not immoral, as a sustainable and placid regime,” and “it isn’t authoritarianism as such that is unbearable, but its forced, day-to-day ideological lies.” By 1991, the nomenklatura was finally
ready to hear these ideas, while Sviatoslav Rybas (1946-) was ready to restate them.

Though he is listed among “prominent Russian Nationalist Intellectuals” as of 1985 in Yitzhak Brudny’s research, Rybas was not so prominent prior to the Perestroika. His print runs were not enormous (375,000 copies between 1983 and 1985), especially compared to such authors as Astafiev and Bondarev. Still, he was clearly a successful young writer close to the Russian nationalist elite circles who were in charge of the Molodaia gvardiia publishing house, where Rybas had published most of his works. After the fall of the USSR Rybas found a niche in the new social landscape. In the 1990s he was among the initiators of the reconstruction of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior and became an honorary member and professor of the Russian Academy of Military Science. Today, when he is not writing biographies of Stalin and Shulgin (among others), he maintains an active LiveJournal page, on which he mostly inveighs against post-Soviet ‘color revolutions’ and treacherous liberals.

Rybas’s biography and ideas embody the mix of continuity and change that Russian nomenklatura conservatism had to undergo to survive past Perestroika, through the Yeltsin era, and into Putinism. He proves that the long-running relationship of nationalist intelligentsia as mentors for state servitors did not have to terminate after Perestroika, as long as both parties switched rails at the right time. To do so, the old-new conservatives would have to use the opportunities opened up by Yeltsinist anti-Soviet discourse. As we have seen in the case of Luzhkov, the libertarian-technocratic ideology of ‘wanting to live in a normal country’ made it possible for former apparatchiks to re-legitimate themselves as competent managers [kreplkie khoziaistvenniki]. Additionally, the monarchist, nostalgic elitism articulated by Govorukhin also opened up possibilities
for state servitors to pick up the same mantle. Both of these vectors are central for Rybas’s interpretation of Stolypin. On the one hand, he is an ideal aristocrat, as in Govorukhin’s account, who truly deserves his social prominence; on the other hand, he is the ultimate ‘competent manager,’ a picture of enlightened capitalist authoritarianism. Later, as Rybas rewrites his biography of Stolypin for the Putin era in 2003, Stolypin’s governmental métier acquires a distinct whiff of Putin-style hybrid authoritarianism, described by Putin’s ideologists as “managed democracy.”

Rybas’s Stolypin is the ultimate activist conservative, who perfectly embodies “the connection between excellence and rule,” to borrow Robin’s formulation. At one point, he is compared to Levin from Anna Karenina—Rybas quotes Tolstoy’s explanation of his character’s admiration for the free capitalist peasant’s labor and says that “Petr Stolypin viewed life in just this same way.” Some pages later, we learn about his admirable loneliness as a competent aristocrat at the top of the late Russian Empire’s political food chain: “he had no hope for [support from the] Russian public. He was alone.” It was a collective loneliness, though—in Rybas’s rendering, the human condition of the Russian aristocratic capitalist was apparently a typical sign of the times, which were “forging together the Russian noble and the bourgeois liberal into a single new social type.” Such hybrid harbingers of the future, Rybas continues, were the ones

…who created a New America on the south of Russia, who created the great peasant Siberia, the first-class factories, the engineers, the pilots, the zemstvo intelligentsia… where did they come from? From the ‘superfluous’ ones? From the idiocy of Russian life? We cannot answer these questions without Stolypin. Stolypin is not so much a personality, as a name for a whole epoch of our life, which was broken by a terrible cataclysm and which can be reborn, if we return to common sense. It might seem strange, but it is nevertheless the case that while common sense ideas are always straightforward, they are usually connected to an extreme conflict of sides.
Outdoing Govorukhin, Rybas here emphatically extols Stolypin as a symbol of an interrupted Russian capitalist modernity that can be reclaimed in the post-Soviet era by a reborn technical class of factory-managers, ‘the engineers, the pilots,’ and so forth.

However, whereas Govorukhin’s rhetoric for the most part stops there, at the level of a generalized Stolypinist ethos, Rybas pushes Stolypin’s elitism into an encomium of the tsarist minister’s authoritarian statecraft. Just prior to the section quoted above, Rybas explains that Stolypin’s loneliness was caused by the fact that he had to pass virtually all of his reforms by fiat, without the input of Russia’s fledgling parliament. This is because his ideas were too “radical” for the Duma, Rybas tells us. This trope of loneliness intensifies through repetition. At one point Rybas describes Stolypin as “the last Roman,” the last servant of a “Russia” that “we no longer have.” At another point, he wonders, “who supported Stolypin?” And he answers: “it is possible to say: everyone and no one […] the narod’s hope bent towards Stolypin.” Rybas’s narod here is not so much a social entity—not even the flawed intelligentsia version of it—as it is a metonymy for the state as a whole, a referent of Russia as a depersonalized national political subject. Despite Stolypin’s constant rigging of election laws to eliminate oppositional undesirables from the Duma, and despite his subsequent constant avoidance of passing laws through his own, maximally rigged Duma, it is nevertheless clear to Rybas that the tsarist minister was doing what Russia wanted and needed from him.

Stolypin’s loneliness, in other words, is distinct from the loneliness of the homo faber—that is, the pilots and engineers building a “new America” in Crimea in the 1900s and, ipso facto, the managers and engineers building a new Russia in the 1990s. Stolypin
transcends the hopes and wishes of even *those* people. He is not really accountable to them—he is only accountable to Russia *the state*, a transcendent entity that speaks through the tsarist minister and is not at all reducible to the parliamentary representative system. If what the state needs is radical reforms, then Stolypin will force them through and will not tolerate dissent. Indeed, he will bravely turn the Russian *ancien régime* upside down to save it. This very notion is already captured in the title of the 1991 book, *The Reformer*. To drive the point home, Rybas also makes sure to refer to Stolypin throughout the text as the “Reformer,” with a capital R, as if a commitment to aggressive reform defined the very core of the minister’s entire being. Then, as we get into the details of Stolypin’s political life, Rybas notes several related “paradoxes.”88 One is that “it was precisely Stolypin, who was not a ‘westernizer,’ but a man who loved and understood Russia, who was fated to carry out a reform that would destroy the peasant commune.”89 Or, another paradox: “He was on the right, a conservative defender [okhranitel] of the natural path of life, but at the same time he reached out to the liberals.”90 Or, yet another paradox: “he, a landowner and a nobleman, was brought by history to carry out bourgeois reforms, which would destroy his native world.”91

In short, Rybas’s Stolypin embodies the conservative paradox outlined by Robin, that “if you want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.”92 And it is easy to see how this paradox spoke to the post-Soviet state leaders for whom Rybas, by virtue of his institutional background, was writing his book. Quite obviously, for Yeltsin, Luzhkov and all of their former nomenklatura underlings to survive into the post-Soviet era they too would have to be willing to “destroy their native world.” They too would have to make strategic common cause with “the liberals.” They too would have to accept
some version of “westernization” as the only path forward. But to what extent? When and how would the ancien régime re-assert itself? In the 1991 edition of the book, Rybas answered this question by highlighting Stolypin’s patriotism and his inward-gazing imperialism. Rybas’s Stolypin opposes imprudent foreign wars (read: Afghanistan), he is committed to the vision of a “Grand Russia” (read: post-Soviet Russian territorial integrity), and he is even excited about a future partnership with the United States.\(^9\) In other words, the ancien régime must modernize its ideology so as to stay in power, because that is what the state needs. Russia’s national interests must be protected. Incidentally, implicit in this logic is a classic Russian conservative line of attack on the state’s liberal critics—destabilization of the elites is dangerous because national security is on the line. By 2003, however, a new emphasis invades Rybas’s biography. Though the vast majority of the new edition remains word for word identical to the old one (Rybas makes no mention of this, nor of the fact that the name of his co-author is entirely missing from the new version), we can also observe some new insertions that have particular relevance for the age of Putin’s “managed democracy.” In this edition Stolypin is celebrated not only for his bold reformism and his patriotic sensibilities, but also for his authoritarian stewardship of a democracy to come.

To put it briefly, in 2003 Stolypin turns out to have been Putin before Putin. For one, he is now approvingly described as a strong leader come to save a country in extraordinary times, as predicted “by the father of political science [politologiiia], Niccolo Machiavelli.”\(^9\) In adding this tidbit, Rybas implicitly ties Stolypin to the popular historical perception of Machiavelli as the philosopher of political manipulation—the quintessential “political technologist [politekhnolog]” \textit{avant la lettre}. In the same place,
Rybas also adds a detailed description of how Stolypin rigged an election for the first time, to the zemstvo in Grodno in 1902. He subverted democratic institutions for a good cause, however: “he saw [the election] as risky business, because they [Lithuanians, Belorussians and Jews] would have sharpened the national contradictions.” And Stolypin was successful in rigging the election because he “looked upon things without dogmatism, he thought that new approaches were necessary.” Rybas concludes, thereby, that “the youngest governor turned out to be a ripe politician.”

Election-rigging for the sake of national harmony remains a centerpiece of Stolypin’s political accomplishments, but in Rybas’s view the Reformer’s main form of mastery actually had to do with rigging the parliamentary legislative process itself, but again for a good cause: a future, more perfect democracy to come. Thus, in a new introduction, Rybas notes how

…it was obvious to Stolypin that the folk peasant masses [narodnaia krest’ianskaia massa], having lived through the trials of princely squabbles, the Mongolian invasion, the Time of Troubles, the Petrine modernization, justify state Power only in the figure of the Tsar-protector. Between the tsar and the people there is no mediation, no social pillars—such pillars must be built. One must build them, while sharing the tsar’s power.

On another occasion, we learn that “Stolypin could have repeated Pushkin’s thought that ‘in Russia the government is the only European.’ In other words, it is the duty of power to improve the people’s life, without waiting for demands from the side of the people themselves, initiating reforms from the top.” At yet another moment, Rybas titles the section introducing Stolypin’s rigged Third Duma “A Specter of a New Russia.”

Finally, as he concludes his account of Stolypin’s political oeuvre Rybas now adds a quote from Rozanov: “Stolypin showed the only possible path for parliamentarianism in
Russia. […] Russia absolutely cannot survive parliamentarianism as another chapter in the history of trying to mimic the West.” The biographer then appends, “What’s there to add to this? Stolypin showed to all Russians, there’s no need to fear the new. There is no need to hide only in old traditions. Bravely meet the changes and fight for the good of Russia.”

In all of the cases of 2003 insertions mentioned above, Stolpyin appears as an ideologist of what we might call an interminable transition to democracy. The “European” reformist state has to “initiate reforms from the top,” it has to create “mediation” and “social pillars,” which will eventually improve the citizenry, presumably eventually rendering them European, too. Stolypin’s rigged parliament is a “specter” of a less rigged future parliament. Lastly, with the Rozanov quote, Rybas reassures his readers that all of the political machinations are justified by an appeal to the Russian essential character, which makes it necessary to temper all democratic advances with a healthy dose of authoritarian Sonderweg, so that nothing gets too out of hand.

Moreover, just as telling as these 2003 insertions are, so too are the various 1991-era sentiments that Rybas feels are still perfectly appropriate for 2003. The story of Stolypin retains its ominous opening: “from a feeling of catastrophe that penetrates our society during the days when these words are being written, let us transport ourselves to the beginning of the century.” As in 1992, the reader of 2003 learns that “Stolypin is for us,” because his is a “quiet,” “bloodless revolution.” Fears of a “permeating catastrophe” and hopes for such a non-revolutionary revolution make perfect sense in 1991, but how is it possible to continue saying such things in 2003, with minor updates in wording (“Perestroika” becomes “post-Soviet,” “twentieth century” becomes “twenty-
first"102), or to reprint this work four times in subsequent editions, the latest of which was issued in 2014? The longevity of Rybas’s state of emergency is the flipside of the Putinist ideology of permanent transitionism. Stolypin’s—and Putin’s—manipulation of the democratic process on the path of necessary radical reforms is justified precisely by the fact that after them comes the flood. Eventually, when present-day extraordinary circumstances abate, such manipulative methods will no longer be necessary. In the meantime, both Stolypin’s and Putin’s hybrid authoritarianism is authorized precisely in the name of an empowered citizenry of the future. And though such a claim might ring distinctly more hollow in 2014, after a quarter century of ‘democratic transition,’ it nevertheless comprises an essential ideological pillar of Putinism to this day.

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Let us now consider the curious Putinist institutional afterlife of Rybas’s book. About three years after the publication of the updated biography of Stolypin, sections of it end up duplicated almost verbatim in the second volume of a set of educational texts published for Putin’s United Russia party, evocatively titled Leaders.103 As I have discussed above, late Soviet conservative intelligentsia figures had been socialized into a system in which they served as ideological tutors for the state, and given that Rybas started out as a late Soviet conservative it is not at all surprising that his work would end up in post-Soviet state party materials. What is more interesting is the way in which the book contextualizes Rybas’s Stolypin as paragon of Russian conservatism writ large. In short, we can view United Russia’s educational edition as a case of nomenklatura talking back and showing the extent to which they have been able to incorporate the rhetoric of Stolypinism into their core ideology.
In terms of direct influence, *Leaders* follows Rybas to a tee: the book’s chapter on Stolypin is a redux hagiography, complete with all of the inaccuracies originally introduced into Stolypin’s biographical myth by Solzhenitsyn in the 1970s and absorbed by Rybas in 1991.\textsuperscript{104} Moreover, occasionally *Leaders* describes Stolypin with almost verbatim repetitions of Rybas’s wording.\textsuperscript{105} The text also makes sure to mention Rybas’s 1991 book as a source in its very short bibliography.\textsuperscript{106} However, beyond the substance of this rendition of his near-saintly vita, *Leaders* through its very structure also makes important modifications of Stolypin’s myth. Most importantly, Stolypin is placed as one of many world historical conservative figures from whom the good party members of *United Russia* are supposed to learn.

*Leaders*, like Putinist state rhetoric in general, flaunts its enlightened cosmopolitan consciousness. For instance, the chapter on Stolypin is preceded by chapters on Ivan III, Cardinal Richelieu, Mikhail Speransky and Teddy Roosevelt. In this way, Stolypin joins a whole pantheon of brilliant Western or Western-minded conservative politicians. The book’s introduction, “To be a Conservative,” written by a certain Dmitrii Orlov, Ph.D [*kandidat istoricheskikh nauk*], achieves a similar effect by demonstratively citing Karl Popper, Alvin Toffler and Michael Oakeshott, as well as many other Western figures. The point of this approach is to emphasize the Western bona fides of contemporary Russian conservatism. One may compare the content of *Leaders* with Putin’s rhetoric regarding Europe. Consider, for instance, a collection of Putin’s thoughts in the collected volume *Sovereignty*, published by an imprint with the rather telling name “Europe” [*Evropa*] in 2006. There too, the President insists that “Russia was, is and will of course remain Europe’s largest nation. […] For over three hundred
years we have traveled hand in hand with other European nations, [...] towards [various] social milestones. I repeat, we did all of this together, sometimes lagging behind but sometimes also moving ahead of European standards.”

The reason for this emphasis on Europeanness has to do with trying to defang the traditional turf of Russian anti-despotic liberals as the “Westernizers.” Putin wants to insist on an alternate, conservatively-inflected, but just as illustrious Western modernity project, in which Russia’s greatest statesmen have always participated. Stolypin, with his capitalist reforms, is a perfect example of such a statesman—which is why quotes of Stolypin predominate in Orlov’s semi-scholarly celebration of the conservative disposition.

Orlov singles out a number of defining themes of international conservatism: it is undogmatic, realistic, modernizing, statist, stable, and anti-revolutionary. In all cases, Stolypin provides the necessary background music with his most famous aphorisms, such as “you desire grand tribulations, while we desire a grand Russia.” At the same time, Orlov’s rendering of conservatism with an emphasis on Stolypin also reveals the structuring paranoia of Putinism—that eventually, this permanently transitionist regime will have to give way to something else. This paranoia invades Putinsism thanks to the political consciousness of the late Soviet ‘middle class’—the tension between a desire for social transformation and a fear of social upheaval. Stolypinism is a natural outgrowth of that consciousness. Hence, Orlov’s Stolypinist conservatism is always subtly aware of its own insufficiency: one has to “make optimal decisions in far from ideal circumstances,” Orlov laments. Or, channeling the words of Stolypin, one has to “try to use an old musket well.” “The main principle of a Russian conservative,” Orlov continues, “is ‘do no harm.’ Security, stability of the social system are far more important to a conservative politician
than the success if this or that reform.”

Social upheaval inevitably will come after Stolypin/Putin, and that is a good reason to slow down the transition as much as possible. At the same time, however, the revolutionary telos is also a symbol of the eventual inevitability of the demise of the regime. By virtue of the constant presence of Russia’s historical memory, the conservative Russian state is always living in the end times. For that reason, Putinist Russia discursively can never actually reach ‘normalcy,’ even though a desire for ‘normalcy’ lies at the root of the post-Soviet state. This sensibility is consistent with the logic of Putinism as it has been rendered by Sergei Prozorov: it both makes permanent Yeltsin’s “transition from nowhere to nowhere,” and it also makes permanent a “ceaseless trepidation before the specter” of the potential revolutionary event.

To sum up: within the articulation of Stolypinism as the core ideology of the post-Soviet state we can see the following internal monologue: ‘on the one hand, we want to conserve the existing hierarchy; on the other hand, we cannot but be aware that this order is dubious, given that it arose out of a delegitimated late Soviet regime and also that it willy-nilly prevailed through the “great criminal revolution” of the 1990s. To justify this incongruity between our conservative desires and the deplorable object of conservation, we insist that stability is always better than revolution. But this justification holds only as long as we can pretend to be competent managers and as long as we continue to speak in the language of democratization—hence our insistence that “Russia is a country that chose democracy for itself.” But to sound like democrats, we also have to make it look like power is slowly but surely trickling down from our authoritarian hands, even as the moment of democratic plenitude is perpetually deferred, in the interests of national
security broadly defined.’

The example of Stolypin is particularly well suited for the self-concept of the contemporary Russian state. He is the consummate proto-Putinist “sovereign democrat” who puts an illegitimate regime on the path of reform, acknowledges the need to share power with the masses, but at the same time masterfully obfuscates the political process by first rigging the parliament and then ignoring it. All along, Stolypin claims to adhere scrupulously to the letter of the law and also insists that he is maneuvering for the sake of a more democratic regime to come—at some future date when Russia will no longer have to stave off revolution, which is nevertheless always just around the corner. As such, Stolypin embodies the concept of activist conservatism that Solzhenitsyn, who launched his modern-day cult, tried to convince Soviet leaders to adopt in the 1970s. In this light, it is not surprising that when laying a wreath on Solzhenitsyn’s grave in 2009 Putin would express his admiration for the late Soviet dissident writer as a “consistent state-minded man [gosudarstvennik].”  

Stolypinism is to this day legitimated by the urbanized educated masses’ elitist self-perception. This feeling is perfectly reflected in Orlov’s statement in Leaders, that

…The political platform of the United Russia party is based on an understanding of social reforms as gradual transformations, carried out democratically. A longterm, multifaceted modernization of the country with support from a responsible national coalition, that should include within itself the majority of the population—such is the future of Russian conservatism and national conservative leadership as we see it. 

Aside from de rigueur claims of “majority population” support, the key Putinist stakeholder here is a “responsible [otvetstvennuiu] national coalition” which supports “multifaceted modernization.” As such, this stakeholder is indistinguishable from
Kommersant’s “well-to-do, […] politically-involved, […] business-involved people” who appear in Russia “alongside the development of capitalism.”

At some point in the last few years—most emphatically after the 2011-2012 mass protests against Putin’s third term—the picture of pro-Putinist consensus among all of the ‘responsible capitalists/democrats’ has begun to crack. It was also at this point that Putin’s old tried-and-true rhetoric of “sovereign democracy” began to coexist in the public sphere with other, more reactionary (but also late-Imperial-inflected) ideologies of power, such as Alexander Dugin’s Eurasianism. However, at the end of the day Putin’s shift to Dugin is quite limited. Most recently, for example, it is rather telling that the ‘systemic liberals’ who were invited in early 2017 to formulate a path out of Russia’s economic crisis came from a think-tank called the Stolypin Club. Given the regime’s origin and its continued existence, Stolypinism is far more organic for Putin than Eurasianism—a fact that Dugin himself has acknowledged with resignation. The enduring affectation for the late tsarist prime minister indicates the extent to which Putin and his bureaucrats are fully aware that theirs is a “hybrid regime” that uncomfortably combines authoritarianism and democracy, to use Ekaterina Schulmann’s influential characterization. Which means that the central ideological task for Russian elites today is to defuse the historical imaginary that continues to legitimate the very idea of Stolypinism—that after this comes the flood.
V. Late Imperial Cinema for the Post-Soviet Narod

“Not-cola for Nikola [Ne-kola dlja Nikoly].”

Fictional Russian nationalist ad for Sprite

In each example of contemporary Russian conservative discourse discussed above, the target audience has been presumed to think of itself as elites—they are the aristocratic “we” of Govorukhin, the “we” of Peresvet, the “politically-involved people” of Kommersant, the normal, convenience-seeking, retro-loving Muscovites of Luzhkov, and, lastly, the “responsible national coalition” of Putin’s United Russia. In every instance, either implicitly or explicitly, this target audience exists in opposition to, or at the very least in distinction from, an imagined narod. At worst, as in the case of Govorukhin, this populace is imagined as a horde of drunk lumpen masses with pitchforks. As we have already stated, this imaginary bifurcation of elites vs narod obfuscated post-Soviet politics and was ridden with dangerous implications. For instance, in the 1990s Ziuganov’s Communist Party was inverting the polarities on the elitist discourse and speaking on behalf of the narod being slighted by the elites, and the only reason the Communists never came to power was because the ‘democrats’ cheated. The explosive potential of a populace being interpellated in this way had to be contained. Moreover, by the late 1990s the ideology of “the upper hundred thousand” was no longer as effective either, since by now there were too many losers and too few winners in post-Soviet capitalism. In short, the Yeltsinist story of “us” uniting against the nominal commu-nazis was becoming less and less electorally and politically convincing.

Naturally, both of these pressures caused the post-Soviet state to look for other,
more inclusive and sociologically adequate ways of imagining its constituents. To that effect, the state could re-examine the Late Soviet discursive practices regarding the *narod*. As discussed in Chapter One, in the late 1960s Grigorii Pomerants reimagined the urbanized educated masses as the new *narod* and a junior partner for the new intelligentsia liberals. Solzhenitsyn, leaning on traditional Russian conservative Slavophile discourse, angrily resisted Pomerants’s post-industrial conceptualization of the masses. Whether they knew it or not, late Soviet liberals adopted Pomerants’s redefinition—they had to do so, because their whole articulation of political and cultural power depended on the size of their audience. Moreover, as I argued Chapter Two the conservative-minded filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov also accepted Pomerants’s terms, which is why his films enjoyed mass success, despite their subtly conservative nationalist messaging. It was again Nikita Mikhalkov who in the 1990s managed to satisfy the Russian state’s desire to speak to the populace more effectively. The last section of the current chapter will examine how Mikhalkov’s 1999 blockbuster, *The Barber of Siberia* fulfilled the ideological needs of the post-Soviet state.

Around the time of his 1996 reelection Yeltsin launched a somewhat bizarre-sounding project—a search for Russia’s national idea. In truth, Yeltsin was trying to come up with a more convincing mass communicative strategy, and as such, this was by no means a new challenge for the Russian state. Since the 1830s Imperial Russian ideologists appealed to some notion of *narod* as an organic, ethnonational base of support for the autocracy. A revamped version of the same notion resurfaced in Soviet rhetoric, especially during World War II, when, to quote Solzhenitsyn, “Stalin […] unveiled the old Russian banner, partly even Orthodox vestments [khorugv’], and we won!” The
1990s, however, were different. After all, the dominant discourse on social reality that led to the formation the post-Soviet state claimed to be “anti-ideological.” Post-Soviet Russians were all supposed to get on with their normal, and hopefully increasingly convenient lives and, as the libertarian fantasy went, the state would just get out of the way. Moreover, this discourse also tracked with the logic of late-twentieth-century consumer capitalism, in which mass ideologies have to be “hidden.” So, the post-Soviet Russian state had to re-learn how to do an old trick in the new context—how could the Russian narod still be conceived of as a maximally inclusive, loyal collective, given the advent of a post-communist democracy and consumer capitalism?

In truth, aspects of this problem were already being solved during the late Soviet era, through a discourse on the Russian high cultural canon, elaborated in a partnership between the state and the intelligentsia. Canonical culture had already been revived by Stalin in the 1930s, but after his death, in the age of late Soviet television and mass-culture it began to play a different role. Chapters One and Two of this dissertation have shown how mass cultural producers like El’dar Riazanov and Mikhalkov became successful by selling canonical Russian culture as an appealing, Gestalt fantasy image to an urbanized mass audience (as opposed to the mostly imaginary peasants and former peasants supposedly reading the Village Prose oeuvre). In the post-Soviet era this vector would intensify through various marketing campaigns, such as the ones behind Peresvet, Bank Imperial and Kommersant. Moreover, we have also discussed how a fantasy image of the pre-Soviet era became a cornerstone aesthetic ideology of post-Soviet urban planning projects, all of which were designed to render a plausible capitalist lifeworld. And even beyond such ‘elite’ products as Kommersant and Moscow architectural
revivals, post-Soviet Russian capitalism also tried to involve the Russian populace as much as possible in the consumption of ethnonational fantasies. Russians, regardless of their self-perceived cultural or economic social status, were invited to both recognize themselves as the narod and also to participate in the Russian capitalist market by enjoying products like Pelevin’s satirical soft drink, “Not-Cola for Nikola [Ne-kola dlia Nikola].” In that particular case, life actually ended up plagiarizing art—in 2005, the company Deka hit the motherlode by manufacturing a kvas (Russian root beer) called Nikola, and actually marketed it with Pelevin’s slogan (“Kvas is no cola, drink Nikola [kvas ne kola, pei Nikola]”).

If the post-Soviet state was to be successful in its plan to consolidate the Russian narod around some revamped notion of the “Russian national idea,” it would have to take the above-mentioned developments to heart. Thinking of Russians as Orthodox peasants was not going to work. Recognizing them as urbanized consumers of mass culture and marketing campaigns would work. Thinking of the “Russian national idea” as a “set of principles capable of inspiring Russian citizens to unite as a nation” was also not going to work. After the fall of the Soviet project, grand narratives were out of style and the state would have to figure out a more subtle, less narratively flagrant way of promoting an imaginary of its loyal populace. In this regard, Russian leaders like Yeltsin were mostly clueless, but there was one conservative-minded figure near the state who was well-positioned to articulate the message in a plausible way—the filmmaker Mikhalkov.

Stephen Norris has suggested that the effective winner of Yeltsin’s “national idea” competition was Mikhalkov, with his 1999 epic blockbuster The Barber of Siberia. This film was a success on many levels. It was an actual “blockbuster,” which
is to say that Mikhalkov actually managed to make a Russian movie that many people went go see at the theaters—an almost singular event during this decade (the other true blockbuster Norris mentions from the 1990s is Aleksei Balabanov’s *Brother*).\textsuperscript{126} Mikhalkov’s film was also produced and marketed with the most advanced Hollywood technologies available, as well as the most recent ‘technologies’ of Russian post-Soviet capitalism—the filmmaker not only used the best Kodak stock and Dolby sound, but also availed himself of marquee projects from Luzhkov’s reconstructed Moscow, such as the Cathedral of Christ the Savior and the Iberian Gates (see Figure 23, below). He even asked Yeltsin to shut off the ruby red stars atop the Kremlin, a legacy of Soviet state symbols, for a night of filming. Additionally, Mikhalkov displayed his Western cross-marketing mettle by promoting the film together with a whole set of “Brand ‘Russia’”

*Figure 23: Casual nineteenth-century life goes on around Luzhkov’s newly reconstructed Iberian Gates*

products, including the vodka Russian Standard, as well as two perfumes, “Cadet No. 1” and “Cadet No. 3.” Mikhalkov then managed to have the premiere take place in the Kremlin, where bitter political rivals happily lavished praise on his picture, granting *Barber* an aura of collective unification. Finally, Mikhalkov used the making of *Barber*
to launch a whole era of state-funded Russian epic blockbusters.

As Norris notes, Mikhalov wanted to say that “Russians should feel proud of their past and of their homeland,” and it is true also that, to quote one of Norris’s surveyed critics, “Mikhalkov was able to do what Govorukhin had tried to do before: bring back the ‘Russia we lost.’” But how did these feelings of “pride” and collective nostalgia invite a more extensive mass buy-in than the elitist message of Govorukhin? Why did Mikhalkov’s nostalgic collectivity appear as broader, as more socially inclusive than the elitist “we” of Russian homo faber discourse, a fact that liberal film critics felt keenly and decried? In short, what was the nation-stitching ‘message’ of Mikhalkov’s Barber, and how did it side-step the problem of having to speak to the nation in an age when national messages were passé? To get at the collective communicative strategy of Barber one has to keep in mind that ‘the medium is the message’ of this film. Or to put it another way, Barber’s means of production is a central part of the narrative through which the film speaks to the post-Soviet Russian public.

The basic storyline, set during the reign of Alexander III (briefly played by Mikhalkov himself), involves Jane Callahan (Julia Ormond), a beautiful American woman who comes to Russia to help her shady and somewhat deranged business partner McCracken fundraise for the construction of his steam-powered tree-chopping machine, called ‘The Barber of Siberia.” Accidentally, Jane meets the junior officer in training (junker) Andrei Tolstoi (Oleg Menshikov). Jane likes Andrei, but at the same time uses their chance encounter to get ahead in her business venture by gaining an audience with General Radlov, the commander in charge of Andrei’s military academy. Jane is willing to let Radlov court her, so that she can secure money for McCracken, who is pretending
to be her father. In the process, Andrei ends up upstaging Radlov’s advances and proposes to Jane himself. Jane is taken aback, because she never expected this decent young man to fall in love with her—after all, not only she is an American swindler, she is also apparently a prostitute. Andrei, however, is unswayed by Jane’s confession on both counts and during an emotional sex scene Jane accepts his proposal. But even after this, Jane thinks she can have her cake and eat it. She continues her long game with Radlov, infuriating Andrei. Everything comes to a head at a performance of Mozart’s *Marriage of Figaro* at Radlov’s academy. Andrei, who plays the leading role in the student opera, interrupts the act, rushes across several audience rows and whips Radlov with a violin bow. Radlov claims the whole thing to have been a terrorist attempt on the life of a Grand Prince and Andrei gives a false confession to this effect, out of vague and unexplained feelings of honor. As a result, Andrei gets sent off to Siberia, while Jane secures the money for McCracken’s machine. In the last scene of the film, Jane makes her way to Siberia to find Andrei about a decade later, where she discovers that he is now a humdrum barber, married with children from his peasant maid. Jane departs and presumably another decade later writes a long letter to her son Andrew about who his real father is. The process of Jane’s letter-writing, as well as Andrew’s bizarre extended confrontation with his US Army drill sergeant, “Mad Dog” over the cultural worth of Mozart, takes place as a parallel storyline to Jane’s exploits in Moscow. In the end of the film, we see how Andrew prevails over his dull-witted drill sergeant. Upon learning of his Russian ancestry Mad Dog declares, “that explains a lot.” This also happens to be the promotional tagline of the film.

Through its plot, *Barber* expresses the feeling of perceiving one’s self as
subaltern to Western progress, falling in love with the West, then being disappointed that
the romance is unrequited, and then also magically ‘winning’ the encounter. Russia is the
object of McCracken’s maniacal desire for wealth, to be achieved through mass
deforestation. Jane is a beautiful cultured Western woman on the outside and an
American liar and whore on the inside. She fails to make a choice between love and
business and then spends the next two decades suffering pangs of remorse. In the end,
Russia definitely ‘wins’ on two counts—Andrei has turned into a wholesome sibiriak,
while the uncouth and utilitarian American sergeant Mad Dog has been cowed by
Andrei’s biological son. But most importantly, Russia also wins on a third count—that
the whole story has been told through a mastery of Western technology, Western digital
aesthetics, Western actors, and Western capitalist marketing. Mikhalkov raises so much
money for the film that he can make a bona fide Western movie star play the defeated
and guilt-ridden American hooker. He can use expensive Hollywood techniques to render
a stunning, authentic-looking fantasy of Moscow from the age of ‘invented traditions.’
He can even make all of the Russian actors speak English, despite the fact that neither
them, nor the characters whom they play (nineteenth-century Russian aristocrats) are or
were ever fluent in this language.

Altogether, Barber’s ultimate message for the masses is, ‘we can spend lots of
money like the Americans, we can make movies as well as the Americans, we can speak
English as well as the Americans, we can market our patriotism as well as the Americans,
and we can even hire expensive Hollywood actors who will tell us that we are better than
them, as long as we pay them enough.’ 129 This is precisely why Jane spends so much
time extolling Russia’s trans-rational essence, its oddities of character, its extreme
commitment to values of honor, self-sacrifice, “laws of the heart,” and so forth. She is an authentic inauthentic Westerner, here to tell us how authentic we are.

How does the presumed “we” of Mikhalkov compare to the “we” of Govorukhin? In subject matter, there is certainly a good deal of elitism in Mikhalkov’s film. For that matter, Mikhalkov himself, as a blue-blooded aristocrat and the director of Barber and the creator of post-Soviet Russia’s first commercially successful independent movie studio (Tri-T) embodies the image of the ideal post-Soviet Stolypinist homo faber. But as a mass-market filmmaker, Mikhalkov does not really direct his work to this elitist audience. In fact, his Barber works precisely by not asking its audience to think of itself as either ‘intelligentsia’ or ‘narod.’ If anything, the political imaginary of this film is supposed to break along the lines of Russian vs Western—but here too, it is not so much opposition to the West or distinction from it, as it is a fantasy of incorporation of it that propels the film’s message. Basically, the Russia of Barber is the epitome of Pelevin’s “Not-Cola for Nikola.” It is a desirable consumer product, generated by post-Soviet, recognizably Western capitalist means of production, to be consumed by someone who wants to satisfy two desires at once: a desire for national authenticity and a desire to enjoy a quality Western consumer product.

The consumers of Mikhalkov’s “Not-Cola” are able to unite not along some vague sociological lines, but as a nation-wide audience that really enjoys this product, whose specific contents are infinitely variable. In The Barber of Siberia, “Russia” is a beautiful tsar, gorgeous state pageantry, honorable junkers, good vodka, vibrant folk traditions, glittering buildings. Russia is also “Russian Standard,” “Junker No. 1” and “Junker No. 3” perfume. Russia is Siberia, Russia is moments of greatness from Russian
history, and so forth. Over a decade later, Ilya Kalinin would describe the mature Putinist ideology of Russianness as a

a patriotic collage composed of […] elements of all ideologies, various versions of history, and ruinized fragments of various epochs, which can be found just as equally in the forests of Mordovia as in the swamps of the Northwest, on the bottom of the Black Sea and in the steppes of the Southern Urals. An administrative unity of territory and shared land—or more specifically the cultural layers buried in it—supply this ‘unity in multiplicity’ that the official discourse of the national idea searches out. The long-sought applied dialectic, which would make peace between unity and difference, is finally discovered in the past, which has been turned into a museum, an Exhibition of the Achievements of the National Economy [VDNKh].

Reading Kalinin’s description of mature Putin-era patriotism, it is clear that Mikhalkov formulated these principles about fourteen years before the fact. He actually showed the state how to do it, and Putin happily obliged.

As Norris points out, in the wake of Barber Putin (who soon became president) was happy to maintain and expand the Patriotic Cinema Fund, thus formalizing the national funding arrangements that Mikhalkov had had to seek out on his own. Putin was also happy to adopt the rhetoric of Russia being “more European than Europe,” so prominently featured in Mikhalkov’s film. And Putin was also happy to downplay in official discourse the logic of politicized collective identities like “intelligentsia” and “narod,” adopting instead a notion of all-inclusive inter-ethnic Russian narodnost—as—culture, which would allow membership for everyone who speaks Russian and likes Russian things. The extent to which the basic principles of post-Soviet Russian patriotic messaging suggested by Mikhalkov have entered the state’s essential ideological arsenal can be judged by Putinism’s capstone aesthetic project: the 2014 Russian Winter Olympics in Sochi. Its opening ceremony starts with “ABC’s” of Russian greatness, in
which a little girl has a dream that starts with her naming cliché Russian items in the order of the Russian alphabet, and then continues as a series of extremely expensive-looking, beautifully choreographed set pieces. Each set piece displays in grand fashion as many myths of Russian greatness as possible—from a fairytale Ancient Rus, to illustrious Imperial Russia, to glorious Soviet industrialization, to the Space Age. In addition, the creators of the ceremony try to reference as many internationally-acclaimed “Brand Russia” products as possible, including Stravinsky, Ballet Russe, the Polovetsian Dances of Prince Igor, Malevich, Kandinsky and constructivism, among other things. Moreover, the Olympics provided a perfect opportunity to introduce an element of ‘Jane Callahan’ in real life: the entire arena is packed to the brim with a captive audience of exhilarated Westerners. And lastly, perhaps in gratitude to their intellectual forefather, the organizers included Mikhalkov himself in the Olympics (see Figure 24, below), both as an extra in one of the film sequences and also as one of the flag-bearers.133
Concluding Summary

This chapter has tracked the ways in which the pre-Soviet past came to inform the discursive field of the post-Soviet Russian state and its stakeholders. I first showed how the anti-Soviet politics and elitist sensibilities of the Yeltsin coalition led a filmmaker like Govorukhin to idealize the late Imperial era as a time of Russia’s interrupted alternate conservative modernity. I then showed how a similar conception of this past, pitched to the same audience, informed the playful advertising campaigns of financial firms like Peresvet and Bank Imperial. The case of Kommersant revealed the extent to which late Imperial categories of the political imaginary, like “the upper hundred thousand” were used to forge a dubious political consensus among the ‘democrats’ who supported Yeltsin in the 1990s and Putin in the 2000s. Section III discussed how Yeltsin’s and Luzhkov’s reconstructionist activities would create an aesthetic consensus among the ‘democrats,’ by orchestrating the fantasy of a ‘normal’ capitalist lifeworld powered by Imperial retro. Section IV examined the way in which a Stolypinist ideology and a late Imperial historical consciousness made it possible for late Soviet nomenklatura to transform themselves into respectable post-Soviet activist conservatives, engaged in the task of permanent modernization of Russia towards a permanently deferred democracy to come, with a permanently looming threat of political cataclysm on the horizon. And the last section showed how late Imperial aesthetics could undergo Mikhalkov’s slick Hollywood treatment and become the cornerstone of a mass consumerist patriotic ideology. Mikhalkov’s Barber of Siberia places the prevalent imaginary sociopolitical notions like “intelligentsia” and “narod” in abeyance, and instead peddles a more universal Russian cultural consensus about the enduring worth of an endlessly expanding collage of
appealing objects from the past, combined with contemporary fantasies of a successful, “European” Russian present. The elitism we first observed in Govorukhin, to which Mikhalkov surely subscribes, is not by any means cancelled out by Barber—rather, it becomes a source of demiurgic power for the filmmaker, who completely masters post-Soviet capitalist ‘means of production’ and thus renders a product that everyone can enjoy. The Putin state then cultivates the same kind of mastery, and demonstrates it particularly well during the 2014 Sochi Olympics—the ultimate “Not-Cola” product for the post-Soviet consumer masses.
Endnotes for Chapter Three


5 As additional reasons for Perestroika, Roy Medvedev emphasizes the Cold War military competition and the Chernobyl disaster—see Roi Medvedev, Sovetskii Soiuz: Poslednie gody zhizni (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Astrel’, 2010).

6 On the extent to which the Soviet creative elites were victorious in the competition over cultural capital, see George Faraday, Revolt of the Filmmakers: The Struggle for Artistic Autonomy and the Fall of the Soviet Film Industry (University Park, PA: Penn State, 2000).


10 For a semi-memoiristic, semi-historical blow-by-blow account of this process, see Roi Medvedev, Sovetskii Soiuz: Poslednie gody zhizni.

11 See Roi Medvedev, Sovetskii Soiuz: Poslednie gody zhizni, 559-564


13 Can’t Live Like This (Tak zhit’ nel’zia), dir. Stanislav Govorukhin (1990; Moscow: Mosfilm; Munich, Filmverlag der Autoren, 1990): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fH54cczXEdk&t=5801s; The Russia That We Have Lost (Rossiia, kotoruiu my poteriali), dir. Stanislav Govorukhin (1992; Moscow: Mosfilm, 1992): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qy6UL82hN4I

14 Stanislav Govorukhin, Rossiia, kotoruiu my poteriali, 00:27:00

15 Roi Medvedev, Sovetskii Soiuz: Poslednie gody zhizni, 164


17 See Nancy Ries, Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation During the Perestroika (Ithaca, NY, 1997).

18 Note that the term “Lumpen” is not explicitly stressed in this film—it is, however, often repeated throughout The Russia That We Have Lost.

19 Stanislav Govorukhin, Can’t Live Like This, 00:41:00

20 Nancy Ries, Russian Talk, 15

21 Stanislav Govorukhin, Can’t Live Like This, 00:48:30

22 See Yurchak, Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005). To be clear, Yurchak does not provide a class analysis of his subjects. However, the
fact that these people were all members of the Soviet mass intelligentsia can be gleaned from their constant references to their student days in universities and institutes, among other things.

22 Stanislav Govorukhin, *Tak zhit’ nel’zia*, 01:36:20

23 Ibid., 123-124

24 Stanislav Govorukhin, *Tak zhit’ nel’zia*, 00:47:00

25 Govorukhin, *Rossiia, kotoruiu my poteriali*, 00:04:00.

26 Ibid., 00:44:50

27 Ibid., 01:02:40


29 Stanislav Govorukhin, *Rossiia, kotoruiu my poteriali*, 00:27:00

30 Though aristocratic and capitalist values have not been easy bedfellows historically, they do compliment each other in conservative discourse: “No simple defense of one’s own place and privileges. […] each the conservative position stems from a genuine conviction that a world thus emancipated will be ugly, brutish, base, and dull. It will lack the excellence of a world where the better man commands the worse. […] If the power goes, the distinction goes with it. This vision of the connection between excellence and rule is what brings together in postwar America that unlikely a[lliance of the libertarian, with his vision of the employer’s untrammeled power in the workplace; the traditionalist, with his vision of the father’s rule at home; and the statist, with his vision of a heroic leader pressing his hand upon the face of the earth. Each in his own way subscribes to this typical statement, from the nineteenth century, of the conservative creed: “‘To obey a real superior . . . is one of the most important of all virtues—a virtue absolutely essential to the attainment of anything great and lasting.’”—Corey Robin, *Reactionary Mind*, 16-17

31 Corey Robin, *The Reactionary Mind*, 29

32 Stanislav Govorukhin, *Rossiia, kotoruiu my poteriali*, 00:16:15

33 S tverdym znakom na kontse, [Documentary film], dir. Leonid Parfenov (2007; Moscow: Pervyi kanal, Rostelekom, 2009), 00:00:45: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMLdc89clvY

34 S tverdym znakom na kontse, [Documentary film], dir. Leonid Parfenov (2007; Moscow: Pervyi kanal, Rostelekom, 2009), 00:00:45: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMLdc89clvY

35 Viktor Pelevin, Dzhon Faulz i tragediia russkogo liberalizma,” in Viktor Pelevin, *Vse povesti i esse* (Moscow: 2005), 395. I will discuss Pelevin’s landmark essay, “John Fowles and the Tragedy of Russian Liberalism” more at length in Chapter Four.

36 On the use of stiob in late Soviet (and presumably also post-Soviet) culture, see Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 249-250.


38 For Bekmambetov’s memoiristic account of the filming process, as well as a selection of originally aired ads, see Timur Bekmambetov, Inna Denisova, (interview), “’Vsemirnaia istoriia’ Bekmambetova,” *Media Pilot Online*, 10/31/2007: http://www.mpilot.ru/analytics-view-1442.html.

39 There are ads about Ivan the Terrible, Dmitry Donskoi, Catherine the Great and Suvorov, Peter the Great and his navy, Nicholas I and Alexander II, but also Alexander of Macedonia, Nero, Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, Conrad III and Ian Sobieski.

40 S tverdym znakom na kontse, 00:07:40

41 Ibid., 00:06:00


43 S tverdym znakom na kontse, 00:06:30


Leonid Parfenov, S tverdym znakom na kontse, 00:11:30. At the time, the most popular film in Russia is the horror thriller Nightmare on Elm Street. The Russian word for “Elm” [viazov] puns nicely with the name of Marshal Yazov, the leader of the August Putsch.

Leonid Parfenov, Stverdym znakom na kontse, 00:00:45

Ibid., 00:27:25


Leonid Parfenov, Stverdym znakom na kontse, 00:00:45

Ibid., 00:58:00

Ibid., 00:16:00

Ibid., 00:14:50

Stephen Kotkin, Armageddon Averted, 170


Iurii Luzhkov, My deti tvoi, Moskva! (Moscow: Vagrius, 1996), 180

Quoted in Sabine Gölz, “Moscow for Flaneurs: Pedestrian Bridges, Europe Square and Moskva-City,” Public Culture 18-3 (2006), 577

Ibid., 579

Ibid., 580

Kathleen E. Smith, Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics & Memory During the Yeltsin Era (Ithaca: Cornell, 2002), 125-127

Ibid., 123-124


“After adopting the idea of reconstructing the cathedral in 1994, Luzhkov invested considerable time, attention, and political and financial resources in the project. […] The cost of the cathedral was estimated to run over $400 million, and fund-raising was an ongoing struggle. Officially, the city government offered tax breaks to organizations involved in its construction. Unofficially, Luzhkov used his position to coax and coerce donations from private and state-run businesses. […] Moreover, despite denials, the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour Council also asked for and received federal subsidies, including tax breaks for big donors. […] The amount of so-called nonbudget revenues directed to the construction project from the city’s coffers remains a well-guarded secret but one city legislator who investigated the question estimated that during the construction phase only 10 percent of daily expenditures at the site were paid for by charitable donations.” —Kathleen Smith, Mythmaking in the New Russia, 122-123

Viktor Pelevin, Generation P (Moscow: Vagrius, 1999), 159
Incidentally, the 1990s were a time when the Imperial-sounding “gentleman [gospodin]” became a de rigueur form of address.

Note, for instance, the statist nature of the reconstructed church in Zvyagintsev’s Leviathan—Leviathan dir. Andrey Zvyagintsev (2014 Moscow: Non-Stop Production; RuArts; Russian Ministry of Culture Cinema Fund; Fox, 2015). Whereas at the beginning of the film the ruins of the pre-Soviet church serve as a communal space for the film’s poor heroes, the reconstructed church at the end of the film is an entirely gentrified site for the town’s statist patricians. A similar notion has also been observed by Ekaterina Schulmann, vis-à-vis the controversy surrounding St. Isaac’s Cathedral in St. Petersburg. In her view, “the degree of religiosity of our society is vastly overestimated. The decision-makers do not understand how secular our public is,” and they also don’t extend to which “increasing irritation with the public activities of the Russian Orthodox Church [has become] a nationwide factor.”—“Stepen’ religioznosti nashego sotsiuma sil’no prevelichina,” Lenta.ru 2/24/2017: https://lenta.ru/articles/2017/02/24/isaakij/

Iurii Luzhkov, My deti tvoi, Moskva, 177-179

Iurii Luzhkov, My deti tvoi, Moskva, 177-179

The extent to which Russian public discourse was saturated by the idea that should the competent centrists lose power, the whole country would turn into either a communist or a fascist hellhole, is perfectly captured in Dmitry Glukhovsky’s post-apocalyptic sci-fi novel, Metro-2033—Dmitrii Glukhovskii, Metro-2033 (Moscow: Eksmo, 2005).


Solzhenitsyn, “Pis’mo vozhdiam Sovetskogo soiuza”

Yitzhak Brudny, Reinventing Russia, 128

For a brief biography of Rybas, see Molodaia gvardia’s site, according to which at some point Rybas was a vice-editor at the publishing house: http://gvardiya.ru/publishing/authors/rybas_s_yu_. Unfortunately, I have not been able to ascertain the dates of Rybas’s editorship. For an account of this former Soviet publishing house’s rightist institutional history, starting from the early 1960s, see Nikolai Mitrokhin, Russkaya partiia, 256-269.


Corey Robin, Reactionary Mind, 16

Sviatoslav Rybas, L. V. Tarakanova, Reformator: Zhizn’ i smert’ Petra Stolypina (Moscow: Nedra, 1991), 17

Ibid., 67-68

Ibid.

Ibid., 105, 21

For a critical view of Stolypin’s executive and legislative career, see Aron Ia. Avrekh, P. A. Stolypin i sud’by reform v Rossii (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1991).

Ibid., 19

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid, 50

Ibid, 61

Corey Robin, Reactionary Mind, 24. Robin channels Tomasi Lampedusa in this statement.

Stolypin’s supposed prophetic ideas about the United States come from a fabricated source, namely Aleksandr V. Zen’kovskii, Privada o Stolypine (New York: Vseslavianskoe izdatel’stvo, 1956). Solzhenitsyn uncritically read Zenkovsky’s text and used it to render Stolypin. Since then, Zenkovsky’s fabrication has continued to crop up in Russian popular biographies of the tsarist prime minister, even though in 1991 Aron Avrekh’s posthumous publication, Stolypin and the Fate of Reforms in Russia outlined the many reasons for why Zenkovsky’s account must be false—see Aron Ia. Avrekh, P. A. Stolypin i sud’by reform v Rossii, 243-253.
For comparison, here is a quote from Reformer, 143: “Он не обольщался насчет возможных союзников, считал, что во Франции нет ни любви, ни уважения к России, только страх перед Германией толкает ее к военному союзу; Англия видит в России постоянно усиливающегося соперника, поэтому больше всех ненавидит Россию и будет искренне радоваться, если когда-нибудь в России падет монархия, а сама Россия не будет больше великим государством и распадется на целый ряд самостоятельных республик.” And here is a quote from Leaders, 127: “Столыпин не обольщался насчет возможных российских союзников. Францию, полагал премьер, только страх перед Германией подталкивал к военному союзу с Россией. Англии он оценивал как главного исторического противника, преследующего цель лишить Россию статуса великой державы.”

Note that Solzhenitsyn goes unmentioned, and though Aron Avrekh is mentioned, none of his critical research appears to have influenced the account in the slightest.


Lidery, 3

Sergei Prozorov, The Ethics of Postcommunism: History and Social Praxis in Russia (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 72, 74

Suverenitet, 7

“Putin vozlozhil tsvety k mogilam ‘gosudarstvennikov’—Denikina, Il’ina, Solzhenitsyna,” News.ru Lidery, 7

00:58:00


See Aleksandr Dugin, Chetvertaia politicheskaia teoriia (St. Petersburg: Amfora, 2009), especially 296-301.


Viktor Pelevin, Generation P, 37

See Kathleen E. Smith, Mythmaking in the New Russia, 158-172.

On the function of nationalism in Tsarist ideology, see Andrei Zorin, Kormia dvuglavogo orla…: literatura i gosudarstvennaia ideologii v Rossii v poslednei treti XVIII — pervoi treti XIX veka (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2004).

Solzhenitsyn, “ Pis’mo vozhdiia Sovetskogo soiuza”; on Stalin’s recycling of Russian nationalist rhetoric, see also Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda, Kevin M. F. Platt and David Brandenberger, eds. (Madison: Wisconsin UP, 2006).

Viktor Pelevin, *Generation P*, 37


Kathleen E. Smith, *Mythmaking in the New Russia*, 158


Ibid., 37, 40

Notris cites the example of Iurii Gladil’schikov, who reads Barber as “an attempt to unite the masses around certain Russian symbols and to leave the intelligentsia out of the national equation.” See ibid., 42.

Douglas McCracken is played by an Irish actor (Richard Harris); Jane Callahan is played by a English one (Julia Ormond).


On the “Europeanness” of Mikhailov’s Barber of Siberia, see Nancy Condee, *The Imperial Trace: Recent Russian Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 108-112; see also section IV, above.

In the words of Putin, “Russians are a the state-forming nation, due to the fact of the existence of Russia. The grand mission of the Russians is to unite, to hold together a civilization. With language, with culture, with our ‘worldwide responsiveness,’ according to Fedor Dostoyevsky. To hld together Russian Armenians, Russian Azerbaijanis, Russian Germans, Russian Tatars. To hold together into a type of state-civilization in which there are no ‘men of nations, [natsmen]’ and the principle of recognizing ‘friend-other’ is determined by a shared culture and shared values.” Vladimir Putin, “Rossiia: Natsional’nyi vopros,” *Nezavisimaya gazeta* 1/23/2012: http://www.ng.ru/politics/2012-01-23/1_national.html,

The previous chapter started out in Perestroika era and showed how a historical imaginary of the pre-Soviet past served as the crux behind the ‘homo faber’ form of anti-Soviet discourse, which made common cause with Yeltsin’s victory and then legitimated the rise of the post-Soviet power elites. Even before the advent of Putin the discourse of the homo faber, as well as the historical imaginary underpinning it, served a conservative function—namely, it provided cultural justification for the rather undemocratic means through which the post-Soviet hierarchy sought to protect itself from potential political renegotiation. The post-Soviet state and a substantial part of its ostensibly ‘democratic’ constituency together made the argument that the nascent Russian political and economic order, warts and all, was the only kind of regime that would allow Russia’s enlightened, reform-minded, productive “upper hundred thousand” to survive the ever-looming onslaught of an uncountable, malevolent ‘red-brown,’ ‘lumpen’ horde. The major question for this last chapter of dissertation is: did a counter-discourse to the one of the homo faber also take shape, both during Perestroika and the ensuing post-Soviet era? Or, to put it another way, did the history and memory of the pre-Soviet past among the late Soviet mass technical intelligentsia that brought Yeltsin and then Putin to power have to end up as neo-Stolypinism—understood as a combination of market capitalism, elitism, a kind of libertarian comportment, and resistance to the ever-looming threat of revolution? Was it possible to extract some other value system from the pre-Soviet past as it was recalled by the intelligentsia figures who shaped the post-Soviet order? Is it possible to
reconstruct a critique of post-Soviet power, with origins in the same textual tradition and social conjuncture as the one underpinning the discourse of the *homo faber*? Finally, to what degree has such a counter-discourse shaped the increasingly distinct and empowered opposition to the Putinist social settlement?

To begin answering these questions, let us briefly return to the dynamic described in Chapter One, in which the late Soviet liberal intelligentsia championed Russia’s pre-Soviet past in the struggle for de-Stalinization. With all due caveats, my dissertation accepts that this really was a liberal humanist story. Akhmatova’s early-Thaw defense of the principle that literary masters and literary traditions going back to the Russian Imperial era should determine the quality of literary writing independently of the state was a structurally liberal position. Thinkers like Pomerants and Lotman thought about the possibility of inheriting eternally noble humanist values from the pre-Soviet intelligentsia. Cultural producers like Eidel’man and Okudzhava forged proto-political audiences among the late Soviet urbanized, educated masses. Their works and performances enunciated both the cultural values of Imperial humanist noblemen, and also lent support to liberal political notions like legalism and possibly parliamentarism. Moreover, due to Soviet censorship constraints, all of these liberal ideas were often expressed through the language of historical allegory. This idiom could easily make its users sound elitist—after all, positioning one’s self as a rightful heir to the high culture of Imperial-era nobility would mean thinking of one’s self as a kind of neo-aristocrat. The Soviet liberals themselves, however, usually imagined their ‘nobility’ as one of humanist virtue, such that anyone could become a member of the group by reading the right books and thinking the right thoughts. Moreover, this virtue was becoming more and more
accessible for the wider public, thanks to the post-War expansion of higher education, as well as the efforts of mass culture filmmakers, such as Motyl,’ Riazanov, Bondarchuk and Mikhalkov, all of whom contributed to turning the pre-Soviet Russian cultural and canonical heritage into an appealing consumer product.

As we recall, in his argument with Solzhenitsyn Grigorii Pomerants characterized Soviet liberal intellectuals’ mission in terms of communication with the ‘new narod’—the educated ‘technical intelligentsia’ class that was now a mass bearer of liberal humanist cultural values and that was on the road to assuming political power in Soviet society. As far as the political valence of this group went, it was oppositional vis-à-vis the Soviet status quo, but the specific direction of that opposition was not pre-determined at the outset. There was consensus among the liberals that existing Soviet power hierarchies were morally and operationally rotten, especially given that they had gone largely unreformed since the post-War late Stalin years. Liberal anti-Stalinism was, above all, a discourse aimed at wresting power from those hierarchies and putting a stop to their obstruction of justice, their repressions against innocent people, their anti-Semitic and otherwise xenophobic practices, and their limits on free political speech. However, Soviet liberal discourse was not categorically opposed to Soviet socialist ideology as a whole, and there was no inherent reason why the anti-Stalinist commitments of the liberals had to transcode into the homo faber libertarian capitalist value system that prevailed politically in the 1990s. Moreover, when the transcoding did take place, a critique of it also emerged. In this chapter’s first section, we will observe one moment of this critique by examining the game show What? Where? When? and the short story “The Queen of Spades” by Ludmila Ulitskaya—two cultural products of the 1990s that tried to navigate
through the debate on high culture, humanist values and capitalist enticements that was taking place in the liberal public sphere during Perestroika and the post-Soviet era. Subsequently, we will consider Pelevin’s post-Soviet critique of the elitist ‘speaking subject’ that in the 1990s was enunciating the *homo faber* discourse of the era. In the third section, we will discuss a subtle critique of inheritance of the Russian Revolution as the historical horizon of the pre-Soviet intelligentsia in Boris Akunin’s “political detective” novel, *The State Councilor*. Lastly, I will close the chapter with a reading of two post-2000 films—Alexander Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* and Leonid Parfenov’s *A Nation in Bloom*, both of which approach the Imperial era as culture to be preserved, rather than inherited. This tweak, I conclude, offers the possibility of a more consistently liberal approach to this past.
The Queen of Spades symbolizes secret malevolence.

Alexander Pushkin, “The Queen of Spades”

In 2002, the writer and prominent post-Soviet liberal figure Tatyana Tolstaya penned an essay titled “Merchants and Writers.” Her text starts off with the lament that “Russian literature is scared of dealing with the subject of money.” The essay then goes on to list several abortive attempts in Russian classics to describe an appealing, honest, entrepreneurial individual. The list of failed capitalists includes Tolstoy’s Levin, Chekhov’s Lopakin, Goncharov’s Stolz, and just about all of Ostrovsky. And Tolstaya’s solution to this anti-bourgeois problem of the Russian cultural canon is simple—to write a new literature that will celebrate the capitalist can-do spirit. Thus, Tolstaya decided to run a literary contest, inviting authors to submit “interesting, funny, and empathetic short stories about entrepreneurs.” The results of the contest, however, were uninspiring—apparently, Tolstaya mostly ended up receiving soft-core pornography involving oil tycoons. Almost a decade earlier, in 1993 The author Viktor Pelevin had penned an essay entitled, “John Fowles and the Tragedy of Russian Liberalism,” which dealt with a similar issue. Pelevin, too, pointed out Chekhov’s Lopakhin as the closest thing to a respectable bourgeois hero in Russian letters. But for Pelevin, it was clear that the morally preferable protagonist of Chekhov’s play is Raneveskaya and her “cherry orchard,” which for him symbolizes a steadfast refusal to engage “in the battle for money or for social status as a worthwhile life goal.” Pelevin’s essay does not entirely ignore Tolstaya’s concerns—it acknowledges that the age of the “cherry orchard” may finally be
over in Russia, that “a change of climate” has taken place, and that Russia’s post-Soviet future might very well depend on the entrepreneurial *homo faber* like Lopakhin.

However, Pelevin is far more cautious about this possibility than Tolstaya:

…the whole misfortune lies in that fact that the former place of [Ranevskaya and her cherry orchard] is being taken up *not* by a productive *homo faber*, but by some shady criminal goodfellas, who can be mistaken for a middle class only after a fifth pint of vodka. Moreover, the majority of present-day antagonists of [the cherry orchard] simply find it impossible to understand that the petty bourgeois ethos— especially the self-celebratory kind— has not become any less banal as a result of the fall of Marxism.⁵

For Pelevin, a new Russian virtuous entrepreneur may be necessary, but his creation is nothing to cheerlead. Pelevin, unlike Tolstaya, does not see the celebration of “the petty bourgeois ethos” as a morally appropriate task for the Russian intelligentsia.

Furthermore, he is rather skeptical about those who would present themselves as this new *homo faber* class in the first place.

The fundamental problem being articulated both by Tolstaya and Pelevin is that *homo faber* values and Russian canonical high culture do not easily mix. The imperial-era humanist intelligentsia figures who forged the Russian cultural canon were more or less united by an anxiety about capitalism and Western bourgeois mores. A century later, the Soviet individuals who called themselves the ‘liberal intelligentsia’ presided over a social transformation in which the *homo faber* acquisitive bourgeois ethos became the discursive foundation of anti-Soviet politics and the subsequent post-Soviet political regime. Chapter Three showed how figures like Govorukhin deployed their own version of the pre-Soviet past to support their *homo faber* sensibilities; however, the source for this recollection was not Russian canonical literature. The preeminent pre-Soviet hero of the new Russian “upper hundred thousand” was Stolypin, not Chekhov’s heroes.
Similarly, politicians like Yeltsin and Luzhkov backed restorative projects that focused on pre-Soviet material culture, rather than classic Russian thought. In that regard, we might also mention that the favorite philosophers of conservative anti-Soviet dissidents, such as Solzhenitsyn and contemporary power elites, such as Putin himself have almost always been White émigré figures, such as Nicholas Berdiaev and Ivan Il’in, who drew their lineage from the conservative fin-de-siècle publication *Vekhi*, which was outside of the Imperial-era intellectual mainstream. Though today the members of *Vekhi* are often mentioned in Russian cultural discourse, they still remain on the fringes of the long-nineteenth-century canon. Moreover, as we saw in Chapter One, it was precisely the liberal humanist canon that had served as the idiom of anti-Soviet resistance among the mainstream of the late Soviet mass intelligentsia. Did all of that heritage simply get bulldozed by the Yeltsinist transition or did it have a role to play in critiquing the victorious anti-Soviet democrats’ *homo faber* discursive transvaluation? The present section will argue the latter, focusing in particular on a curious reception of Pushkin’s story, “The Queen of Spades” in two post-Soviet cultural products—the popular high-brow quiz show, *What? Where? When?* and the story “The Queen of Spades,” written by Ludmila Ulitskaya, one of the most recognized and widely published post-Soviet writers.

*What? Where? When?*

For decades, Vladimir Voroshilov was a household name in Russia, due to his role as the creator, producer and host of both the USSR’s and post-Soviet Russia’s popular, long-running television game show. Voroshilov was born in Simferopol, Crimea in 1930, moved to Moscow in 1943, and in 1954 got his first job at a Soviet Army theater.
traveling between military bases in East Germany. He quickly lost this job for excessive fraternizing with the locals and returned to Moscow, where he went on to work for a number of prominent theaters. He kept getting fired from productions, due to creative differences and a bad temper, and in 1966 ended up working on early Soviet television, which was at this time still a relatively uncensored creative space in Soviet Russia. However, in 1968, as the events of Prague Spring led to a tightening of screws in the Soviet public sphere, Voroshilov got blacklisted from TV work. Fortunately, he still had friends at the studios, who arranged for him to continue working as a freelancer. He continued to design and shadow-direct gameshows in an anonymous capacity, until eventually, by 1977 or so, he finalized the formula of *What? Where? When?*, which became his most successful and enduring project, by far.

Distilled to its mechanical essence, *What? Where? When?* was (and still is) a battle of wits. On the one hand, there is a team of six players, called the *znatoki* (literally, ‘cognoscenti’). They spin a roulette wheel, which lands on one of twelve questions submitted by the audience. Each question is a riddle, often requiring a high degree of cultural erudition to solve, and the team gets one minute to brainstorm an answer. If the question is answered correctly, the *znatoki* get a point. If not, the point goes to the audience, whom Voroshilov also always called a team. The first team to gain six points wins the game. The all-powerful adjudicator of answers and disputes was Voroshilov himself, who would almost never appear on screen, but would lead the whole show as a disembodied voice, watching and directing the movements of a hand-held camera. This particular aesthetic innovation was allegedly a result of censorship at first, given Voroshilov’s shaky political status in Soviet television circles, but it worked well enough.
that he never sought to change it, and a disembodied master of ceremonies has continued to run the show in the wake of Voroshilov’s death in 2001 (today, the show’s leader is Voroshilov’s adopted son, Boris Kriuk). In the 1970s and early 1980s, the prizes for the znatoki and for those who submitted questions were primarily rare books. In the late 1980s, however, the prizes began to mutate towards other things, and by 1991 they morphed into money, as we will discuss below.

Remarkably, over the last five decades What? Where? When? has snowballed into a vast social phenomenon in the Russophone world. Literally thousands of amateur clubs of znatoki have and continue to operate throughout the fifteen (now former) Soviet states, the Eastern Bloc, and post-Soviet diasporas in Israel and the United States. The teams have self-organized into leagues and staged competitions. During the late Soviet era the best teams were occasionally invited to Moscow and some made it onto TV. Meanwhile, the actual TV show’s popularity has long been truly staggering. For instance, the show’s 1986 season finale was being actively watched by 46.8% of everyone who had their TV sets on at that moment in time in the entire USSR. In 2002, long after USSR’s collapse, the show’s audience still amounted to 120 million viewers. The mass cultural success of What? Where? When? hinged on its sociopolitical imaginary—specifically, the fact that it peddled a feeling of partaking in elite intelligentsia culture to the urbanized mass intelligentsia (that is, Pomerants’s new narod—see Chapter One), which liked to think of itself as an elite. Indeed, it is precisely for this reason that in 1990 Voroshilov began to refer to What? Where? When? as an “elite intellectual club.”

The vicarious elitism promoted by What? Where? When? was entangled with two sets of values—on one hand the idealization of liberal humanist commitment to high
cultural erudition and intellectualism, and on the other hand the idealization of the glittering, successful consumerist Cold War West. During the late Soviet era, these conceptions were not felt to be contradictory, because they both had an anti-Soviet valence. Voroshilov’s intellectualism was juxtaposed to the dull-witted, uneducated Soviet regime and its apparatchiks. However, this liberal core of the show also went along with such vaguely Western—and for that reason anti-Soviet—aesthetic elements as a roulette wheel, cocktail bars, live performances of semi-underground Soviet rock stars, and music videos by bands like Queen, Abba and Boney M, which the producers apparently got past censorship by means of misleading credits (“youth band from East Germany,” for example). By the very late 1980s, however, Perestroika was in full swing and the Gorbachev’s modernization agenda was increasingly looking like it would proceed along capitalist lines. Capitalist enterprise was legalized in 1988, while glasnost’ policies made it possible to talk about the appeal of Westernism precisely as Western capitalism, rather than simply Western mass culture. Accordingly, the libertarian, acquisitive, bourgeois discourse of the homo faber was becoming increasingly prominent among the ascendant ‘democrat’ parliamentary camp. What? Where? When? reacted to this situation by doubling down on imagining a synthesis of both value systems. To pull this off, as periodically happens in Russian history, they called in the Varangians.

In 1989, when joint ventures with Western corporations became legal in the Soviet Union, Voroshilov quickly moved to acquire a bona fide capitalist sponsor for his show—the Swedish corporation TetraPak. At this time the show also began to phase out book prizes; instead Voroshilov would reward winners with stock options for the show. To cap off this transition, Voroshilov invited a team of “Swedish Professors” to come
play with the aid of simultaneous translators. One of these professors was Gad Rousing, a scholar of prehistoric Scandinavian archeology and, more importantly, one of the owners of TetraPak. To emphasize the thoroughly intellectual cachet of his players, Voroshilov had a number of them wear their medieval-looking academic caps and gowns (see Figure 25, below). Moreover, the game’s screening was interrupted with an ad reel for What? Where? When? that was ostensibly pitched to Western viewers. The ad made Voroshilov look like the spiritual leader of an enormous Russian social movement by juxtaposing him with huge crowds of people while the English-language voiceover declared:

“Attention future sponsors! When you buy shares of the International What? Where? When? Club, you stimulate the intellectual potential of this country!” (See Figure 26, below). The team of Swedish professors lost badly that evening, and I do not know if any Western viewers were swayed into buying shares of the show. But it is my contention that the point of the whole gambit was to present the idea of the West knocking on Russia’s door as a utopian fusion of high culture and big money—Gad Raising embodied this juncture, while the ad presented Western capitalism as consistent with humanist cultural value, hence its framing of investment in What? Where? When? as an intellectual duty, rather than a sound financial decision.

By 1990, just as the Yeltsin coalition juxtaposed the Imperial flag to the Soviet one, and just as the stylized neo-Imperial newspaper Kommersant went to print, Voroshilov’s “elite club” moved into a new venue, where it remains to this day—a small Catherinian-era ‘hunting cabin’ in Moscow’s historic park, Neskuchnyi sad. Then, in December of 1991, as Yeltsin was finalizing his takeover of the Kremlin, Voroshilov rebranded his show into an “Intellectual Casino” and redesigned its visual formula. The
Figure 25: A member of the team of Swedish Professors takes her seat in her professorial gown at the October 14, 1989 game of What? Where? When?

Figure 26: Voroshilov is depicted as a leader of anti-Soviet intellectual men in a commercial promoting the shares of the 'International "What? Where? When? Club,' October 14, 1989.
roulette table was now adorned with large stacks of cold hard cash. The players were dressed up in tuxedoes. Every show would start with the logo of an owl under an Imperial crown, accompanied by Herman from Tchaikovsky’s opera *The Queen of Spades*, singing, “Our Whole Life is a Game!” Next, the eighteenth-century French aria of the Countess, from Act II scene ii of the opera would accompany a methodical placement of the money on the roulette table in a dark room, candelit by several candelabra, with Voroshilov’s cranky, disembodied voice directing the croupier (See Figure 27, below). The lights would then go on to reveal a tight, extremely well-dressed crowd huddling over the roulette table. Lastly, to the accompaniment of the theme of Richard Strauss’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* Voroshilov would state, night after night: “good evening here, in the intellectual casino *What? Where? When?* where everyone can earn money with his own mind.”

*Figure 27:* The croupier places money on the table, surrounded by candelabra, to the tune of the Aria of the Countess from Tchaikovsky’s *Queen of Spades.*
What was the reason for Voroshilov’s injection of this operatic, kitschy imperial aesthetic into his show? And why the stacks of money? On the one hand, his stylistic choices dovetailed perfectly with the times—Chapter Three has shown the extent to which imperial retro was the leading style of the era, especially among those who were taking power. *Homo faber* discourse, mainstreamed by the likes of Govorukhin, had turned pre-Soviet Russia into a lost object of nostalgia and Russian capitalism was all set to dress up in Stolypinist garb. On the other hand, however, Voroshilov’s fantasy aesthetic went quite a bit beyond *homo faber* discourse. The choice of a *Catherinian* venue, the emphasis of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century style—as opposed to early twentieth-century Stolypinism—all of these visual elements went back to the Gestalt image of pre-Soviet Russia that had been produced by late Soviet liberals in the 1960s and 1970s, as discussed in Chapter One. The meaning of that aesthetic, if we recall, was supposed to be liberal humanist, emphasizing the eternal value of the canon of high culture from Russia’s Golden Age. Pushkin and Tchaikovsky—the two main source texts for Voroshilov’s aesthetic—were mainstays of that canon. The game *What? Where? When?* had originated precisely out of this late Soviet liberal milieu, and in the late 1980s the show was being criticized for selling out to neo-bourgeois temptations. As book prizes were getting replaced by fine china and eventually cash, critical publications lamented that “the *znatoki* have plunged into the material world, and that soon [the show] will be giving out fur coats and automobiles.”¹³ That initial wave of opprobrium hinges on the antinomy between money and culture, and Voroshilov was struggling to reinvent his show with regard to this conflict. And it was precisely for that reason that Voroshilov introduced both money and *The Queen of Spades* to the show.
Altogether, the money and the opera were a leap into the belly of the beast. The show indeed wanted to prevent the look of players competing for fur coats and automobiles. Voroshilov wanted his game to look more glamorous than the sullen, petty bourgeois *homo faber* ethos that a character like Lopakhin—extolled by Tolstaya and derided by Pelevin—might suggest. The players instead would be made to look like ultra-wealthy aristocrats from the world of Pushkin, wagering huge sums of money with abandon. Similarly, the kitschy tsarist aesthetic of the show was not meant to elicit the same kinds of nostalgic emotions as Luzhkov’s Imperial-retro architecture. There was nothing *real* about the look of Voroshilov’s show—on the contrary, it was always supposed to appear as a playfully excessive fairytale site, full of “sparklers and fireworks in the midst of half-ruined, cold and dreary Moscow.” What? Where? When? did not want to stage any kind of imaginary authentic return to a ‘Russia That We Have Lost.’ Rather, Voroshilov wanted his players and its audience to enjoy the Golden Age myth, and to view the stacks of cash as an organic part of that myth, rather than making the prizes recall the mundane reality of the early post-Soviet chase for petty bourgeois comforts.

On first glance, it seems like the opera reference is there precisely to highlight the myth. Thus, on one occasion, in a long-form introduction to the opening of the show’s Summer 1995 season, Voroshilov spends several minutes narrating the history of the *Neskuchnyi sad* park that surrounds the gameshow’s venue. He wistfully narrates such tidbits from the park’s history, such as “over there was where Pushkin and his wife Natalie used to go to the summer theater. Over here is where Ivan Turgenev fell in love. […] In the evening, when the hunters got tired, they would go to this little hunting lodge,
to relax, to enjoy some tea and play cards. They would go home around dawn.” He concludes his narration with a reference to Princess Shakhovskaya, the presumed prototype for Pushkin’s character: “Sometimes, Princess Shakhovskaya, ‘The Queen of Spades’ would visit—her summer home was here, nearby. Can you hear her voice?”

Here, it seems that the show is entirely about the inheritance of the cultural prestige of the players’ illustrious Golden Age ancestors.

On the other hand, however, Voroshilov’s use of “The Queen of Spades” story also implies a more subtle understanding of the social dynamic underpinning the show. To understand how, we must recall both Pushkin’s and Tchaikovsky’s variant versions of the narrative. In Pushkin’s 1834 story, an ethnic German Russian officer, Hermann, whom one character describes as a man “with the profile of Napoleon and the soul of Mephistopheles,” obsessively watches his aristocratic Russian friends play the card-game Pharaoh, but never participates himself, for fear of losing his family’s hard-earned capital. Hermann then overhears the miraculous tale of the Old Countess, who long ago had gotten herself into an enormous card debt, but was able to get out of it by playing three secret cards, taught to her by a mystical Parisian courtier. Hermann is impressed by the story, which offers him the possibility of having his cake and eating it—playing cards for big money, while taking no risk. So, he decides to try his luck with the countess. In order to get into her private chambers he seduces Lisa, the tyrannical countess’s impoverished lady-in-waiting. Once in Lisa’s confidence, Hermann surprises the countess in her boudoir, tries to extract her secret by force, and the old lady dies from fright. The night after her funeral, the countess’ ghost visits Hermann and tells him the secret- to win at Pharaoh, he must wager on a 3, a 7, and an Ace. Hermann tries it and
loses everything when instead of wagering on an Ace, he accidentally bets on a Queen of Spades. In conclusion, Hermann goes crazy, and Lisa marries someone else.

The version of the story in Tchaikovsky’s opera differs significantly. Premiering in 1890, with a libretto written by the composer’s brother, the opera makes two important modifications to Pushkin’s story. For one thing, Tchaikovsky’s Herman (now spelled with one ‘n’) pursues the secret of the three cards because he is poor and in love with Lisa, who is now a rich granddaughter of the Countess, rather than her poor, tormented lady-in-waiting. Thus, almost right up until the very end of the piece, Tchaikovsky’s Herman is a perfectly likable operatic protagonist, very much unlike Pushkin’s greedy, yet risk-averse original hero. For another, the action of Tchaikovsky’s Queen of Spades has been moved five decades back, to the Catherinian late eighteenth century, a historical setting which is supported by a score stylized to sound like Haydn and Mozart, complete with a little classical pastorale in the second act. The stylization culminates with the Countess’s aria, just prior to her encounter with Herman—for the sake of period authenticity, Tchaikovsky has her sing a section of a French eighteenth-century opera.

Tchaikovsky’s two alterations of Pushkin’s original story significantly change the narrative’s ideological subtext. Pushkin’s story turns on a clash of Russian aristocratic versus German bourgeois values. The Russian aristocrat gambles in order to throw himself at the mercy of fortune and even to show his personal disdain for filthy lucre. Actually winning money here is beside the point, which is why the Countess had received mystical assistance in the first place—she needed it to save herself from dishonor, not to get rich. Hermann, meanwhile, wants to take the miraculous advice that had been intended for an aristocrat, and to use it for his inglorious bourgeois purposes. In the end,
the Countess—or the Queen of Spades—has the last laugh. Hermann is a kind of petty demonic parvenu on the Russian aristocratic social scene, and he is brutally and justly punished for his violation of the aristocratic code of honor. None of this context is present in Tchaikovsky’s opera. Here, the ideological matrix is a kind of nostalgia for the hegemony of aristocratic culture. The backdrop to Herman’s tragic downfall is an appealing image of an aristocratic era prior to the French Revolution, prior to the rise of the bourgeoisie, and therefore prior to the social problematic of Pushkin’s Hermann.

Keeping this background in mind is essential to understanding what “The Queen of Spades” was doing in Voroshilov’s show. On the most basic level, the fact that “The Queen of Spades” is directly associated with the theatrical placement of money on the roulette table introduces an equivocation—are we meant to think of Tchaikovsky’s opera, or of Pushkin’s story, with its bourgeois context? Or a bit of both? The Catherinian cabin and the Tchaikovsky references seem to repress Pushkin’s version of the story, and yet it is precisely Pushkin’s version that seems far more germane for the What? Where? When?’s players and audience in the 1990s. Voroshilov’s constituents had spent a decade and a half of their Soviet existence valorizing the show as a competition for cultural prestige, in which the players, the would-be players and the audience recognized each other as part of the same social elite. Implicit in this competition was the consensus that the desire for cultural prestige was morally upright. This was, after all, the so-called ‘secular religion’ of the Russian intelligentsia, which celebrated the love of culture and the noble pursuit of high cultural erudition. The intelligentsia supposedly prioritized this humanistic ethos above their earthly concerns. However, what Voroshilov understood about his audience was what Hermann’s noble friends understand about him in Pushkin’s
tale—that the myth of noble competition for cultural prestige had been vastly overblown, and that all of these people actually really wanted money. The engineers, the scientists, the teachers that had made Voroshilov’s Soviet show successful had been forced to compete for cultural capital alone—what they had really wanted was the monetary kind. But Voroshilov also understood that his audience and his players wanted to repress this dirty bourgeois secret, or even better, somehow culturally to legitimate it. To a degree, this work of legitimation was already being done by ‘bringing in the Varangians’ and selling shares, but that was a one-time stunt and now, after 1991 Voroshilov needed a more permanent solution. Ergo the new formula.

Ultimately, the placement of the money together with the Aria of the Countess, can be read in three ways—it either represses, sublimates or ironically highlights the implicit tension between the desire for culture and the desire for money. The ‘repressive’ reading is the most obvious. The players and the audience pretend to be aristocrats, engaged in some kind of laudable, refined cultural business, while the real social drama of the 1990s, in which the former Soviet ‘middle class’ is out to get rich, as are their liberal leaders, as are the new capitalists sponsoring Voroshilov—in short, the story of zero-sum competition among the “upper hundred thousand” discussed in Chapter Three—is disavowed.

Meanwhile, on the level of sublimation, we might easily interpret the show as participating in the general process of transvaluation towards the homo faber discourse of the ‘democrats’ who ended up taking power in the 1990s. To that effect, we might consider the theme of “Thus Spake Zarathustra,” which follows the aria of the Countess. Clearly, the theme’s Nietzschean message refers to the game as a venue in which only the
strong survive. To be fair, the quote from Strauss is actually the oldest part of the show’s enduring aesthetic, going back to the early 1980s. But in the context of the 1990s, it acquires a new meaning. The crucial assumption now is that the show’s players and viewers are the strong ones, fit to make it in this brave new post-Soviet world. This messaging comes to a head on the night of December 11, 1993. That evening, Voroshilov has two guests in attendance, both of them running for parliamentary office as part of Yeltsin’s coalition, in an election that is wrapping up that very night. One of the guests is himself a former player. And the other is Anatoli Chubais—the face of Russia’s post-Soviet economic transition, the architect of Yeltsin’s privatization reforms. On such an auspicious occasion, Voroshilov makes an exception and comes out onto the set. Whereupon he and Chubais engage in the following conversation:

**Chubais:** What’s fantastic is the way you started. A game for money that can be earned by your mind— that’s exactly what we need, [...] that’s what we’re working for in government. [...]  
**Voroshilov:** You know, someone once said about your leader, Premier Gaidar, that “this is simply a smart person.” My God, finally this country has people being called smart, and it’s not even an insult, it’s a compliment! [...] You know, I think we’ve got over 200 clubs throughout the country, throughout Russia. We strive to become smart people. We’re not a political organization, so we will be voting our conscience. But I think we’ll all be voting for smart people. For smart Gaidar and his smart team.  
**Chubais:** You know, what’s important to me is that the people sitting here and the people watching TV right now are the kinds of people who want to make their own decisions. [...] These are the people who will lead all of Russia forward. [...]  
**Voroshilov:** You will be counting on these people. And we will be counting on you.  

The *homo faber* discourse of this interaction is clear—*What? Where? When* ’s players and viewers are educated cultural elites, and it is *for that very reason* that they are ready to “make their own decisions” in post-Soviet Russia by voting for privatization and capitalism.
However, beyond repression and sublimation, there is also an ironic interpretation of the show’s aesthetic and its social import, also made possible by “The Queen of Spades.” Sometimes Voroshilov’s game communicates the irony intentionally, and sometimes by accident. Tending towards the intentional, there is the implicit message of using Herman’s aria, “Our Whole Life is a Game!” as the show’s signature motif. It first appears in the winter of 1990. But Herman, let us recall, sings this aria in the opera’s last scene, when he has decided to play cards instead of marrying Lisa. Lisa has, by now, committed suicide and Herman’s song is a cynical paean to luck, which is life’s only meaning—the other famous line from this aria is, “let the unlucky man cry”—a rather fitting, if bitter message for the post-Soviet 1990s. And tending towards the accidental, there are the various ways in which the image of the show’s players as either cultured aristocrats or as successful post-Soviet capitalists constantly splits at the seams. The rapid devaluation of currency is quite palpable—sometimes, you can actually observe zeroes being added to the sums from game to game (compare Figures 28 and 29, below). And the players winning all of this money can’t actually afford to buy their own tuxedos. Every game night, they get dressed in the park outside the pavilion, sometimes in biting Moscow winter cold, and they trade a proverb among themselves, “the tux isn’t yours, so don't get it wet [ne mochi kazennyi frak].”18 Or, consider another revelatory moment: the equivocating prizes given to the game’s Most Valuable Players at the end of each season in the early 1990s. Each MVP would receive a glittering crystal owl, a complete 86-volume reprint of Brockhaus & Efron’s fin-de-siecle Encyclopedic Dictionary, and a timeshare!19 On the one hand, a set of intellectual, maybe even aristocratic prizes; on the other hand, the dream of all boring mid-nineties Muscovites. Or yet another, perhaps
most cutting irony: in the early 1990s Voroshilov repeatedly announced at the beginning of the show that *What? Where? When?* “is the only place in Russia where you can earn money with your mind,” But who was providing this money? Well, it just so happened that in 1993 the show’s main financial sponsor was the bank MMM—that is, post-Soviet Russia’s most infamous Ponzi scheme, which defrauded literally millions of those who thought of themselves as the middle class—i.e. the viewers of *What? Where? When?*.

Yet perhaps we should grant Voroshilov some degree of ironic self-awareness. Both behind the scenes and on set, Voroshilov’s show overtly failed to block out a bleak post-Soviet reality with its fantasy, and this was, I think, the additional reason behind Voroshilov’s use of “The Queen of Spades.” This theme was intentionally designed to ‘bare the device’ of his TV wonderland, to allow us to have it all three ways—to believe in the possibility of enduring humanist values surviving the transition to capitalism, and also to glorify the transvaluation of those values into the terms of *homo faber* discourse, and also to understand the irony of both positions vis-à-vis the social reality of the 1990s. Herman’s Aria and the Aria of the Countess, combined with the over-the-top, theatrical, kitschy use of the Imperial aesthetic, allows us to both believe and disbelieve. And to top it all off is Voroshilov’s own subject position. Voroshilov, after all, also has a place for himself in his interpretation of “The Queen of Spades.” He is neither Hermann nor the Countess, exactly, but he does certainly present himself as a kind of post-Soviet “mix of Napoleon and Mephistopheles.” Indeed, sometimes he even dressed up to fit the part (see Figure 30, above). In other words, he was happy to embody the devilish force that accompanies many typical nineteenth-century stories about gambling. He knowingly invites his intellectual audience to participate in his game, he knowingly invites the likes
Figure 28: The opening of the 1994 Summer season, in June. The highest win on the roulette is 1M RUB. The RUB to USD conversion rate is 1952:1.

Figure 29: The opening of the 1994 Winter Games in December of that year. The highest win on the roulette is 2M RUB. The RUB to USD conversion rate is 3388:1. Between June and December there was a certain Black Tuesday, whose name is self-explanatory. 

Figure 30: Voroshilov dressed up as an operetta general, along with his apparent ‘adjutant’ and favorite player, Aleksandr Druz’.
of Chubais and MMM in on the fun, and on top of that, he also invites his audience in on the fun, should we prefer to enjoy our TV ironically.

**Ludmila Ulitskaya’s “Queen of Spades”**

At about the same time as Voroshilov was steering *What? Where? When?* through the epochal transitions of the early 1990s with the aid of Pushkin’s tale and Tchaikovsky’s opera, the celebrated and widely published post-Soviet author Ludmila Ulitskaya also recalled this story, publishing a text with the same title in her second collection of stories and novellas, in 1998. From the context, it is clear that her “Queen of Spades” is set in the early 1990s and tells the story of Anna Fedorovna, a middle-aged eye doctor of German Russian heritage on her father’s side, living in a famous Stalin-era house for writers and artists, along with her mother, the ninety-something-year-old Polish noblewoman Maria Czarniecka, known as Mour, as well as with her forty-year-old daughter, Katya, and Katya’s two children. The story begins with the surprise arrival of Marek, Anna’s ex-husband. Marek had emigrated to Israel in the 1960s and then moved to Johannesburg, South Africa, where he became a fabulously wealthy foot doctor and businessman. Now, on a cold December day in the mid-1990s, after not seeing or speaking with any of his former family for almost forty years, Marek has come to Moscow on a business trip. Marek’s visit swiftly disturbs the balance of power in the house. His daughter and grandchildren immediately fall in love with him, largely because he showers them with extremely expensive presents. Marek then departs, but invites his progeny to come join him in Greece in the summer, at his villa. Mour, seeing her power slipping away, categorically opposes her family’s trip, but Anna decides to make it
happen anyway and hides all of the preparations from Mour. On the day that the kids are supposed to depart for the airport, Anna wakes up in the early morning to go buy milk for Mour’s coffee. During her brisk walk, as she contemplates her impending triumph and saviors the thought of slapping Mour across the face, Anna slips, falls on the icy street and dies instantly. Once the news makes it back to the house, where Mour is already enraged because the secret of the trip is out, Katya slaps Mour across the face, in response to which Mour utters her final words, “What? what? All the same, everything shall be as I wish.”21 Katya then pours some milk into Mour’s coffee.

What force endows Mour with her despotic power in the household? Why does Marek disturb the household’s power arrangement? And what does “The Queen of Spades” have to do with it? The overt foundation of Mour’s power is her biographical linkage to an impressive cultural past. In an early characterization, we learn about her famous lovers: “Their name was legion. Reams had been written by the best pens in praise of her pale ringlets and the ineffable secrets of her soul, and from the portraits of her that were conserved in museums and private art collections you could have studied the trends of early twentieth-century painting.”22 Ulitskaya also supplies her narrative with lots of tiny references to Mour’s Silver-Age carousals. We hear names like “Maetsky” and “Caspari,” tidbits about some precious diadem lost in a card game, the involvement of the famous Russian painter Bakst, and so forth. At some point, Anna catches Mour in her room, at her little card table, sitting “in the pose of an absinthe drinker”—a reference to Picasso’s 1901 painting, on exhibition at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. Later, the narrator discusses Mour’s success in the Soviet cultural milieu as well. We are told that in the 1930s “Mour understood that “the age of decadent
poets and unruly heroes was over,” and so she made a “foray into the realm of the new Soviet literature,” where she eventually landed an excellent match, “a truly classical Soviet writer, a genius of duplicity, wearing the mask of an ascetic but with nouveau riche passions raging in his breast.”\textsuperscript{23} The “classical Soviet writer”—likely a reference to Alexander Fadeev (1901-1956, the head of the Soviet Writers’ Union and the father of Ulitskaya’s childhood friend, Maria Aliger)—had the good sense to die soon after Stalin’s death.\textsuperscript{24} As a result of a lifetime of expert trading on her social status and cultural capital, in the early 1990s Mour and her whole household live in the apartment of an easily identifiable Stalin-era building across the street from the Tretyakov Gallery, where a number of prominent Soviet official writers were housed, thanks to the Soviet cultural patronage system.

Ulitskaya goes to such great lengths to give Mour’s backstory in order to explain Mour’s power as a despotism of culture—a form of despotism that had been supported not only by the Soviet Writers’ Union, but also by the mass Soviet technical intelligentsia’s valorization of earlier epochs of Russian cultural achievement, particularly with respect to the fin-de-siècle era. In that regard, it is unsurprising that Ulitskaya is a typical representative of the technical intelligentsia milieu—she was born to a biochemist and an engineer during their war-time evacuation near Ufa in 1943, that same year returned to Moscow, received a degree in the sciences from Moscow State University in 1967, got her first job at the Institute of General Genetics, and also entered into two marriages with scientists—first a physicist and then a geneticist.\textsuperscript{25} It was precisely Ulitskaya and her peers who liked to play games of inheritance vis-à-vis the pre-Soviet past throughout the late Soviet era. Mour, in Ulitskaya’s story, is presented as
an embodied bearer of that past, while Mour’s daughter Anna Fedornva, an accomplished
eye surgeon, is a typical member of the technical-scientific elite, quite like Ulitskaya
herself. It is precisely this cultural arrangement that explains Mour’s explicitly Freudian
reign of castration in her household—at one point we are told that

...fatherlessness had thus become a deep-rooted inherited condition in their
family, firmly established over three generations. It would never have occurred to
Anna, Katya, or even Lenochka, who was approaching puberty, to introduce into
this home, so completely and utterly the domain of Mour, even the most modest
and insignificant male. Mour, filled with a magnificent disdain for her female
progeny, had accorded them no such right.26

Mour tyrannizes her household like Freud’s Primal Father dominates his horde, and her
reign expresses a kind of collective castration anxiety of the Soviet intelligentsia, vis-à-
vis its imagined cultural masters. Indeed, the tribal family metaphor of Freud’s *Totem
and Taboo* is quite fitting for the kind of familial perspective that Ulitskaya ascribes to
late Soviet intelligentsia social relations, as evidenced by her memoir, in which she
venerates the still living pre-Soviet generation of various *babushka*-type figures who still
inhabited Moscow’s Arbat district in the 1960s, when Ulitskaya came of age.27

However, what’s remarkable about Mour is that for all of her cultural cachet, she
does not exhibit even a shred of the kind of positive liberal humanist values that
Ulitskaya so thoroughly associates with Mour’s generation of people. Mour is no
Akhmatova. Similarly, she stands in opposition to the dynamic described by Zubok,
where the elder generation of Arbat inhabitants and Moscow State University professors
“could not help passing on to their students their manners, habits, ethical standards, and
aesthetic attitudes—while keeping their political views to themselves.”28 Mour’s power
has nothing to do with “ethical standards” and everything to do with the flow of cultural
capital. She is an embodiment of the fetish of culture, which apparently could easily flow from a generation of fin-de-siècle aristocratic intellectuals straight into the Stalinist nomenklatura. Her cachet never made anyone better as a person, but it did allow her to hold on to her elite status through seemingly irreconcilable eras. In a word, then, Mour embodies the idea of nobility in the old, original sense of the term—not nobility of virtue, but nobility of status pure and simple, passed down the ages successfully, and always deployed to keep power from others. To be sure, her power starts to look a bit ridiculous in the 1990s, when Mour apparently wields it in order to acquire French cosmetics from late-night infomercials, but the point of her apparent devolution is precisely to mark her out as someone who is consistently sensitive of where power lies in a given moment in time. Mour’s mastery of acquisitive consumerism of the 1990s has come to replace her mastery of Soviet cultural institutions, just as the latter had originally replaced her mastery of the illustrious world of fin-de-siècle bohemian intelligentsia.

The conflict and resolution of Ulitsakaya’s story hinges on Marek, who successfully contests Mour’s power, even as the “Queen of Spades” ends up having the last word. Marek, the story’s catalyst, embodies a whole cluster of late Soviet intelligentsia fantasies. He is a typical example of a late Soviet educated urban mid-level professional without much love for the Soviet state, who has finagled his way out of the country and made a fortune abroad. By the time he returns, he is a foreigner in his former homeland. And Ulitskaya takes great pains to emphasize Marek’s complete transformation into enviable foreignness— he arrives in the dead of winter without a coat, in nothing but a light-colored suit and “a woolen scarf of a blood-red hue and a quality so superb as almost to turn material values into spiritual ones.”29 He’s got a deep
South African tan, he owns a villa on an island in Greece, and he is also staying at the opulent Baltschug Hotel, not too far from Mour’s home: “it had been transformed over the last few years into something quite magnificent, like the crystal bridge in the fairytale that in a single night spans from shore to shore.” The “fairytale” description of the Baltschug almost verbatim mimics an onlooker’s description of What? Where? When’s Imperial fairytale aesthetic (see above). The fin-de-siècle hotel’s recent reconstruction signals the advent of Luzhkov’s Imperial retro agenda for 1990s Moscow (see Chapter Three). And though the narrator apparently ironizes Marek’s sublime fusion of “material” and “spiritual” values through the red hue of his expensive scarf, the point is nevertheless that such a fusion has taken place. Marek is the old Soviet liberal intelligent, but now with a villa in Greece. Moreover, as a rich Russian foreigner, Marek can afford to enjoy the opulence of a reconstructed Imperial Russia, and all that without having killed or defrauded anyone, as far as we know (though who knows what he did in Apartheid-era South Africa—sensitivity to postcolonialism is beyond Ulitskaya’s purview).

From his luxurious position in the Baltschug, Marek threatens Mour’s dominion. The refurbished post-Soviet rendition of her Silver Age past doesn’t belong to her anymore, but to him. Conversely, Marek no longer registers the whole system of cultural capital that makes Mour’s household obey her. This comes through in his final conversation with Anna, where they get to the subject of Mour:

“… a real miracle how a curse can turn into a blessing. This monster, this demon of egoism, the Queen of Spades, has destroyed everything, has put everyone in their graves. And how do you bear it? You are simply a saint.”
“Me? A saint?” Anna stopped in her tracks as if she had walked into a lamppost. “I am afraid of her.. and there is my duty… and I feel sorry for her.”

“How can I help you? What can I do for you?”
She waved a gray mitten at him. “Walk me back home.” Marek does not comprehend the whole castration dynamic through which the daughter is entangled with the “demon of egoism.” He offers a distinctly post-Soviet way out for his progeny—his money can buy all of them a stay at his villa in Greece, and Anna is tempted to take it, if not for herself then for her children. And it is precisely on this level that Ulitskaya’s story connects to Pushkin’s original tale.

At first glance, it seems like Mour is called “The Queen of Spades” simply because she is old—Anna points out that she has “outlived even Marxism.” There are also some direct references to Pushkin’s story. Anna has German ancestry on her father’s side, like Hermann. Mour is an actual noblewoman from the ancien régime, thus recalling the image of the old Countess in Tchaikovsky’s opera. Moreover, on a structural level Ulitskaya copies Pushkin’s idea of a sudden turn of fate at the end of the story, such that the devilish force prevails and punishes the gambler who would dabble in it. Anna decides to gamble against Mour by defying her, and she loses her life in her moment of triumph, quite like Hermann, who loses all of his money and his mind as he wagers on the last of the three fateful cards. But why does Mour have to win? This has to do with her uncanny nature, which Ulitskaya’s story also imports from Pushkin.

As is well known, Pushkin was influenced by E.T.A. Hoffmann’s tales when he wrote “The Queen of Spades” (“Gambler’s Luck” in particular is relevant, given its theme of playing cards as a demonic activity that eventually destroys the apparently lucky gambler). As is also well known, Hoffmann’s “Sand Man” initiates Freud’s discussion of “the uncanny,” which according to the founder of psychoanalysis denotes the feeling of encountering “the return of [the] repressed.” In Freud’s case “the repressed”
is castration; in the case of Pushkin’s story, as I have read it above, Hermann’s “repressed” is, essentially, the cultural transvaluation initiated by the advent of the bourgeois era. As for the post-Soviet cultural context, there are two “repressed” elements that threaten to return. For one, we have already seen the way in which What? Where? When? tried to negotiate the transcoding of Late Soviet liberal humanist values into post-Soviet homo faber rhetoric—a process that both the show and its audience approached with quite a bit of disavowal and bad faith. For another, scholars like Alexander Etkind have argued that late- and post-Soviet Russian culture has been dominated by constant returns of the repressed memories of Stalinism. Ulitskaya’s short story combines both of these vectors. The manifest irony of Ulitskaya’s ‘countess,’ Mour Czarniecka, is that she is both the consummate aristocrat and the consummate Stalinist, and the “repressed” of Anna Fedorovna (and by extension her whole generation of Soviet intelligentsia) is that they are faux-aristocrats born out of Stalinism. Of course, such a conclusion on its own is not particularly daring—way back in 1974, in his famous anti-Pomerantz essay “Obrazovanshchina,” Solzhenitsyn had bemoaned the collusion between the regime and its nominally oppositionist liberal elites that had been created by that very regime (see Chapter One). The same critique was articulated by the sociologists Lev Gudkov and Boris Dubin in the 1990s and was quite common in the post-Soviet public sphere. But Mour’s critique—by way of her final victory—is less about origins and more about values. The remarkable continuity of Mour’s entirely unethical, self-serving, acquisitive, non-humanist, and at the same time fully aristocratic reign through almost a century of Russian history suggests a different truth about Stalinism and the post-Stalin era—that the intelligentsia that was birthed out of its conjunction might never really have been
humanist, it was always already bourgeois, driven by the acquisition and management of capital, perhaps not necessarily of the monetary sort, but certainly of the sort that led to social power and the good consumerist life.

The basic idea of Stalinism as Russia’s bourgeois Thermidor was articulated by some writers and thinkers of the 1930s, such as Andrei Platonov and Mikhail Lifshitz, and in the late-Soviet era it was reiterated by scholars like Vladimir Papernyi, Richard Stites and Vera Dunham. But what Ulitskaya’s short story stages is the realization in the 1990s that the nominally anti-Stalinist, Yeltsinist intelligentsia that saw itself as finally getting its long-desired clean break with the past, was deluding itself. Mour symbolizes the absolute mastery of the drive for acquisition and management of cultural capital that had been a mainstay of both the early Soviet and the late Soviet era. Marek and Anna, for their part, challenge Ulitskaya’s version of the old countess to a duel, by announcing to her the advent of a supposedly new era in Russian history, with supposedly new Westernist *homo faber* values, and therefore a time in which Mour should have no dominion. And Mour fatefully wins the epochal contest in order to prove that what seems like change is actually not, that the whole story of the post-1950s intelligentsia forging a new, anti-Soviet value system for the future had been a sham, repressing the supposed liberals’ entirely banal desire for mastery over material comforts. As we have already mentioned earlier, this was precisely the realization made by Voroshilov in the 1990s. In both cases, the uncanny “Queen of Spades” lays bare the device of the intelligentsia’s disavowal of prestige.

So, to return to the original question—why did liberal humanist values get transcoded so easily into support for post-Soviet capitalism? Voroshilov and Ulitsakaya,
through their readings of the “Queen of Spades” suggest that on a certain level, this transcoding had always been a fact. In Ulitskaya, this critique is revealed textually, through the uncanny victory of Mour over her household. In Voroshilov this critique is revealed implicitly, through the cynical practice of his post-Soviet show. In both cases, the logic of the “Queen of Spades” invades the present-day context and makes the critique possible—and this is also ironic. Pushkin, a quintessential pawn in the game of Russian intelligentsia’s distribution of cultural capital, suddenly finds a voice in the post-Soviet era and speaks the truth of this ‘bourgeois’ cultural dynamic. Indeed, Pushkin announces this truth precisely to a late-twentieth-century Russian intelligentsia that had convinced itself that its worship of Pushkin had everything to do with ineffable humanist values and nothing to do with the acquisitive bourgeois ethos. In both Voroshilov and Ulitskaya, the “Queen of Spades” ends up working as a Russian classic that talks back to those who are most invested in mastery over the Russian classic. Pushkin’s tale is uncanny precisely because it returns as repressed critique, within a framework in which we least expected to hear it. But the critique must surface, precisely because there is an antinomy between the discourse of humanist high culture and the discourse of acquisitive capitalism, and this antinomy is irrepressible.
II. Can One Check Out of the Insane Asylum?
Viktor Pelevin’s Critique of the Intelligentsia Elite Speaking Subject

“A real chance to join the elite. [...] There will never again be another one.”

A street ad in Viktor Pelevin’s Empire V

In Section I, above, I have highlighted one aspect of autocritique that arose within post-Soviet intelligentsia circles in response to the advent of homo faber discourse. “The Queen of Spades,” an object of venerated pre-Soviet Russian cultural past, uncannily reveals the truth of transvaluation of intelligentsia values and announces considerable skepticism regarding the moral good of a supposedly liberal post-Soviet order. Moreover, the use of Pushkin in Voroshilov and Ulitsakaya complicates the discourse of liberal inheritance of pre-Soviet humanist values, as it had been originally enunciated by the late Soviet intelligentsia. Inheritance of the liberal humanist tradition turns out to be complicated by the morally dubious late Soviet, and then post-Soviet social order. All of this is not to say that behind a discourse of liberal values there were always only calculations of personal gain, and that the likes of Lotman and Eidel’man were simply in bad faith about this mundane social truth. It is to say, however, that the social institution of the late Soviet intelligentsia, whose discourse forged its concept of cultural inheritance, will have to be critiqued in order to understand why its commitment to liberal humanism lost out and got transcoded into a valorization of acquisitive capitalism during the course of the social transformations of Perestroika and the Yeltsin era.

In the section below, I consider another post-Soviet critique of homo faber discourse, launched by Viktor Pelevin, arguably post-Soviet Russia’s most widely cited author, whose essay “John Fowles and the Tragedy of Russian Liberalism” is the source
of the term *homo faber* that I deploy in my analysis (see Chapter Three), but whose oeuvre I have thus far not considered closely. Either on purpose or by accident, Pelevin’s post-Soviet literary project produces a critique of the Russian historical imaginary and its elitist speaking subject, both of which stand at the heart of the anti-Soviet discourse of the liberal intelligentsia that took power in the late 1980s and the 1990s.

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Chapter One showed how the Soviet liberal discourse on the pre-Soviet past turned late Soviet cultural elites and their audiences into inheritors of the old Imperial elites’ perennial struggle to wrest power from a despotic state. Additionally, the liberal intelligentsia produced an appealing Gestalt image of a beautiful lost world from before the Revolution. Chapter Two showed how Soviet conservatives, too, emphasized the Revolutionary watershed, yet articulated a counter-narrative that it was in fact the liberal elites, in the guise of Soviet power, who had brought about the destruction of the good old days. In Chapter Three, we saw how in the very late Perestroika era, the political and the aesthetic vectors of Soviet liberal fantasies about the Imperial past, as well as some conservative ideas about the end of the beautiful pre-Soviet era in the conflagration of the Revolution, were fused together into the discourse of what Sergei Prozorov has called “liberal conservatism,” which ended up underpinning both Yeltsin’s and Putin’s rule. Through cultural products like Govorukhin’s films, the structurally liberal, parliamentarian desires of the late Soviet mass educated class came together with the understanding that normal, parliamentarian development of Russia was “shot down like a bird in midflight.” The beautiful Gestalt image of Russia before the Revolution heightened the emotional tenor of what was imagined to have transpired in 1917—Russia
was both aesthetically and politically on a good, *normal* trajectory prior to the
Revolution, which ushered in an aesthetically and politically *abnormal* regime. The anti-
Soviet democrats and anti-Soviet conservatives debated as to what exactly made the
Soviet regime abnormal—democrats such as Govoruhkhin argued that it was the lumpen
mob; conservatives such as Solzhenitsyn blamed the liberal elites. Both anti-Soviet sides
hoped, however, that the advent of the post-Soviet era would mean a return to normalcy.

From the liberals’ perspective, the new regime would be normal not only because it
would be capitalist like the West, but also because those with the best ideas about how
Russia should be ruled and what it should look like—i.e. the cultural elites and their
educated followers—would be in charge, while keeping away the mob with their uncouth
desires. From the conservatives’ perspective, the post-Soviet regime would be normal
because it would maintain statist order and keep the overeager liberals at bay, while
actively carrying out reforms necessary for the geopolitical and spiritual good of Russia.

The post-Soviet writer Viktor Pelevin became a famous satirist of the post-Soviet
‘new normal’ with his bitingly ironic 1999 bestseller novel, *Generation P*, though he had
broken onto the literary scene in 1991 and was already widely read throughout the 1990s.
The subject-position from which Pelevin launches his critique was, according to “John
Fowles,” that of the “sovok”—in this context a late Soviet puttingre intelligient, who
busied himself with all sorts of useless, but interesting activities, because he did not have
to worry about problems of economic or social survival, thanks to Soviet labor and
welfare policies:

The denizens of Russia (and, by the way, not even just the *intelligenty*),
automatically, without desire or participation, experienced an additional, non-
functional psychic level, that additional space of recognition of one’s self and the
world, which in a normally developing society is available to only a few. For life to follow the laws of the glass bead game, one needs a Castalia. Russia of our recent past was precisely such an enormous surrealist monastery, whose inhabitants didn’t face the problem of social survival, but rather eternal spiritual questions, asked in an ugly, parodical form. The sovok whiled away his days very far from normal life, but not far from God, whose presence he didn’t notice. Living on the dumpster closest to Eden, the sovki chased their forcibly opened spiritual eyes with the portwine Kavkaz, until eventually they were kicked out of the Cherry Orchard and commanded to gather bread by the sweat of their brow. Now, this non-functional appendix of the Soviet soul has turned into an unaffordable luxury. Miranda is off to defend the [House of Parliament] and soon after that ends up in the grips of Caliban, who has taken off his Komsomol pin and blocked all of her familiar walkways with an untraversable barrier of clothes-stands.

With his mentioning of the sovok’s existential state of “living on the dumpster closest to Eden” Pelevin calls by another name what the iconic late- and post-Soviet singer-songwriter Boris Grebenshchikov referred to as “the generation of janitors and watchmen,” and what the anthropologist Alexei Yurchak has described the state of living in “vnye,” a state of liberating ‘indeterminacy’ vis-a-vis Soviet official discourse and its institutions. Prozorov, for his part, has interpreted the same concept as a condition of the “workless slave,” an individual who has been ejected from Hegelian history, but not as a result of bringing this history to its final synthesis of mass recognition. The point of all of these characterizations of “inoperative,” or “workless” or indeterminate Soviet “being” is to identify a particular form of ideal discursive subjectivity that was made possible by the late Soviet era, which would stand in contrast to that of the homo faber. Pelevin’s sovok is a kind of homo non-faber, a human subject unplugged from all of the vain pursuits that characterize the ‘normal’ life of liberalism—the rat-race of capitalism, the chase for political rights, the chase for prestige, and so forth. Pelevin’s books, especially recent ones such as Empire V (2006) and Batman-Apollo (2013) contain
hundreds of pages of catecheses on the subject of *vanitas vanitatum*—the pointlessness, from the perspective of the Buddhist Absolute, of all social pursuits, especially post-Soviet ones. Pelevin’s *sovok* is someone who allegedly had felt that absolute, liberating pointlessness organically, with his “forcibly opened spiritual eyes.”

There are two aspects that interest me in Pelevin’s ongoing and today already quite long-winded critique of “normal” life: one is the conditions of possibility of the ‘inoperative subject’ who levels this critique, and the other is the imagination of the past—including the pre-Soviet past—which underpins the idea of *vanitas vanitatum* as a perpetually relevant conclusion to be drawn by Pelevin’s enlightened indeterminate beings. To get at both points, I will close-read Pelevin’s 1996 novel, *Chapaev and the Void* (*Chapaev i Pustota* in Russian), the urtext for the kind of ‘Socratic’ dialogues on the subject of Buddhist enlightenment that then went on to predominate in his later novels. I will consider the novel’s premise—a form of time travel between 1919 and 1995, accomplished, ostensibly, by a patient in a post-Soviet insane asylum. I will also examine the novel’s didactic conclusion, framed in terms of “checking out of the insane asylum”—where it is possible to embrace an attitude of inner detachment from a given historical moment, while at the same time gaining sufficient mastery over the present moment’s social rules. I will show that both premises hinge on an elite subject, who continually imagines for himself an eternal return of the conditions of his own elite status. This premise of eternal return implies a model of inheritance of the past that constantly forecloses the possibility or moral worth of future-oriented action. Lastly, I will claim that through the repetition-compulsion of his texts, Pelevin comes to critique and unmake the very form of social imaginary that makes the existence of his elitist
speaking subjects possible.

*Chapaev and the Void*’s premise is a peculiar form of time travel—the chapters alternate between 1919 or so and the present, sometime around 1995 or so (in the second chapter, the novel refers to the 1995 Schwarzenegger blockbuster *True Lies*). The novel’s five even-numbered chapters, taking place in 1995, concern Petr Pustota (literally, ‘Petr Void’), a 26-year-old man, who has exhibited narcissistic delusional ideations since he was 14, and who presently believes himself to be living through the second year of the Russian Civil War, as a Russian decadent poet. Petr is confined in a Moscow insane asylum with three other inmates, all of whom share a delusion described as “the splitting of false personalities,” and who are being treated for this delusion through an experimental, “collective” and “cathartic” form of talk/dream therapy. Hence, aside from Petr’s own delusion, we also encounter the delusional narratives of three other male inmates, with a chapter dedicated to each. Those include an angry low-life man named Maria, who is suffering from an “anal Agamemnon complex” regarding Russia and the West (personified by Schwarzenegger, with whom he has bizarre cyborg sex); Serdiuk, a suicidal alcoholic with an intricate Japanese samurai fantasy; and lastly Volodin, a ‘New Russian’ mobster, who dabbles in Buddhist enlightenment with the aid of psychedelic mushrooms. Meanwhile, within the novel’s odd-numbered chapters as well as the introduction, altogether occupying approximately 54% of the text, Petr lives his life as a poet and White sympathizer of aristocratic background, who in 1919 joins the entourage of a certain Vasilii Chapaev. Chapaev, in Petr’s account, is a legendary Bolshevik commander by day, but by night is a grand mystic of an indeterminate, but likely ancient age and illustrious provenance. Chapaev’s entourage includes two adepts—
the stunningly beautiful and unapproachable Anka, and also a certain Kotovsky, who mostly just inhales lots of cocaine, an activity he describes as “thinking about Russia.”

Both the 1919 and the 1995 chapters try to pass themselves off as the authentic part of Petr’s life, while branding Petr’s existence in the other era as delusion. Thus, we should conclude that both eras are equally delusional and dreamlike, despite the fact that in both eras the dominant discourse of the time (Bolshevism in 1919 and new Russian discourse in 1995) is calling upon its subjects to act vigorously and decisively to forge a brave new reality. Still, the framing of Petr as a post-Soviet delusional man is more convincing, for two reasons: one is that Petr’s delusion makes sense in terms of his background as someone who came of age in the late Soviet era and was socialized into its “glass bead game”; and the other reason is that Pelevin is a post-Soviet author, whose whole oeuvre is fixated on the post-Soviet condition. If 1919 and 1995 are brought together in his novel, then it is to reveal some less obvious truth about 1995, rather than about the past. This is all the more obvious considering that the novel’s ‘truth’ about the past is so manifestly absurd—after all, it reimagines the legendary Soviet simpleton cavalryman Chapaev as a mystic with a Buddhist superweapon, who drives a private armored limo and casually passes between the worlds of the living and the dead.

Taking the post-Soviet insane asylum setting as the site of relative reality in the novel, let us consider how thoroughly Petr’s 1919 identity has been worked out from his vantage point in 1995. The stylization of the past happens by way of Petr heavily citing some writers, like Soloviev and Blok, while also being dismissive of other writers, like Bunin, Aleksei Tolstoi and Valerii Briusov. The period detail with which Petr experiences 1919 is quite thorough. If Petr is a crazy-man from 1995, then he is a
remarkably well-informed one. How did he acquire this mastery of the era? At one point, the novel describes some of Petr’s highly intricate drawings at the insane asylum:

From my first glance at the two-meter cardboard, covered with tiny multi-colored figures, I felt my own deep connection to this strange object. [...] It looked like an illustration to Tolstoy’s novel *War and Peace*, due to the multitude of actors, abundance of detail, and the intricacy of the depiction. I have in mind the kind of illustration which might fit all of the heroes of the novel and its entire plot. The enormous story-board of Petr’s life explains on the level of plot just how exactly the man who thinks he’s in 1919 has managed to work out his alter-temporality so thoroughly. The work that Petr has put into his ideations, combined with the knowledge that he had been constructing them since he was 14—that is, starting in 1981, the final act of the Brezhnev-era social deep-freeze—makes his whole delusion look like a particularly byzantine exercise of a sovok who for years has been playing his “glass bead game [...] on a dumpster closest to Eden.” Kanashnikov, the director of the insane asylum, refers to Petr as an *homme de lettres* [*literator*]; he could have just as well called him an *intelligent*. Petr is the consummate well-read sovok, who has given meaning to his life by developing extreme erudition in a useless domain of knowledge—the literature, politics and social life of 1919. In fact, to mark out the gratuitousness of his erudition the text even adds a moment when Petr gets confused as to whether his interlocutor, Kanashnikov, is referring to Nabokov Sr. the Constitutional Democrat or Nabokov Jr. the future writer, and currently still “Vovka,” a schoolmate from the Tenishevsky Secondary School, now (in 1919) hiding out in Crimea.48

Another question about 1919—what makes Petr a *poet* of the times? For one, Petr is apparently well-embedded in the literary circles of the 1910s—the novel’s first chapter describes his random encounter with Briusov and the drunk “disobedient wolfhound”
Aleksei Tolstoi in a seedy Moscow cabaret, the Muzykal’naia tabakerka [literally, Musical Snuffbox], whereupon they briefly chat about Blok’s recently published poem, *The Twelve*. For another, Petr constantly displays his own modernist poetic tastes—specifically, his love of bold imagery. Thus, in his first encounter with Kanashnikov, he finds the asylum director’s description of “a bull locked in a museum hall” an “extraordinary image.” At another point, Kanashnikov’s describes how “some people remain behind to sort out nonexistent business with the shadows of an extinguished universe”—to this, Petr responds, “that is marvelous. It’s almost Balmont.” A page later, Kanashnikov’s describes “Russia, that over and over tries to carry out her ill-starred alchemical wedding with the West,” and Petr finds this image “excellent” as well.

Petr also gives us examples of his “decadent” comportment, presented as a mix of daring, irony, high-brow ennui, and cynical readiness to master the unappealing circumstances in order to survive. In this regard, the first chapter sets the tone. First, Petr exhibits a touch of irony and ennui when describing to his friend-turned-Chekist, Grigorii von Ernen, how he had shot some Bolsheviks in Petersburg: “What was I to do? When I was running away from them, I was shooting back. You of course understand that I was firing at a specter that had been woven together by my own fear, but I wouldn’t have been able to explain that on Gorokhovaia [the Chekist headquarters—PK].” Then, just after killing von Ernen, Petr sits down at his grand piano and plays his “favorite Mozart Fugue in f-minor” (here, Pelevin makes a mistake—the piece he apparently has in mind has fugue-like elements, but is actually a Fantasia, K. 608). In that same moment, he describes his “melancholy,” which “had no relation to the excess with von Ernen,” and puts on the Chekist’s leather jacket, because “despite the riskiness of some of my literary
experiments, I was nevertheless not enough of a decadent to put on my coat, which had already become a funeral shroud, and besides was shot through in the back.”

When other Chekists arrive at the apartment, Petr decides to play their part—he grabs von Ernen’s Chekist briefcase, which is comprised of a large tin can full of cocaine and blank arrest orders, does lots of cocaine with his new underlings—who are, stereotypically, Sailors of the Baltic Fleet, and one of whom has apparently dabbled in cannibalism—and off they go to the Tabakerka to “carry out our [Party] line.”

In this way, Petr successfully starts pretending to be a Chekist, while at the same time taking no delight in his new role or showing any interest in its Bolshevik ideology. By the end of the novel, he will be privately writing poetry in memory of the executed Nicholas II, while publicly performing his Revolutionary verses—a situation that Petr comes to identify as “the eternal, unchangeable fate of a Russian intelligent [...] to watch the Emperor’s final outing with an inner gaze, while speaking out-loud about the [...] callused genitals of the Proletariat—always, I thought, always it will be so.”

On that last note, let us now consider Petr’s Revolutionary poetics. These are captured not only in the three cases of Petr performing poetry in the novel, but also in the moments when Petr must present himself as a proper Chekist agent. Thus, while observing a performance of a Dostoyevsky-inspired play at the Tabakerka, Petr realizes...

"...that everything happening around me is not a conspiracy against me [...] but simply a mystical call. I immediately decided to heed it and turned to the withdrawn sailors:
—Lads, stop. This is treason.
Barbolin lifted an uncomprehending gaze at me.
—The Englishwoman shits,— I threw out at random.
It seemed like these words had some kind of meaning for him, because he immediately reached for his rifle. I held him back:
—Not like that, comrade. Wait. [...] We are going to show them the music of the"
The meaning of “heeding the mystical call” is revealed in the fact that Petr can speak as a Revolutionary and write Revolutionary poetry “at random,” without comprehending or caring for the words. Those words end up having “some kind of meaning” for the Bolsheviks and that is all that is needed to make Petr’s ploy successful. Petr then proceeds to write a poem in the style of Mayakovsky, calling for Revolutionary terror. The “fitting text” is written on a Chekist arrest order and is “ready after just a few minutes.” Petr then performs it with a gun in his hand and shoots at the chandelier at the end, sending the whole cabaret ablaze with gunfire and panic. Needless to say, the Bolshevik sailors love it: “I didn’t get you at first, Pet’ka. I didn’t see your soul. But you’re a fine fellow. Gave a good speech.” Later in the novel, Petr does another Bolshevik poetry performance—once again, the poem takes a second to write, once again it is concluded with a couple of gunshots, and once again the performance is well-received by the Red Army audience, whom Petr now describes as a “dark sheeple [temnoe bydlo]” that “rises after every social cataclysm” and “forces everyone else to live according to its cowardly and secretive laws.”

If Petr is quite good at channeling Revolutionary tongues into his poetry without even understanding what he is saying, then his spiritual master, Chapaev, is even better. Indeed, Chapaev, whom Kanashnikov would describe as a “splitting” of Petr’s “false personality,” is really Petr’s ego ideal. As soon as they meet each other, Petr concludes that Chapaev “is playing the same insane game as I am, but for far longer, with more virtuosity, and possibly of his own free will.” At another point, Petr observes Chapaev, who otherwise tends to come off as an exquisite intelligent, giving a folksy speech to his
Red Army troops and using the word “zaruka” the process. The word doesn’t actually exist in Russian; it seems to be a case of Chapaev’s populist stylization, but when Petr asks him about it the mystic replies,

You know, Petr, when you have to speak to the masses, it is entirely unimportant as to whether or not you understand the words you pronounce. What’s important is that others should understand it. You simply have to reflect the expectations of the mob. Some do it by studying the language of the masses, but I prefer to act directly. So if you want to know what the word ‘zaruka’ means, you will have to ask those who are standing on the square right now, rather than me.

Chapaev here is just as derisively dismissive of his Bolshevik audience as Petr. In his personal life he has nothing to do with the Red cause at all—just a few pages after the above encounter, Petr, Chapaev and his alleged niece Anka are wearing aristocratic clothes and toasting with champagne and refined foodstuffs on board the legendary Red Army commander’s luxurious train car, which is nevertheless pulling a whole division of rowdy, degenerate Bolsheviks behind it to the front lines. All of Chapaev’s mystical mastery then comes to head when the Red Commander/Ancient Mystic talks to Petr about his stay in the insane asylum in 1995. Within the context of their conversations, the asylum chapters appear as nightmarish visions, which Chapaev asks Petr to write down. After reading them, Chapaev declares: “wherever you might end up, live according to the rules of the universe in which you ended up, and use those rules to rid yourself of them. Check yourself out of the insane asylum, Pet’ka.”

Chapaev’s existence and his advice all come down to maintaining mastery of one’s circumstances, however absurd they might be, while also practicing radical subjective withdrawal from those circumstances—hence, Chapaev’s champagne toast “to all those who even in these days do not stop struggling for freedom.” The point of the
toast is emphasize Pelevin’s Buddhist hobby-horse—that real freedom is won in a struggle of subjectivity to let go of its investments in reality. Through this unbelonging Pelevin’s subject makes himself superior to both the “dark sheeple” and the scoundrels like von Ernen—that is, the pawns and the kings of the absurd world in which they operate. If someone like von Ernen is despicable for contributing to the forging of the present, then someone like Chapaev is the one who can survive it unscathed, precisely because he does not believe in anything real, but at the same time knows how to get by. And therein lies the linkage between 1919 and 1995.

During his stay in the insane asylum Petr encounters Maria, a man “who has become a real bitch lately,” and is for that reason well ready to take on the post-Soviet world:

I would put everyone who doubts the reality of the world on trial. They belong in prison, not the insane asylum. [...] You see that Mercedes 600 Series parked over there? [...] Is that an illusion, you say? [...] You know who drives that illusion? The commercial director of our looney bin, his name is Vovchik Maloy and they call him The Nietzschean. [...] So think about it. That bandit might have had ten people rubbed out to get himself this car. So what, did those ten men give up their lives for nothing if this is an illusion? [...] You have to read newspapers and feel emotions when doing so. Not to doubt the reality of the world. It’s during the Soviet regime that we lived among illusions. But now the world has become real and understandable. Got it?63

With his monologue, Maria functions as Petr’s foil, and also generally embodies a kind of low-life version of the discourse of the homo faber. Puttering about in one’s own dreams and doubting the reality of the present is no longer acceptable. As the homo faber would say, moving into the new era means giving up illusions. One must “feel emotions” for this absurd world, despite the well-known fact that it is dominated by mobsters. One must envy The Nietzschean’s fancy Mercedes and desire a similar one. Petr and Chapaev, on the other hand, suggest some other way—a path that combines both mastery and non-
commitment. And this conclusion appears to be eternally relevant in Russia. ‘The new’ perennially appears on the horizon and beckons us to involve ourselves in it, and then this ‘new’ turns out to be rather disappointing, and so on, in an eternal return. And the ideal Pelevinist subject himself has to carry out what in his final poem Petr calls “eternal non-return”: “Because in a world that has the property of disappearing to who knows where, / It is best not to make vows, but simultaneously / to say ‘no, no’ and ‘yes, yes.’”

Now, let us step back from Pelevin’s world and pose certain questions about its structure, ideology, and aesthetics. First off, what are the sociological conditions of possibility of becoming a Petr or a Chapaev, or for that matter a sovok? Secondly, what are the consequences of Pelevin’s historical imaginary of “eternal return” of Russia’s disappointing futures? And thirdly, why has Pelevin been writing novels for the last twenty years with essentially the exact same didactic point as Chapaev and the Void?

To tackle the first point: it is not at all an accident that Petr and Chapaev are aristocrats. Most of Pelevin’s novels are about elites. Pelevin’s novels brim with protagonists and Buddhist gurus who are almost always high elites, sometimes real but more often mythical ones. In that regard, we might consider Count Tolstoy in t, the vampires Osiris and Enlil in Empire V and Batman-Apollo, the millennia-old she-werewolf A Huli in Sacred Book of the Werewolf, or more recently the many hypostases of the ghost of Emperor Paul in The Custodian. In every one of these cases, the individuals who attain to Buddhist enlightenment start out at the very top of the social order and then decide to renounce their subjective investment in that order, either by withdrawing or by pursuing a task of what Tolstoy called oproshchenie—literally, ‘simplification [of one’s self].’ Almost the same characterization goes for Pelevin’s
favorite pre-Soviet “Sovki,” Ranevskaya and Lokhankin. Those individuals are also elites, who attain the enlightened truth of Buddhist inaction by accident—they simply cannot embrace the necessary comportment for succeeding in the modern reality surrounding them.

Elitism is crucial to Pelevin’s post-Soviet imaginary because the writer almost always reacts to the post-Soviet discourse of the *homo faber*, and that discourse is thoroughly elitist. We might also mention that Pelevin’s novels’ target audience appears to be the post-Soviet *haves*, the middle class of Western-minded Russian techies and hipsters. Pelevin’s post-historical, “whatever being” vantage point of the *sovok* is simply the flipside of *homo faber* discourse, produced by the same speaking subject. His idealized *homo non-faber* can “check out of the insane asylum,” he can achieve social mastery. Or perhaps he (in Pelevin it is almost always ‘he,’ rather than ‘she’) is someone whose mastery has already been handed to him by the sheer circumstance of having been socialized into the urbanized intelligentsia circles of the late 1980s. The scene of a non-elite giving up the vain world almost never takes place in Pelevin. As the post-Soviet writer Ariel Brakhman of *t* would put it, the leading hero has to be “a demon with ennui and a salary starting at a hundred thousand dollars a year. [...] What kind of Byronism could there be if you had no money? That’s not Byronism then, it’s just posturing.”

Conversely, the masses, however defined, do not have any positive bearing in Pelevin’s writing. Sometimes the *narod* is characterized as an unruly mob with its own hive mind, which cannot be controlled, but whose emotional waves can be successfully surfed by adepts such as Petr and Chapaev. Other times—as in *Generation P*—‘the people’ are the consumer masses, defined entirely by their “oral and anal wow-
impulses.67 Still other times, as in Empire V and Batman Apollo ‘the people’ are an enormous herd that produces a drug called bablos (from “bablo,” meaning “money” in post-Soviet slang) for a race of vampiric supermen, who manipulate the sheeple through the dark arts of “glamour” and “discourse.” What is absolutely unthinkable in Pelevin, however, is that one should actively try to subjectivize one’s self as a member of the wider circles of the non-elites. All a decent person can do is stay away from both the mindless mob and the scoundrels who would lead them for personal gain. And if one does decide to ‘simplify one’s self’ à la Tolstoy, then this is done not for the sake of the narod, but for the sake of saving one’s own soul from suffering. Withdrawal—whether to Inner Mongolia as in Chapaev or Optina Pustyn’ as in t, or the Buddhist vampire heaven, as in Batman-Apollo, or Idyllium, as in The Custodian—is the only option for a member of an elite who finds self-interested action despicable and collective action impossible.

How is Pelevin’s historical imaginary constructed? The basic premise of Chapaev and the Void, is a parallel between 1919 and 1995. In it of itself, this analogy is not rare in post-Soviet discourse—for instance, in Chapter Three of this dissertation Govorukhin drew analogies between February 1917 and the early 1990s. The meaning of Pelevin’s analogy, however, is opposite of Govorukhin’s. Pelevin discovers the injunction to do, to participate in the forging of a new reality as the dominant discourse of the Reds in 1919 and the new Russians of the 1990s. Meanwhile, both realities for Pelevin are absurd, full of wanton violence, lowbrow tastes, and terrible people. Hence, once Petr successfully checks out of the insane asylum while still remaining in 1919 in his own mind, he easily finds the newest version of the Tabakerka, which is once again located on Tverskaya, and he easily gets past the bouncer by reminding him that “I was just here not long ago with a
few buddies, remember? That was also when you got hit in the crotch with the butt of a rifle." Petr’s ‘memory’ from 1919 happens to fit 1995 perfectly. Lastly, once Petr is in the venue and orders his usual vodka/drug cocktail, he observes the place and describes it in the exact same words as he had in 1919: “the venue has changed very little—it still looked like a middling restaurant with pretensions of chique.” And then two pages later: “the public was quite motley, but as always happens in human history, the majority was comprised of pig-faced profiteers and richly adorned whores.” Once Petr goes out with guns blazing, the novel concludes with him getting into Chapaev’s armored car, which has magically reappeared outside. The fact that Chapaev returns from 1919 to drive off with Petr into the sunset of Inner Mongolia (essentially, Shangri La) is the novel’s final symbol of the eternal return of Pelevin’s problem—the need to survive both physically and morally in a perpetually deranged, unreal world.

Another mainstay of Pelevin’s historical imaginary is wistful remembrance of a bygone past. Hence, while in von Ernen’s apartment, Petr discovers that the place was recently abandoned by “a well to do Constitutional Democrat (i.e. Imperial-era middle-class) family,” and that “despite the disorder and abandonment, one could see traces of old life, lit up by the light of the pre-war era.” Despite the fact that within the world of Chapaev and the Void it is undeniable that the recently lost pre-Revolutionary era appears with the same kind of positive emotional register as it does in Riazanov’s or Mikhalkov’s films, it would nevertheless be inconsistent with Pelevin’s general project to treat this particular past as somehow more authentic. After all, in “John Fowles,” Generation P and also the opening of Empire V, this kind of nostalgic affect is directed towards the late Soviet past. In other Pelevin novels, the bygone past can be in medieval
China as in Sacred Book of the Werewolf, or ancient India as in other parts of Empire V and Batman-Apollo, or late-eighteenth-century Russia as in The Custodian. All of this suggests that the point is not to say that there really was a certain past that was more ‘normal’ than today, and that can somehow be recovered. If anything, the past always appears as a mythical place in which tastes were better and people were more spiritually attuned. Hence, medieval China appears in A Huli’s memories as a time when wise, refined courtly monks knew that she was a werewolf and happily conversed with her. Ancient India from the time of the Buddha is recalled by Osiris in Batman-Apollo as an era when a whole lot of people were able to achieve Nirvana, which is today only available to a few especially enlightened vampires like himself. A similar story occurs in Chapaev and the Void, when Petr is given a tour of the underworld by its overseer, Baron von Jungern. The “Black Baron” tells Petr that there used to be a time when his mounted unit, composed entirely of spiritually enlightened and now eternally-living troops, used to receive new recruitments several times a day, and it seems like “it’s only now that the narod has turned shallow somehow.”

For Pelevin, the point of easier attainment of Enlightenment is always located in the past. Or, to put it another way, the history and memory of the past is precisely what can be more easily manipulated to create myths and models of Pelevin’s kind of Enlightenment. Pelevin’s brand of post-Soviet “magical historicism,” to borrow Alexander Etkind’s recent term, constantly involves subjectivities whose experience of the absurd, unbearable, or otherwise confounding present forces them to busy themselves with transforming the past into myth. In the context of Petr, this dynamic is particularly stark, because it doubles back on itself. As Kanashnikov surmises in the first 1995
chapter of the text, Petr has produced his “splitting of false personality” as a result of living through the epochal changes of 1991: “you belong to the generation that had been programmed to live in one kind of socio-cultural paradigm, but then ended up in an entirely different one.” Petr’s delusion doubles his present condition—i.e., by imagining himself as a symbolist poet living through 1919, Petr has found himself living in another era in which he feels out of place. And Petr’s cure for his condition—his realization that the only way to deal with the absurdity of the world is to respond casually “yes, yes” and “no, no” to it—might very well only be possible for a subject who experiences himself as liminal vis-a-vis the historical moment in which he finds himself. It is possible to say that for Pelevin it is only those who can recall a past under a different regime—that is, the sovki today, or the White symbolists in 1919, or eternal life-forms like vampires and werewolves, all of whom have straddled one or more historical divides—who are best positioned to achieve a sense of “inner freedom” vis-a-vis the present.

Altogether, then, Pelevin corrects the intelligentsia’s myth of its ability to inherit the past. For him, a form of inheritance is possible, but not because some set of values have survived to be reclaimed. Rather, inheritance takes place when those who think of themselves as elites once again re-experience the Russian cycle of history, where periodic regime change returns the palpable feeling of the repetitive and unbearable absurdity of human life. Every regime change in Russia involves the rise of the dark sheeple, the rise of scoundrels to power, and the rise of a few chosen elites who are capable of looking over the unfolding chaos and declaring that they want no part of it. In this way, Pelevin answers the historical discourse of the homo faber: while the latter surveys a century of Russian history and describes the 1910s as ‘normal,’ the 1920s-1980s as ‘abnormal’ and
the 1990s onwards as ‘new normal,’ Pelevin responds by saying that it has always been ‘abnormal’ all the way down.

On the one hand, by refusing to call post-Soviet Russia a return of the ‘normal,’ Pelevin appears as a critic of the gung-ho *homo faber* rhetoric of ‘transition,’ whether to democracy or capitalism. Elsewhere Pelevin jokingly refers to it as a “transition from nowhere to nowhere.”74 On the other hand, Pelevin’s long view of the eternal return of the “absolute unbearableness of Russian life in all of its aspects”75 is a perspective of the exact same discursive subject as the one producing *homo faber* rhetoric. It is simply another version of the typical intelligentsia lament observed by Nancy Ries, “why is everything always so bad with us?”76 and it is only available to those who think of themselves as having the right to make such laments—i.e., those who think of themselves as the intelligentsia. Pelevin’s *sovok*, the *homo non faber* who survives the cataclysms of 1991 and then launches a scathing critique of the new regime, does not stand on any more solid ground than the committed Yeltsinist ‘democrat’ or Putinist conservative. To put it bluntly, this individual is an outcome of late Soviet social institutions, which produced the fundamental ideology of the Soviet mass intelligentsia ‘class’—that is, a large group of Soviet people from usually not particularly glamorous social origins, socialized in Soviet educational institutions (often fairly middle-brow ones), who then for some reason decided that they could inherit the elite self-concept and comportment of someone like Chekhov’s Ranevskaya (or Stolypin, for that matter). The problem is that there is no reason why this basic ideology has to be acceptable, and we have already discussed in Chapter Three the problems with maintaining it—problems that have become particularly palpable during the Putin era. Pelevin’s discourse does not transcend those problems,
because it maintains the existence of the speaking subject. Pelevin’s circular historical consciousness, which has also been deployed by intelligentsia figures like Dmitry Bykov, simply contributes to the idea that this subject will continue to exist forever.

I do think, however, that Pelevin on some level understands the inherent problem with this ideology—that is why his texts so compulsively repeat the trick of elites unmaking themselves. Pelevin’s repetition compulsion points to his schema’s constitutive impossibility. Moreover, the same impossibility is also hinted at by the extremely cartoonish descriptions of what happens when Pelevin’s characters reach Nirvana—for instance, A Huli turns into a rainbow, Osiris completes a Zelda-like videogame level, Baron von Jungern’s men go through a flash of light and reappear on huge white elephants, and so forth. Desubjectivizing Nirvana appears to be the only laudable goal of an elitist false consciousness, but at the same time the sheer repetition of this moral lesson suggests that the point is to give up the ideology entirely, as opposed to trying to “check out of the insane asylum” by playing by its rules. But perhaps Pelevin’s texts, or maybe Russian literature—insofar as it remains an institution administered by the intelligentsia—simply cannot get there. Perhaps the main conclusion that we should derive from the bad infinity of Pelevin’s post-Soviet texts is the need to reform the very foundation of the speaking subject who publishes, reads, lauds and critiques them. Perhaps what Pelevin really wants is to no longer be read. In this, perhaps he is succeeding.
III. Detecting the Political:
The Conflicted Moderate Liberal Imperial Past of Akunin

That’s Russia’s eternal misfortune. Everything in it is twisted. Fools and scum defend the good, while martyrs and h-heroes serve evil.

Fandorin, in Boris Akunin’s *State Counsellor*

Thus far, I have discussed two forms of critique of the discourse of the ‘democrats’ who oversaw the post-Soviet transition, In the first section, Voroshilov and Ulitskaya reveal the ‘repressed truth’ of embourgeoisement as a desire operating alongside the late Soviet- turned post-Soviet intelligentsia’s talk of liberal humanist values. In the second section, Pelevin, maybe not entirely on purpose, reveals the doomed nature of the very speaking subject of the disaffected Russian *intelligent*, who through repetition compulsion finally realizes that he cannot critique *homo faber* discourse insofar as he continues to speak from the same elitist locus as his post-Soviet ‘liberal-conservative’ counterpart. In both cases, attention to the workings of the pre-Soviet past serves as a fulcrum through which the critique can be reconstructed. In Voroshilov and Ulitsakaya, the pre-Soviet past of Golden Age Russian canon uncannily reveals the workings of cultural capital underneath liberal humanist moralizing talk about Russian canon. In Pelevin’s *Chapaev and the Void*, Petr’s delusion about Russia’s pre-Soviet and Civil War-era past reveals the inadequacy of the elitist speaking subject who claims to inherit the cycle of Russian history and his own place in it. Below, I turn to another typical formation of post-Soviet liberal discourse—the concept of the *sislib*, ‘the liberal within the system,’ and demonstrate how the pre-Soviet past frames the basic coordinates of liberal collaboration with a semi-odious regime, that on some level must be opposed,
but on another level must not be radically disturbed and in some circumstances also
deserves to be assisted. My example is Boris Akunin’s bestselling historical fiction novel,

I briefly mentioned the idea of the *sislib* in the Stolypinist section of Chapter
Three, where I argued that Stolypinism is the predominant ideology of the Putin regime
and that it reappears especially clearly in instances when a *sislib* is asked to come in and
help carry out reforms on behalf of the state. Boris Akunin, is not, properly speaking, a
*sislib*—he is a private writer and not by any stretch of the imagination a member of or
mentor to the power elites. However, he *is* among those post-Soviet cultural actors who,
despite their liberal rhetoric and oppositional outlook, nevertheless forge successful
alliances with near-state projects. This is evident on the level of fairly big budget and
commercially successful film adaptations of Akunin’s novels, including *State Counsellor*
(produced by Mikhalkov, with money from the state and input from the state-run Channel
One). Of course, that would make Akunin no different than the majority of Russian
liberal cultural producers, who find ways to carry out projects in the context of a regime
that is neither ideologically monolithic, nor even particularly well-informed of its own
participation in the Russian public sphere, especially when it comes to media output other
than nightly news and political talk shows. Akunin’s mass-media success is a result of a
much freer relationship between post-Soviet liberal intelligentsia and power than what
had been possible in the late Soviet era. In fact, my reading of *State Counsellor* attempts
to outline the liberal perspective on that relatively free relationship. What makes
Akunin’s novel into a “political detective” is precisely the fact that this book tries to
detect the political fissures implicit in the post-Soviet liberal subject. Secondly, I will
show that the liberal version of the late Imperial era, as it has been outlined by Akunin, both enables the post-Soviet liberal subject and also disempowers him, precisely because it ends up too easily underwriting the need to achieve concord with the state, so as to prevent a Revolution that still looms as a threat, rather than an open political potentiality.

On the simplest level, _State Counsellor_ is a cat-and-mouse game with late Imperial-era leftist revolutionary terrorists from the People’s Will Party on one side and the state on the other. The revolutionaries are led by a man named Green and his Battle Group, which starts the novel with a bang by killing a certain high-placed General Khrapov onboard the latter’s train to Moscow. On the side of the state, the forces are a bit more complex and comprise the ‘whodunit’ of Akunin’s detective. The main cliff-hanger of the novel is _not_ who killed Khrapov, or even whether Green will be caught, but rather: who is the high-placed traitor who leaked and continues to leak crucial information to the Battle Group? The only person absolutely beyond suspicion is the State Counsellor, Erast Petrovich Fandorin. The hero of a whole series of Akunin’s novels, Fandorin starts out _State Counsellor_ as the _de facto_, but not _de jure_ chief of police, overseen by his patron, Prince Dolgorukoi, the governor of Moscow. At first it is up to Fandorin to carry out the investigation of Khrapov’s murder. Soon, however, Fandorin’s search and authority get subverted by the arrival of Prince Pozharsky from Petersburg. For the remainder of the text, Pozharsky apparently successfully ferrets out the Battle Group, while Fandorin chafes under his arrogant new boss and is perplexed by the continuing nefarious activities of the Battle Group in Moscow (these involve a few more murders and an ‘expropriation’ of a bank). Eventually, at the very end of the novel, Fandorin discovers that Pozharsky is the one passing sensitive information to the Battle Group and that he has been doing it all
along, so as to kill the Prince’s enemies among the power elites—all so that he could get ahead and become the official chief of Moscow Police. This intrigue occupies the odd-numbered chapters of the novel. The even-numbered chapters, meanwhile, are dedicated to Green and his team. Green, a man with quick reflexes, calm nerves and a seemingly powerful intellect, has had a whole string of impressive killings of high Imperial officials, all thanks to tip-off letters that he has been receiving for some time, always typed and signed with the acronym “TG.” Once Green finds himself in Moscow after the killing of Khrapov, things begin to get complicated until eventually he realizes that all along he has simply been a pawn in Prince Pozharsky’s game. In conclusion, Green dies, but not before watching his revolutionary partner-turned-lover, Igla (meaning, “Needle”) explode Pozharsky and everyone else in her house with her homemade explosives.

The structural choice of the novel, with its positioning of chapters as a confrontation of Fandorin and Green, at first gives the story the feel of a staged battle with clear sides. Sometimes, the novel’s characters describe their conflict as a schoolyard game of “Cossacks and thieves”; at other times they call it a war—Green likens it to the 1812 battle at Borodino, replete with enemies in distinct uniforms and also some basic rules of combat, especially regarding civilians. At the same time, the novel’s basic premise, the idea that makes the novel a “political detective” (as promised on the verso of the title page), is that the two sides are not so simply distinguished. Thus, at a certain point, an agitated and therefore slightly stuttering Fandorin declares that “Russia’s eternal misfortune” is that “everything in it is twisted. Fools and scum defend the good, while martyrs and h-heroes serve evil.” Indeed, Green is more a “hero” than “scum.” He and most of his Battle Group are not wantonly brutal. Green’s moral flaws, which ultimately
prove fatal, are his naiveté, arrogance and his fundamental irrationality. On the level of naiveté, we are meant to smile dismissively at Green’s “theoretical” musings, such as “What will we have to do with people like Kozyr [a professional bank robber - PK] in a free, harmonious society?” Green answers that

…there will remain dangerous professions that will require people of an adventuring sort. [...] They will delve to the bottom of the seas, they will conquer unreachable mountain peaks, they will experiment with flying apparatuses. And later, after another fifty years, we will have to explore other planets. 82

Green’s musings here recall Soviet propaganda, in particular the Stalinist 1930s, with its marquee mass-media projects such as the conquest of the stratosphere and so forth. The fact that Green consistently refers to himself as a “man of steel”83 brings the point home—that he is a kind of naïve proto-Stalinist type. He is not outright evil, but we should judge him for failing to realize that his ideas about the harmonious future society might instead bring great social evil.

On other occasions, we learn about Green’s other failings. For instance, we find out about how his sense of self-importance motivates his revolutionary activities, so much so that even when he does an honorable thing by defending his town’s Jewish quarter from a pogrom in 1881, the narrator tells us of his disappointment that “fate had prepared him [...] not for a blinding flash that would rise up out of the wheels of a gilded [Imperial] carriage and shake the whole world, but a pointless death [...] for the sake of pitiful, uninteresting people, with whom he had nothing in common.”84 Green also uses synesthesia to sort out friends from foes—another flaw, which gets him killed. At the beginning of the novel, we are told that in Green’s view, “everything in the world has its color, all objects, concepts and people [...] Green never tried to figure out why
[something] receives the color that it does for him—he simply received it as knowledge for future reference, and it rarely got him in trouble, at least in the context of people."\textsuperscript{85} Whether or not Green’s synesthesia has been successful in the past, it certainly fails him now, twice. On the first occasion, Green greets the high-end prostitute Julie who has apparently arrived to help him rob a bank, and perceives her as “emerald, light and celebratory. [...] were Green’s fate to have turned out differently, he would likely have fallen in love with such a woman.”\textsuperscript{86} On the second occasion, he meets Rakhmet, a member of his Battle Group who had just been apprehended and released by the Okhranka (the Imperial Era’s secret security services). The color of Rakhmet’s soul after his run-in with the law is apparently still the same: “Rakhmet’s gaze was clear, brave, even insouciant. And his color remained the same, cornflower-like. Traitorous blueness did not get any thicker.”\textsuperscript{87} Green is wrong about both Rakhmet and Julie. Rakhmet is, in fact, a traitor, and Green only finds out about it from his secret source, “TG,” i.e. Prince Pozharsky, who had turned Rakhmet into an Okhranka spy and then sold him out to Green on purpose. And as for Julie, in the end we learn that she was Pozharsky’s lover all along and was the one leaving Pozharsky’s “TG” notes for Green.

Green’s synesthesia is a foil for Fandorin’s hyper-rational “deductive method.” Green’s unexamined arrogance is a foil for Fandorin’s constant self-examination of his own motives in serving the state—this point is driven home by the opening of Fandorin’s first chapter, in which the State Counsellor tries to figure out why he serves “odious [...] or stupid” members of the state like Khrapov—is it because of a sense of duty, or because of “careerist calculations,” he wonders.\textsuperscript{88} Lastly, Green’s political utopian naiveté is a foil for Fandorin’s complicated feelings about his own line of work. Fandorin is willing to
entertain many of Pozharsky’s justifications for the need for unscrupulous actions for the sake of national security. He stays quiet when the Prince explains to an underling that “our state is unjust and unclean. But it’s better like this than mutiny, blood and chaos. […] You and I are janitors. We clean outhouses, so that shit doesn’t pour out onto the street.”

On another occasion, Fandorin objects to Okhranka arrest methods, but once the operation’s director, Myl’nikov successfully apprehends Rakhmet, Fandorin “feels himself obliged” to this “unpleasant, but not dumb, not at all dumb” man. Even so, Fandorin puzzles as to “why any business involving politics always leaves a taste of rottenness and dirt,” and he also expresses his own desire for maximally moral action on behalf of the state. Fandorin too thinks of a janitorial metaphor: “a good groundskeeper [dvornik] is always in a snow-white apron, because he doesn’t gather dirt with his hands […] but works with a broom and a shovel, and knows how to use them correctly.”

Given his personal qualities, and particularly his desire for pursuing national security goals in the most honorable way possible, Fandorin is obviously the ideal liberal hero in Akunin’s eyes. And in the end, that is why Fandorin walks away from government service. Once Fandorin realizes that the Battle Group had been led by the Prince all along, Pozharsky’s explanation— that he was using the Battle Group to kill off incompetent elites to clear the way for much-needed reforms in Russia— is unacceptable. Then, once Pozharsky gets hoisted on his own petard because Green has figured him out, Fandorin refuses the offer to become official chief of Moscow police, because his new boss, Grand Prince Simeon will not condemn Pozharsky’s actions, nor even acknowledge them, all for the sake of maintaining “the prestige of power,” which is “more important than anything else.” This is Fandorin’s red line. Occasional Okhranka double-dealing
had been tolerable; murder of incompetent bureaucrats by means of revolutionaries is not. It is also for this reason that Fandorin allows Pozharsky to be hoisted by his own petard—because “evil shall consume evil,” i.e. Pozharsky’s self-created Battle Group shall kill him. But to make this ending tie up, the novel has to introduce not one but two *deus ex machina* devices, which are not readily apparent, but are ideologically significant.

At the end of the novel, Pozharsky dies at the hands of Green and Igla, because the revolutionaries have figured out the mystery of “TG” on their own and have captured Julie. Fandorin *also* knows that Green and Igla know, and he also knows that they have laid a trap for the Prince. Green then confronts Pozharsky about his double-dealing, to which the Prince responds that no one will believe him, and suggests that the State Counsellor “keep quiet” so as “to keep your dignity, which is so valuable to you.”

Meanwhile, Pozharsky himself is on the way to apprehend Green, not realizing that he is walking into a trap. Presumably, if Pozharsky had acted differently with regards to Fandorin, the State Counsellor might have considered telling him about the trap, but no such luck. However, here the novel presents a subtle contingency. By letting Pozharsky walk into Green’s trap Fandorin has apparently accepted that he would rather passively tolerate the revolutionaries’ evil, than abet the evil of Pozharsky. The State Counsellor does not know that Pozharsky will outwit Green somewhat, resulting in their mutual deaths. Green, too, does not know that his side is doomed. Once Pozharsky is under his gun and tells him the truth about “TG,” Green feels forlorn and wonders, “how should one live on” and “knows that it will be difficult to find the answer.” At this point, Green is about to execute Pozharsky, but suddenly, out of nowhere, Julie leaps for Green’s gun. Pozharsky reacts quickly, whips out his own gun and shoots the revolutionary. Then,
after watching the whole scene unfold, Iglá activates her bomb and kills everyone in the
room. And thus, “life ended just as it should have—with a momentous fiery flash.”94 The
Battle Group pulls off its final assassination of the new Chief of Police, and Fandorin also
wins—the cynical rogue agent Pozharsky has been killed off by his own revolutionary
creation, and the Battle Group, too, died with him.

Julie’s action miraculously achieves political equilibrium for the novel. Fandorin
had been ready to let the revolutionaries live another day, but now he doesn’t have to live
the consequences of this outcome. But there is also a second deus ex machina in the last
scene: Pozharsky’s confession to Green. Fandorin, if we recall, had let Pozharsky go to
his death because the latter was a bit too cynical in his methods. In principle, however,
Fandorin would probably agree that the Imperial bureaucracy could use some fresh air.
But now, in the last pages of the last chapter of the novel we suddenly find out that
Pozharsky is quite a bit worse than he had let on. In his final conversation with Green the
Prince reveals the full extent of his careerist selfishness. We learn that General Khrapov
was not killed off for being an ossified idiot, but for being Pozharsky’s rival, “who
couldn’t stand me and did everything in his power to block my career.” The Moscow-
based Gendarmerie and Okhranka chiefs whom Green killed with Pozharsky’s help also
weren’t eliminated because they were ‘bad’—the former died “because of a dirty trick”
he played on the Prince; the latter died because he was about to capture the Battle Group
on his own, which “would be unfair” to the Prince. And just to make himself look even
more odious, Pozharsky also mentions two more murders by the Battle Group, which
happened prior to the novel’s action—Green apparently was used as a tool for killing a
romantic rival of Pozharsky’s Petersburg boss, plus a young career rival “who was
blocking my sunshine.” So, in the end, it turns out that Pozharsky was lying to Fandorin—he was not at all a cynical exponent of government killings for the sake of national security, he was simply eliminating people who were in his way.

But why does Akunin introduce this extra bit of characterization for Pozharsky, at the very last moment? I think he does it because if Pozharsky really had been acting out of misguided national security concerns, then he wouldn’t have necessarily deserved to die. It is my sense that Akunin’s “political detective” novel instinctively detects the boundaries of Fandorin’s ‘liberalism-within-the-system” and finds them wanting, but does not quite know how to verbalize its discomfort and papers over the mess by neatly killing off all the ‘bad guys.’ To get at this discomfort, let us consider Fandorin’s literary roots. Fandorin is a scion of the sensibilities of late Soviet liberals like Eidel’man and Okudzhava (see Chapter One), particularly their commitment to legalism. “Liberal institutions,” in Eidel’man’s reading of Lunin, were above all defined by standardized and transparent legal norms, and this is clearly Fandorin’s political ideal as well. He serves his state because he believes that the implementation of such norms in it is possible, albeit in the near future. He quits once it becomes clear to him that the state will remain too extra-legal and non-transparent for his liking. At the same time, Fandorin (and Akunin) are also heirs of late Soviet and Perestroika-era ‘liberal conservative’ discourse opposing the Russian Revolution. It has been observed that much of the characterization of Akunin’s revolutionaries is derived from Yuri Trifonov’s 1973 novel about People’s Will terrorists, Impatience [Neterpenie]—unsurprisingly, Trifonov’s conclusion in that novel had been that the radicals’ commitment to the revolutionary ethos of “impatience” had been a bad idea. Govorukhin’s perspective on the Revolution is also relevant for
Fandorin’s political imaginary. Fandorin agrees with Pozharsky when the Prince explains to him that “we are a thin line, holding back an angry and dumb elemental force.” Fandorin agrees that “a revolution will throw [our state] backwards to Ivan the Terrible,” and that “there will still be no justice, but just new thieves, and once again they will have everything and others nothing.” Fandorin agrees with Pozharsky that “time is ticking and Russia has very little of it left.” It is true that Fandorin himself never says such things, but when Pozharsky points them out the State Counsellor keeps quiet, because these arguments are convincing. Indeed, they are so convincing that they provide enough cover for Pozharsky to almost let the Prince get away with it.

Pozharsky’s perniciousness turns on the fact that ideologically, he is not wrong. His rationale is precisely what makes Fandorin lament that in Russia “Fools and scum defend the good, while martyrs and h-heroes serve evil.” And Akunin’s solution to this quandary is garbled. He cannot abide the Revolution, so he has to kill off his revolutionaries. At the same time, he cannot disagree with Pozharsky outright. Indeed, he endows Pozharsky with preternatural prescience about Russia’s coming post-Revolutionary Soviet era, with its “new thieves” and “no justice.” So, Akunin’s solution is a deus ex machina for his own unsettled conscience. The liberal writer is profoundly discomforted by the idea that on the one hand he cannot give up the post-Soviet liberal-conservative mainstream perspective on the evil of Russian Revolution, and that on the other hand he knows very well that this perspective is precisely what enables cynical state manipulators like Pozharsky to outwit righteous liberals like Fandorin. Much simpler, then, to turn Pozharsky into an entirely self-serving villain at the end, rather than keeping him around as a Faustian force ‘that does good.’ And that same trick also makes it much
simpler to have Fandorin walk away from the state to save his clear conscience. Akunin *knows* that Fandorin has to walk away, he *knows* that the national-security rationale of preventing revolution does not mix with proper liberalism. But it is much easier for us to accept Fandorin walking away, once we know that Posharsky murdered a bunch of rivals in power and was not at all interested in ‘clearing the way’ of incompetent Imperial bureaucrats for the sake of the state.

Ultimately, the “politics” that Akunin “detects” in his mass-market historical fiction novel lie in the fact that in post-Soviet Russia, the rhetoric of national security regularly acquires liberal allies for cynical authoritarian leaders. This alliance is made possible by a shared ‘liberal-conservative’ discourse on the Russian Revolution as a kind of eternal telos of overly left-leaning politics in Russia. The Russian Revolution functions as the undisputed futurity of Akunin’s Imperial-era characters. The wise villains know it, but so do positive characters. Even twenty-something underlings opine that “Russia awaits monstrous tribulations” if the gradualist Imperial state enlightenment project stalls. And all Fandorin ever does, vis-a-vis these ideas, is listen along with us, the readers. In all cases we cannot but agree that the ideas and the prognoses about Russia’s looming fate are correct. What we do not hear in this constant din of forthcoming history, however, is that the Revolution will not *have to* turn out the way that it will. The basic argument of 1920s and 1930s leftists—‘when did it all go wrong?’—is simply not an argument for Akunin and his reader base. In their historical imaginary, there is no point where the Revolution could have gone *right*, and that is why it is undoubtedly, manifestly evil, despite the fact that it is served by “martyrs and h-heroes.” And needless to say, such a conceptualization of political opposition puts major dampers on just how a good
liberal should resist the odious state today.

But why does Fandorin only ever listen to these ideas? Why doesn’t he ever respond with his own, and why doesn’t he ever voice the same dire prognoses? It is my sense that his silent, detective posture subtly pushes Akunin’s novel to the point of almost realizing that the future does not have to be like this. With Fandorin’s quiet gestures and also with The State Counsellor’s symptomatic need for a deus ex machine at the end, Akunin’s novel almost crosses the threshold of where this post-Soviet popular writer’s moderate Russian liberalism would end, and a more left-wing form of discourse on power, with more investment in the contingency of the future, would begin.
IV. A Russia That They Have Lost

*These people are ancient Russia for us. We’re not from it, we’re from the Soviet one.*

Leonid Parfenov, *A Nation in Bloom*101

The major issue of this dissertation as a whole has been the problem of genealogy in Russian liberal cultural discourse. Easy historical analogies have yielded an extremely problematic historical self-image for both late- and post-Soviet cultural elites, but as we have already seen in Chapter One, a number of liberal figures always understood the tenuousness of their peers’ strategies of inheritance. For instance, despite the fact that thinkers like Pomerants and Lotman wanted to outline some mechanism through which they could inherit the imperial intelligentsia’s ethical comportment or their social role vis-a-vis the *narod*, both of these individuals had their doubts about this operation. They recognized that in their modern social context establishing communion with imperial history and aristocratic cultural elites would not be easy. I also concluded Chapter One with the figure of the ‘bad bard’ in Okudzhava’s *Gulp of Freedom*. The ‘bad bard,’ I originally argued, arose from an anxiety within Okudzhava’s communicative strategy, in which political concord between the liberal author and the liberal audience was assumed to exist on its own, silently, because ‘everyone already knows everything.’ The ‘bad bard’ is the communicator who miscalculates his audience. While this figure doesn’t explicitly point to the problem of inheritance, it does implicitly suggest that assumed easy historical allusions, in which ‘everyone already knows everything,’ may be more trouble than they are worth.

As I have argued in Chapter Three, by the early 1990s the discourse of pre-Soviet
inheritance was well on its way to forging the legitimacy of a new, and not particularly liberal post-Soviet order. Meanwhile, sections I-III of this chapter have shown how a liberal critique sometimes consciously and sometimes instinctively arise with regards to post-Soviet deployments of the imperial past. Altogether, they suggest that the whole discourse of historical inheritance must be dismantled for post-Soviet liberal discourse to rediscover its “power of resistance” (to borrow Lipovetsky’s term) vis-a-vis the conservative discourse of Putinism. Дismantling that discourse would have to involve realizing two concepts: 1) that the pre-Soviet intelligentsia’s subject-position and social imaginary is not our own, and should not necessarily be reclaimed; and 2) that the ‘future’ of the Revolution and its consequences for the imperial intelligenty is also not our own. Accepting these two formulations would mean editing the formula of “Russia That We Have Lost.” For post-Soviet liberal discourse to be a counterweight to Putinist conservatism, the perspective on the Imperial era will have to change to the “Russia That They Have Lost,” with the recognition that making this past speak to “us” is no easy task.

Today, the “Russia That They Have Lost” is an easier perspective to maintain than it had been in the 1990s. Chapter Three has shown how in the early post-Soviet era, massive state-funded restorative nostalgia projects, from Luzhkov’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior to Mikhalkov’s Barber of Siberia appeared to take shape with mass consent. Certainly, there were always ironists like Pelevin, who joked about “a respectable Lord for gentlemen of respect” and “not-Cola for Nikola,” but the blockbuster success of films like Barber generally made it seem like statist investment in glittering imperial retro was the right strategy. In this regard, Stephen Norris has argued that Mikhalkov’s Barber ushered in a whole era of successful “patriotic blockbusters,” which were made possible
through a productive working relationship between prominent post-Soviet studio heads, such as Mikhalkov and Karen Shakhnazarov at Mosfilm, and state resources, disbursed through outfits like Channel One and the Patriotic Film Fund, among others. Incidentally, the 2005 adaptation of Akunin’s *State Counsellor* was produced in precisely such a way—at Mikhalkov’s studios, shot on Shakhnazarov’s historical set, and it was quite successful at the box office (though at the cost of removing almost all traces of the novel’s liberal ambivalence regarding the state).  

In the wake of the Bolotnaya protest movement, however, a prominent discursive position aimed at critiquing the social imaginary of both the Russian state and the liberal opposition has emerged. The most succinct summation of this critique is captured by the mainstream impact of the radical neo-avant-garde poet Pavel Arsen’ev’s protest slogan from December 10, 2011, “You Do Not Even Represent Us/You Cannot Even Imagine Us [*Vy nas dazhe ne predstavliaete*].” The fact that Arsen’ev’s slogan “went viral” during the protest winter indicates the extent to which the contemporary Russian liberal self-consciousness was at that moment finally ready on a collective scale to put in question the “you” and the “us,” the collective identities that have framed relations between the Russian state and the liberal opposition possibly for as long as sixty years.

Dovetailing with these developments there has also taken shape an increasingly prominent discourse of opposition to Putin’s deployment of history-inflected patriotism. Here too, the question was: who does the past really belong to, and who are the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ in this arrangement? In the Russian academic circles in January 2012 Ilya Kalinin provocatively described the Putinist strategy of using the past as a “patriotic collage,” deployed by a “nouveau riche,” who “hasn’t got his own family jewels” and
thus tries to sell gems that don’t belong to it “to their actual owners.”105 In February 2012 Pussy Riot carried out its “punk prayer” action on the site of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. The show-trial that resulted out of that action upset the intelligentsia’s imperial nostalgia consensus about the recently restored site and highlighted the problem of inheritance of this past. In the words of Pussy Riot’s Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, pronounced at her trial in 2013, “the aesthetic of Putin’s regime is an aesthetic of protection,” which “consistently cites and recreates the aesthetics of two regimes preceding it historically— the [...] Imperial one and [that of] socialist realism. [...] The recreation of these aesthetics is being pursued so hamfistedly and unreflectively that the ideological apparatuses of the present political regime do not deserve any praise.”106 The flop of Mikhalkov’s Sunstroke (2014) among the wider public and liberal critics was another indicator that since 2012 “hamfisted and unreflective” and by now thoroughly clichéd deployments of the pre-Soviet past and its Revolutionary terminus no longer inspire cultural consensus.

**Sokurov’s Russian Ark: Memory as Antidote to History**

In truth, the liberal counter-discourse against the conservative/statist use of the pre-Soviet past was already taking shape in the early 2000s. In 2002, Alexander Sokurov’s *Russian Ark* provided an important answer to Govorukhin and especially Mikhalkov.107 In many ways, *Russian Ark* is the anti-Barber. Sokurov has repeatedly described *Russian Ark* as arthouse cinema that is trying to stand up for the value of high culture and to fight consumer tastes. Sokurov’s articulation of this position makes particular sense when put in the context of Mikhalkov’s bombastic speech at the Russian
Filmmakers’ Union in 1998, on the eve of the release of Barber. At that time, the most successful post-Soviet studio mogul brought his fellow directors to the Palace of Congresses at the Kremlin, where he shamed his peers for making commercially unviable movies instead of well-produced pictures that would inspire enjoyment and patriotism in the viewing public. Several months later, as Stephen Norris reports, Mikhalkov would premiere his slick, expensive and appropriately patriotic Barber in the same hall.\textsuperscript{108} I do not know if Sokurov attended either the keynote or the premiere (I doubt it). However, thanks or no thanks to Mikhalkov’s suggestions, Sokurov took production quality for his 2002 arthouse film very seriously, dressing up around two thousand actors and extras in the best period costumes money could buy, recruiting Valery Gergiev and his Mariinsky Orchestra for the final scene of the grand ball, and then investing in considerable digital postproduction after the one-day shoot. As for the shoot itself, this is where Sokurov outpaced all of his peers, both in Russia and the West—\textit{Russian Ark} was the world’s first feature-length production shot on SteadyCam as a single 87-minute take, without any cuts. So, though Sokurov’s budget was about 8 times smaller than Mikhalkov’s (compare \textit{Barber} at $35 million vs \textit{Russian Ark} at $4.5 million), it is undoubtedly the case that his film is thoroughly ‘Western’—meaning, technically advanced—in production quality and methods.\textsuperscript{109} What differentiates them is the purpose of the picture.

The film tells the story of two ghosts, a post-Soviet Russian man (the narrator voiced by Sokurov) and a nineteenth-century European diplomat (often identified as Marquis de Custine, especially in various materials about the film), who wander through the halls of the St. Petersburg Hermitage Museum and watch its almost 300 years of history unfold in various rooms. The main focus, however is on the late Imperial era,
which is generally presented as a Gestalt image of nineteenth-century aristocratic Russia—to that effect, the film’s final scene, which is supposed to recall the final grand ball given at the Winter Palace by Nicholas II, sometime in the early 1910s, also involves Pushkin, Natalia Goncharova and a great number of people from what looks like the filmworld of Sergei Bondarchuk’s “War and Peace” (1965-1967) as its attendees (see Figures 31 and 32, below).

The blending of epochs in Sokurov’s rendering corresponds to the film’s most famous feature—its single, 87-minute-long SteadyCam shot—and has a direct relation to the question of the historicity of the Hermitage. It has been said that Sokurov’s SteadyCam is a counterpunch to Sergei Eisenstein’s practice of montage, which not only defined early Soviet cinema, but was also specifically associated with the Winter Palace, given that his *October: 10 Days That Shook the World* (1928) was set there. While I do not dispute this observation, I do not think that fighting with the ghosts of Soviet propaganda cinema is the main goal of Sokurov’s filmic device, especially because by 2002 it was no longer just the Soviet rendering of this site that needed to be deconstructed, but also the post-Soviet Mikhalkovian-type version of Imperial Russia as ‘patriotic Disneyland.’ With the success of *Barber*, state-sponsored historical set-pieces proved to be as adept as their Soviet predecessors at re-cutting Russia’s past to suit present-day political messaging needs, and Sokurov’s not-one-cut responds to this contemporary discourse at least as much as it does to Eisenstein.

The basic effect of Sokurov’s device is to create an unexpected experience of “the transference of straight time onto the film screen.” In the context of the Hermitage the uninterrupted film-time is associated with the overwhelming plenitude of the past that has
Figure 31: The first dance of Natasha Rostova, in Sergei Bondarchuk’s *War and Peace*

Figure 32: The grand ball at the conclusion of Sokurov’s *Russian Ark*. The Marquis dances with someone we presume to be Natalia Goncharova, Pushkin’s wife (the film includes background glimpses of Goncharova and Pushkin fighting). Note also the dress styles and uniforms—though this scene supposedly marks the last grand ball of the Empire, the imperial look has apparently not changed for the past century. Incidentally, the real ‘last grand ball’ given by Nicholas II involved guests in 17th-century dress-up, to honor 300 years of the Romanov dynasty.
taken place at this site. When we interact with mainstream cultural or even professional historical discourse on the past, we expect to receive past events arranged, re-cut, narrativized for us. A historical account without a narrative arrangement of the past is essentially impossible, as the philosopher Paul Ricoeur concluded (all that despite trying to find a counterexample through Fernand Braudel). But any narrative is inherently false vis-a-vis the plenitude of the events that had actually transpired. Moreover, in the Russian cultural context, it is precisely prominent, authorized historical narratives that have been so central to the discourse of various waves of authoritarian Russian states. If the montage of Eisenstein’s *October* literalized the process of state-driven re-cutting of the past, then by refusing to cut his long take Sokurov creates the feeling of a spectral presence of the whole past in the Hermitage.

*The Russian Ark* insists on the permanence of different layers of the past within the walls of the museum, and also on the possibility of establishing various forms of communication with the past—all of them mediated by the Hermitage as a “lieu de memoire,” a singular ‘ark’-like site that contains “a residual sense of continuity,” to borrow Pierre Nora’s term. This is precisely the point of the scenes in which temporalities appear most garbled, where modern-day museum visitors argue with the specter of the Marquis about the art that hangs on the walls. Their lifeworlds are thoroughly different from each other, they apprehend the art and the museum space in entirely different ways. When the Marquis first encounters the modern museum visitors wearing their regular clothes he wonders, “who are these people? What estate are they from?” On this and other occasions he interacts with them. Sometimes he gets mad at them for not looking at the paintings the way he does. Other times, the Marquis meets
women who “speak” with the paintings and the sculpture, through movement or with their hands. In all of these cases, we see people from completely different worlds, with completely different cultural bearings, who nevertheless find their individual ways to connect to the articles in the Museum and to enjoy the traces of the past that are left in it. This form of connection stands in stark contrast to the “Russia That We Have Lost” type of nostalgia industry represented by films like *Barber*.

The intended audience response to a film like *Barber* is a feeling of nostalgia about an authentic Russia of yore, a lost object that is restored to the viewer through the feeling of patriotism, in which the message is one of uncomplicated inheritance, along the lines of: ‘the glorious Imperial Junkers are gone, but you are their descendant and can inhabit some of their values and ideas. Also, buy my perfume.’ In contrast, the outcome of watching *Russian Ark* is the recognition of the possibility of communication with the part of the past that has been preserved as “culture.” Communication with culture for Sokurov does not mean inheritance in any easy way—after all, what can we possibly understand of the world of the Marquis, or the attendees of the grand ball, or the ghosts of Gogolian bureaucrats and spies that chase the Marquis and the narrator throughout the film? The Marquis makes this very point to the narrator, when the latter spots Catherine the Great with her attendant and chases them out into the wintry garden outside. The Marquis does not follow, but we hear his voice on the background, saying: “It is impossible [*negozhe*] for simple mortals to chase after tsars. You will not overtake them.” The Steadicam, proceeding at its even pace, cannot overtake the Empress, who runs off into the distance. At this moment, the ghostly narrator stops his movement and gazes out at Catherine disappearing into the wintry fog. (See Figure 33, below). The hue of this
scene has also been altered in post-production to make it more melancholy.\textsuperscript{114} The extradiegetic music intensifies—it is an elegiac piano work by Mikhail Glinka (who the Marquis assumes is a “good German composer”). Altogether, this scene is loaded with reflective emotion, but it is not about the ‘lost object’ of the past that can somehow be reclaimed through a fetish; rather, in this moment the narrator realizes the past’s ineffably distant nature. The narrator spies on the specters inhabiting the Winter Palace, but cannot inhabit their experience of this site. But still, the site remains, and communion with the past that inheres in it is possible, and in any case, the film’s conclusion suggests that the narrator himself ultimately becomes as much a part of this site as his illustrious predecessors, and for the same reason—the narrator (voiced by Sokurov himself) has by way of Sokurov’s film transformed himself into eternal “culture.”

For \textit{Russian Ark}, culture is eternity. About half-way into the film, the Marquis stops in front of a painting of peasants by a Flemish master. He looks at their depictions
and says, “live on, live on, you will outlive everyone.” Similarly, the film is concluded with the words, “look, the sea is all around. And we are to sail forever, and we are to live forever.” Eternity is possible, but only in this site, insofar as it is perceived as an “ark,” as the place that preserves the bits of the past that have remained in it in the form of culture—which includes architecture, paintings, sculpture, the myriad cultural memories associated with the site, and now also Sokurov’s film. It is the very approach of the Hermitage as an ark-like site that makes communication with it possible. Communication with culture on the one hand means recognizing one’s distance from it: that there exists a plenitude of the “sea” of the past beyond whatever we might know of it. From the standpoint of inheritance of this past, the vast majority of it cannot ever become “ours”—especially at a place like the Hermitage, the site of Imperial Russian splendor that is quite foreign and “impossible” for modern Russian “mere mortals” to grasp. On the other hand, however, the encounter with this past culture, which the museum setting both makes present and estranged, leaves open the possibility of the past acquiring new meanings.

The specific contemporary meaning of the past of the Hermitage is, in a way, beyond the purview of the film’s unique aesthetic. The camera aesthetics are designed to capture the “thunderstrike” of the singular day of filming in the Hermitage, or a singular day of walking through this museum. The meaning-making takes shape in the following months of post-production, just as in a post-encounter setting the museum goers might very well come away from the Hermitage with a feeling of nostalgia for a “Russia That We Have Lost.” However, such a conclusion lies beyond the purview of the cultural encounter, and it is the instant of the encounter itself, with its many potentialities of future interpretation, that marks the possibility of communication with a past that is both
present and distant. And what enables this possibility is the ideology of cultural preservation as such—the idea of stewardship of the museum site and the traces of the past in it. The late Soviet liberal intelligentsia’s insistence on the high value of the past as culture as such comes through here. Valorization of the Imperial era has indeed been put to work as a handmaid of the post-Soviet state, but that is not what this past has to mean. The past as “culture,” as a site of the encounter, and preservation as guarding the possibility of that encounter for the future—Sokurov’s film redeems precisely this kernel of Soviet liberal humanism. What kind of properly liberal politics this kind of ideology might underpin still remains to be seen—but again, the point of the film is to recognize that when one encounters the past, this encounter should be felt as a moment of difficulty. The past as culture demands that one work to communicate with it. And such an encounter is quite different from Govorukhin’s easy path of lamentation for Stolypin’s Russia shot in mid-flight by the roving hordes, or Mikhalkov’s easy path of enjoyment of stereotypical, idyllic peasants celebrating Mardi Gras at the Kremlin.

**Parfenov, The Nation in Bloom**

Eleven years after Sokurov’s Russian Ark, after the clarification of the thoroughly conservative interpretation of the pre-Soviet past as a fulcrum of the Putinist historical imaginary, Russian mainstream liberal discourse had apparently developed some antibodies. In 2002, Sokurov had emphasized the distance between the past and present as the core of an encounter with culture, and in that way was trying to counter a nostalgic consumerist encounter with the past as an appealing narrative. Still, it is likely that in 2002, the majority of Sokurov’s Russian audience would have interpreted his glittering
Hermitage precisely as a “Russia That We Have Lost.” Eleven years later, however, the popular liberal TV documentary filmmaker Leonid Parfenov would approach the Gestalt image of this glittering past and also insist on its distance, rather than its closeness. The same filmmaker who had celebrated the refurbished Imperial aesthetic and social bearings of the newspaper Kommersant in 2009, would now question the limits of inheriting the Imperial past in his 2013 documentary on Sergei Prokudin-Gorsky, A Nation in Bloom [Tsvet Natsii].

The figure and the oeuvre of Prokudin-Gorsky has been so serendipitously helpful for post-Soviet Russia’s Imperial nostalgia industry, that ‘if he didn’t exist, he would have had to be invented.’ Prokudin-Gorsky himself was a fin-de-siècle Russian scientist and innovator of photography, who in the decade prior to World War I traveled the breadth of the Russian Empire in an attempt to capture as much of it as possible on his own recently invented color photo-plates. He did the project at the behest of Emperor Nicholas II, who was the first and most important viewer of these images, which would then form the backbone of Imperial school textbooks on the subject of ‘Motherland-love’ [Rodinoliubie], as Parfenov explains in the documentary. Thus, the photographer’s carefully staged and masterfully shot images would inspire patriotism in Russia’s monarchs and their subjects, orchestrating a visual unity between an all-seeing state and its hyper-colorful multi-ethnic populace, in the absence of non-statist, “autonomous, horizontal ties of nationhood,” to borrow Nancy Condee’s framing of the issue. In the 1990s, Prokudin-Gorsky’s archive was rediscovered at the US Library of Congress (where it had languished for decades), and modern digital techniques were applied to render Prokudin-Gorsky’s plates into vibrant and highly detailed color images. In the
early 2000s, the Library of Congress posted its digital collection of Prokudin-Gorsky’s archive online, and since then the photographer’s pictures have circulated throughout the Russian internet and on social media, often shared with appended laments, like, ‘what a country we’ve flushed down the toilet!’ In 2014, these very laments, as well as Prokudin-Gorsky’s pictures, inspired Mikhalkov’s extremely well-funded and both critically and commercially quite unsuccessful adaptation of Bunin, *Sunstroke.*\(^{118}\) However, after 2012 laments about Russia’s pre-Soviet past were starting to feel past their prime and Parfenov responded to the shift in the public mood by approaching Prokudin-Gorsky in a much more innovative and contemplative way.

On the surface, it feels as though Parfenov’s *Nation in Bloom* is as much a part of the nostalgia industry as Mikhalkov’s *Sunstroke*—both films are made with expensive High Dynamic Ranging (HDR) technology and other digital effects in order to make pre-Revolutionary Russia come off as vibrantly as possible by removing filmic chiaroscuro and making the world on screen appear as if one is “looking through a window” at it.\(^ {119}\) Moreover, Parfenov’s project clearly seemed mainstream enough that the state-run Channel One happily funded and screened it in November 2013, just a few months prior to post-Soviet Russia’s capstone retro-inflected patriotic pageantry event, the 2014 Winter Olympics. Be that as it may, Parfenov’s use of expensive movie magic has a much more motivated and self-conscious relationship to his project. Parfenov uses his state-of-the-art technology in order to establish a discursive and aesthetic *dialogue* with Prokudin-Gorsky, his pictures and their original users. His slick renditions of Prokudin-Gorsky’s images at their contemporary locales are done in order to *respond* to the photo-oeuvre of a man who a hundred years earlier had also used hyper-advanced technological
means in order to document the Russian Empire. This becomes apparent when about halfway into the film, Parfenov points out that his own HD camera and our television screens are unable to transmit fully the shades of color that Prokudin-Gorsky was able to capture on his plates a century ago. Meanwhile, instead of taking up Prokudin-Gorsky’s version of late Imperial Russia in a straightforward, unproblematic fashion, Parfenov highlights these pictures’ original owners—the late Imperial state and its elite servitors. This is precisely why the original Russian title of Parfenov’s documentary, Tsvet natsii is so intentionally loaded. Literally meaning both The Color of the Nation and The Crème of the Nation, the title highlights that Prokudin-Gorsky’s pictures are first and foremost made by and for those who thought of themselves as such—the Russian Imperial elites.

The emotional and conceptual culmination of Parfenov’s film takes place towards the end of the film, when Parfenov delivers a monologue at Paris’s famous Russian Orthodox cemetery of St. Genevieve de Bois, where Prokudin-Gorsky is buried, alongside many other exiled Russian ancien régime émigrés:

When you walk about and read the tombstones here, it’s like reading the runes of Aztecs and Mayans. It’s all in Russian, but… ‘acting state councilor,’ ‘hereditary honorable citizen,’ ‘prince,’ […] ‘merchant of the first guild,’ ‘cavalier of the order of St. Anne First Degree,’ ‘Rotmistr.’ […] We cannot understand the point of summing-up a life with such inscriptions. It’s like, there were ancient Greeks, and the new ones didn't come from them. And ancient Egyptians- the present ones aren’t from them. And so us present-day Russians, but we’re not from these ones. […] These people are ancient Russia for us. We’re not from it, we’re from the Soviet one. But here lies the crème/color of the former country, which its last chronicler managed to depict in color [A tut lezhit tsvet byvshei strany, kotoruiu ee poslednii letopisets uspel sniat’ v tsvete] (see Figure 34, below).

The final line’s untranslatable word-play reinforces Parfenov’s point— Prokudin-Gorsky belongs to the crème of the former country, which is infinitely removed from “us,” the post-Soviet Russians.
Parfenov’s film further highlights the distance and the difficulty of conversation between the past and the present by playfully inserting the director himself into Prokudin-Gorsky’s photographs or manipulating the Imperial photographer’s images. His HDR aesthetic constantly ‘bares the device’ of its own artificiality, highlighting that the filmmaker’s own communion with Prokudin-Gorsky’s Russia is a filmic conceit, rather than a case of earnest restorative nostalgia. On that note, one of the most telling images in the film is that of a German Lutheran church in St. Petersburg. Prokudin-Gorsky had photographed the church, which was then defaced and repurposed during the Stalin era. Parfenov considers what the church would look like if it were to appear in the modern skyline, and we watch the building assemble itself cartoonishly out of its contemporary remaining pieces (see Figure 35, below). But as it does so, Parfenov points out that ‘really’ rebuilding this church would be pointless, because “it’s impossible to restore the Petersburgian Babylon on the 60th Meridian, the city in which nearly all bakers and
apothecaries were Germans.”

Along the same lines, but even more categorically, Parfenov chooses to end his film on the site of a ruin of a church which could never be rebuilt (see Figure 36, below). Industrialization has changed the course of the river, and so today the ruin stands on a tiny islet in the middle of the new riverbed. Parfenov wonders: “What’s to restore here? Not much already. And to rebuild from scratch? It’ll be even worse, because how can there be a functioning church in the middle of water? ...So let’s just fix the ruins in place, and let them stand here authentically, like a monument to a country that is no more. And when ships pass by, it’ll be a greeting to new Russia.” The distance between “ancient” pre-Soviet Russia and ourselves is insisted on here. The act of “fixing the ruins in place,” preserving them, would turn traces of imperial Russia into memory sites on which some kind of undefined communion between ancients and moderns would take place. Here, just as in Sokurov, the past would cease being a lost object to be regained, and instead become *culture* to be encountered, a trace with a plenitude that is inherently inaccessible for us, a past that by remaining a ruin reminds us that “we’re not from it.”
Figure 35: The old Lutheran Church cartoonishly reassembles itself out of an abandoned Stalin-era Palace of Culture that currently stands in its place.

Figure 36: A specter of Prokudin-Gorsky's shot of this church appears hazily over the modern-day ruin.
Conclusion

Whereas post-Soviet conservative references to the Imperial era have hinged on Govorukhin’s pithy and consequential slogan, “The Russia That We Have Lost,” the liberal critique has contested this slogan on three counts. First, it has turned out that Imperial Russia is not “ours” in any easy sense of the term. Second, it has become increasingly clear that Imperial Russia’s future-past—i.e. its hoped for or dreaded Revolutionary terminus—is also not “ours” and is in any case not a politically productive perspective for post-Soviet liberals. And third, it has become increasingly evident that a productive relation to the past will have to proceed through culture—not through cultural capital accrued through elitist ‘intelligentsia’ socialization (as was surmised by the late Soviet and Perestroika era liberals), and certainly not through ‘culture’ as grand, authoritative history on the past (as was surmised by late- and post-Soviet conservatives). Rather, what is required is a relation to culture understood as traces of the past, to be encountered and preserved, but not manipulated into some new universal narrative or useful historical allegory. These three points of intervention in the history and memory of pre-Soviet Russia have taken shape, but sometimes not entirely consciously over the last quarter century. However, I do think that after 2012 they have coalesced into a somewhat prominent counter-discourse to Putinism, and this coalescence indicates that the Russian public consciousness has rounded an important corner of the ‘post-Soviet’ era.

With all of the above in mind, let me conclude this chapter and this dissertation by cautiously suggesting several big-picture ideas about modern Russian cultural discourse:

1. Within the framework of my project, the post-Soviet era does not really hold together as an independent entity. What has emerged instead is an arc of sixty-some years of
cultural discourse that may be summed up as the age of surfeit of history—an epoch in which various historical narratives and counter-narratives have been proposed as panaceas for all kinds of Russian sociopolitical ills; an age in which the production of history has motivated both liberal and conservative political discourse, an age in which historical (false) consciousness has defined liberal and conservative Russian subjectivities.

2. The cause of this age of surfeit of history is no mystery—it is the logical outcome of the weakness of other, more effective forms of political action, socialization, institutionalization, and so forth. After 2012, however, I think it has become clear that other forms of political action are possible in Russia. Consequently, appeals to simplistic historical allegory in the discourse of Russian liberalism are waning, particularly among the activist contingent of post-Soviet Russian liberals led by Alexei Navalny.

3. Meanwhile, a critical counter-discourse against easy inheritance of the past has emerged, and this development suggests that the surfeit of history as a hegemonic attribute of Russian cultural discourse is coming to an end. The fact that the liberal authors of the new paradigm themselves have not necessarily realized the shift in their discourse suggests that the old cultural logic will continue for some time longer. However, this time of running on empty is undoubtedly shortened with every new brazen attempt by an increasingly embattled Putin regime and its increasingly discredited cultural defenders to champion the history of a Russia that they did not lose, nor stand any chance to get back.


Endnotes for Chapter Four

1 “Pikovaiia dama,” in Aleksandr Pushkin, Sobranie sochinenii v desiatyi tomakh, t.5, (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel’sto khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1960), 233
2 “Kuptsy i khudozhniki,” in Tat’iana Tolstaia, Ne kys’ (Moscow: Exmo, 2004), 544
3 Ibid., 551
4 Viktor Pelevin, “Dzhon Faulz i tragedii russkogo liberalizma,” in Viktor Pelevin, Vse povesti i esse (Moscow: Eksmo, 2005), 395; available online: http://pelevin.nov.ru/rass/pe-jon/1.html
5 Ibid., 396
6 On the creative freedom at early Soviet television, prior to the tenure of Sergei Lapin as head of Gosteleradio, See Kristen Roth-Ey, Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cold War (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2011), 176-211.
8 On censorship as the reason for the disembodied presence of Voroshilov in his game, see Fenomen, 111.
10 Fenomen, 113
11 Ibid., 29, 67, 112
13 Fenomen, 30
14 Fenomen, 13-14
15 Chto? Gde? Kogda? Vladimir Voroshilov, dir., Igra TV, Pervyi kanal, May 20, 1995; available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zFeFB-GulkJE&list=PLhJfMV84r_0shJc0vHN-x9CbiDw-SyRf
16 Aleksandr Pushkin, Sobranie sochinenii, t. 5, 252
18 Fenomen, 154
19 For a list of prizes and recipients every year in the 1990s, see http://chgk.tvigra.ru/letopis/.
22 Ibid., 78
23 Ibid., 92
24 On Ulitskaya’s relationship with Fadeev’s daughter, see her book of memoiristic essays, Liudmila Ulitskaya, Sviashchennyi musor (Moscow: Astrel’, 2012).
25 For a brief biography of Ulitskaya and her arrival on the literary scene, see Elizabeth A. Skomp, Benjamin M. Sutcliffe, Ludmila Ulitskaya and the Art of Tolerance (Madison, WI: Wisconsin UP, 2015), 3-31.
26 Sonechka, 95
27 See Sviaashchennyi musor, 65-77, especially 67: “I valued greatly my friends from the older generation, they were the age of my grandmother, some of them received an education before the Revolution, in their youth they managed to visit the world whose cities seemed almost entirely imaginary: Paris, London, Geneva. Almost all of these friends were women: our century was far more pitiless towards men. The men rarely lived long enough to grow old. But the old women were grand. Among them were several women with very famous last names and there were also simple ones without any education, but all of them had an
enormous, stupefying life experience: Elena Iakovlevna Bsalavskaia […], Nina Konstantinovna Bruni-Bal’mont, Irina Iliinichna Ehrenburg.”

29 Ludmila Ulitskaya, “Queen of Spades,” 96
30 Ibid., 100-101
31 Ibid., 103-104
32 Ibid., 86
33 For a memoire account pointing to the link between Hoffmann and Pushkin’s “Queen of Spades,” see Wilhelm von Lentz’s (anonymous) account: “Prikliuchenia Lifliandtsa v Peterburge,” Russkii arkhiv 16:4 (1878), 441-442.
38 Viktor Pelevin, Empire V: povest’ o nastoiashchem svorkhcheloveke (Moscow: Eksmo, 2006), 24
41 The “workless slave,” Prozorov has argued by way of the philosopher Giorgio Agamben, marks out the possibility of “deactivating the figure of mastery […] the figure of the workless Slave fatally jams the very machine of dialectics that was originally entrusted with bringing history to completion.” Elsewhere, Prozorov has also highlighted Agamben’s concept of the “originary inoperosity of humankind,” the idea of “whatever being,” or “being without any historical tasks.” Sergei Prozorov, Ethics of Postcommunism, 10-11; 58-59.
42 Viktor Pelevin, Chapaev i Pustota (Moscow: Vagrius, 2001), 281
See Alexander Etkind, Warped Mourning, 220-242

73 Pelevin, Chapaev and the Void, 43

74 See the title of his 2003 collection, The Dialectic of the Transitional Period (From Nowhere to Nowhere): Viktor Pelevin, Dialektika perekhodnogo perioda (iz niotkuda v nikuda) (Moscow: Eksmo, 2003).

75 See Enlil Maratovich’s speech to Rama, in Viktor Pelevin, Batman-Apollo (Moscow: Eksmo, 2013), 317.

76 Nancy Ries, Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation During Perestroika (Ithaca: Cornell, 1997), 84

77 On the trope of historical circularity in Bykov, see Mark Lipovetsky, “The Poetics of ITR Discourse: In the 1960s and Today,” Ab Imperio 1 (2013), 123.


79 Boris Akunin, Statskii sovnetik (Moscow: Zakharov, 1999), 178

80 Ibid., 110; 171

81 Ibid., 178

82 Ibid., 131

83 This characterization first appears in the title of the book’s second chapter: “how the steel man rests [Otdykh stal’nogo cheloveka],” Ibid., 39.

84 Ibid., 46

85 Ibid., 40

86 Ibid., 93

87 Ibid., 101

88 Ibid., 16

89 Ibid., 113

90 Ibid., 80

91 Ibid., 84-85

92 Ibid., 283

93 Ibid., 271

94 Ibid., 278-279

95 Ibid., 277


97 Boris Akunin, Statskii Sovnetik, 151

98 Ibid., 113

99 Ibid., 271

100 Ibid., 31


Sokurov insists on this word throughout his interviews about The Russian Ark—see In One Breath.

See In One Breath: Sokurov’s Russian Ark.

Ibid.

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