PUTIN AND EMPTINESS • THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF ANDREI BITOV •
NGOS IN TAJIKISTAN • REMEMBERING YALTA • THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION IN BELARUS • CHECHEN AND RUSSIAN MEDIA OPERATIONS •
THE OCCULT REVIVAL IN RUSSIA

April 2009
Emily D. Johnson  
Putin and Emptiness: The Place of Satire in the Contemporary Cult of Personality  

Ellen Chances  
An Event Like No Other... The Four Dimensions of Andrei Bitov  

Livia Alexandra Paggi  
Pretending Civil Society: Western NGO Scripts and Local Actors in Post-Soviet Tajikistan  

Serhii Plokhy  
Remembering Yalta: The Politics of International History  

David R. Marples and Uladzimir Padhol  
The 2006 Presidential Election in Belarus: The Candidates, Results and Perspectives  

Dodge Billingsley  
Weaponizing the Story: Chechen and Russian Media Operations  

Birgit Menzel  
The Occup Revival in Russia Today and Its Impact on Literature  

Front Cover: One of the works of art, painted for Andrei Bitov’s Forum, on the wall of the Vladimir Nabokov Museum in St. Petersburg.  
Train with letters of Bitov’s last name on earch carriage.  
Back Cover: Putin Balloons (see Emily Johnson, “Putin and Emptiness”).
Putin posters, postcards, New Year’s greetings, t-shirts, wall clocks, calendars, oil portraits, biographies, encyclopedias, English-language primers, and films: in recent years, the figure of Russia’s second president has loomed ever larger over the cultural landscape of the Russian Federation and the quantity and variety of Putin paraphernalia available for sale has correspondingly increased. Although I am not a serious collector of consumer items associated with the contemporary cult of personality, one object that I found in a kiosk just outside the metro station Akademicheskaya in Moscow in the fall of 2006 did capture my imagination: bright blue rubber balloons imprinted with the face of the Russian president. I bought a small supply for myself and also for Boris Isayevich Belenkin, the librarian at the central office of Memorial, who, I knew, had an interest in the iconography of power. In his work space, Belenkin had assembled an impressive display of artistic reproductions and photographs clipped from magazines, all of which contained human figures or animals with features that, to one extent or another, resembled Putin’s: images of narrow-nosed dogs with long faces and sad, expressive eyes; a famous portrait by the fifteenth-century painter Jan van Eyck; Dobby, the house elf from the Harry Potter movies; a drowsy, slightly petulant-looking lemur. In this door-sized collage of images, it seemed, the leader’s face emerged spontaneously and often incongruously from the pages of old magazines and from posters for long-forgotten exhibitions, as if nature and generations of artists from around the globe had, in dozens of separate acts of creation spread over a period of centuries, prophesied the emergence of Russia’s current leader.

Belenkin, I thought, might like to add a Putin balloon to his collection of pseudo-Putiniana. What better object to crown the strange genealogy of images that he had constructed, than this joyous, supremely modern affirmation of political ascendancy!

My gift was very well-received. Belenkin blew it up and then called in his friends as he set about affixing it to the wall. “Where,” Memorial staff members asked, “did you find that fabulous piece of filth? On the Arbat?” “What happens if we pop it? Would that count as a terrorist act?” Jokes about moral elasticity, puffed-up political leaders, and the possibility or desirability of their deflation followed in quick succession. “Who would make a thing like that?” someone asked. “Don’t they think things through?”

No one at Memorial in Moscow, it seemed, had ever seen Putin balloons before or knew of their existence. At least initially, some staff members were inclined to view the balloon as a souvenir made primarily for tourists, something akin to the political matryoshki dolls and wooden eggs that have been ubiquitous to outdoor art markets since the late 1980s. They expressed surprise when I said that I had found it in a down-market kiosk that sold a mixture of cheap gifts and children’s
Toys, computer supplies, batteries, and other odds and ends, presumably, to a predominately Russian customer base. One staff member promptly asked for exact directions, I assume so that she could go and buy a little “piece of filth” for herself and/or her loved ones.

In the context of the Memorial library, affixed to the top of Belenkin’s Putin wall or attached to the lamp over his desk (it was displayed in several locations over the course of the next few weeks), the Putin balloon I bought read as an ironic comment on the current Russian president’s growing cult of personality. It inspired sarcastic quips and gave Memorial staffers another excuse to vent the hostility that they felt towards the Russian president and their anxiety about anti-democratic trends in Russian society, particularly following the Politkovskaya assassination and the scandalous Litvinenko poisoning.

The balloons received a very different reaction when, after my return to the University of Oklahoma in December 2006, I showed them to a recent Russian immigrant who occasionally teaches introductory courses for us. Eyeing my “find” with complete indifference, she noted: “They carried those in demonstrations in Samara, where my mother lives, before the last election.” Quite clearly, unlike much of Memorial’s staff, she did not perceive the balloons as a bizarrely ill-conceived manifestation of Putin’s growing cult of personality; rather, she saw them as the normal detritus of the election process, the equivalent of a Barack Obama bumper sticker or a Hillary for President front-yard sign.

And, indeed, from a certain point of view, absolutely: she is right. What exactly is so outlandish about a balloon bearing the face of the Russian president? Balloons are a fairly standard accouterment of the political marketing process, which the Russians learned from extremely well-paid Western consultants in the early 1990s. They figure in essentially all U.S. elections. You could buy campaign balloons on the websites of a number of our 2008 presidential contenders, including both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. True, in both cases, they were decorated with names and logos rather than the faces of the candidates, but is this difference in and of itself so essential? Doesn’t it just reflect the fact that political consulting has a longer history in America than in Russia and hence has produced a somewhat greater store of collective wisdom? Advisors to our candidates have learned, by dint of hard experience, to anticipate the kind of ribbing that occurs in nighttime talk-show monologues (and the offices of NGOs) and hence, as a rule, do not put their own candidate’s face on anything that might easily explode. Are the Putin balloons I found really nothing more than an example of clumsily executed Russian election material?

The very different responses that I received from Russians to whom I showed the Putin balloons helped remind me of an important and, I think, very basic fact: a cult, like beauty, is to some extent always in the eye of the beholder. Whether or not we view a particular object as having cultic significance depends, to a large measure, on the context in which we see it. A Putin balloon pinned to Boris Belenkin’s ironic display of pseudo-Putiniana means something very different than one carried in a political demonstration. Where we see an object for sale is important, because it seems to suggest something about its producer, sellers, and intended audience: Is it just a piece of kitsch slapped together for sale to foreign tourists who know little about contemporary Russia but may have seen, at one point or another, a photo of its judo-loving president? Did its maker mean the balloon to be carried in support of Putin and his policies? Who (other than me, obviously) buys Putin balloons at Metro Akademicheskaya and with what intention?

Many Putin objects, like these balloons, I think, have no fixed meaning in and of themselves. They are essentially empty or, if one prefers, so full of potentially conflicting significance that their meaning remains indeterminate. When individuals buy a postcard of Putin struggling to master a lump of clay at a pottery wheel, do they regard it with reverence or amusement? Does it show us an elected official being a good sport at some awful public event, or does it mockingly cast Putin as a leader of Soviet-style pretension, intent on “re-shaping the nation and/or human nature”? How about the popular photographs of Putin out for a stroll with a jacket carelessly draped over one shoulder or the “romantic” fuzzy-edged Putin posters that show the leader with a Byronic scarf about his neck à la Pushkin? Offered for sale in bookstores around Russia, are they sold with an eye to their potential ironic appeal? If so, then how is it that these same images also appear in tediously reverent biographies and, for that matter, on office walls?

The question of how, where, and to whom Putin paraphernalia is marketed is not, I think, irrelevant to a discussion of the larger issue of the origin of this contemporary cult of personality or, for that matter, of its function in Russian society. Scholars of earlier Soviet-era Russian and East
European cults of personality have tended to understand these complex cultural structures as the result of the confluence of several distinct cultural trends: conscious top-down efforts to produce a new mythology of power and spontaneous expressions of reverence for Party leaders that are, even if self-interested, largely uncoached. Such a balanced attitude characterizes Nina Tumarkin’s seminal study *Lenin Lives!* and also more recent work on communist cults such as Sarah Davies’ article “Stalin and the Making of the Leader Cult in the 1920s,” and Benno Ennker’s “The Stalin Cult, Bolshevik Rule and Kremlin Interaction,” all of which describe leader cults as emerging out of unprompted adulation and toadyng as much as carefully orchestrated efforts to engineer new objects of worship, rituals, and belief systems.1

I believe that, at least in the case of the Putin cult, but potentially also other cults that reached their zenith in the years following Khrushchev’s secret speech, another factor may also be in play: the satiric impulse. What came first, the Putin cult per se or the scandalous accusation that such a cult might be in the process of emerging? Were cultic practices really so indisputably evident when the first satiric sallies directed against Putin as great leader began to appear? Thinking back to the beginning of Putin’s tenure in office, quite frankly, my own impressions are uncertain. I remember vividly, however, that the first time I saw a substantial group of Putin portraits for sale at a Russian bookstore, the display struck me as, on balance, more ironic than reverent. The photographs, posters, and postcards of the new president—he’d been in office for about a year—appeared alongside reprints of Stalin-era propaganda materials and frequently caught Putin in a pose that was, arguably, more than a little ridiculous. His neck constricted by starched shirt collars and overly-broad striped neck ties, he invariably looked undersized and uncomfortable. In most portraits, including those featuring contemplative poses, the expression on the new president’s face seemed blank or apprehensive, rather than thoughtful, determined or triumphant. The placement of these Putin portraits next to reproductions of classic Stalinist propaganda begged the question: Regardless of his own ambitions, could the new president ever look anything but laughable in the role of secular deity?

Was his primary flaw an authoritarian character, his long association with the state security apparatus and seeming willingness to embrace the worst aspects of Soviet political culture, or, perhaps even more damningly, was it simply hubris?

For all that the Kremlin’s media handlers and public relations consultants have carefully massaged Putin’s public image over the past two terms, highlighting his athleticism, robust health, and decisiveness, the presidential cult of personality that suffuses so much of Russian culture today remains a contradictory phenomenon. A remarkable number of the most memorable cultural artifacts and texts associated with the Putin cult are at least arguably partly satiric in thrust. They are ambiguous: they are so grotesque in form and seem so self-conscious in their appropriation of the communicative norms of Soviet-era agitation that it is hard to take them completely seriously, and yet, at the same time, they have a surprising ability to attract audiences capable of giving them a straight reading. The pop anthem that the girl group *Poiushchie* (Singing Together) released in 2002 under the title “Ia khochu takogo, kak Putin” (I Want a Man Like Putin) represents a particularly striking example of this trend. The song boasts an infectious dance beat and lyrics penned by Aleksandr Elin, who is best known for his work with the heavy metal group Aria:

My boyfriend’s in a jam again.
He got in a fight, he got wasted on hooch
He’s been such a pain, I kicked him out
And now I want a man like Putin.

A man like Putin, who’s full of strength.
A man like Putin, who doesn’t drink.
A man like Putin, who won’t be mean
A man like Putin, who won’t flee the scene.

Should we really take this text as a straightforward attempt to glorify the president? As one reviewer noted in an online article entitled “Be Prepared to Do Battle for the Conceptualist Cause”: “I really can’t take the group *Poiushchie vmeste* entirely seriously. That is simply beyond me. It seems more likely that this entire project is something like one of those lubki ‘General Putilin off the hydra of oligarchy in the loo.’ It looks entertaining and patriotic; the masses like it; so what else do you need?”


At times the relationship between the producers of Putin paraphernalia and texts, the consumers who take it upon themselves to ingest this material, and the commentators who write about it in the press assumes an almost Gogolian character. The 560-page Putin Encyclopedia (Putinskaia entsiklopediia), which appeared in Moscow in 2006, for instance, recounts the saga of the Cheliabinsk student Mikhail Anishchenko, who, in 2001 sued a German journalist for reprinting the text of a dreadful anthem of praise that he had written about the president as part of an ironic article. Offended that his “Song about the President” had been defiled, Anishchenko demanded the payment of moral compensation and the revocation of the journalist’s credentials.3

Peppered with curious episodes like this, recounted in a manner that can only be described as arch, the Putin Encyclopedia is itself an interesting study in ambiguity. It opens with a page-and-a-half-long preface entitled “Who This Book is About” (O kom eta kniga). The reference, it would seem, is obvious: as the subtitle on its cover proudly proclaims, the Putin Encyclopedia is a book about Putin, “his family, his team, his opponents, and possible successors.” In fact, however, Zenkovich’s preface says almost nothing about Russia’s second president. It focuses instead on Zenkovich’s own formal choices as author and his efforts to accommodate the taste and needs of his potential readership. In the preface, Zenkovich explains that he chose to write an encyclopedic biography, because he felt that this genre best suited the “new generation of Russians […] that started first grade in 1985 when Gorbachev first came to power,” whose “members […] think entirely differently than we did at their age.”4 In books, these new people, Zenkovich suggests, prefer “a wealth of data” as opposed to tidy historical narratives. They inhabit a world “of informational technology, artificial intelligence, and the re-examination of old ideological structures, of the confirmation of the eternal truism ‘Everything is born as heresy and dies as prejudice.’”5 If we read this last statement as a comment on the world view of Zenkovich’s target audience, then it seems to allude to a particularly postmodern form of moral and intellectual relativism: the tendency to perceive ideas, beliefs, and values as transitory phenomena that pass through distinct life stages and then ultimately, after they have outlived their usefulness, pass into oblivion; the rejection (couched as an “eternal truism”) of the whole notion of everlasting truth.

The essentially Putin-less preface to Zenkovich’s encyclopedia, I think, points to something enormously important in current Russian political and cultural reality: Isn’t the real subject of the Putin cult, and hence of any book that focuses on it, the cult’s diffuse army of creators and consumers? If this is so, then perhaps we should indeed consider the extent to which this phenomenon represents a product of distinctly postmodern modes of thinking and rhetorical practices, the tendency to employ both historical references and cultural citations as pure signs, divorced from their original context; a loss of faith in absolute truths and meta-narratives that imbues all communicative acts with a kind of inherent subjectivity; a inclination to find, in both the production and consumption of cultural content, opportunities for role play, mischievous-making, and free experimentation. For all that the Putin cult may seem superficially to resemble the cults of personality of the Soviet period, I wonder if it isn’t, at least in certain respects, a fundamentally new animal, a product of distinctly postmodern modes of thinking and communicative relations that speaks less of true unadulterated hero worship (although I do not question the statistics showing that most Russians were satisfied with their president’s job performance) or even organized promotion than it does of rhetorical and perhaps philosophical indeterminacy.

What of Putin’s place in the new leader cult? Up to now, I have accorded the figure of Russia’s president almost as little attention in this essay as Zenkovich did in the preface to his encyclopedia. This has been intentional. Clearly, Putin’s face and athletic physique exert a powerful hold on Russia’s collective imagination today: how many other major European leaders appear, in photos circulated by their own public relations team, fishing toless or slamming opponents to the floor in judo matches? In a different sense, however, I think, Putin, as a physical entity, might reasonably be said to play a secondary role in the cultic structure that he inspired: in many recent works in which he theoretically figures, the president was accorded what amounts to a cameo. Putin works often focus on the strivings and travails of presidential observers or admirers; we glimpse the center of power only briefly and then from such a limited perspective that the president’s nature, actions, and accomplishments remain largely unknowable. In Connie’s Stories

4. Ibid., 3.
5. Ibid.
the infamous English-language children’s primer that describes life from the perspective of the presidential dog, the identity of the black Labrador’s eternally busy owner becomes clear only on the last page. In Victor Teterin’s 2005 satiric play Putin.Doc, the president also remains, with the exception of a final scene, an off-stage presence, whose will is made manifest only in letters paraphrased by one of the two central characters, dueling little-men bureaucrats who compete to show who loves the great leader more.6

In this respect, I think, the Putin cult reads as an exaggeration of trends evident even in earlier Soviet-era personality cults. For all that they may seem to throw a spotlight on the center of power, political cults are always more about the act of worship than the godhead per se. They model appropriate behavior for devotees in minutely specific terms but characteristically sketch the deity’s person and acts in broad, archetypal strokes. What is new in the contemporary cult is that the position of the worshipper is, as a legacy of conceptualist art and post-modern intellectual exploration, inherently problematized.

Emily Johnson is Associate Professor of Russian language and literature at the University of Oklahoma. Her first monograph, How St. Petersburg Learned to Study Itself: The Russian Idea of Kraevedenie (Penn State University Press, 2006), won both the SCMLA Book Prize and the Likhachev Fund’s Anstiferov Prize.

An Event Like No Other.

...Plus Fireworks over the Fontanka

Ellen Chances

The title of my article, “An Event Like No Other,” is certainly an appropriate way to describe the “International Forum: Empire. The Four Dimensions of Andrei Bitov,” that took place on October 1-4, 2007, in St. Petersburg, Russia, in honor of contemporary Russian writer Bitov’s seventieth birthday and the fiftieth anniversary of his “creative activities.” The Forum program described the event as “an attempt to create a new genre, a new form. This is not the traditional birthday celebration, not strictly a scholarly conference, and not a festival, but rather an experiment—to have, at one and the same time, both a deeply scholarly comprehension of phenomena of contemporary culture, and a spontaneous living dialogue with that culture.”

True to the goal of intermingling scholarship with the creative arts, the Forum included scholarly papers, theatrical and musical performances, poetry readings, an art exhibit, the planting of a tree in the Botanical Garden, a visit to a statue, and the screening of an animated film. The entire event was magical, miraculous. The entire event was a testament to Bitov’s own creative energy and free spirit.

The driving force behind the creation and execution of the Forum was the extraordinarily talented, remarkably energetic chief organizer, Marina Smirnova, at the time a twenty-four-year-old literary scholar writing a dissertation on Bitov at St. Petersburg University. (At one point, Bitov jokingly remarked that the only reason that he had agreed to the Forum was that he hadn’t thought that it could be pulled off.) Smirnova had been a student and advisee of Bitov’s wife, St. Petersburg University professor Natalya Gerasimova, who died on September 26, 2006. Smirnova told me that she and Gerasimova had had long discussions about what to do to celebrate Bitov’s seventieth birthday. Smirnova also said that throughout the planning for the Forum and throughout the Forum itself, she was profoundly aware of Gerasimova’s guiding energy.

In addition to Smirnova, who is Executive Director of the international association, “Zhivaia klassika” (The Living Classics), the organizing committee consisted of Boris Averin, literary scholar, professor at St. Petersburg University and Chairman of the Board of “The Living Classics”; Anna Berdichevskaya, poet, philosopher, and editor of three of Bitov’s books; Sergei Bocharov, literary scholar, a head senior researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences Gorky Institute of World Literature in Moscow; Aleksandr Bolshev, St. Petersburg University professor and Development Director of “The Living Classics;” Maria Virolainen, literary scholar and head of the Department of Pushkin Studies at the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House) in St. Petersburg; and myself. Institutional organizers included “The Living Classics,” with support from the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute of Russian Literature (St. Petersburg) and Gorky Institute of World Literature (Moscow), St. Petersburg University, and the Vladimir Nabokov Museum.

The Forum also received support from the Committee on Culture of the City of St. Petersburg. The working group that cheerfully and tirelessly took care of everything, from food, lodging and travel arrangements for the participants, to technological, media, and computer concerns, included Smirnova, Bolshev, Anna Abalakina, Aleksandr Bespalov, Dmitiy Fyodorov, Olga Lee, and the consulting group, Bespalov and Partners. The media sponsors were the TV channel STO (St. Petersburg), and the FM radio station, “Radio Ekho Moskvy” (Radio Moscow Echo) in St. Petersburg; “Coach” was an Information Partner. A website—www.bitov.ru—still active, was set up, with information for the press, information about Forum events, a biography of Bitov and a bibliography of his works, biographies of the participants, and a
“photo gallery” of pictures taken during the preparation for the Forum and during the Forum itself.

With her enthusiasm, positive outlook, and indomitable spirit, Smirnova was able, Bitov told me, to negotiate arrangements for discounts, for example, for the Ambassador Hotel, the fancy four-star hotel where many Forum participants stayed. Food and liquor were lavishly presented to Forum participants. For instance, a Petersburg liquor company, Luding, donated its wares to dinners and receptions. At the Ambassador Hotel, the spread at an afternoon smorgasbord and banquet, and at the official opening of the Forum, was lavish, elegant, tasty and tasteful, literally and aesthetically. Hot lunch was served daily in the House of Architects, the building of the professional organization of architects, located across the street from the Nabokov Museum (47 Bolshaya Morskaya Street), where the scholarly conference sessions and certain other parts of the Forum took place. Bitov’s daughter, Anya, told me that she remembers, from her childhood, going to the House of Architects, since her grandfather, Bitov’s father, had been an architect.

Even the weather made a positive contribution to the celebration of Bitov in his native city of St. Petersburg. The weekend before the Forum began, the weather was sunny, with temperatures in the 70’s. In the city’s parks, the smell of autumn leaves commingled with the feel of warm, gentle air and the sight of the clear blue sky above. Throughout the Forum, the weather continued to cooperate. The temperature was in the 50’s and 60’s, and although the sky was sometimes overcast, it rained, for the most part, only at night and/or when Forum events were taking place indoors.

One of the most enjoyable parts of the Forum was the texture of human interactions. Public birthday celebrations can sometimes feel false, pompous, “officialese,” lifeless. There was none of that at this event. One could feel a real authenticity. There was an atmosphere of genuine good will. The faces looked interesting. I felt as if this were one big “kukhnia” (kitchen), in that Russian sense of sitting “na kukhne” (in the kitchen), discussing, in freewheeling conversations, the “big questions” of life, the latest art exhibit, books, the fate of humanity, and—in Soviet times—where to find deficit items like lemons or toilet paper. Gathered at the Forum were young and old and in between, famous people and not, publishers, writers, editors, musicians and artists, scholars and students, a museum director and a government official, an architect and a film director, a theatre director and actors. What united everyone was a genuine interest in, respect for, and love of Bitov’s writings and, in the case of family and friends, of Bitov the person.

Tatyana Ponomareva, Director of the Nabokov Museum, graciously welcomed Forum participants to the museum and thanked Bitov for all his efforts at getting the Nabokov’s former house made into a museum.
One could tell, from the outset, that this was going to be unusual, even for the conference part of the Forum. Anna Florenskaya, one of the avant-garde “Mitki” artists, had asked several artists to paint pictures in order to decorate the walls of the Nabokov Museum room in which we were meeting, with paintings either of Bitov or of themes relevant to his writings. This was a beautiful wood-paneled room, which had once been a room in the home of Nabokov’s family as Nabokov was growing up. And now, in honor of Bitov, on the walls hung paintings which had been created specifically for the Forum. One showed a bird in a cage. (A section of Bitov’s novel, Oglashennyje [The Monkey Link], is called “Ptitsy” [Birds].) Another painting was of a train, each car of which displayed a few letters of Bitov’s name. (Bitov has written many travelogues.) A third was a likeness of Bitov. A fourth showed structures that looked as if they were in the Caucasus. (Bitov wrote travelogues about Armenia and Georgia.) In the front of the room, on a wall, hung a large cloth clock, with the depiction of a closed umbrella as one of its hands.

On one wall there was a sculpture of a flying Bitov, complete with a suitcase and an umbrella. The “flying away Bitov” had resonances with Bitov’s frequent traveling and with his novel, Uletaiushchii Monakhov (The Disappearing Monakhov, or The Vanishing Monakhov, or The Flying Away Monakhov). An illustration related to that sculpture served as the Forum logo. Anna Florenskaya had drawn the logo of the ever moving Bitov, facing away, leaving (again, the travel theme), that graced copies of the Forum programs, pens, notebooks and paper bags (imagined suitcases) that were given to participants. The logo also appears on the website.

For the entire four days of the Forum, TV and film crews, radio, TV, and newspaper correspondents were omnipresent, eager, for the benefit of transmission to broader audiences, to record Bitov’s words, and eager to capture the events held in his honor. Members of the media conducted many interviews with Bitov, and they also interviewed Forum participants, from near and far, from Russia and abroad. A four-part film about the Forum and about Bitov and his works was made for future viewing on the TV channel “Kul’tura” (Culture). As a public intellectual, Bitov’s opinions are sought, on TV and in newspaper and journal interviews. For several years, he wrote a column in the newspaper, Russkaya gazeta.

The title of the Forum, “Imperiia. Chetyre izmereniia Andreia Bitova” (Empire. The Four Dimensions of Andrei Bitov), was based on the title of a 1996 four-volume edition of Bitov’s selected works, Imperiia v chetyreh izmereniakh (Empire in Four Dimensions). Volume One includes largely fiction, whose setting is Leningrad/Petersburg (the novels, Aptekarskii ostrov [Apothecary Island], Dachnaia mestnost’. Dubl’ [Dacha District. A Double Take], and Uletaiushchii Monakhov. Roman-punktir (The Vanishing Monakhov. A Novel with Ellipses).
The second volume contains the novel *Pushkinskii dom* (Pushkin House). The third, *Kavkazskii plennik* (A Captive of the Caucasus), includes three of Bitov’s travelogues, *Uroki Armenii* (Armenia Lessons), *Gruzinskii al’bom* (Georgian Album), and *Nash chelovek v Khive* (Our Man in Khiva). The last volume consists of his novel, *Oglashennye* (The Monkey Link). The empire is the Soviet empire, and the works deal with the Soviet Union, in time and in space, in a particular time period of the 1950s until the fall of the Soviet empire, and geographically, from one end of the Soviet Union to the other. Of course, the empire is also Bitov’s own creative empire.

The Forum program was divided into four days. The theme for the first day was “Bitov about Literature, and Literature about Bitov.” Ten out of the many publishers and editors of Bitov’s works, from his earliest to the present, spoke about their experiences of publishing and editing Bitov in different publishing houses, in different venues, and in different time periods, i.e., at first during the oppressive Soviet era, and then in Gorbachev’s era of glasnost’, and in post-Soviet Russia. Kira Uspenskaya, the editor of Bitov’s first books, *Bol’shoy shar* (The Big Balloon, 1963), *Takoe dolgoe detstvo* (Such a Long Childhood, 1965), *Aptekarskii ostrov* (Apothecary Island), and *Sen’ puteshestvii* (Seven Journeys, 1976), spoke, among other things, about the mindfields that she had to cross, within the publishing house Sovetskii pisatel’ (Soviet Writer), in order to ensure that the house reviewers of Bitov’s manuscript would be people with open minds, rather than hard-line ideologues who would be against Bitov’s highly individualistic and decidedly not Socialist Realist prose. Bitov commented that in those years, how things got published was more interesting than what was written.

Uspenskaya’s daughter, Anna, also an editor, as well as professor and scholar of Russian and ancient Greek poetry, turned out to be, because of the quirks of history, the editor of Bitov’s final Soviet book publication. He was, she said, her favorite writer. Her publishing house, the Leningrad branch of Sovetskii pisatel’, had published Solzhenitsyn, among others. She suggested that Bitov also be published. That, she continued, was how the publication of Bitov’s book of essays, *My prosnulis’ v neznakomoi strane* (We Woke Up in an Unknown Country, 1991), came to be. The timing, though, was problematic. Soviet tanks had gone into Vilnius, so she worried about the fate of the book. It did get published, with a circulation of 100,000.

A slight aside: Anna Uspenskaya’s daughter, Maria Andrianova, who attended the Forum, has written scholarly articles on Bitov’s works, and is working on a book about his writings. Here, then, is a three-generation family cultural tie with Bitov’s prose.

Sergei Shevelyov, editor of several of Bitov’s books, including *Obraz zhizni. Povesti* (Image of Life. Tales, 1972) and *Dni cheloveka* (Days of Man, 1976), explained that the authorities didn’t like Bitov because they didn’t understand him. He said that with the publication of the almanac *Metropol’. Literaturnyi al’manakh* (Metropol. A Literary Almanac, 1979), which contained works of Soviet writers that had been rejected by the censors (Bitov was an editor and contributor),—and of course, with the publication, in the West, of *Pushkin House*,—all possibilities for publication ceased for Bitov. For example, he continued, *The Vanishing Monakhov* should have come out, but didn’t. In 1980, Bitov had already thought up the design for the book, and Revaz Gabriadze was creating the illustrations. (It first came out as a separate book only in the glasnost’ period, in 1990.)

Bitov expressed his enormous gratitude to Kira and Anna Uspenskaya, to Shevelyov, and to the other editors and publishers. He said that there is a kinship, almost a blood tie between him and them. He stated that to this very day, he has always depended on people in whose interest it wasn’t—to publish him. In the Soviet period, this was for ideological reasons, and in post-Soviet times, because of market forces.

In their talks, the editors demonstrated their devotion to Bitov. For instance, Vladimir Kochetov, editor-in-chief of Vagrius publishers, and editor of Bitov’s *Neizbezhnost’ nenapisannogo* (The Inevitability of the Unwritten, 1998) for that publishing house, was impressed by the power in that book, as in *Pushkin House*, of Bitov’s attention to psychological subtlety. He spoke, in glowing terms, about Bitov’s genius. Liudmila Dorofeeva, editor of Bitov’s *Molenie o chashe. Poslednii Pushkin* (Prayer about the Cup. The Late Pushkin, Fortuna EL Publishers, 2007), said that at the international book fair, the book sold briskly and almost sold out. Dorofeeva also edited, among other books, the edition of *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniakh* (Fortuna Limited, 2002) that compresses all four volumes into one large book. Bitov joked that a friend of his said that it was too uncomfortable to read the book on the subway, and that it was too heavy a tome to read while lying in bed because it kept falling on his chest. He also said that in one way, he feels as if he
had written two or three books, and in another way, as if he had written dozens.

Andrei Aryev, co-editor-in-chief (together with Yakov Gordon), since 1992, of the journal Zvezda, gave a history of the Bitov works that had appeared in the journal. He explained that since there was no real literary criticism in the Soviet period, Bitov’s writings were published with greater frequency than were articles about him. He stated that it was great that Bitov was able to publish substantive works in the Soviet Union. Confirming the observations of previous speakers, Aryev said that so much depended on the particular editor.

I spoke about the special issue of the West European journal, Russian Literature (Netherlands) that I had edited in 2007 in honor of Bitov’s seventieth birthday. The contributors, almost all of whom participated in the Forum, included Priscilla Meyer, editor of Life in Windy Weather (1986), the first book in English, of Bitov’s prose; Susan Brownsberger, Bitov’s translator into English of Pushkin House, A Captive of the Caucasus, and The Monkey Link; Ronald Meyer, author of “Andrej Bitov’s Pušhkinskij Dom” (Indiana University, 1986), the first Ph.D. dissertation on Bitov; Elena Khvorostyanova, author of the first analysis of Bitov’s volumes of poetry; Marina von Hirsch, writer of the first Ph.D. dissertation on Bitov’s commentaries (Florida State University, 1997); Aleksandr Bolshev, for whom Bitov’s works undermine values; and me, author of Andrei Bitov. The Ecology of Inspiration (1993), the first book in any language on Bitov’s oeuvre.

The topic of Bitov’s participation in the cover design of the 1985 edition of Gruzinskii al’bom and in the design for Dvorets bez tsaria (Palace without the Tsar, 2003) came up. Bitov expressed his appreciation to the publishers, including Ivan Limbakh, for the 1995 edition of Oglašenennye, and to the publishers of Dvorets bez tsaria, who, he said, had listened carefully to his “nonprofessional gibberish” about book design matters and had then helped him enormously with the realization of his ideas. He recalled the censors’ removal of buttons from a photograph for the cover of the 1985 edition of Gruzinskii al’bom, because the buttons on a uniform were from the tsar’s army.

In the evening of the first day of the Forum were the official opening ceremonies and “An Evening of Writers,” both of which took place on the ninth floor of the Ambassador Hotel, with a grand panoramic view of Petersburg—and the ever-changing white-gray clouds that hovered above the city. The city government presented Bitov with a medal for his contributions to Petersburg literature, and a telegram from the Minister of Culture was read.

Boris Averin, who served as master of ceremonies of the “Evening of Writers,” explained that we had first heard from publishers, and that it was now time, during a round table discussion, for
us to turn to writers to speak about Bitov. Bitov introduced Gleb Gorbovsky as his first teacher. Gorbovsky recalled their days together, fifty years ago, at the Mining Institute, when Bitov had first joined a literary group. Fellow member of the group, poet Lidiya Gladkaya, made the comment that even in the 1950s, people said that Bitov would be a great writer. His early story, “Babushkina piala” (Grandmother’s Uzbek Cup), was already mature prose. She mentioned Bitov’s benevolence and profound intelligence. Bitov said that he had suffered from an inferiority complex, thinking that they all were much better writers than he was.

Yuz Aleshkovsky, a friend of Bitov’s for many decades, spoke about their close and long friendship. Writer Inga Petkevich, Bitov’s first wife, said that for her, “Do Bitova ne bylo nichevo” (There was nothing before Bitov). She hadn’t realized, she said, that he was an exception. She continued, “On sformiroval menia” (He shaped me). She emphasized his exemplary human, as well as artistic qualities. Peter Vail, writer, founding member of the Academy of Contemporary Russian Literature, and editor-in-chief of the Russian bureau of Radio Liberty, recalled the time in New York, in 1987, when he had heard Bitov at a reading. It was, for him, an event, he said.

Gabriadze, a longtime close friend of Bitov’s, reminiscing about their first meeting at the advanced film courses in Moscow, declared that there are no accidents in life. Bitov said that they have known each other for forty-one years and that he is thankful for their having met. Yakov Gordon said that Bitov and he had known each other since the late 1950s. He said that he was impressed by the “vibrancy of his style of living.”

In introducing Sergei Nosov, Averin pointed out that the roundtable speakers included representatives of three generations of writers, the 1950s, the 1970s, and the present younger generation. Nosov said that Bitov unites rather than divides, and that he had taught many in Nosov’s generation to be honest and not to sell themselves. He was struck, he continued, by the discomfort of honesty that he felt when he read his first Bitov work, “Penelope” (Penelopa). Bitov then suggested that Smirnova speak. She explained that she had gotten interested in Bitov when she read Pushkin House. After the end of the roundtable discussion, Forum participants hung around for awhile, enjoying good food, good drinks, and good company.

But the evening was not over. Buses were waiting to take us to the place along the Fontanka canal where the statue “Chizhik-pyzhik” is located.

“Chizhik” is a bird, a little siskin. Bitov and Gabriadze, as a sign of protest against the monumental larger than life Soviet statues, had thought up the idea of this tiny statue, approximately five inches tall. It is in a place close to the water itself. One would not know that it was there without bending over the railing to see it, perched on its pedestal, observing life in the canal. Some say that the Petersburg city government has duplicates of the statue because as a prank, it gets stolen from time to time. People throw coins at the pedestal for good luck, and the statue has become an unofficial tourist attraction. “Chizhik-pyzhik” is based on a famous nineteenth-century student song that generation after generation has been singing. The words are:

Chizhik-pyzhik, gde ty byl?
Na Fontanke vodku pil.
Vypil riumku, vypil dve.
Zakruzhilos’ v golove.

Chizhik-pyzhik, where’ve you been?
On the Fontanka, drinking vodka.
I drank one glass, I drank two.
My head began to spin around.

In honor of Bitov’s and Gabriadze’s statue, yellow plastic cups of vodka and plates of cut-up pickles were waiting for us on the canal’s stone railing. The evening was autumn-brisk, but not ice-cold, and the sky, a clear blue-black. A large October yellow-orange moon, silent, slowly made its way ever higher above us, as its reflection played on the water’s surface below. And then, suddenly, across the canal, there was a fireworks display, to celebrate Bitov’s birthday. (Smirnova had received permission from the St. Petersburg city government.) Two streaks of yellow-white sparkled and spun, and in the center glowed the number 70.

As people dispersed, a bâteau-mouche, like those in Paris on the Seine, slid through the waters, its lights doubling in reflected light upon the surface of the black canal. Blue balloons were released into the Petersburg night air, and we could hear people on the deck shouting, in unison, “Bi-tov. Bi-tov.” So ended the first day of the Forum.

On the second day, some scholarly papers were presented. (The full text of the papers will be published in a volume, Imperia. Chetyre izmereniia Andreia Bitova, edited by Smirnova.) Sergei Bocharov and Maria Virolainen chaired the sessions. Boris Averin commented that his generation liked Bitov’s prose for its confessional quality; he spoke about
the plurality of “I”s in Bitov’s Neizbeznost’ nenapisannogo. Igor Smirnov, professor at Konstanz University as well as Petersburg’s State Pedagogical University, and co-editor of the journal, Die Welt der Slaven, concentrated on Bitov’s protagonists’ capacity to think and on his ability, regardless of genre, to address the universal. He recalled a 1986 interview in Berlin, during which the important question, for Bitov, was “What is the human being?” Ronald Meyer, translator, and Publications Officer at Columbia University’s Harriman Institute, focused on Uletaiushchii Monakhov, and on Bitov’s changes to that novel, from 1962 to 2007. Aleksandr Velikanov, an architect and friend of Bitov’s, who had written a section of commentary to Bitov’s novel, Oglashennyye, spoke about the way in which the structure of that novel corresponds to modern tendencies in architecture, for example, hiding things and then, as in the Georges Pompidou Center in Paris, showing what is usually concealed. Literary scholar and translator Marina von Hirsch discussed the parallels of chemistry and Bitov’s “Tablitsa ambitsii” (Table of Ambitions), in the commentary to Oglashennyye. Wolf Schmid, professor of Slavics at Hamburg University and chairman of the Pushkin Prize jury, observed that Bitov is the only intellectual contemporary Russian writer. He emphasized the fresh new and defamiliarized ways in which Bitov sees the familiar world, whether in his fiction or in his travelogues. Andrei Aryev spoke, among other things, about the question posed, in Bitov, of whether human duality can be transcended. Elena Khvorostyanova, a literary scholar at St. Petersburg University, highlighted the lyrical “I” of Bitov’s prose narrators—whether first, second, or third person—that was the same as in his poetry.

The remaining activities of the second day of the Forum focused on Bitov and Petersburg. In one of his early short stories, “Avtobus” (The Bus), the protagonist meanders through Leningrad on a bus. We Forum participants went, on a bus, on a “puteshestvie s Bitovym” (journey with Bitov), an excursion to Bitov places, to some of the significant Petersburg places connected to his life and work. Bitov pointed out the house in which he and Inga Petkevich had lived; and the house in which Natalya Gerasimova had lived before they were married. When we crossed a bridge that he had written about in “Avtobus,” he said that from there had begun his “empire.” He added that gazing at the picture-postcard view from the bridge, approximately fifty years ago, had come, no doubt, from his unwillingness to go to school. He showed us Aptekarskii ostrov (Apothecary Island), the section in Petersburg, an academic region, in which he had grown up. He showed us the Karpovka River, similar to “a small river in the countryside,” in whose “turbid waters” he and his friends had swum, “on oil,” as he put it. He showed us the house itself, Aptekarskii ostrov 6 (6 Apothecary Island). As we have seen, the title of one of his books is Aptekarskii ostrov. Another is called Pervaia kniga avtora. Aptekarskii ostrov, 6 (The Author’s First Book. 6 Apothecary Island, 1996). As we stood in the courtyard, Bitov pointed out the windows of the third floor apartment where his family had lived. When Bitov was already an adult, his mother had had to move out because the building had been taken over by some kind of government institute.

Petersburg’s Botanical Garden is located across the street from the writer’s former house. That was our next destination, on foot. Bitov told us that for several years, he used to jog, every day, for about 2½ kilometers, in those “beautiful gardens.” He was, he said, “preparing himself for literature.” Once in the park, among the tall and tranquil trees, we met up with Gennady Popov, a gardener at the Botanical Garden. He and his colleagues had chosen a tree to be planted in Bitov’s honor. We all watched—Forum participants and media crews—as Bitov, with Popov’s guidance, planted the Japanese red pine (sosna gustotsvetkovaia; pinus
densiflora). It is a tree that usually grows in the Russian Far East and in Japan.

Bitov had wanted a cedar in honor of his mother, whose maiden name was Kedrova (“kedr” is the Russian word for cedar), but the Botanical Garden had not been able to find one. David Matevosian, the son of a close friend of Bitov’s, the deceased Armenian writer, Grant Matevosian, promised that a cedar would be planted in Armenia.

It makes sense that a tree would be planted in Bitov’s honor for reasons besides the biographical tie to the Botanical Garden—and that is his interest in ecology and in trees. He was writing about the need to preserve the environment before most people turned their attention to the subject. One example is his impassioned cry, in Pushkin House, written in 1964-71, for human beings to stop exploiting natural resources before it is too late. One of his stories is called “Les” (The Forest), and one of his books, Derevo (The Tree).

The next event was the performance of a “monospektakl’,” a one-man, one-act play, “Bezdel’nik” (The Idler), based on Bitov’s 1961 story of that name, and starring the award-winning actor, Vyacheslav Zakharov. There was no curtain, and there were no props—only Zakharov seated on a chair with an exposed brick wall behind him. The actor’s performance was spellbinding and powerful. His interpretation of “Bezdel’nik” highlighted, in a fresh, new way, the deep existential dimensions of the story.

The performance took place in the art-café, “Podval brodiachei sobaki” (The Stray Dog Basement), restored site of the early twentieth-century Stray Dog Cabaret, whose guests had included major Russian cultural figures, including, among others, Anna Akhmatova, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Alexander Blok, and “Mir iskusstva” (World of Art) artists. As we watched the play, we were seated at small tables, sipping coffee and wine.

Our last stop that evening was Pushkin House, the Russian Academy of Sciences Literary Institute—and the title, of course, of Bitov’s novel. Many of the novel’s scenes take place in Pushkin House. Bitov told us that he had never actually been inside the institute until many years after finishing the novel. He, his wife Natalya, and their young son, Yegor, went there for a New Year’s party. They dressed up as the Three Musketeers. Circus actors came, too, Bitov said, and their dogs were wearing Three Musketeer costumes.

We climbed up to the tower, where Bolshev had prepared the exhibit “Commentaries to the Novel Pushkin House.” I had conceived the idea for the exhibit. In the commentary to Pushkin House, Bitov explains that he will not comment on the obscure things that scholars usually comment upon, but rather on those things that are familiar to people in a particular time period, on those things that get lost—a song, a cigarette brand, a particular kind of child’s toy. My idea had been to create an exhibit out of those objects that he mentioned in the commentary. Thus, Bitov lent a teakettle that he said had been used by the character, Uncle Dickens, in the novel. There was a Gillette razor, a pack of “Sever” (North) cigarettes, also mentioned in the novel and commentary, and a recording of a song popular at that time. There were pictures and newspaper clippings of some of the historical figures mentioned. And in that beautiful Pushkin House tower, some of the Forum participants—
Wolf Schmid and others—waltzed to the melody that was being played, while we all socialized, looked at the exhibit, partook of yet more refreshments, and the TV correspondents interviewed Bitov and others.

The third day of the Forum, entitled “Kavkazskii plennik” (A Captive of the Caucasus), featured the same two cultures, Armenian and Georgian, that Bitov wrote about in the two travelogues, *Uroki Armenii* and *Gruzinskii Al’bom*, that are in *Kavkazskii plennik*, the third volume of Bitov’s *Imperiia v chetyrekh izmereniakh*. Nina Gabrielian, an Armenian poet, prose writer, artist, literary critic, and translator of classical and contemporary poetry of the east, chaired the session devoted to Bitov and Armenia. Yerevan State University had awarded him an honorary doctoral degree, and he had been made an honorary citizen of the city of Yerevan. At the Forum, David Matevosian, on behalf of the Armenian Ministry of Culture, presented him with a gold medal for all that he had done for Armenia, in allowing, through *Armenia Lessons*, the rest of the world to learn about Armenian culture. On behalf of the rector of Yerevan State University, from the professors and students, in appreciation of his continuing the line of Andrey Bely, Valery Briusov, and Osip Mandelstam that served as “guides” to Armenia, Matevosian gave Bitov a watch. Bitov jokingly asked, “Are you sure the watch works?” As he pointed to the cloth clock on the wall, he added, “I believe only in that clock.” He then said, “Maybe I’m also Armenian,” and pointed out that some of his early prose, such as the story, “Obraz” (The Image) had first been published in Armenia. He thanked David Matevosian for getting *Armenia Lessons* translated into Armenian.

Matevosian then spoke about his father’s and Bitov’s friendship, and about the poem, “Grantu” (To Grant) that Bitov had written about his father, adding, after his death, two new lines to the poem:

> Esli verit’ im, to my s toboi tsari,  
> Kak derev’ia: srubiat i – gori!

> If one believes them [our mothers – E.C.],  
> then you and I are tsars,  
> Like trees, we’ll be chopped down and – burn!

Matevosian explained that the word “tsar,” in Armenian, means “tree.” He then showed what he called “human slides” of the two writers.

Gabrielián’s paper focused on transformational aspects of Bitov’s *Armenia Lessons*, of the journey from oneself to oneself. Peter Vail spoke about Bitov’s *Armenia Lessons* containing more about Armenia than Mandelstam’s *Puteshestvie v Armenii* (*Journey to Armenia*) did. He also said that no one before Bitov, in that book, had talked about the ecological catastrophe that befell Lake Sevan. Grigorian’s paper compared an essay Bitov had written about Matevosian with a “Postscript” essay that he wrote twenty years later.

During a break between sessions, young women, dressed in Armenian folk costumes, served glasses of Armenian cognac. Serdak Papikian, Director of the Cultural Center of the Moscow city branch of the Union of Armenians in Russia, also dressed in Armenian national costume, sang Armenian folk songs about love. Musician Aleksandr Movsesian, winner of Russian and international prizes in folklore festivals and competitions, played melancholy minor-key melodies on a fifteenth-century Armenian stringed instrument, the kemancha, which looked, to the untrained eye, as if it belonged to the same general family as the guitar, the violin, and banjo.

After we had been serenaded, we heard the remaining papers about Bitov and Armenia. An Armenian international affairs journalist, Viliam Mkrtchan, whose career assignments had included a several-year stint as Tass correspondent in Washington, recalled that his grandmother had urged him to learn Russian. It was only after he had read *Armenia Lessons*, he admitted, that he began reading other things in Russian—like Tolstoy’s novels and Pasternak’s translations of Shakespeare. (In his paper, Ronald Meyer had also mentioned his grandmother, crediting her with introducing him to reading other things in Russian—like Tolstoy’s novels and Pasternak’s translations of Shakespeare. (In his paper, Ronald Meyer had also mentioned his grandmother, crediting her with introducing him to his first reading of a Russian novel, Tolstoy’s *Voina i mir* [War and Peace]. This is the only conference I had ever been to, where panelists discussed their grandmothers. This, then, too, was another way in which the Forum was different from other conferences.) In *Armenia Lessons*, he went on, Bitov had, for the first time, given him, an Armenian, a sense of the reality of the Armenia that he, Mkrtchan, had lived in all his life. Quoting historian Ronald Suny, Mkrtchan said that Bitov noticed what other people didn’t.

Roman Shubin, a literary scholar at the M. Abegian Literary Institute of the Armenian Academy of Sciences, argued for viewing *Armenia Lessons* through the lens of *Gulliver’s Travels*. He also suggested parallels between Swift’s and Bitov’s attention to the human being’s biological nature. Poet Gevorg Gilants, also writing a dissertation at the Abegian Literary Institute, finished off the
As part of the session, the audience was shown an animated film of Bitov’s and Gabriadze’s “Svobodu Pushkinu” (Freedom to Pushkin), a whimsical, humorous account of what would have happened, had Pushkin gone abroad.

Natalya Sokolovskaya introduced a chorus of four male voices, who sang Georgian songs. She then read quotations from Georgian Album, including Bitov’s words about the classic Georgian poet Shota Rustaveli. That was a lead-in to her presentation, to Bitov, of Rustaveli’s “Vitiaz’ v tigrovom shkure” (A Knight in Tiger Skin), in Russian and Georgian, which she described as the “Georgian Bible” that represented the very faith that Bitov enjoyed with his friends.

Olga Kutmina, literary scholar and docent at Omsk University, rounded off the session by giving a talk on being held captive to Bitov’s A Captive of the Caucasus. She spoke about all of his prose, not just his film scenario, “Zapovednik” (The Wildlife Preserve), being like a wildlife preserve.

The final event of the day, before an evening theatre performance, was a lecture on Bitov’s story, “Penelope,” by literary scholar, critic, and head of the literary criticism section of the journal Novyi mir, Irina Rodnianskaya. Her focus was on what she saw as three films in the story—French New Wave cinema, the movie The Odyssey that the story’s two characters watch, and the narrator’s description of the main character Lobyshev and of Nevsky Prospect in terms that are suggestive of a film. She also spoke about the image of women in “Penelope” as being similar to the image of women in other Bitov works, such as Pushkin House. In addition to Lobyshev’s state in “Penelope,” she discussed the frequency of split heroes in Bitov’s prose.

The theatre performance, in Petersburg’s Lensovet Theater, turned out to be the world premiere of the play, Penelope, based on that same story. Directed by award-winning director Grigory Kozlov, the play starred Sergei Agafonov as Lobyshev and Ekaterina Gorokhovskaya as Penelope. In the excellent production, the character of Lobyshev is made into a writer, seated, at times, at a typewriter on one side of the stage, a bit removed from the action. It was a wise creative decision, on Kozlov’s part, to make Lobyshev into a writer, something that he is not in the story, and to place him, from time to time, at the side of the stage, at a typewriter. This corresponded visually and in substance, to Lobyshev’s distancing behavior in the story. The minimal stage set included distorting mirrors, which emphasized the distorted behavior of Bitov’s Lobyshev. The young actors, in their
interpretations of the characters, highlighted the timeless, universal human emotions depicted in “Penelope,” even though the story itself had had a particular time-bound appeal to people in the Soviet Union of the 1960s.

After the play, Forum participants gathered, for refreshments, in the theatre’s buffet, a palace-like elegant room with high ceilings and small cozy tables. Kozlov, Agafonov, and Gorokhovskaya were there, too, so that people could informally discuss the performance with them.

A large portion of the last day of the Forum was devoted to scholarly papers. Wolf Schmid and I co-chaired the sessions. A great many perspectives on Bitov’s writings were discussed. Literary scholar and St. Petersburg University professor Igor Sukhikh spoke about Bitov’s Piatoe izmerenie (The Fifth Dimension), a book of essays on literature and culture. He spoke about the “philological” quality of Bitov’s thought, and about the fact that Bitov writes things that force us to think—for example, his essay on Erich Maria Remarque as a sociological phenomenon. Irina Surat, a literary scholar who has collaborated with Bitov on some of his books on Pushkin, and who, in 2007, edited a special issue of the journal Oktiabr’, in honor of Bitov’s seventieth birthday, talked about Bitov’s writings on Pushkin. He was the first, she said, to make Pushkin, the person, come alive for us and help us live. Pushkin, she said, saved Bitov in hard times, and for him, the main lesson of Pushkin, is life. Sergei Bocharov’s paper emphasized the fact that no writer before Bitov had, in his writings, discussed the moral responsibility of the author. In my paper, I talked about the similarity of certain ideas in Benjamin Hoff’s The Tao of Pooh to some ideas in Bitov’s works, and about Bitov, in many works, reducing things to their essence. Rosemarie Tietze, the longtime translator of Bitov’s works into German, spoke about what she called the new genre of “shadow commentary.” When she and Bitov would go on a book tour and Bitov would answer questions about the problems of life and literature, these discussions, said Tietze, are texts, although they are rarely preserved. When she asks him questions about the text she is translating, he offers stylistic analyses or pieces of information, as for example, details about the peasant who sells champagne bottle corks at the open market.

Poet, translator, and literary scholar Viktor Kulle noted parallels between Kafka’s Trial and Bitov’s “Zapiski iz-za ugla” (Notes from around the Corner), and commented on the nature of time in “Our Man in Khiva.” Priscilla Meyer, a professor of Russian literature at Wesleyan University and the author of over 100 scholarly publications, concentrated her remarks on parallels she observed between Philip Roth and Bitov. Both, she said, were born in the 1930s. Both use autobiographical narration. Both have doubles in their work. Roth’s touchstone, said Meyer, is Shakespeare, whereas for Bitov, it is Pushkin. Tatyana Shemetova, a literary scholar at Buriat University, spoke about Bitov’s characterization of Pushkin’s writings as “a unified text” and saw Tolstoy’s Detstvo. Otrochestvo. Iunost’ (Childhood. Adolescence. Youth) as a paradigm for Pushkin House.

Smirnova saw the stories in The Vanishing Monakhov as a unified text, pointing out, for example, the obstacles the protagonist encounters in each part of the novel. Sergei Yakovlev, a prose writer and literary scholar, discussed the loss of national identity, the issue of “the writer and the people,” and the question of a “Russian ethics” in Bitov’s works. Pushkin specialist Sergei Fomichev, a literary scholar and a chief senior researcher at Pushkin House, spoke about Griboedov and
Pushkin, about Pushkin’s *Puteshestvie v Arzrum* (Journey to Arzrum), and about Bitov’s having turned people’s attention to the Griboedov episode in Pushkin’s life. Kiev Pedagogical University scholar Aleksandr Yudin emphasized the self-realization, including the unpleasant things that one would rather not know about oneself, which came up as he read Bitov. He talked about Bitov’s method of self-analysis that gets the reader to become involved in his or her own self-analysis.

After the conclusion of the scholarly papers, Pyotr Kozhevnikov, a screenwriter, director, TV writer and host, and author of prose, showed a home movie of Bitov, his wife Natalya, and their son, Yegor, from several years ago. In it were scenes of the family in its Petersburg apartment and at its dacha. There were also shots of the traveling Bitov, arriving by train to Petersburg from Moscow.

The final activities of the Forum took place in Petersburg’s Jazz Philharmonic Hall. On stage, the backdrop was a painting of jazz musicians. The audience, as in a jazz club or a cabaret, was seated at small tables, where food and drink were served throughout the evening. Bella Akhmadulina read some of her poetry, including poems connected to Pushkin. Yuz Aleshkovsky sang some of his dissident songs. Then the Bitov-Quintet performed Pushkin’s unfinished 1824 poem, “Zachem ty poslan byl?” (Why Were You Sent?), and a poem from the last year of his life, what he called a last will and testament. He ended with the finished version of Pushkin’s 1835 poem, “Vnov’ ia posetil” (I Once Again Visited). As if in tribute, Bitov gave the date on which Pushkin had written that poem—September 26—which is, of course, the day in September on which Bitov’s wife Natalya had died. As he recited the poetry, jazz musicians Aleksandr Aleksandrov (bassoon), Yury Parfenov (trumpet) and his son (double bass), and Vladimir Tarasov (drums) improvised. Bitov has pointed out that during their performances, his human voice sounds like a musical instrument, and the musical instruments sound like human voices.

Writer Liudmila Petrushevskaya was the last performer of the evening. She came out on stage in a black dress, black tights, black high heels, and a wide-brimmed black hat with a veil, and announced that she would sing cabaret songs. She sang “Les Champs-Elysées,” “Lili Marlene,” and finally, a song that she called “Blues,” for which, she said, she had composed her own words, in Russian. It’s a melody that I know, in English, as “Dream a Little Dream for Me.”

So ended the Forum.

After all that, where are we? The entire Forum reflected Bitov’s free spirit, his creative spirit. With all of the things that we hear about gloom and doom in the world, it is wonderful to know that in Petersburg, the creative intelligentsia is very much alive and well, …and is definitely having fun, too. I hope that the readers of this article have had fun learning about those magical, miraculous days of celebration of the many dimensions of Andrei Bitov’s unique creative “empire.”

P.S. In an instance of “accidental symmetry,” a poster of James Joyce’s Dublin Days hung on a wall in the cloakroom of the Nabokov Museum. The name of Bitov’s cat is Joyce, named after the writer.

P.S. again ...Not far from Bitov’s former house, our bus had gone by a sign, with words that I had never before seen on a billboard: “Verite v chudo?” (Do you believe in miracles?)

Ellen Chances is Professor of Russian literature and culture at Princeton University, and the author of Andrei Bitov. The Ecology of Inspiration (Cambridge University Press, 1993). The Russian translation, Andrei Bitov. Ekologiya v dokhnovenii, trans. I. Larionov, came out in St. Petersburg in 2007. She was guest editor and a contributor to a special issue of the journal, Russian Literature (The Netherlands), In Honour of Andrej Bitov’s Seventieth Birthday (vol. 61, no. 4, 2007).

Other scholarly publications include the book, Conformity’s Children. An Approach to the Superfluous Man in Russian Literature, and dozens of articles. Her scholarly interests include the nineteenth, twentieth, and now, twenty-first-century novel; Bitov; Dostoevsky; Chekhov; the thick journal; Kharms; the ethical dimensions of contemporary Russian cinema; and comparative Russian and American literature and culture. She is also a writer of essays, memoir, fiction, and poetry.

Illustrations


page 8: Olga Lee, Marina Smirnova, and Ellen Chances in a Petersburg café the night before the Forum began. (Photo by Anna Abalakina.)
The Gabriadze-Bitov statue, “Chizhik-Pyzhik,” on the Fontanka Canal. (Photo by Loki, Wikimedia Commons)

The house in which Bitov grew up, Aptekarskii ostrov, 6 (Apothecary Island, 6); Bitov and TV and film cameras, in the courtyard of Aptekarskii ostrov, 6.

Bitov planting the tree in his honor in St. Petersburg’s Botanical Garden.

Bitov in Pushkin House.


Bella Akhmadulina reciting her poetry; Bitov and jazz musicians. Both photos taken in Jazz Philharmonic Hall.

Liudmila Petrushevskaya sings cabaret songs during the farewell evening held at the Jazz Philharmonic Hall.

Photos by Ellen Chances, unless otherwise noted.
Pretending Civil Society: Western NGO Scripts and Local Actors in Post-Soviet Tajikistan

Livia Alexandra Paggi

It is a common (and comforting) belief that international aid projects exist to spread human rights and democracy globally. How this actually happens is not self-evident. The most satisfying explanation, at least from a Western point of view, is that International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGO) establish transnational links that foster a cohesive local civil society by reinforcing citizens’ political and spiritual aspirations through institutionalized networks of solidarity.1 Once citizens have access to international resources, innate universal democratic values will be unleashed. People will then take the next step to join forces, demand basic rights and free elections, and topple authoritarian rule.

The belief has been particularly popular with respect to the post-Soviet states on the grounds that the region’s fragmented or non-existing civil societies continue to be the primary obstacle to democratization. For example, the U.S. Agency for International Development, one of the largest donors of technical assistance to the former Soviet Union, confidently claims to have trained the key democratic actors and “created the network of civic minded people” necessary to launch Ukraine’s Orange Revolution in 2004, as well as Georgia’s Rose Revolution and Kyrgyzstan’s Tulip Revolution of 2005.2 Without taking a position on this particular claim, this article aims to understand to what extent INGO efforts have been successful at rooting a Western-style civil society. The community of INGOs representing Western values has integrated itself into Tajik society to the point that many of the best qualified English-speaking graduates of local universities have become dependent on them.

Foreign assistance in Tajikistan has undoubtedly created a sector with formal elements that resemble a Western civil society. The community of INGOs using a Western paradigm of civil society to implement projects that attempt to build institutions and establish networks of reform-oriented citizens. I will argue that this model impedes the international community from understanding the complications of local society which might make them function more effectively. Given the prevalence of this model, I raise the question whether the real aim of foreign assistance is to promote a cohesive local civil society capable of organizing itself autonomously with respect to the international community and local government.

My focus is Tajikistan, the smallest and the poorest of the former Soviet republics. After a murderous civil war that was fought from 1991 to 1997, Tajikistan has been ruled by an ever-more authoritarian parliamentary system under the presidency of Emomali Rakhmon. The deterioration of Tajikistan’s economy, coupled with the fact that it shares a 750-mile border with Afghanistan, has made the country the subject of assiduous aid efforts, particularly in view of U.S. global security concerns after 9/11. In 2006 alone, Tajikistan was the recipient of $180 million dollars in official development assistance.3 Of this $180 million, USAID provided $16 million, with disbursements totaling $240 million since 1992.4 Through the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) program, the European Union provided 14 million Euros in 2006.5 Though Tajikistan’s urban population is only one million, the two major towns, Dushanbe and Khujand, are home to over one hundred international organizations, the majority of which focus on rebuilding civil society through specialized projects that promote agriculture and land reform, gender equality, and legal reform.

Foreign assistance in Tajikistan has undoubt-


5. Details of EU project disbursements can be found at <http://www.delkaz.ccc.eu.int/joomla/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=34&Itemid=67>.


for employment. Citizens rely on them for basic modern services, including internet, foreign-language classes, and cultural activities, for example, movie-going, which would have been provided by the state under Soviet rule. Finally, the international community has a large enough presence that the Tajik government cannot easily bypass it in policy-making on a range of key issues, such as freedom of press, security, and land reform. INGOs appear to act like a civil society insofar as they provide an arena of apparent autonomy, if not subtle opposition to the state.

On the basis of my fieldwork as well as my reading of civil society studies and INGO civil society projects, I would maintain that INGOs have created a “bubble civil society,” infused with Western rhetoric and resources, but without effective roots in Tajik society. By bubble civil society, I refer to INGO resources (equipment, services, and support from Western governments) that have attracted key actors (mainly government, elites, and motivated youth), enabling them to hook into the resources. But they are not necessarily reform-minded, nor does the assistance create strong links of solidarity among members even among other groups outside of the particular sector for which aid is provided. This happens for two reasons: first, INGOs ignore existing systems of social networks and the dependency of citizens on clans or informal organization of political and social networks of Tajikistan that were established during the pre-Soviet as well as Soviet political systems. Second, as INGOs attempt to collaborate and build relations of solidarity with local individuals on project implementation, Western staff members establish their own new relations of hierarchy with local employees. Local staff has very little voice in their operations and can only participate by articulating Tajikistan’s problems in terms of Western universal rights rhetoric. Often this rhetoric fails to reflect the nuances of Tajik society. The bubble civil society created by INGOs thus accommodates both international and local actors’ interests just enough to distract or deter both of them from making real institutional change in Tajikistan. As local actors reconfigure themselves to engage with international actors and resources, they try to adapt the organizations to their own interests. Once this dynamic has been institutionalized, it contributes to maintaining the status quo, obstructing any new dialogue about social values and politics, much less new social movements.

To explain this phenomenon, this article will look at the “scripts” for the bubble society in Western ideas of civil society before looking more closely at the interaction between international and local actors and the contrast between larger INGO goals and the interests of local actors. At the center of my research, is a case study of ABA/CEELI, an American INGO in Tajikistan funded by USAID to promote criminal law reform and legal education. The case of ABA/CEELI demonstrates how an initial focus on legal reform becomes diluted as actors reconfigure themselves to the project and resources.

The script for INGO action can be traced in its American version to a universal concept of civil society that is constructed on a romanticized vision of how civil society ostensibly functioned in U.S. history and culture. In Thomas Carothers’ words, U.S. foreign assistance defines a vibrant civil society as “a society in which ordinary citizens are engaged in all cross cutting civic participation with thousands of earnest, diligent civic groups working assertively but constructively to help ensure that a reluctant government gradually becomes responsive to citizen’s needs and sheds its habits of indolence and corruption.” Behind this vision stands a particular interpretation of Alexis De Tocqueville’s often-quoted remarks on America as the “most democratic country in the world” in which citizens have “perfected the art of pursuing in concert the aim of their common desires and have applied this technique to the greatest of objectives.”

However, a proper reading of Tocqueville’s concept is useful to understand the problems INGOs face in Tajikistan today. Tocqueville made the point that “not only does democracy make men forget their ancestors but also hides their descendents.” And American style-civil society institutions could

---

6. Interviews were conducted over a two week period in January 2007 in Dushanbe, Tajikistan. The individuals I interviewed were western representatives, as well as local citizens who currently work for Western funded international organizations.


11. Tocqueville, 66.
thus be conceived as carved out of the breakup of networks based on class, clans, and family ties. If democracy is contingent on a society in which traditional networks have been transformed, then it is evident that democratization would be particularly difficult for Tajikistan. Post-Soviet Tajikistan has an existing traditional civil society in which citizens identify first and foremost with their local clan network, rather than political parties, ethnic groups, or a democratic opposition to the state. Rather than acknowledging the historically peculiar origins of democratic associations in the U.S., proponents of exporting democracy see civil society as a blank slate. Accordingly, informal networks in Tajikistan are simply sources of backwardness and corruption that need to be erased. INGOs are especially reluctant to recognize local networks whose values conflict with Western or U.S. interests. For example, the U.S. government labels the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), a social network tied to political Islam that attracts individuals from all over Central Asia, as a terrorist group. Although donors and governments condemn these kinds of civic networks, they nonetheless are forms of civil society in that they act in opposition to the state.

Janine Wedel is helpful on this point in her book on foreign aid in post-Soviet Russia. Wedel calls attention to the fact that one cannot simply view the delivery of aid to developing countries as a “transmission belt.” Rather, “aid appears more like a series of chemical reactions that begin with the donors’ policies, but are transformed by the agendas, interests, and interactions of donor and recipient representatives.” Furthermore, “each side influences the other and the result is often qualitatively different from the plan envisioned.” INGOs are not delivering foreign assistance to passive and voiceless recipients. Aid providers may imagine local society as a “pristine domain, free of the murky ties and tensions of ethnicity, class, clan, and political partisanship, as Thomas Carothers observes.” By flattening out the complexity of local societies and their history, “the nonwestern subject,” in the words of historian Bonny Ibhawoh, ends up being treated as “needy, incapable of self-government, and in need of long-term external assistance.” This view panders to turning foreign aid into a “moral fairy tale of distress and rescue.” In the end, to quote the very expert Olivier Roy, INGOs use civil society as “the means to groom ‘true’ democrats, which often means bypassing real political actors, or ‘civilizing’ them by recasting their agendas in terms compatible with western thinking.”

The point is not to dismiss the work of INGOs by putting forth a cultural relativist claim that assumes Western agendas are incompatible with local values and norms. Instead, the question becomes how does the INGO world reconcile itself with local society, and, in turn, what parts of Tajik society have molded and appropriated the presence of INGOs?

INGOs are grappling with a particularly tenacious society with several subtleties that tend to be concealed by informal institutions. Studies of post-war civil society in Tajikistan have tended to describe it as a deeply fragmented and “atomized society” whereby “disintegrative factors cross-cut and dissect one another, splitting society into ever smaller units.” The result is that “autarkic behavior becomes the norm” and various forms of corruption dominate interest-based social and political interactions. Although the civil war in Tajikistan brought regional and ethnic tensions to a climax, like elsewhere in Central Asia, there has always been traditional society, by which I mean networks of solidarity and trust based on kinship ties through which individuals can express common interests, resist encroachments of the state, as well as compensate for services that the weak state is not providing. Tajikistan was a “peripheral state” of the Soviet Union, according to Barnett Rubin, providing raw materials for the empire in exchange for social benefits and infrastructure which were subsidized by wealthier Soviet states. To ensure Tajikistan’s collaboration, the Soviet system distributed the resources through existing traditional networks. Observing the role of patron-client relations, Rubin writes, “Territo-

15. Carothers, 212.
The peace agreement in 1997 was an attempt to reconcile the rivalries and conflicts among the various factions, including the Kulyab region, which was historically dominated by the Rakhmon clan. Despite the efforts to establish peace, the post-civil war Tajikistan is still marked by clans, informal networks, and inter-clan competition. The Soviet system and traditional networks constantly interacted and negotiated with one another, mutually solidifying their positions of power.

This interpenetration of state and local, patron and client, new networks and family-based clans held throughout the whole kolkhoz agricultural system, according to Oliver Roy. Far from abolishing traditional rural linkages through the establishment of collective farms; “solidarity groups (were) reincarnated within the structures of pre-existing groups.” In turn, local party systems grafted themselves onto these informal networks. During the Soviet era the leading clan from the northern region of Khujand was the dominating power; other groupings of so-called “traditional society” were constantly in a process of negotiation with them. Through formal and informal institutions there has always been inter-clan competition. If the Soviet system, with its idea of revolutionizing traditional relations, became so involved in local identities and solidarities, it is easy to imagine the powerful resistance Western foreign aid projects face as they step into the oscillation between formal and informal politics.

Contemporary politics at a national level in post-civil war Tajikistan is still marked by clans, although different ones from those that dominated during the Soviet era. The end of the civil war gave rise to a new clan from the Kulyab region, the home territory of President Emomali Rakhmon. Although the peace agreement in 1997 was officially set up to balance different clan and regional tensions, the government has increasingly played a game of exclusionary politics, and more people from this region occupy positions in the formal institutions of government. The Swedish expert on Tajik foreign policy, Lena Jonson, writes that President Rakhmon’s strategy is to be at the top of the pyramid of clan politics by consolidating “his own narrow power base—the Kulyab district—and secure the balance of power between the regions... preventing the regions from becoming political actors in confrontation with the central government.” For example, Rakhmon felt threatened by his formal Presidential Guard, Gafur Mirzoev, who in 2004 was replaced by Colonel Rajab Rakhmonaliev, a native of the Dangara area in the Kulyab region. Moreover, he reorganized the central government so that former ministers not from his region were sent to work at embassies abroad. Political Scientist Kathleen Collins, an expert on clans in Central Asia, observed that the role of clans and informal institutions peaked with Rakhmon’s government.

The implications for INGOs in Tajikistan are twofold. First, ordinary citizens, including employees of INGOs, are forced to resort to different forms of corruption and informal networks to obtain work positions and status in Tajik society. Second, this kind of corruption destabilizes the regime, making the process of democratization through formal institutions much harder. For their survival, not only individual citizens must maneuver between formal and informal institutions, but INGOS must do so as well. For the INGO, survival means renewing contracts with donors, and successfully implementing projects without threatening local government authorities. Circumventing these obstacles often poses a challenge to the moral priorities of INGOs. In the best of circumstances, as Fiona Adamson writes referring to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, democracy assistance programs do not realize their potential because INGOs, for the most part, take a long time to understand the distinctions between the formal institutions of society and the real seat of power, because informal networks of patronage or personal influence are difficult for outsiders to access. In Tajikistan, an international representative from OXFAM, an organization that mainly focuses on gender equality and improving agriculture in rural Tajikistan, bitterly complained that the projects had ultimately become services that replaced duties of the state, for example, clean water for villagers or providing fertilizer for farmers. However, the moment OXFAM wanted to make structural challenges by questioning legislation with regard to land reform and farmers rights, it was immediately blocked by the local government. In order to continue implementing projects or at least continue to provide the basic services, OXFAM was forced to make several compromises, including negotiations.

with corrupt local officials. The French INGO, ACTED, recently paid local officials fines, because the office building had violated a series of numerous but dubious safety violations. Moreover, INGOs in Tajikistan constantly struggle and blame their inability to implement projects on the fact that they face several obstacles in this authoritarian environment, including the basic day-to-day operations of an office.

Finally, to come to grips with the behavior of INGOs with regard to security and survival in a politically contentious environment, it is indispensable to examine the so-called ‘Big Game’ between the Tajik and Western governments, as well as what might be termed the local games between INGOs, local organizations, and the media. For example, although Rakhmon closely monitors INGOs, he is also willing to cooperate to the extent that it will help consolidate his regime. Thus an INGO’s survival often depends on the support from their governments and not the collaboration with other INGOs in the international community. Contrary to what one would think, the increase in INGOs often leads to competition over funding, often to the detriment of cooperating to construct a unified vision of civil society.

Although aid is articulated through idealistic rhetoric emphasizing democratic human rights values, the INGO sector in Tajikistan is inherently connected with the power of foreign governments to influence and put certain pressures on domestic governments. As the international community expressed interest in reform and partnership with Tajikistan, Rakhmon gladly entered into dialogue and negotiations as a way to strengthen his regime and have his position as leader internationally recognized. The ultimate paradox for the case of Tajikistan is that international presence becomes a kind of prerequisite to participate in the big game of politics and great powers. To be exact, President Rakhmon has a foreign policy that is open to embracing international actors such as the United States as long as it consolidates his position as leader, while combating issues that are a menace to his regime. One instance is the porous border with Afghanistan that threatens to import terrorism and Islamic groups opposed to him. The paradox is that president Rakhmon is able to strengthen his grip by claiming that he is modernizing the country while combating terrorism. As a result, foreign aid and the presence of the international community legitimate his rule.

Nonetheless, INGOs proved to be an obstacle to Rakhmon on certain points. By entering into negotiation with the big powers, he could not entirely dismiss the presence of INGOs. Commenting on Rakhmon’s political system, Lena Jonson writes that the “regime, which on the one hand had an interest in introducing reforms, on the other hand feared the political implications of these dynamics for society and for its own capacity.” Specifically, Western media successfully provoked fear in Rakhmon by attributing the Tulip Revolution in 2005 in Kyrgyzstan to Western-funded NGOs. Just as Rakhmon is forced to concede and acknowledge the presence and some of the demands of INGOs, they are also forced to make compromises to ensure their own survival by not being overly threatening to the regime. Moreover, this atmosphere of caution has the effect of maintaining the status quo, where all sides remain firmly in control. This was particularly visible during a five-day workshop sponsored by UNDP on anti-corruption methods for Tajik Members of Parliament. The parliamentarians happily attended the workshop, which was held at a spa in the mountains nearby. Parliamentarians openly accepted handouts, guide books, and attended the lectures. However, they showed little interest in reforming the budget system, and there was an upheaval when the two international consultants criticized the Soviet system and told them they had been colonized. In other words, the parliamentarians were willing to collaborate with the international consultants in so far as their basic interests were met—mainly that of attending a workshop and obtaining professional experience. However, they remained entirely loyal to the executive branch, and criticized the consultant’s model that depicted a balance of powers. The consultants had little leeway or resources to further negotiate with the group of parliamentarians.

Despite external difficulties INGOs encounter when trying to establish relations with formal institutions and government officials, there are several factors internal to INGOs that hinder their capacity to build a unified civil society amongst citizens. INGOs are dependent on their local staff and local NGOs to implement projects and maintain contacts with official government institutions. How-

27. Interview with Western representative working for ACTED, Dushanbe, January 15, 2007.
29. Jonson, 128.
ever, local staff and local NGOs have no authority to change project proposals and can only articulate the issues in terms of Western rhetoric. Political Scientist Clifford Bob observes that local initiatives in Latin America and in Africa often become ineffectual as they “conform themselves to the needs and expectations of potential backers in Western nations. They simplify and universalize their claims, making them relevant to the broader missions and interests of key global players. In particular they match themselves to the substantive concerns and organizational imperatives of large transnational NGOs.”

The result is that official institutions often grow weary of INGO local staff and their intentions. In addition, very superficial and weak links are created between local staff or local NGOs representing INGO values with existing networks of power and formal institutions. Furthermore, as local staff becomes dependent on international actors for employment and status, they are simultaneously marginalizing themselves and developing no leverage to influence politics and state institutions. In sum, local staff of INGOs and local NGOs may become members of the international community. But they are excluded from decision-making in both the “bubble civil society” as well as in Tajikistan’s existing, albeit weak, civil society.

To better understand how a civil society project takes root in Tajikistan and the obstacles that arise in the interaction between Western liberal ideals and the on-the-ground realities, let us now consider more closely a case of an American INGO that has been present in Tajikistan since 1997. At the end of the Cold War in 1990, the Central European and Eurasian Law Initiative (CEELI), a public service project of the American Bar Association, was established with the mission to contribute to the democratization and transition of former Communist states throughout the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union by providing training and technical assistance to legal professionals. CEELI’s main donors are USAID, the U.S. State Department, and the U.S. Department of Justice, which provide law-oriented aid, geared towards reshaping and strengthening a nation’s legal system. Drawing support from American lawyers and judges, including Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor who is a board member, CEELI has provided over 150 million dollars in pro-bono assistance. Furthermore, CEELI has radically expanded by initiating rule of law projects throughout countries in the Middle East, including Iraq.

CEELI represents a classic example of an initiative that envisions promoting a particularly American neo-Tocquevillian outlook on civil society. CEELI’s mission is grounded in the belief that the rule of law and strong legal associations are a fundamental component for democracy and a basic part of American “culture fabric.” To be exact, CEELI’s projects are based on a notion of civil society that emphasizes the strengthening of democratic institutions to enable them to uphold the law, as well as provide checks and balance on the exceses of executive power. In other words, the goal is to create a space whereby citizens can peacefully express dissent and are guaranteed protection from the state infringing upon their fundamental rights, such as access to a fair trial free of corruption as well as gender equality. It emphasizes democratization by upholding negative rights. In the case of Tajikistan, this means working mostly with urban professionals as opposed to organizing grassroots movements in impoverished rural areas.

In order to carry out this vision of civil society in Tajikistan, CEELI has implemented a number of different projects that aim to reform existing legal institutions, redraft laws, and raise standards of the legal profession. CEELI has two small offices in Tajikistan: one is located in the capital Dushanbe, and the other Khujand, the second largest city and home of the powerful clan that during the Soviet period dominated the country’s resources and key political positions. Currently, CEELI runs two programs funded by USAID and INL.

The first is a criminal law program with a budget of $300,000 dollars extended over a period of two years. The Criminal Law Reform Program has a “top-down approach,” meaning that the focus is institution capacity building with the objective of forming a bar association for criminal defense advocates and enhance solidarity to strengthen their position in the court system. By providing training for criminal defense advocates, CEELI attempts to plant seeds of reform, primarily by combating corruption amongst prosecutors and judges. The second project is a legal education program called “My Civic Standing,” which can be best understood as a “bottom-up approach” with projects geared

33. Carothers, 168.
34. CEELI Project proposal for Criminal Law Reform Program.
35. Carothers, 169.
to target “the people,” in this case the next generation of Tajik citizens, by teaching basic concepts of international human rights in schools and summer camps. This program attempts to equip young citizens and student lawyers with the rhetoric of rights (which are officially protected by the Tajik Constitution) in order to enhance their capacity to confront the oppressive state. Moreover, to bring about democratization, CEELI uses a combined approach that targets both state institutions as well young citizens at the grassroots level, drawing on several different local actors.

The internal organization of CEELI’s offices are such that all projects are supervised and managed by a salaried country director, in addition to two U.S. lawyers or “liaisons” who volunteer their expertise and legal skills for a year and are responsible for maintaining relations with donors and representatives of other international organizations in Tajikistan. The country director, who had recently arrived in Dushanbe, explained that she envisioned herself as a representative of the American legal system, and as a toolbox filled with skills and resources to offer Tajikistan. However, she also admits that her primary reason for taking up this three-year paid position in Dushanbe is to advance her career by serving her time out on the field, making her more competitive on the U.S. job market.36

Even though the law liaisons are “volunteers” their living standard in Dushanbe is incomparably higher than that of local staff; moreover, they have access to special staff, including chauffeurs. Even so, they are entirely dependent on the local staff, for they rarely speak Russian and are generally uninformed about Tajik politics and society, having had little or no prior contact with post-Soviet countries. Moreover, the rapid turnover of U.S. staff makes it difficult to have an enduring impact. Liaisons are contracted for a one-year period to manage a project, a short period given the fact that it often takes four months to build personal networks and a reputation within the international community as well as become acquainted with the Tajik legal system. The result is that they are unable to become invested in the projects, even if they want to. As it stands, upon completing their service liaisons often leave without guaranteeing a project’s continued funding, which results in the project’s termination, thus putting an end to any progress.37

The local staff is predominantly composed of young Tajiks from middle-class professional families, who benefited from education and status during the Soviet era. Generally speaking, the local staff possess good English skills and are recent graduates from either the faculty of law or international relations in Tajikistan. The local staff’s main responsibility is project implementation. They handle relations with local cooperating partners, assist in conducting U.S.-style training sessions, and are responsible for all translation. The local staff does not have the authority to alter or tailor project goals to make them more suited for the environment. Nonetheless, CEELI does provide a number of resources for staff, including a professional environment that offers higher salaries, internet access, cell phones, and opportunities for staff to gain professional development and experience abroad. In addition, in the past several CEELI staff members made successful applications to study abroad on scholarship programs funded by the Soros Foundation or the U.S. government. However, the majority of scholarship recipients, upon their return to Tajikistan, continue to work in international organizations.38 To be precise, Western scholarship funds and INGOs such as CEELI invest in training a group of potential reformers that in turn are supposed to become loyal to their resources and ideology. However, if they remain part of the international community, whether they are reform-minded or not, they become further detached from local society, and ultimately lose their capacity to influence politics and formal institutions.39

Besides local staff, CEELI has involved local actors, including lawyers and judges, who have received training on a wide range of topics, such as legal ethics and trial skills. The main incentive for local participants is to utilize the training for professional development and temporarily take part in an international and more modern work environment. By providing this training for legal professionals, CEELI is replacing a function of the state. A typical training session at CEELI on judicial ethics will consist of a presentation of the international principles of judicial conduct, a video presentation and discussion of a day in the life of an American judge in California, and a discussion of hypothetical situ-

36. Interview with Country Director of CEELI, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, January 10, 2007.
37. Interview with Local Staff Attorney Criminal Law Program, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, January 6, 2007.
39. Interview with Tajik scholar who claimed that IOs were constantly trying to recruit her as an employee because of her English language skills, but she has refused and instead initiated her own civil society project, mainly that of setting up a museum, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, January 7, 2007.
Consequently, legal actors have littered the violation of procedures established by law.”43 In the interest of one’s close relatives or friends” and “of one’s status to resolve issues of personal interests been legislation since 1999 that prohibits the “use of corruption indicates that people found law enforcement bodies, including courts and the prosecutor’s office, to be the most corrupt government institutions.44 Finally, despite the suggestions that these training programs are not having the intended long-term impact, they are used in donor reports as an indicator of a project’s success.45 The number of training sessions conducted with information on the number of participants and the materials CEELI produces and hands out, such as the booklet called the Legal Reform Index, are the indicators that supposedly measure the accomplishments of the INGO’s projects.

But it is evident that these indicators cannot adequately evaluate the long-term impact of a project. Even when the legal actors are reformed, they have no say in setting donor priorities. For instance, CEELI changes the focus of its training on an annual basis, depending on how donors earmark funds. The first-year training might focus primarily on ethics, and the following year it may focus on methods to combat trafficking. Consequently, legal actors have little opportunity to build on their previous skills. Although there is significant interaction between international and local actors with regard to judicial reform, only superficially is a civil society being created enabling to accommodate all actors, yet unable to make systemic changes.

CEELI’s legal education programs have made admirable attempts at engaging students from local schools, including the madras, the religious primary school.46 The program “My Civic Standing” uses university law students to help implement a “street law-style program in which law students prepare and conduct lessons on human rights and basic constitutional protections.” The program has reported several success stories, for example, when children have stood up to police officers, insisting that they have no right to search them and make illegal requests for documentation.47 However, this project reveals how INGOs often rely on local NGOs to help implement projects and demonstrate in donor reports that they are indeed cooperating with a vibrant home-grown civil society. In other words, INGOs often set up local NGOs or fund them as a way to guarantee their own economic survival and continue to renew their contracts with donors. Despite this cooperation, local NGOs often become subordinate to the Western INGO. Specifically, CEELI cooperates with the local NGO Student League of Lawyers, established in 2002, which is responsible for conducting the series of interactive legal education training sessions in the various schools. The League was established by law students who wished to assemble and build an association after the civil war. Initially, the league was most concerned with setting up activities such as moot court and a network that could help find students internships. As it began to receive funding from CEELI, the NGO began to cooperate closely on various projects. In a recent assessment of the NGO, students said “we do not feel ourselves as a separate organization from ABA/CEELI, we are like volunteers of ABA/CEELI.”48 In other words, the league of student lawyers was initially a local initiative; but after receiving funding from CEELI, it has gradually lost its autonomy; now to a large extent the student lawyers must implement only activities approved by CEELI. The report also indicated that the student’s inability to write grant proposals hindered them from diversifying their funding and as

41. Carothers, 175.
42. Interview with local staff attorney of the Criminal Law Program, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, December 28, 2007.
43. Article 12 of Anti-corruption law of the Republic of Tajikistan issued on December 1999.
44. Survey of the perception of corruption in the country conducted by the strategic research center with UNDP’s collaboration 2006.
46. Although the Madras school in Dushanbe has recently rejected CEELI’s offer to collaborate.
a result activities would often abruptly come to halt. Political Scientist Sarah Henderson coined the term “principled clientelism” to describe the dynamic between local NGOs and Western donors in Russia. By this term, Henderson refers to those Western organizations that have established a new hierarchy among local organizations. Whatever their intention, Western groups have thus bought the loyalties of local civic groups. Moreover, this relationship of interdependence established between CEELI and the student lawyers illustrates how even young reform-minded individuals invested in change become subordinated to the priorities and values of the international community.

The INGOs’ reliance on money from donors in order to survive also has the effect of there being little collaboration or coordination amongst the various INGO projects. Despite the fact that meetings are often held with regard to cooperation amongst INGOs, discussion of actual projects is rare. At a roundtable entitled “Development Partners,” held at the UN office on December 2, 2005, the declared aim was to “work together more effectively.” However, the meeting was reduced to give-and-take not about significant issues but about minutiae, such as how to obtain visas for the international staff and arriving consultants. Ultimately, bringing together the different actors to cooperate accomplishes very little in the way of concrete agreements.

In contrast to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan has been relatively tolerant toward the presence of INGOs as the government has until recently conducted a foreign policy that embraces Western governments. Nevertheless, CEELI has been singled out for public criticism in the media for its legal education program to task, accusing CEELI of having unclear goals and violating the terms of cooperation. Specifically the activities are “directed toward agitation and spreading propaganda about Western values among the next generation.” Finally, according to the author, CEELI’s programs have a negative influence on the consciousness of future generations of Tajik children by leading them to forget their Asian values, including respect for adults and children. In sum, CEELI has come to be identified as an INGO that is anti-state, embracing Western values, and behaves according to political rather than humanitarian values. CEELI defended itself by reiterating the project mission as well as reminding Tajikistan that it wants to bring about democratization and that it was sharing the “government’s expectation that the youth of Tajikistan will play an active role in the development of their new democracy and in the advancement of the rule of law in Tajikistan.”

However CEELI’s existence in Tajikistan strongly depends on the backing of the US government. In fact, outraged, the US ambassador responded that he demanded an apology as these kinds of attacks on American organizations were threatening the good relations Tajikistan has with the United States. Clearly, what appears to be civil society projects invested in upholding human rights also serve as crucial tools in diplomatic relations. The stakes are too high for the Tajik state to threaten its relations with the US government. Thus, they are willing to make more compromises to tolerate the presence of CEELI. In other words, the capacity of INGOs to implement projects also greatly depends on how much support their sponsoring government provides and how much leverage they have to influence the Tajik government.

The case of CEELI demonstrates how Western democracies with normative agendas that seek to transplant the concept of a vibrant civil society results in having mixed effects. The most evident effect is that the international community’s presence has created a kind of civil society with its resources and links with the power of Western governments, which has led key urban local actors to reconfigure their interests. A Russian-Tajik woman who always worked as an English teacher for the Slavonic University, but also started programs to teach English to local staff working at INGOs, observed that she could no longer imagine Dushanbe without the international community. Since the arrival of INGOs, modern services have begun to be introduced, including luxury hotels, supermarkets, and restaurants, not to mention a French cafe that serves chocolate truffle cake and desert wines. But access to these kinds of goods requires that people have high salaries, and which is only possible if they are employed at a high level by an INGO—or if they are stalling the system by engaging in some kind of racket. Besides access to consumer goods, INGOs provide other professional services, which require

49. Henderson, 165.
50. Minutes, Development Round Table Discussion held UN office, December 2, 2005.
52. CEELI’s response in Jumhuriat, November 2005.
54. Interview with English Teacher working for INGOs, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, January 9, 2007.
In conclusion, we should turn to the question of whether the bubble civil society developed through the world of INGOS ought to be regarded as detrimental to the local societies. The institutionalized mechanism of interaction between INGOS and Tajikistan could have long-term stultifying effects to the degree that Rakhmon’s authoritarian regime has had the best opportunities to benefit from INGOS and their resources, while simultaneously preventing them from becoming a serious threat to his regime. Even if that is not their intention, INGOS by and large maintain the status quo of the old Soviet traditional key actors instead of promoting the autonomy of the potential young reformers with whom they work. Throughout my interviews, two expressions were commonly used to describe the impact of INGOS in Tajikistan. Westerners working in Tajikistan sum up their pessimism about reform on the part of the locals by saying that they are stubborn: They “don’t know how to think outside of the box.” In other words, the Tajiks are held to lack the sort of creativity needed to really build a strong civil society and let “people power” prevail. This is a mistaken view. INGOS are hampered by their own lack of creativity and lack of understanding of the subtleties and historical intricacies of the situation in Tajikistan. If we take this mechanical metaphor seriously, the lines of the box are drawn by Western assumptions about how a civil society is supposed to be created. On the other hand, when Tajiks are questioned about how they perceive the INGO community, they frequently answer that “you can’t just give people fish; you have to show them how to fish.” This sounds like a metaphor of dependency. In reality, it displays a more organic vision of the process of transferring resources and skills. If you just throw them fish, they will simply take them and never think neither about how to catch them themselves or about the pond in which they have to survive. True, the “showing how” might only add to their dependency. But it is implied that “showing how” would bring greater transparency and enable the local actors to become more autonomous.

The question remains, then, if the INGO neo-Tocquevillian model of civil society is the only one currently available. One alternative would be to examine a Muslim faith-based organization’s vision of civil society, such as the Agha Khan Foundation in Tajikistan. Although the Agha Khan Foundation’s civil society project document shares similarities with CEELI’s project documents in that it expresses the need for a strong civil society to improve the quality of life, it operates within a different framework than CEELI or other INGOS. The spiritual leader, Agha Khan, uses his foundation to provide assistance and fund civil society projects in countries with Ismaili populations, for example, Pakistan, Tanzania and Tajikistan. In Tajikistan, this has meant that he funds projects mostly in the Pamir region, where there is a strong concentration of Ismailis. The Agha Khan Foundation’s project document understands civil society as “bridging faith and society in a multifaceted development process involving economic, social and cultural activities. The program will therefore take a balanced approach, working with AKDN and its agencies as well as actors outside the AKDN system, including CSOs, government, and business.” In other words, Agha Khan operates on the assumption that there is already a common shared ground for building a civil society—mainly that of the village organizations already connected around a common faith. In other words, Agha Khan Foundation is much more focused on working with existing forms of communal civil society, than introducing new networks or attempting to build civil society from scratch. Although Agha Khan projects are often isolated and in remote areas of Tajikistan, they have been successful in the Western sense of building a civil society, to the point that Pamiris have become very loyal to the organization, respecting and following “His Highness” the Agha Khan. In addition, the Agha Khan Foundation takes several initiatives to represent the Pamir region in domestic politics. For instance, he is in constant negotiation with President Rakhmon over providing resources to the Pamir region and setting up universities there. Most famously, he ensured that the Pamir region did not starve during the civil war by shipping food. A case study would be needed to understand the full range of activities and organizational behavior of the Agha Khan Institute, but clearly

56. Freizer, 234.
organizers are able to construct a civil society with seemingly formal Western elements, because they are often operating on a common ground and with a shared vision of reform (mainly that of improving already existing social structures). Moreover, there is the idea that there is a sense of reciprocity—Agha Khan will help the citizens with activities, providing scholarships, and even representing them in the political arena during negotiations. In addition, the organization is set up so that Tajiks occupy all leadership positions within the local offices. In turn, the citizens are very loyal to “His Highness,” and are enforcing his base of power as a world religion. On the other hand, it can be argued that the Agha Khan Foundation is not promoting a cohesive national civil society because he only supports one region—mainly the Pamir. This often causes envy and resentment for the region, as students have access to far more funds for scholarships and opportunities to go abroad. In sum, short of knowing more about the operations of non-Western paradigms of civil society, as they are organized through non-Western NGOs, we have to rest our case that the neo-Tocquevillian route does not yield the universal good that it claims to be working towards.

Livia Paggi graduated from Columbia College in 2007. This article comes from an independent research project supported by a Harriman Institute fellowship and supervised by Professor Alexander Cooley. This paper draws on her work with the American Bar Association’s Central European and Eurasian Law Initiative (CEELI) and the United Nations Development Programme in Tajikistan. Currently she lives in London, where she works as a consultant for Control Risks.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


On February 4, 2005, military guards welcomed guests arriving at the Livadia Palace near Yalta, as they had done sixty years earlier on the first day of the Yalta Conference, which brought together Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin to discuss the shape of the world after the Second World War. Aside from the honor guard and the return to the Livadia Palace of some of the former Soviet soldiers and waitresses who had provided security for the conference and helped assure its smooth progress sixty years earlier, there was little resemblance between the events of February 1945 and those of 2005. The organizers of the 2005 Yalta conference—a symposium entitled “Yalta 1945-2005: From the Bipolar World to the Geopolitics of the Future”—anxiously awaited but never received greetings from President Viktor Yushchenko of Ukraine, to which Yalta and the Crimea now belong, or from President Vladimir Putin of Russia—the legal successor to the Soviet Union, which hosted the Yalta Conference in 1945. Nor were there greetings from the leaders of Britain or the United States. Every political leader whose greetings never reached Yalta on February 4th had his own reasons to overlook the anniversary of the conference that shaped the modern world and plunged it into almost half a century of cold war.

In the opinion of the Polish historian Jerzy Jedlicki, the twentieth-century history of Eastern Europe is “a perfect laboratory to observe how the genuine or apparent remembrances of the past may aggravate current conflicts and how they themselves are modified in the process.” According to Jedlicki, the most intriguing question that the study of Eastern Europe can help answer is: “What factors activate historical reminiscences, and what circumstances would rather allow them to remain dormant and apparently forgotten. In other words, collective ‘memories’ may become ‘hot’ or ‘cooled,’ and the course of events may often depend on their emotional temperature.” I propose to examine patterns of collective remembrance and forgetting of historical events of international importance by analyzing public debates on the legacy of the Yalta Conference in Russia, Latvia, Poland, Ukraine, and the United States. I consider the interrelations between politics and historical representations in each of these countries, and the impact of the changing international situation on the ways in which intellectual and political elites interpret the importance of the Yalta agreements. In conclusion, I analyze the narrative strategies employed by the “winners” and “losers” of Yalta in representing their vision of the past.

Since the end of the First World War and the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman empires, Eastern Europe has been an arena for the competing interests of new nation-states and the ambitions of great powers. After the German vision of Mitteleuropa as a Berlin-dominated space between Germany and Russia evaporated in the wake of the German defeat in the First World War, and the Bolshevik revolutionary advance on Europe was thrown back in 1920 by the “miracle on the Vistula,” the territory between the Baltic and Adriatic seas became a contested ground between the capitalist West and the Communist East. While Britain and France regarded the newly independent countries of the region as a “cordon sanitaire” against Bolshevik expansion, the Soviets tried to undermine some of the new regimes by turning their republics of Ukraine, Belarus and Moldavia into a socialist Piedmont for the national minorities of Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania. Eventually Stalin used the irredentist argument to divide Eastern Europe with Hitler in 1939. As Britain and France entered the Second World War over the German invasion of Poland, London considered the restoration of Poland’s independence and British interests in the region one of its main objectives in the war. The Yalta Conference effectively put an end to those plans, since Soviet armies occupied

---

1. On the symposium organized by the Crimean authorities to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the Yalta Conference, see Liudmila Obukhovskaiia, “Imet’ uvazhenie k proshlomu,” Krymskaia pravda, 9 February 2005. There is an extensive literature on the conference, most of it published during the Cold War. For a post-Cold War assessment of the decisions made at Yalta, see Lloyd C. Gardner, Spheres of Influence: The Great Powers Partition Europe, from Munich to Yalta (Chicago, 1993).

most of Eastern Europe, and Churchill failed to persuade Roosevelt to back British policy in the region. Yalta initiated the era of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, which lasted until the end of the Cold War and left bitter memories of Western betrayal and Soviet dominance in the collective memory of the region.3

The events leading to the disintegration of the Soviet bloc in Eastern Europe, the collapse of the USSR, and the emergence of new nation-states on the ruins of the communist empire have often been treated by historians as a manifestation of “the revenge of the past.”4 It would be difficult indeed to exaggerate the role of history in the rearticulation of national identities in post-communist Eastern Europe. The recovery of collective memory suppressed by authoritarian regimes and recollections of the region’s traumatic experiences during and after the Second World War not only helped boost the national pride of the newly freed nations, but also fueled ethnic and sectarian conflicts from the Balkans in the west to Nagornyi Karabakh in the east. 5

The European borders established at Yalta generally survived the historical and national resurgence of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Germany was reunited, but there was no adjustment to its eastern border as of 1989. Czechoslovakia split into two states, but their borders remained those established immediately after the Second World War. Nor was there any change in the borders of Poland or the former Soviet republics of Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine, all of which “inherited” part of Poland’s interwar territory. Does this mean that the new national elites are satisfied with the map of Eastern Europe as drawn at Yalta, or do they still harbor grudges against the authors of the Yalta agreements? The historical “amnesia” of the world leaders who forgot to send their greetings to the Yalta symposium in February 2005 indicates that while the Yalta borders generally remained intact, the historical and political consequences of the decisions made at Yalta in 1945 continue to haunt the world’s political elites.

The Ghosts of Yalta

Vladimir Putin had more reason than any world leader to “forget” the sixtieth anniversary of the Yalta Conference. In early 2005 he faced a growing international crisis whose roots could be traced back to the legacy of Yalta. Russia ended 2004 as a big loser in international relations: its intervention in the Ukrainian presidential elections on the side of a pro-Russian candidate with a well-known criminal record and underground connections backfired. The Orange Revolution brought to power a Western-leaning and pro-democratic Ukrainian opposition leader, Viktor Yushchenko. Russia was losing control over its closest neighbor, whose territory now included the Crimea and the site of the Yalta Conference. In December 2004, the Russian minister of foreign affairs, Sergei Lavrov, suggested to the American secretary of state, Colin Powell, that Ukraine was part of the Russian sphere of influence—a statement that had all the hallmarks of a Yalta-type approach to international affairs. It was intended to counter Western criticism of Russia’s meddling in the Ukrainian elections and persuade the American leadership to give an increasingly authoritarian Russia a free hand in proceeding against democratic governments on the territory of the former Soviet Union. Powell rebuffed Lavrov’s suggestion: the United States regarded developments in Ukraine as proof that democracy was on the march all over the world, from the Middle East to the former Soviet Union.6

While the American administration rejected the Yalta-inspired principle of the division of the world into spheres of influence, politicians in Germany and Japan—the main “losers” of the Yalta agreements—rejected not only the principles underlying the Yalta decisions but also the legitimacy of Russian territorial acquisitions approved by the Crimean conference. In October 2004 the opposition parties in the German parliament raised questions about the continuing militarization of the former East Prussia, allocated to Russia by the Big Three in February 1945 and known as the Kaliningrad oblast ever since. They suggested calling an international conference with the participation of organizations representing Germans resettled from East Prussia to discuss the economic development of the region, which they referred to as the Königsberg oblast. They also suggested the creation of a Lithuanian-Polish-Russian cross-border region to be called “Prussia.” The Russian government was appalled. Stressing that Gerhard Schroeder’s government had no territorial claims against Russia, Sergei Lavrov condemned those German politicians who had raised the


6. For a Russian commentary on the outcome of discussions between Powell and Lavrov during a conference of foreign ministers of OSCE member nations in Sofia, see Artur Blinov and Artem Terekhov, “Krah mifa o zonakh vliianiia,” Nezavisimaiia gazeta, 9 December 2004.
whether the Soviet takeover of the Baltic states, tacitly
the core of Russo-Baltic tensions was the question of
\[\text{cow aroused heated discussions in the Baltic states. At}
\] the international arena wearing the mantle of principal
victor over fascism and savior of Europe from Nazi rule.
VE Day, however, brought not only liberation from fasci-
sm, but also Soviet occupation of Eastern and Central
Europe, which lasted in one form or another for more
than forty years. The leaders of the “captive” nations were
now determined to remind the world of that episode and,
in the process, to encourage Russia to face its Stalinist
occupation. The answer to that question had serious
legal and political repercussions for Russia, as it would
affect the status of the Russian minority in Latvia and
place on the international agenda not only the issue of
Russia’s moral responsibility for an act of aggression but
also its legal consequences. Potentially, the Russian gov-
ernment faced lawsuits demanding material compensa-
tion for the imprisonment, deportation and death of hun-
dreds of thousands if not millions of citizens of the Baltic
states. The Russian political elites took the issue so seri-
sously that they were prepared to soften their demands
on the issue of the human rights of Russian speakers in
the Baltic states—their main weapon in diplomatic con-
flicts with the Baltics throughout the 1990s—if Latvia
and Estonia would drop their claims for recognition
of the Soviet takeover of the Baltic states as an act of
occupation. On February 3, 2005 (the eve of the sixti-
eth anniversary of the Yalta Conference), the Russian
side leaked to the press drafts of unsigned joint decla-
rations on Russo-Estonian and Russo-Latvian relations
that included a quid pro quo agreement in that regard.

The debate over the participation of the presidents
of the Baltic states in the VE Day celebrations in Mos-
cow became especially acute in Latvia, the home of
the largest Russian minority in the Baltics. Indeed, it crossed
national boundaries and caused an international scandal.
The president of Latvia, Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga—her-
self a refugee from Soviet rule and a former professor of
psychology at the University of Montreal, known in Rus-
sian diplomatic circles as the “Canadian”—has been a
strong advocate of the thesis that Soviet rule in her coun-
try amounted to an occupation. She has not been reluc-
tant to express that conviction at home and abroad, and in
January 2005, at the ceremony marking the sixtieth anni-
versary of the liberation of the prisoners of the Ausch-
witz concentration camp, she presented President Putin
with a book promoting that interpretation of the history
of Russo-Latvian relations. The Russian response was
swift and decisive. The publication of the book, entitled
The History of Latvia: The Twentieth Century, was offi-
cially condemned by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of
the Russian Federation, and when a Russian translation
of the volume was subsequently launched in Moscow,
one of its authors was denied an entry visa to Russia.

Not surprisingly, Dr. Vike-Freiberga was highly
reluctant from the outset to participate in the Mos-
cow commemorations. Only later, under pressure from

---

7. See Evgenii Grigor’ev, “Mid RF ostroit Kaliningrad,” Nezavi-
simaia gazeta, 16 November 2004.
8. See Artem Blinov, “Tokio daiut trubu, no ne ostrova,” Nezavi-
simaia gazeta, 17 January 2005; idem, “Ul’timatum proigravshego,”
Nezavisimaia gazeta, 10 March 2005.

9. On the history of the Baltic states after the Soviet takeover, see
Romuald J. Misiusmas and Rein Taagepera, The Baltic States: Years of
10. On the controversy accompanying the Moscow launch of
the book presented by Vike-Freiberga to Putin, see Ivan Gorskho,
“Eto prosto tochka zrenia latyshei,” Nezavisimaia gazeta, February
4, 2005.
President George W. Bush of the United States, did she change her mind and accept the invitation, becoming the only Baltic head of state to attend. The Latvian president stated that she would take part in the ceremony in Moscow out of respect for the Russian people and their sacrifice in the fight against Nazism, but she stood firm when it came to the interpretation of Latvian history and Russo-Latvian relations after the Second World War. Speaking on the Latvian radio program *Krustpunkti*, she suggested that Russia’s harshly negative reaction to the Latvian viewpoint precluded open discussion on important questions of recent history, while other countries were making attempts to reevaluate their past. According to the Latvian president, Soviet-era stereotypes continued to dominate the Russian interpretation of the Second World War and the postwar era. In an article published in *Der Tagesspiegel* on May 6, 2005, Vika-Freiberga reiterated her earlier statement, arguing that after the expulsion of the Nazis, Latvia and the other Baltic states had become victims of Soviet occupation, which resulted in mass arrests, killings and deportations of their citizens. She also suggested that both Latvia and Germany had faced their record in World War II, while Russia refused to separate its heroes from its tyrants and condemn the atrocities committed in the name of communism.\(^11\)

**The Polish Revolt**

If in the Baltic states the decisions of the Yalta Conference were seen as a mere confirmation by the Western powers of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which delivered the Baltics into Stalin’s hands, in Poland those decisions were viewed as a separate matter. There the Yalta debate coincided with discussions about President Aleksander Kwaśniewski’s possible visit to Moscow for the VE Day celebrations. The tone and direction of the debate provoked strong criticism on the part of Moscow. As in the case of Russo-Latvian disagreements over the interpretation of the Soviet past, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs took it upon itself to present the Russian point of view on the matter. On February 12, 2005, sixty years to the day after the conclusion of the Yalta Conference, the Information and Press Department of the ministry issued a statement distributed by the government-controlled press agency ITAR-TASS. The authors of the statement took issue with those Polish authors and politicians who regarded Yalta as a symbol of Poland’s betrayal by its Western allies and of the subsequent Soviet occupation. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs protested what it called an attempt to rewrite the history of the Second World War and take historical events out of context. It asserted that the participants in the Yalta Conference had wanted to see Poland strong, free, independent and democratic. The fact that the Soviet Union did everything in its power to turn that country into anything but a strong, free, independent and democratic state apparently was not considered by the authors of the statement to be part of the historical context. Another Russian argument in favor of the Yalta decisions dealt with the extension of the Polish borders to the north and west and the recognition of those borders by the Big Three at Yalta and Potsdam. The statement conveniently overlooked the fact that Poland lost its eastern lands, and, by incorporating western territories previously settled by ethnic Germans, became an accomplice in Stalin’s partition of Europe.\(^12\)

It is not clear what the initiators of the Russian Foreign Ministry’s statement expected, but it created a great deal of negative publicity in the Polish media. Critics immediately pointed out that as a result of the Yalta decisions, Poland found itself under the control of a totalitarian regime and not only gained but also lost territory. Still, the Polish media was not prepared to open the Pandora’s box of the postwar European border settlements. Some observers even asserted that if Lviv had remained in Poland after the war, it would probably have become a Polish Belfast. Generally, when it came to countering Russian arguments on the significance of the Yalta decisions, the Polish media treated them with a kind of fatalism—what else could one expect of the Russians? Commentators stated that it would be unreasonable to think that Moscow could condemn the decisions made at Yalta with the participation of Roosevelt and Churchill if it still refused to admit its failure to support the Warsaw uprising of 1944 or release all available information on the Soviet execution of thousands of Polish prisoners of war in Katyn Forest in 1940.\(^13\)

The Katyn massacre of more than twenty thousand Polish prisoners of war by Soviet security forces has always been high on the list of Polish grievances against Russia.\(^14\) In the spring of 2005, some commentators even


\(^{14}\) There is an extensive literature on the Katyn massacre. At the time of writing, the latest monograph on the subject is George Sanford’s *Katyn and the Soviet Massacre of 1940: Truth, Justice and Memory* (London and New York, 2005).
suggested that Kwaśniewski’s visit to Russia for the VE Day celebrations would be justified only if he used the occasion to lay flowers at the mass graves of Polish officers in Katyn Forest. Even the last Communist ruler of Poland, General Wojciech Jaruzelski, who was invited to attend the celebrations in Moscow and intended to visit his father’s grave in Siberia, stated that he did not understand why the Russians were reluctant to tell the whole truth about Katyn and publish the available documents.15 Opposition leaders in parliament, including the future president of Poland, Lech Kaczyński, declared themselves against Kwaśniewski’s visit to Moscow. But the Catholic Church hierarchy and majority public opinion supported the visit, as did the government, which maintained that it would not amount to a ratification of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 or the Yalta decisions of 1945.

In his interview with the German daily Die Welt in late February, Kwaśniewski stated that he intended to go to Moscow to celebrate the end of the bloodiest dictatorship in human history, but would not accept the invitation if it were for a ceremony marking either the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact or of the Yalta Conference. Like the Baltic presidents before him, Kwaśniewski noted President George W. Bush’s earlier statements that Yalta had led to the partition of Europe and failed to bring freedom to significant numbers of Europeans. Kwaśniewski believed that the anniversary of the end of the war in Europe presented Putin with an opportunity to remind the world of the contribution of the Russian and other Soviet peoples to the victory over fascism and to give a just assessment of what had taken place after the war. In early May 2005, before leaving for Moscow, Kwaśniewski addressed his compatriots at the Polish VE Day celebrations in Wroclaw. According to the Polish State Information Agency (PAP), Kwaśniewski stated: “Yalta was painful… for Poles, above all, because the declarations on independent and democratic Poland were not kept.” He added, however, that “thanks to the Yalta and Potsdam agreements, our country built and continues to build its sovereignty and found new opportunities for development in the west and north.” Kwaśniewski condemned the Soviet killings of Polish patriots after the war, stating, “We remember with indignation and bitterness that when fireworks exploded in the Moscow sky to celebrate the victorious end of the war, sixteen leaders of the Polish Underground were incarcerated in the Lubianka Prison, and three of them were murdered.” Having calmed public opinion at home and countered his opponents’ calls to turn down Putin’s invitation, Kwaśniewski was ready to depart for Moscow.16

There he was in for a major surprise that strengthened the hand of those who had opposed the visit from the outset and advised him not to go to Russia. In his speech at the festivities President Putin omitted Poland from his list of nations that had contributed to the victory over fascism. This apparently came as a surprise not only to Mr. Kwaśniewski, but also to his Communist predecessor, Wojciech Jaruzelski, who had boasted before his trip to Moscow that he was going to Russia as a representative of the fourth largest army in the anti-Hitlerite coalition. Whether Putin’s omission of Poland in his VE Day speech was deliberate or not, it helped bring Polish-Russian relations to a new low. As was later admitted by Artem Malgin, the coordinator of the Polish-Russian Forum on European Politics, official Russia lost a unique opportunity to improve its image abroad. In Poland, according to Malgin, Russian diplomats did not show sufficient flexibility, as they failed to shift discussion from topics harmful to Russo-Polish relations and focus on useful ones instead. One such topic, suggested Malgin, was the current status of veterans of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army, who had fought not only against the Germans but also against the Poles and Soviets. In Malgin’s view, Russia had failed to exploit the generally positive opinion in Polish government and society of the role played by the Soviet Union in the Second World War. In the Baltic states, where the governments adopted an “anti-VE” stand, the best option for Russia was allegedly to ignore the historical debate altogether. Malgin warned his readers against assuming that there was a coordinated Western information offensive against Russia and called upon them to continue working for the improvement of Russia’s image abroad. Given the degree to which that image had been damaged by the debates over the legacy of the Yalta Conference, Malgin’s advice was timely indeed.17

Meanwhile, the Russian authorities preferred to put on a brave face and interpret the criticism of their country’s post-Second World War role in Eastern Europe as an indication of the growing strength of the Russian state. Thus the Russian foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, stated that in 1995, when the world celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the victory over fascism, no one had bothered to present historical claims against Russia, since it was a weak state at the time. As Russia grew stronger, its neighbors became concerned about its new might and decided to advance their historical claims. According to Lavrov, one of the factors that worried Russia’s detractors was its desire to lessen its treasury’s dependence on energy exports. This was a peculiar claim to make at a time

---

16. See Jacek Lepiarz’s summary of Kwaśniewski’s interview with Die Welt in the online version of Polityka, February 27, 2005.
when much of Russia’s economic recovery was fueled by the country’s energy exports and rising oil prices.18

The Second Front: The Americans Join In

Lavrov’s questionable argument, which linked energy policy with the history of the Second World War, appears less strange if one considers the interplay of two similar factors in the speech given by President George W. Bush in Riga on May 6, 2005. Bush entered the East European historical debate head on, placing the legacy of the Yalta agreements within the broader context of the progress of freedom throughout the world and American support for democracy in countries ranging from former Soviet republics to Iraq, the latter occupied by American troops. As Bush presented it, democracy was the link between America’s policy in Eastern Europe after the Second World War and its policy in the oil-rich Middle East. But this is the only parallel that one might draw between the Russian and American positions on the significance of the Yalta decisions.

As he accepted Vladimir Putin’s invitation to attend the VE Day celebrations in Moscow and encouraged others, such as President Vike-Freiberga of Latvia, to do likewise, Bush decided to take the opportunity to visit not only Russia but also Latvia and Georgia, two former Soviet republics whose recent relations with Russia were far from smooth. The message was clear. Although the U.S. administration cared about maintaining good relations with Russia, it was not relinquishing its support of democratic processes in former Soviet republics struggling to escape the Russian sphere of influence. In Latvia, Bush apparently felt obliged to take a stand on the legacy of the Yalta Conference, given the prolonged debate in that country on the history of Russo-Latvian relations during and after the Second World War. Referring to the conference in his Riga speech, Bush deliberately took the East European side in the ongoing debate. Indeed, he showed his readiness to go further than any of his predecessors in acknowledging American complicity in the Yalta division of Europe.

“As we mark a victory of six days ago—six decades ago, we are mindful of a paradox,” stated Bush. “For much of Germany, defeat led to freedom. For much of Eastern and Central Europe, victory brought the iron rule of another empire. VE Day marked the end of fascism, but it did not end oppression. The agreement at Yalta followed in the unjust tradition of Munich and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Once again, when powerful governments negotiated, the freedom of small nations was somehow expendable. Yet this attempt to sacrifice freedom for the sake of stability left a continent divided and unstable. The captivity of millions in Central and Eastern Europe will be remembered as one of the greatest wrongs of history.”19 A U.S. administration official later revealed that the Yalta remark was intended as an invitation for Putin to apologize for the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. If that was indeed the case, then the White House speechwriters clearly miscalculated, for the remark did nothing to change Russia’s position on the issue. Bush certainly scored points with leaders of the “new Europe,” but he also created unexpected problems for his administration at home. The speech reignited the old debate between Republicans and Democrats over the role of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in what his critics called the “sellout” of Eastern Europe to Joseph Stalin. Conservative journalists and commentators such as Pat Buchanan and Anne Applebaum praised Bush’s remarks as a long overdue recognition of the “awful truth,” while liberals, represented by a number of historians of U.S. foreign policy and the Cold War, accused the Republicans of reviving the spirit of Joseph McCarthy. The Democrats maintained that the Yalta Conference had done little more than recognize the reality on the ground, given that by the time of the Crimean summit Stalin had already gained control of Eastern Europe.20

The Riga speech was by no means the first public statement in which President Bush criticized the Yalta agreements. He had done so on previous occasions as well, always expressing his criticism in remarks addressed to East European audiences. Those remarks were apparently designed to placate allies of the United States in the new Europe, demonstrating American concern about the consequences of an event crucial to their history. They were also aimed at President Putin, encouraging him to be more honest in his assessment of the role played by the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. In the past, Bush’s criticism of the Yalta agreements had failed to convince Putin to alter Russia’s official interpretation of the event, but it was clearly appreciated by the East European elites.

When it comes to American discourse on Yalta, Bush’s critique did not so much follow in the footsteps of Joseph McCarthy, as claimed by his Democratic critics, but echoed statements made by leading figures in President Bill Clinton’s administration. In March 1999 Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the daughter of a Czechoslovak diplomat who escaped to the West after


the communist takeover, stated to representatives of East European governments: “Never again will your fates be tossed around like poker chips on a bargaining table.” In fact, Albright was developing an argument made earlier by her deputy and Clinton’s classmate Strobe Talbott. “After World War II,” remarked Talbott in May 1997, “many countries in the east suffered half a century under the shadow of Yalta. That is a place name that has come to be a codeword for the cynical sacrifice of small nations’ freedom to great powers’ spheres of influence, just as Versailles has come to signify a shortsighted, punitive, and humiliating peace that sows the seeds of future war.”21

Why, then, were the liberal opponents of President Bush so critical of his Riga speech? Leaving aside the political dynamics of May 2005, it should be noted that Bush was much more explicit in his critique of the Yalta agreements than his Democratic predecessors, especially as he compared Yalta not to Versailles but to Munich and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. In so doing, he indeed revived some of the ghosts of the McCarthy era. “The Munich Called Yalta” was the title of a chapter contributed by William H. Chamberlin to a book published in 1950 that criticized American diplomacy for appeasing Stalin and sacrificing the independence of Poland and the national interests of China.22 By contrast, the comparison with the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was a new addition to the decades-old controversy introduced by the author of the Riga speech, presidential assistant Michael Gerson.23 It seemed appropriate to mention the division of Europe between Germany and the USSR in 1939 in a speech made in Latvia, where the memory of the Hitler-Stalin deal is alive and well more than sixty-five years after the event, and where every schoolchild knows that at Yalta Roosevelt and Churchill agreed to Soviet territorial acquisitions based on that pact. Not so in the U.S. By drawing attention to the connection between the pact and the Yalta agreements, Bush opened the door to possible comparisons of FDR not only with Neville Chamberlain but also with Hitler and Stalin. More than anything else, it was that sacrilegious suggestion that provoked attacks on the administration from the belligerent Democrats—attacks that the White House had not expected and would have preferred to avoid.

What were the arguments on both sides of the Yalta debate in the United States? It would appear that the opposing parties contributed very little new material to the debate that reached its climax in the 1950s and 1960s. On the Democratic side, the old arguments were summarized and reiterated by a participant in the academic debates of the 1960s, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. In his commentary on Bush’s Riga speech, he stated that the president “is under the delusion that tougher diplomacy might have preserved the freedom of small European nations.” Schlesinger rebuffed that thesis, stating that “it was the deployment of armies, not negotiated concessions, that caused the division of Europe.” He reminded his readers that at the time of the Yalta Conference Eastern Europe was already occupied by the Red Army, and conflict with the USSR was inconceivable as long as the war with Japan was still going on. Among the achievements of the Yalta Conference, Schlesinger listed Stalin’s promise to enter the war with Japan at a time when “the atom bomb seemed to be a fantasy dreamed up by nuclear physicists,” and FDR’s success in making Stalin sign the Declaration on Liberated Europe, which obliged the Soviets to conduct free elections in the countries of Eastern Europe that they occupied.24 Jacob Heilbrunn, writing in the Los Angeles Times, put forward another important argument in favor of Yalta that Schlesinger had overlooked. He claimed that refusing to make a deal with Stalin on Eastern Europe “would have seriously jeopardized the common battle against Germany.”25

The defenders of Bush’s Riga speech did not, of course, argue that the West should have gone to war with the Soviet Union, jeopardized the victory over Hitler, or impeded the war effort in the Pacific. Their argument, like the reasoning of their opponents, was deeply rooted in formulas developed in the political and scholarly debates of the 1950s and 1960s. Pat Buchanan, for example, titled his article on the issue “Was WWII Worth It? For Stalin, Yes,” echoing the title of the chapter “Stalin’s Greatest Victory” in Chester Wilmot’s book The Struggle for Europe (1952).26 Buchanan juxtaposed Putin’s rhetoric about the Soviet liberation of eleven countries with Bush’s admission that many of the European countries liberated from fascism found themselves under another form of oppression as a result of the agreements reached at Yalta. Siding with Bush, Buchanan accused FDR and Churchill of selling out Eastern Europe to one of history’s deadliest tyrants, Joseph Stalin. Following in the footsteps of prewar American isolationists, he also questioned


23. See Bumiller, “In row over Yalta, Bush pokes at Baltic politics.”


the rationale behind American involvement in a war that took 50 million lives. Echoes of the earlier debates were also to be heard in the *National Review* editorial “Yalta Regrets,” which stated that the United States could have won the war against Japan without Soviet participation.27

Anne Applebaum, on the other hand, added some new emphases to the old theme as she attacked “a small crew of liberal historians and Rooseveltians,” who claimed that “Yalta was a recognition of reality rather than a sellout.” “Their charges,” according to Applebaum, “ignore the breadth of the agreement—was it really necessary to agree to deport thousands of expatriate Russians back to certain death in the Soviet Union?—as well as the fact that Yalta and the other wartime agreements went beyond mere recognition of Soviet occupation and conferred legality and international acceptance on new borders and political structures.” The new element in this conservative argument was the conviction with which the author spoke about Stalin’s crimes and the complicity of the Western powers in them. Applebaum, the author of an acclaimed book on the Gulag based on archival materials that became available after the collapse of the USSR, knew exactly what she was talking about when she wrote of the “certain death” awaiting former Soviet citizens shipped back to the USSR by the American and British military. “The tone was right,” stated Applebaum with regard to Bush’s speech, “and it contrasted sharply with the behavior of Russian president Vladimir Putin, as perhaps it was intended to. Asked again last week why he hadn’t made his own apology for the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe, Putin pointed out that the Soviet parliament did so in 1989. ‘What,’ he asked, ‘we have to do this every day, every year?’”

**The Long Shadow of “Uncle Joe”**

Putin was certainly in no mood for apologies during the Moscow celebrations of VE Day, and Bush did not insist on them. He stated in his remarks about his Moscow visit that “Yalta was a recognition of reality rather than a sellout.” When asked about when she wrote of the “certain death” awaiting former Soviet citizens shipped back to the USSR by the American and British military, “The tone was right,” stated Applebaum with regard to Bush’s speech, “and it contrasted sharply with the behavior of Russian president Vladimir Putin, as perhaps it was intended to. Asked again last week why he hadn’t made his own apology for the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe, Putin pointed out that the Soviet parliament did so in 1989. ‘What,’ he asked, ‘we have to do this every day, every year?’”

The Russian liberal press remained largely silent on the issue of Yalta in February 2005, when it was at the center of controversy in Eastern Europe. Yalta reemerged in Russian public discourse only in April 2005 within the context of a broader debate on Stalin’s role in Russian history. The debate had begun in the late 1980s, with the onset of glasnost. It originally focused on the crimes committed by the Stalin regime, but acquired new characteristics in the 1990s with the rise of Russian nationalism. More Russians adopted a positive attitude toward Stalin after 2000, as Vladimir Putin took power and authoritarian tendencies came to the fore in Russian politics. In the spring of 2005, the Stalin debate was reignited by Zurab Tsereteli, arguably Russia’s most productive and controversial sculptor. In anticipation of the anniversary of the Yalta Conference, Tsereteli created a gigantic bronze sculpture of Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill as depicted in numerous photographs taken in front of the Livadia Palace in February 1945. The sculpture, which is four meters tall and weighs ten tons, was originally supposed to be installed at the Second World War memorial near Moscow, but it was later offered to the Livadia municipal council. The city council first accepted the offer and then turned it down. After that, the sculpture was offered to the war memorial in Volgograd, the site of the Battle of Stalingrad. By April 2004 the issue had attracted the attention of the Russian media and representatives of the Russian liberal elite, who issued an appeal protesting the idea of installing the sculpture on Russian soil.

The authors of the appeal, who included Oleg Baslalshvili, Aleksandr Gelman, Daniil Granin, Oleg Tabakov, and the “grandfather of perestroika,” Aleksandr Yakovlev, regarded Tsereteli’s depiction of the Big Three as an attempt to build a monument to Stalin and as a step toward his political rehabilitation in Russia. “For the first time since the revelation of Stalin’s crimes against humanity,” wrote the authors of the appeal, “an attempt is being made in our country to put up a monument to him, and that on the sacred occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of Victory, which would have cost our nation considerably fewer victims had it not been for Stalin’s ‘purges’ of military cadres and his glaring miscalculations in policy and strategy.” The statement was a direct response to those in the Russian nationalist camp and among the public at large who often cite Stalin’s contribution to the victory over Nazi Germany as the main argument for his rehabilitation. Ironically, the appeal was not addressed to the Russian public but to President Putin, who brought back the Stalin-era anthem of the USSR as the anthem of the new Russia and whose rule witnessed a rise in the popularity of the once dreaded generalissimo. It would appear that the liberal intellectuals who signed the appeal had no illusions about the presence in Russia of any force other than the authoritarian president capable of stopping the public rehabilitation of Joseph Stalin.

The Stalin controversy and the approaching celebrations of VE Day finally brought the question of the Yalta Conference and the historical responsibility of the USSR (and, by extension, Russia) for its decisions to the attention of Russian liberals, giving them a legitimate voice in a discussion earlier dominated by officialdom. On April 3, 2005, Vladimir Pozner, the host of the popular Russian television program Vremena (Times), asked a guest who was to be credited with victory in the Great Patriotic war, Stalin or the people. The guest refused to distinguish between the two, and Pozner was later criticized by Russian nationalists for trying to separate Stalin and the state from the people. But the liberals were not silenced. Writing in Izvestia in late April 2005, Fedor Lukianov noted the danger of associating the end of the Second World War with the victory of the Russian state. He wrote: “But if that war is understood not as a heroic feat of the nation but as the political triumph of the Russian state, then we fall into a trap. One would then have to argue, foaming at the mouth, that Stalin acted as he should have done, the pact of 1939 was in accord with international law, and Yalta brought democracy to Eastern Europe.”

Writing after the VE Day celebrations in Moscow, Viktor Sheinis, a member of the liberal Yabloko Party, stated that at Yalta the Western leaders had approved the territorial acquisitions obtained by Stalin according to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Those decisions blocked the progress of democracy in Eastern Europe for more than forty years, and it should come as no surprise that the East Europeans regarded Yalta as another Munich and refused to participate in the VE Day celebrations in Moscow. In Sheinis’s opinion, “If one is to show respect for Churchill, who understood earlier than others what a mess Stalin’s Western allies had made, then I would depict him not in a chair on the

33. On the Russian politics of remembrance, as reflected in the composition of the memorial during the Yeltsin period, see Nurit Schavelev, “Moscow’s Victory Park: A Monumental Change,” in History and Memory 13, no. 2 (2001): 5-34.
The Crimean Debate

What happened in and around Yalta in the spring of 2005 that first prompted the municipal council of Livadia, the actual setting of the Crimean conference, first to accept Tsereteli’s gift and then to refuse it? The city fathers changed their minds, by and large, for two reasons. The first was the attitude of the Crimean Tatars, whom Stalin forcibly deported from the peninsula less than a year before the Yalta Conference. They were welcomed back by the government of independent Ukraine and became embroiled in a political struggle with the Russian-dominated Crimean parliament for the return of their political, cultural and economic rights in their historical homeland. The second reason was the position taken by the Ukrainian government, the new master of the Crimea and of the conference site. In 1954 the Crimean peninsula, including Yalta, was transferred from the jurisdiction of the Russian Federation to that of the Ukrainian SSR, and in 1991 it became an autonomous republic within the independent Ukrainian state. Thus, by the spring of 2005, it was not only the citizens of Livadia but also the Mejlis (parliament) of the Crimean Tatars; the authorities in Simferopol, the capital of the Crimea; and the leadership of the Ukrainian state in Kyiv who influenced the Livadia decision.

The decision to commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the Yalta Conference was made by the Ukrainian parliament on December 16, 2004, less than two months before the event. The reason for this last-minute decision was readily apparent, given that in November and December 2004 the Orange Revolution had thrown the Ukrainian parliament into turmoil. The decision on the Yalta commemoration was made after the resolution of the political crisis, but prior to the third round of the presidential elections, which brought the opposition into Kunitsyn’s alleged embezzlement of parcels of land

Kazarin argued that it was a monument commemorating a particular event, not a tribute to Stalin. One could not remove important figures from history or pretend that certain events had never happened. Kazarin also noted that there were monuments to Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, which, in his opinion, was as it should be. As Kazarin sought to promote the commemoration of the Yalta Conference in the national media and argued in favor of installing Tsereteli’s monument in Livadia, he found himself under increasing attack in the Crimea. The leaders of the Crimean Tatar Mejlis accused Kazarin—who, aside from being vice-premier of the Crimean government, was also a member of the Communist faction in the Crimean parliament and head of the Russian cultural society of the Crimea—of attempting to rehabilitate Stalin and Stalinism under the pretext of commemorating the Yalta Conference. They reminded the public that two years earlier the Communist deputies of the Sevastopol city council had voted in favor of building a monument to Stalin in their city. A leading figure in the Mejlis, Ilmi Umerov, stated that he could not accept the idea of a monument to the Big Three, given the forcible deportation of the Crimean Tatars conducted on Stalin’s orders, as well as the controversial nature of the Yalta Conference, which had divided Europe into spheres of influence. The head of the Mejlis, Mustafa Dzhemilev, stated for his part that if such a monument were to be erected in Livadia, the Crimean Tatars would ensure that it would not stay there long. The appeal not to allow the installation of the monument was signed by dozens of former dissidents in Ukraine and Russia. The Crimean branches of Ukrainian political parties that supported the Orange Revolution made a similar appeal to Kyiv. As a result, the office of the Crimean attorney general annulled the decision of the Livadia town council to install the monument, citing a law that gave national authorities the right to make final decisions on the construction of monuments of national significance. Kazarin had to retreat, announcing the postponement of a final decision, pending “public consultation” on the project.

This was not the end of the controversy. On February 4, 2005, the anniversary of the Yalta Conference, Communists staged a meeting in Simferopol to protest the refusal of the Crimean authorities to install the monument. They criticized the Crimean premier, Serhii Kunitsyn, for kowtowing to the new “Orange” government in Kyiv and threatened to initiate a criminal investigation into Kunitsyn’s alleged embezzlement of parcels of land

on the Crimean shore of the Black Sea. The Crimean Tatars held their own rally in Livadia to protest the installation of the monument. On the eve of the commemoration, Kazarin noted the irony that a bust of President Roosevelt was to be unveiled in Yalta, but that there would be no monument to the Big Three in Livadia. At the Livadia Palace, there was an exhibition featuring the offices occupied by Roosevelt and Churchill during the conference, but not Stalin’s office. Eventually the organizers of the commemoration compromised, deciding to include Stalin’s Livadia office in the exhibition instead of installing the monument to the Big Three. President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia even promised to send artifacts from the Stalin museum in his native town of Gori. But the controversy over the monument did not go away entirely. In April, Leonid Hrach, the leader of the Crimean Communists, called upon the Livadia town council to install Tsereteli’s monument in order to honor the memory of those who had fallen for the “Great Victory.” The leaders of the Mejlis issued their own statements on the matter, threatening to block the roads along which the monument could be transported to Livadia. By that time the decision not to allow the installation was final, forcing Tsereteli to look for a site in Russia, which led, in turn, to a major controversy in the Russian media.41

“Making Sense of War”

In 2005 Amir Weiner published his Making Sense of War, in which he discussed the impact of the Second World War on the elites and general population of Vinnytsia oblast in Ukraine during the postwar era.42 Judging by debates in the Ukrainian media, Ukrainians in the spring of 2005 were still struggling to make sense of their Second World War experience; hence the Yalta debate was not limited to Crimean political and historical discourse. Throughout 2005, articles in the Ukrainian press criticized the artificiality of Stalin’s “constitutional reform” of 1944, which allowed the Soviet dictator to ask for an additional UN seat for the Ukrainian SSR. Such prominent Ukrainian historians as Yurii Shapoval attacked Stalin for the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, questioning the dictator’s role as “gatherer” of the Ukrainian lands.43 The Kyiv authors Serhii Hrabovsky and Ihor Losiev, writing in the American Ukrainian-language newspaper Svoboda (Liberty), adopted the Polish-Baltic position on Yalta.44 That position was shared by the majority in formerly Polish-ruled western Ukraine, which became part of the USSR as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the Yalta agreements. Eastern Ukraine, however, was not prepared to accept the “Westerners’’ interpretation of the history of the Second World War or of the decisions reached at Yalta. In the spring of 2005, as the Ukrainian government struggled with the question of whether President Yushchenko should accept Vladimir Putin’s invitation to the Moscow celebrations, the Ukrainian media kept its readers informed about the controversies provoked by the VE Day anniversary in Poland and the Baltic states. Polish articles debating the issue were published in translation in Ukrainian newspapers, and statements of the Baltic leaders were liberally quoted in articles by Ukrainian authors. Some of them, such as Viacheslav Anisimov, writing at the end of March in Dzerkalo tyzhnia, called upon Yushchenko not to fear displeasing the Kremlin, to decline Putin’s invitation and celebrate the anniversary in Ukraine with his own people.45 After long hesitation, President Yushchenko opted for compromise: he flew to Moscow for a few hours, then rushed back to Kyiv on the same day to commemorate VE Day in the Ukrainian capital.

Prior to the VE Day celebrations in Moscow and Kyiv, public debate in Ukraine centered on the issue of whether the country had fought in the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet people or participated in the Second World War. The first interpretation meant sticking to the old Soviet myth of the war, which treated only Red Army soldiers as legitimate combatants and portrayed the cadres of the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA), who fought both the Soviets and the Nazis in western Ukraine, as German stooges. The second option allowed Ukrainian intellectuals to develop a Eurocentric or Ukraine-centric interpretation of the war, as opposed to a Russocentric one. Within that framework, Ukraine emerges as a country that fought against and was one of the major victims of both totalitarian systems of the twentieth century—fascism and communism.46 The choice of concept was not only important for the inter-

41. For reaction to Hrach’s statement by the leaders of the Tatar Mejlis, see Tsentr informatis’ta dokumentis’t kryms’kykh tatar, http://www.cidct.org.ua/press/2005/20050104.html#33.
43. See Iurii Shapoval, “‘Ukrains’ka druh Svitova,’” Dzerkalo tyzhnia, no. 15 (543), April 23-May 6, 2005; Serhii Makhun, “‘Zolotyi veresen’ abo ‘vyriushennia pytannia shliakhom druзн’oi zhody,’” Dzerkalo tyzhnia, no. 36 (564), September 17-23, 2005; Vladyslav Hrynevych, “‘Iak Ukrainu do vstupu v OON hotuvala stalins’ka ‘konstytutsiina reforma’ voienoi doby,’” Dzerkalo tyzhnia, no. 41 (569), October 22-28, 2005.
45. See Viacheslav Anisimov, “‘Radist’ zi sl’ozamy na ochakh, abo pro polityku, istoriiu i moral’ na zori XXI stolittia,’” Dzerkalo tyzhnia, no. 11 (539), March 26-April 1, 2005.
46. See Vitalii Radchuk, “‘Velyka Vitchezhyniana chy Druha Svitova?’” Dzerkalo tyzhnia, no. 26 (554), July 9-15, 2005. For diametrically opposing views on the issue, see articles in Ukraine’s leading internet newspaper, Ukraina ’ka pravda, by Serhii Hrabovs’kyi, “‘Chas povertatysia z viiny,’” Ukraina ’ka pravda, May 6, 2006, and...
pretation of history but also had serious political implications for the Ukrainian government and society at large.

At President Yushchenko’s initiative, the new Ukrainian government sought to do away with the Soviet-era tradition of commemorating Victory Day with a formal parade and attempted to use the occasion to encourage reconciliation between Red Army and UPA veterans, who had fought one another during the war. Among other things, such a reconciliation was supposed to help bridge the gap between eastern and western Ukraine that had widened during the divisive presidential elections of 2004. Like many of the plans of Yushchenko’s revolutionary government, the high hopes invested in the VE Day commemorations were disappointed. First, the Soviet Army veterans’ organization protested changing the format of the celebrations. Then the idea of reconciliation was opposed by the Communists and their allies in parliament, who protested the extension of government benefits enjoyed by combatants in the “Great Patriotic War” to UPA fighters. The government, trying to avoid a new conflict between the two veterans’ groups and their supporters, decided to abandon the idea of changing the traditional VE Day anniversary celebrations. The Communists maintained their control over the Soviet veterans’ association and preserved their de facto political monopoly on the commemorations.47 On October 15, 2005, when UPA supporters attempted to celebrate the sixty-third anniversary of the founding of the army with a demonstration in Kyiv, they were physically attacked by Communists and supporters of radical pro-Russian groups.48 Once again, worshippers of “the great Stalin” intervened to oppose Ukraine’s attempt to break with the Soviet past. After the VE Day celebrations Ukraine remained as divided as before in its attitudes toward the Second World War and its outcome.

Conclusions

It has become a cliché to state that all politics are local. It is more controversial to state that all historical debates are parochial, or are determined by local (national) agendas, traditions, fears and complexes. The recent Yalta debate, despite its international scope, seems to support the second proposition as much as the first. Remembering, forgetting and (re)interpreting the Yalta Conference during the winter and spring of 2005 turned out to be a process fueled as much by national historiographic traditions as by current perceptions of national interests. Nevertheless, the recent Yalta debate allows one to draw some preliminary conclusions of a more general nature, as it sheds light on the interrelation between historical memory and international politics in a dialogue involving great powers and smaller states dependent on their protection. One such conclusion is that if the victims of Yalta stood united in their negative assessment of the Yalta accords, the victors’ assessments of the agreements varied by political camp. It has been said that victors are not judged. The debates of 2005 in the United States and Russia show that they are judged, not only by others but also by themselves.

For the East Europeans, the anniversary was a chance to express their indignation about an event that had remained at the core of their historical memory and identity for the last sixty years. They could finally begin the process of healing their historical traumas by presenting a list of grievances to the main perpetrator, Russia, and its Yalta accomplices. It seems quite clear that for most of the Polish and Baltic elites, remembering Yalta was necessary not only to recover historical facts suppressed by the Communist regimes, but also to ensure international recognition of the trauma suffered by the East European nations after the end of the Second World War. The first of these tasks was achieved immediately before and after the collapse of communism, with the consequent delegitimization of the Russocentric communist historical narrative. It was now time to achieve the second goal. By commemorating Yalta in 2005, the East European elites were once again parting ways with their nations’ communist past and dependence on Russia—but they were now doing so on the international scene. As the countries of Eastern Europe were admitted to NATO and the European Union, it became safer for them to air their historical grievances against Moscow in the international arena. As the new Russia’s activity in the region increased with the start of the new millennium, while a new generation of East European citizens who had never witnessed Communist or Soviet domination of their countries came of age, it also became useful, for domestic and international reasons alike, to remind the world about the trauma of Yalta. As the East Europeans saw it, the new generation should not forget the lessons of the past, while the West should not repeat the errors of Yalta by allowing Russia a special role in Eastern Europe.

No country in the region was more interested in delivering this message to the world than Ukraine, which had just emerged from the drama of the Orange Revolution, in which it had rejected Russian interference in its internal affairs. While the new Ukrainian government

would have preferred to side with its Polish and Baltic colleagues in unreservedly condemning the Yalta agreements, it had to acknowledge the lack of consensus on the significance of the Second World War within its own political elite. Remaining pro-Soviet sentiment in the country’s eastern regions, as well as the still influential Communist opposition in parliament, drastically limited the new government’s options with regard to public remembrance of the end of the Second World War. The Ukrainian public debate on the legacy of the Yalta Conference was influenced not only by political dynamics after the Orange Revolution but also by international considerations. None was more important than the issue of Ukraine’s borders. While sharing the criticism of Yalta expressed by its western neighbors, the Ukrainian intellectual elites could not fully condemn the conference that had made their country a founder of the United Nations and provided international legitimacy for its western borders. Thus, in the Ukrainian media, the border question was discussed in the context of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, but not in that of the Yalta agreements. The sensitivity of the border issue helps explain Ukraine’s reluctance to take advantage of the anniversary to raise its international profile: at Yalta the Big Three had made not only Poland but also Ukraine complicit in Stalin’s division of Europe. As a result of the Yalta decisions, Ukraine obtained lands that did not belong to it before the war, although they were largely settled by ethnic Ukrainians. A new nation that could be considered both a beneficiary and a victim of Yalta, Ukraine, as represented by its government, preferred to “forget” so important an event in its history as the Yalta Conference.

What about the other beneficiaries of Yalta? No country seems more entrapped by the Yalta decisions and the legacy of Stalinism than the Russian Federation. Faced with actual and potential claims against its Yalta booty and post-Yalta policies on the part of Germany, Japan, Poland, and the Baltic states, the Russian leadership is as far today as it has ever been from issuing a public apology for the “crimes of Yalta.” Russian imperial pride is one reason President Bush’s invitation to President Putin to apologize for the wrongs done to Russia’s neighbors has elicited no positive response and will not do so in the immediate future. For the Russian elites, Yalta remains a symbol of their country’s glory, reminding them of Moscow’s former status as the capital of a superpower rivaled only by the United States. The nostalgic Communists continue to see the Yalta decisions as proof of the triumph of communism and the greatness of the Communist dictator Joseph Stalin. Only the liberals, now weak and marginalized—an echo of the once powerful popular movement of the Gorbachev and early Yeltsin years—remain critical of both the Stalinist legacy and Russia’s continuing imperial ambitions.

All Russian political forces, from nationalists to liberals, approached the Yalta and VE Day anniversaries with their own hopes and political agendas. The ruling elites wanted to raise and embellish Russia’s international image by reminding the world of its leading role in defeating fascism. The Russian conservatives complained about the post-Cold War world, rife with unpredictability and danger now that it was no longer held in check by Yalta-type agreements. In the eyes of Russian diplomats, the solution to the world’s new insecurities was quite simple: it would suffice to recognize the territories of the former Soviet Union as a zone of Russian responsibility. Russian liberals expected the collapse of the unjust Yalta arrangements to lead to the complete elimination of the Iron Curtain and make Russia a full member of the club of European nations. None of these scenarios materialized, and the negative reaction to the Moscow celebrations in East Central Europe dashed the hopes of Russian conservatives and liberals alike. This failure should not obscure the general trend in the evolution of Russian collective memory since the collapse of the USSR. As the loss of empire becomes more obvious to the Russian elites and society at large, and former clients adopt more independent policies toward Moscow, official Russia becomes less inclined to issue apologies for crimes and injustices perpetrated against the empire’s former subjects. On the contrary, it becomes more aggressive, both in the interpretation of its historical role in the region and in the pursuit of its current policies there.

Only the United States rose to the occasion when, in the words of its president, it condemned the Yalta agreements, placing them in the same category as the Munich appeasement and the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Unlike Russia, the United States is prepared to admit its historical error for the sake of building better relations with the countries of the region. President Bush’s remarks about Yalta are an interesting case of the use of history on the international scene. There is little doubt that they were not intended mainly for a domestic audience. Bush appears to have had at least two goals in mind. The first was to support the countries of the new Europe that showed loyalty to the United States and embarrass President Putin, who was in no psychological, political or economic position to afford a similar admission of guilt. The second was to legitimize his war in Iraq and his policy in the Middle East by pledging never again to abandon support for freedom and democracy—the latter being the major theme of his discourse on Iraq. The president’s use of the Yalta anniversary to recognize America’s past errors, while promoting his new international agenda, did not sit well with critics of his administration in the U.S. Enraged by the comparison of the Yalta agreements to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (a mere recognition that, in the Baltic states at least,
the Yalta decisions ratified the borders established by the Stalin-Hitler agreement of 1939), the Democrats rose instinctively to the defense of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the Democratic president revered by all—even Ronald Reagan. The Yalta debate in the United States itself demonstrated once again the predominance of the national over the international perspective in the collective memory of the world’s only remaining superpower.

Nevertheless, it would appear that the United States is winning not only the geopolitical competition with Russia in its East European backyard but also the historical debate. The ideas of freedom and democracy, which lie at the core of the master narrative of American history, are well suited to the requirements of past and present American policy in the region and find support and understanding on the part of the East European “losers” of Yalta. As the tone of the Yalta debate in Poland demonstrates, the ideas of liberty and independence remain central elements of the Polish historical narrative and national self-image. They coexist with the tradition of depicting Poland as a quintessential victim of Russia and other world powers from the partitions of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the second half of the eighteenth century to the end of the twentieth. In the East European countries discussed in this essay, only the Ukrainian elite ended up sitting on the fence, in complete accordance with the popular historiographic paradigm of Ukraine as a country positioned on the civilizational divide between East and West, democracy and authoritarianism.

In the case of Russia, its historical narrative lost its universal appeal with the collapse of communism. It is no longer possible to justify the Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe either by the interests of world communism or by those of the toiling masses of the East European countries. The pan-Slavic idea, employed by Stalin during and immediately after the Second World War, has also lost its appeal. The idea of Russia’s great-power status, which works at home, can only frighten the western neighbors of the new Russia. Thus, as was the case during the Yalta Conference, Moscow sought in 2005 to find common ground with the West and its former republics and dependencies by appealing to Russia’s role in the struggle against Nazi Germany and the liberation of Eastern Europe from fascist rule. While the anti-Hitler theme clearly worked and apparently has a future, the “liberation” motif clearly backfired, since it opened Russia to attack by all those who were enslaved by communism after having been liberated from fascism. The only way for Russia to change the dynamic of the historical debate would have been to offer sincere apologies to the victims of the Yalta agreements. Moscow had missed one more chance to improve its image abroad and its relations with its western neighbors.
The 2006 Presidential Election in Belarus: The Candidates, Results and Perspectives

David R. Marples and Uladzimir Padhol

Introduction

On December 16, 2005, the lower assembly of the Belarusian Parliament, the House of Representatives, voted unanimously to hold the 2006 presidential elections in Belarus on March 19, some four months earlier than anticipated. The decision closely followed a summit meeting between President Alyaksandr Lukashenka and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Sochi. That the decision was made by the president, rather than the parliament, seems clear. The latter had been under the close control of the former, particularly after the elections of October 2004. Now the president was a candidate for an unprecedented third term in office and under the prevailing conditions, certain to win again. In this paper we will ask several questions: how was Lukashenka able to manipulate the Constitution in order to extend his mandate? What explains his popular appeal? What was the response of the opposition? Who were the candidates and what did they stand for? Finally what is the long-term outlook for the political and economic future of a republic that has been termed “the last dictatorship of Europe”? What are the chances for regime change in Belarus?

The Referendum and Parliamentary Elections of 2004

The decision to hold a referendum, the third during Lukashenka’s administration,1 on whether the president could be permitted to run for a third term in office was announced on September 7, 2004, with the date set as October 17. The referendum question was announced by the president himself during a rally in Minsk:

Do you allow the first president of the Republic of Belarus, Alyaksandr Hryhorevich Lukashenka, to participate in the presidential election as a candidate for the post of president of the Republic of Belarus and do you accept Part 1 of Article 81 of the Constitution of Belarus in the wording that follows: “The president shall be elected directly by the people of the Republic of Belarus for a term of five years by universal, free, equal, direct, and secret ballot?”

Though the question as outlined was ambiguous, since it would be possible in theory to answer positively to one question and negatively to the other, many observers felt that it was also ominous: the president was seeking to remain in office for his lifetime, and at the age of 49 (in 2004), he could in theory remain in office for another three decades. The timing of the announcement was also fortuitous. It coincided with the date of the parliamentary elections, the hostage taking in the Russian Federation at the school in Beslan, and the third anniversary of the 9-11 terrorist attack on the United States. In this way, Lukashenka was able to reassure voters that such horrors were inconceivable in Belarus as long as he remained in power. On the contrary, he remarked, Belarus looked like a giant construction site and no resident of Belarus had ever fallen victim to a terrorist attack or a military conflict. His decision to hold a referendum was supported openly by the chairman of the Central Election Commission (CEC) Lidziya Yarmoshyna, who also commented that the outcome would be decided by the people of Belarus, and not by American politicians who would never be satisfied with the political situation in this republic.3

The referendum announcement also coincided with a decision by opposition leaders to unite forces in a Democratic Congress that would elect a single leader to run against Lukashenka in the 2006 election. The improvement in opposition organization notwithstanding, no anti-government figures succeeded in getting appointed to the CEC, despite the fact that some parties applied en masse, including 473 candidates from the United Civic Party. In addition, most of the prominent opposition leaders were excluded from the parliamentary campaign on various pretexts. The reasons were diverse, from alleged falsehoods on the nomination forms, failure to send documents to the CEC in response to inquiries, and in the case of former parliamentary chairman Stanislau Shushkevich, the fact that his party headquarters was located in the district of Masyukov, rather than Pushkin,2

---

1. Earlier referendums took place in 1995 and 1996, resulting in several changes to the Constitution, enhancing the power of the presidency, changing the state flag and symbols, elevating Russian to the status of a state language, reducing parliament from 260 seats to 110, and others. For details, see David R. Marples, Belarus: A Denationalized Nation (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999), 72-75, 96-99.


as stated on his application form.4 Anatol Lyabedzka, chairman of the United Civic Party, stated that of 59 candidates put forward for nomination by his party, 32 had been rejected, and usually for reasons that he felt were “absurd.”5 In terms of affiliated candidates, the largest number came from the Liberal Democratic Party, whose leader, Syarhey Haydukevich, a candidate in the 2001 presidential elections who ran a distant third, had long since made his peace with President Lukashenka.

During the election and referendum campaigns, the president appeared regularly on television to make his case for amending the Constitution. He was no tsar, he stressed, but a man prepared to undertake exhausting and serious work. Unlike other potential candidates, he was not concerned with his own ambitions. What he termed a “Belarusian model for development” had been created from the “experience of life in Belarus” and constituted a dramatic improvement from the situation a decade earlier, when people were going hungry, mass protests were occurring in the streets, and corruption was evident everywhere. In contrast, he added, under his 10-year administration, 90 percent of enterprises were working under normal conditions. One reason for his success was that he had not turned away from Russia as some oppositionists advocated. Russia was the country with which Belarus was linked most closely under Soviet rule, and was the vital source for raw materials.6 To reinforce this statement, Belarusian TV ran a program that included a scathing attack on the 1991 dissolution of the Soviet Union, which reportedly demoralized 240,000 soldiers, as well as Belarusian society. Shushkevich was fingered as the man responsible for this debacle, whereas Lukashenka had been the only deputy in the Parliament (Supreme Soviet) to oppose the dissolution.7 Despite such statements and the one-sidedness of a political campaign that deprived those who opposed the referendum questions from a media voice, opinion polls indicated, on the one hand, that nostalgia for Soviet times was fading in Belarus,8 and, on the other, that the president was unlikely to receive the mandate he sought to run for a third term.

Several independent survey centers indicated that support for a change in the Constitution was below 50 percent of the electorate. They included the Russian Analytical Center, which revealed that 47.5 percent intended to respond positively to the referendum question, 37 percent negatively, 9.7 percent found it difficult to respond, and 5.8 percent declined to reply.9 At the same time, the European Union and United States opted to place a ban on four Belarusian leaders from traveling to these countries, because of their role in the disappearance of prominent politicians, well known for their opposition to Lukashenka. The politicians in question were Minister of Internal Affairs Uladzimir Navumau, Prosecutor-General Viktar Sheiman (subsequently the head of the presidential administration and then Lukashenka’s campaign manager in the 2006 election), Minister for Sport Yuri Sivakou, and commander of the rapid reaction forces, Dzmitry Paulichenka.10 Lukashenka responded to the ban with a declaration that the West was seeking to assassinate him, accusing some of the opposition leaders of terrorist activity. He also ensured that the elections would take place under severely restricted conditions, which included advance polling for a substantial portion of the population, with demands issued on public transport that people should vote early, and parents of children being ordered to come to school by teachers who then supervised the early voting of the parents. When voters arrived at the polling station, they were often plied with drink and in most cases the stations were adorned with large portraits of the president. At one polling station in Minsk, senior citizens were given ballot papers on which a cross had already been placed opposite a “yes” vote.11 Belarusian Television declared (October 9) that there would be “no revolution” in Belarus like the one in Georgia or the mass protests in Ukraine.

The election and referendum results were thus predictable, despite the suggestions of opinion polls. The turnout was reported as 89.7 percent, and the percentage of those supporting the amendment to the Constitution to allow the president to run for a third term as over 79 percent. In a similar vein, none of the few opposition figures permitted to run for parliament were successful. Altogether 108 out of 110 deputies were elected on October 17. Among the few successes outside the government camp were Haydukevich, who, as noted, had changed his allegiance and was backed by a pro-government newspaper, Minskii Kur’yer; Uladzimir Kruk, a former member of the United Civic Party who resigned from the party prior to the election; and Olga Abramova, leader of the Belarusian branch of the Yabloko Party, who was also a member of the former parliament and remains very much the token opposition-

---

4. See, for example, Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belarusi, September 18, 2004; Minskii Kur’yer, September 18, 2004; Narodnaya Volya, September 16, 2004.  
9. Narodnaya Volya, October 6, 2004. An exit poll conducted by the Gallup Baltic Service, which was based on interviews of almost 19,000 people between October 12 and 17, indicated that only 48.4 percent of eligible voters supported the referendum motions. The margin of error in this poll was stated to be less than 1 percent. See www.charter97.org, November 5, 2004.  
11. See, for example, Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii, October 12 and 15, 2004.
ist in the lower house.\(^\text{12}\) The results were not recognized by the EU, the OSCE, or the Council of Europe, while the Lithuanian Parliament maintained that the decision to extend indefinitely the president’s term in office violated the democratic traditions of Europe.\(^\text{13}\) Street protests took place in central Minsk, and continued for several days, though the number of protesters never rivaled those in the streets of Kyiv at this same time. Only Russia’s President Putin was prepared to accept the results of the referendum as valid and binding, though he had not intervened in the campaign as he had in Ukraine, evidently recognizing that the results were a foregone conclusion.

The United Opposition Candidate

The anomalies and electoral violations of October 2004 spurred on the opposition to continue the process of electing a single candidate to face Lukashenka. The Permanent Council of Pro-Democracy Forces created an Organizing Committee to convene a National Congress of Democratic Forces that would take place between September 1 and October 1, 2005. The chairman was Alyaksandr Bukhvostau (Bukhvostov), the leader of the now defunct Belarusian Labor Party, supported by two deputies, Alyaksandr Dabrovolsky of the United Civic Party and Viktar Ivashkevich of the Belarusian Popular Front.\(^\text{14}\) By mid-June 2005, meetings around the country, held under the most difficult conditions in which meeting halls were often closed to participants, had nominated some 700 delegates to the Congress. By August it was evident that the two leading candidates for the opposition’s bid for the presidency would be Alyaksandr Milinkevich and Anatol Lyabedzka. Two fringe candidates also intended to run: the Belarusian Party of Communists\(^\text{15}\) leader Syarhey Kalyakin and Shushkevich, who is affiliated with the Belarusian Social Democratic Party. A Political Council was being set up to carry out the election campaign, which in turn was to establish a National Executive Committee or Shadow Cabinet.\(^\text{16}\) By August, the Congress leaders had begun to despair of finding a building for the assembly, having been quoted rates of more than 60 euros per hour, and there was speculation that the election of the single candidate might take place outside Belarus, in Smolensk or Kyiv. However, on October 2, over 800 delegates were permitted to gather at the Palace of Culture affiliated with the Minsk Automobile Factory.

Prior to the voting, Shushkevich, a 71-year old professor and corresponding member of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences, and also the former leader of the country from 1991 to 1994, withdrew his candidacy. Thus three candidates entered the contest: Kalyakin, Lyabedzka, and Milinkevich. In the first round, the voting was as follows, and based on 813 votes:

\[\text{Table 1. First Round of the Elections of the Single Opposition Candidate}\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Milinkevich</td>
<td>383</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyabedzka</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalyakin</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank or invalid</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: www.bonp.org

Thus Kalyakin, as the third-placed candidate, dropped out of the contest and a second round of voting was held:

\[\text{Table 2. Second Round of the Elections of the Single Opposition Candidate}\]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Milinkevich</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lyabedzka</td>
<td>391</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blank or invalid</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: www.bonp.org

---

\(^\text{13}\) Svobodnye novosti plus, October 27-November 3, 2004; and Interfax, November 3, 2004.
\(^\text{14}\) One should note that the Belarusian Popular Front, founded in the late 1980s by Zyanon Paznyak, split into two factions in 1999. One faction, which retained the original name, was led until recently by Vintsuk Vyachorka (currently the head is Lyavon Barscheuski) and has its headquarters in Minsk. The second is headed by Paznyak, who is currently living in exile in Warsaw and has not resided in Belarus for the past decade. It is called the Conservative Christian Party of the Belarusian Popular Front. Both parties are obliged to use the acronym BPF rather than the full name because of a government ban on using the word “Belarus” or “Belarusian” in the name of a political party.
\(^\text{15}\) Similarly there are two branches of the Communist Party in Belarus; Kalyakin’s wing is in opposition to the Lukashenka government. The five main opposition parties are: the BPF, the Women’s Party, the Social Democratic Party, the United Civic Party, and the Party of Communists. The 5-Plus group, based on an earlier arrangement to combine forces against Lukashenka, consisted of the BPF, the Social Democrats, the Belarusian Labor Party, the United Civic Party and the Party of Communists. It was also joined by the Belarusian Green Party, independent labor unions, and NGOs. At the same time, other groups formed a “European Coalition”—the Women’s Party, a separate wing of the Belarusian Social Democrats (Naradnaya Hra-

---
Thus Milinkevich won the election, but by the narrowest of margins and with less than a majority of all delegates eligible to vote. The narrowness of his victory was to cause some difficulties. However, the opposition had at least succeeded in electing its candidate, and at that time it was projected that Milinkevich would have at least seven months to organize his platform and election campaign. His candidacy also seemed to have two significant advantages. Unlike the others, he had no previous record as a campaigner, no “baggage” to carry, and unlike Shushkevich he could not be identified with alleged past failures in the early period of independence. Second, although he had been nominated by the Popular Front, he had no party affiliation and was thus relatively free to outline his platform. Who is Milinkevich and what is his political outlook?

Alyaksandr Uladzimirovich Milinkevich was born on July 25, 1947, in Hrodna. His great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather reportedly participated in the Polish uprising against the Russian Empire in 1863 and were repressed by the tsarist authorities. His grandfather was an activist in the Belarusian movement of the 1920s in Hrodna region. His father was a respected teacher in the Belarusian SSR. Milinkevich, who holds the degree of Candidate of Physics and Mathematics, also started his career as a teacher, subsequently moving to the Institute of Physics of the Belarusian Academy of Sciences. For twenty-two years (1978-2000), he was a senior lecturer in the Physics Department of Janka Kupala State University in Hrodna, with a period of four years spent at a university in Algeria in 1980-84. In the period 1990-96, he was deputy chairman of the Hrodna city government, and played an active role in the development and reconstruction of the most picturesque city in Belarus. Among the projects supported and influenced by Milinkevich were the establishment of public associations of Poles, Lithuanians, Russians, and Jews, and the creation of the Supreme Catholic Seminary. He is the author of 65 scientific works on physics, architecture, and the history of culture and education, and speaks five languages, including English and German. Married with two sons, he thus represents an influential, highly respected academic figure with strong ties to Belarus’s most Catholic and westernized province, with its substantial Polish population. However, Milinkevich has insisted that his background is essentially Belarusian, despite his ancestry.

In an interview with the leading opposition newspaper, Narodnaya Volya, Milinkevich provided an outline of his political perspective. He stressed that according to the Constitution, Belarus is a neutral country, and he has no plans that it join NATO or any other military unions. The strategic partner must, first of all, be one’s neighbors (Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Latvia). As for the EU, in which three of those neighbors currently hold membership, though there is no immediate prospect of membership, that goal must still be kept in mind for the long term. Belarus currently has many economic agreements with Russia and it is necessary to ascertain which of them will bring more benefit both to countries and peoples, but no agreements that are currently in force will be annulled. On the other hand, the conception of a common currency with Russia (as prognosticated by the terms of the draft papers on the Russia- Belarus Union) will not help the Belarusian economy. It would tie Belarus to the Russian economy, which is completely dependent on world prices for energy. Therefore it is necessary “to strengthen our own currency,” which is a constituent part of the financial and economic independence of the country. In this context, he believes that at present there is a lack of a viable policy that can accommodate both state and private interests. Lukashenka evidently intends to give up control over Beltransgaz (to Gazprom) in exchange for political support from Russia in the elections. But the president is unpredictable and cannot be relied on to keep his word.

Concerning the economy, Milinkevich maintains that the country could improve its economic status rapidly, but this is impossible without foreign investments, which are needed to modernize factories, to update equipment and install new technology. Small and middle-sized businesses, in his view, must be given tax breaks in order to thrive, and numerous inspectors must be eliminated. Banks should not be permitted to bail out chronically bankrupt enterprises through credits. Regarding privatization, Milinkevich does not differ markedly from the Lukashenka regime. He maintains that the larger enterprises, the providers of vital jobs and security, must remain state property, while small and middle-sized businesses may be privatized. The potential is high because of the highly educated workforce, but investments will only materialize if this middle-range privatization is introduced. Business people cannot thrive, because excessive regulations restrict their enterprises. A drastic revision of the system would enhance business and simultaneously inflict a blow to bureaucrats and deprive them of bribes. The entire system, in Milinkevich’s opinion, must be simplified and improved. He also would like to see changes to the taxation system, including the abolition of income tax on salaries below the subsistence level and a discussion of the possibility of a flat tax for the workforce in general.

17. www.bonp.org/single/con5.html
19. Ibid.
The First Stage of the Election Campaign

The prelude to the announcement of the campaign was the December 14 meeting between the Belarusian and Russian presidents, Lukashenka and Putin. At this meeting, Russia, through Gazprom, offered Belarus a price of $46.6 per cubic meter for gas supplies in 2006, compared to an offer of $230 for Ukraine. Armed with this information, Lukashenka evidently instructed Parliament to approve the announcement of a March 19 election two days later. In addition to a “deal” on gas imports, the early announcement also reduced the united opposition’s chances of mounting a sustained campaign. Ljubetzka speculated that the early date may have been chosen because the international community would be preoccupied with a hard-fought parliamentary election campaign in Ukraine, scheduled for March 26. Another possibility is that Putin suggested the early date so that when Russia took up its chairmanship of the G-8 countries that summer, it would not suffer the embarrassment of hostile comments about the election campaign in its closely allied partner, Belarus. By December 28, the Central Election Commission had registered initiative groups representing eight candidates with the following number of members:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contender</th>
<th>Members of IG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alyaksandr Lukashenka</td>
<td>6,212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alyaksandr Milinkevich</td>
<td>5,136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alyaksandr Kazulin</td>
<td>3,347</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syarhe Haydukevich</td>
<td>3,073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zyanon Paznyak</td>
<td>2,405</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alyaksandr Votyovich</td>
<td>1,134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valery Fralou</td>
<td>1,152</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syarhe Skrabets</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: RFE/RL Daily Report, December 27, 2005

The CEC registered all eight initiative groups; the next stage of the process, the inspection of the candidates, was set for December 29-January 27. During this period each candidate was required to gather a minimum of 100,000 signatures in order to run; no more than 15 percent of these signatures could be declared invalid. Registration of candidates was scheduled for the period February 12-21.

A number of comments can be made concerning these initial results. First, the totals for Milinkevich’s initiative group were impressive and he was facing few problems in collecting the necessary number of signatures. Second, the candidacy of Zyanon Paznyak appeared suspect, because he did not fulfill the residency requirement for a presidential candidate, that is, 10 years of full-time residence in Belarus prior to the election date. Third, Votyovich soon withdrew from the campaign on the grounds that the election was not authentic and the results were already predetermined. At the same time, he did not cast his vote for the Milinkevich team, believing that it was necessary for all candidates to withdraw from the contest, leaving Lukashenka the sole candidate on March 19, which would serve to undermine the validity of the election. Fourth, the low numbers for the Skarbets campaign suggested that he would be unable to mount a serious campaign. A former deputy of the opposition group Respublika in the House of Representatives, he was arrested in mid-May 2005 and accused of bribery and illegal business activities, and transferred from a prison in Brest to one in Minsk. His trial began on January 16. Because Skarbets is a long-time opponent of the Lukashenka regime, observers maintained that his arrest and trial were politically motivated, effectively preventing him from participation in the election.

Of the remaining six candidates, General Valery Fralou, another former member of Respublika, was considered a rank outsider. By declaring that he was running for election, he threatened to compromise the campaign of fellow member of the Social Democratic Naradnaya Hramada, Kazulin, and shortly thereafter the two campaigns were merged with Kazulin as the candidate. Finally, as noted, Haydukevich was not an opposition candidate and if there had been a second round, he would likely have cast his vote for Lukashenka.

Of the remaining candidates, then, the campaigns of Paznyak and Kazulin merit closer analysis (albeit, in Paznyak’s case, a short-lived affair), since these are both well-known opposition figures that decided not to support the united opposition candidate, Milinkevich. Paznyak, born in 1944, has become something of a maverick figure since fleeing Belarus and being granted refugee status by the United States almost a decade ago. He has spent most of his time since then in Warsaw, from where he ran another aborted campaign in a mock presidential election staged by the opposition in 1999. He has periodically criticized all the leaders of the opposition in the media for what he perceives as selling out to Moscow, the absence of an independent national policy; moreover, he has singled out Milinkevich as one of those guilty of such defects. Paznyak ran in the presidential campaign of 1994 and finished a respectable third behind Lukashenka and Vyacheslav Kebich, then the prime minister. Perhaps more than any other figure, he has been responsible for highlighting the crimes of Stalinism in

Belarus, and was one of the discoverers of the mass graves of NKVD victims at Kurapaty Forest in the northern suburbs of Minsk in 1988. He has also, however, rarely cooperated with other opposition leaders, and has never compromised on his bitter opposition to Russia. Unlike Milinkevich, Paznyak would orient Belarus only toward the West and the Baltic States and he has always been very concerned with the demise of the Belarusian language and what he perceives to be the incursions of Russian imperialism in Belarus. Once popular, he is now a fringe figure in Belarusian politics with the support of less than 2 percent of the electorate. As a non-resident, he could not legally take part in the election campaign.

Alyaksandr Uladzimirovich Kazulin was born on November 25, 1955, in Minsk. He completed Minsk Specialized School No. 87 (with courses taught in English) in 1971, and spent the next two years there working in the laboratory of the Department of Physics. At the same time he taught evening classes at Belarusian State University. Between 1974 and 1976 he served in the Baltic Fleet. From 1976 to 1983 he attended the mechanics-mathematical faculty of the State University and played an active role in the Komsomol movement. In 1986-88 he taught at the same institution, completing his candidate degree. In 1988 he started work at the Belarusian Ministry of Education, rising to the position of First Deputy Minister, and was one of the authors of the Law on Education in Belarus. He also completed a doctoral degree during this time. In 1996 he was appointed Rector of Belarusian State University directly by the president, and introduced a number of schemes to transform the university into a profitable institution, including the creation of an FM radio station. He was fired from the university in 2003, following his obvious lack of enthusiasm for Lukashenka’s 2001 election campaign and a scandal involving an enterprise connected with the university that dealt with the extraction of metals from waste.23

Though Kazulin had been identified with the establishment up to this point in his career, he has emerged as the new leader of the united Social Democratic Party, formerly headed by Mikola Statkevich and Shushkevich.

The formation of a united party arose from the initiative of several party leaders early in 2004 to create from several factions one strong party that could unite left and left-centrist forces on the eve of a new presidential election. During 2004, four round-table discussions were held in Minsk, and a further two in the regions, and on September 26 of that same year a Forum for United Social Democrats was held with the participation of representatives from Sweden and Latvia. Also in attendance were several delegates perceived at that time as potential presidential candidates, including Alyaksandr Yaroshuk, Valery Fralou, Pyotr Krauchanka, and Natalya Masherauva.24 Kazulin was elected leader of these united forces for several reasons: he had no ties to the earlier negative experience of the Belarusian opposition; he had not made any agreements with foreign political forces and thus had the appearance of a candidate free of any outside influences. In addition, he was a former member of the nomenklatura and had established himself as an impressive manager and the leader of a major institution. His relative popularity contrasted with that of Shushkevich and Statkevich, who had had many differences with each other and with the other party leaders, and could not conceivably offer a serious challenge to President Lukashenka; this was particularly so in the case of Statkevich, who had been the victim of a sustained campaign of persecution. But what kind of platform did Kazulin plan to offer the electorate of Belarus, and how did it differ from the conception of Milinkevich? The answer was provided in a lengthy statement that appeared in Narodnaya Volya early in 2006, which was based on a pamphlet edited by Kazulin and entitled “The Path to a Decent Life: The Conception of Belarusian Social Democracy” (referred to hereafter as the Conception).

The Conception represents the Social Democrats’ vision of the recent past and current situation in Belarus, and states that the country has suffered a systemic crisis for the past fourteen years. This crisis is rooted in the restrictions on democracy, the return of the economy and social sphere to administrative-command methods of management, as well as the country’s international isolation. The centralization of power, based on the so-called “presidential vertical,” is becoming stronger, whereas all forms of public work and self-expression are becoming narrower. The history of Belarus and the values of its society, according to the Conception, have been reduced to the Soviet period alone. The national language and culture, and even the classics of Belarusian literature are humiliated and despised. The names of the streets of Minsk help to preserve the relics of Russian Bolshevism: Volodarsky, Sverdlov, Dzerzhinsky, Kuibyshev, Kalinin, etc. The diagnosis, it states, is tough but obvious. The main problem is that property and power are concentrated in the hands of the state bureaucracy, and the supreme value of state regulation is the decision made by the head of state. Most of the decisions made by Lukashenka have tended to emanate from his intuition rather than from expert advice. Yet the president insists that state politics respond to the needs of the population. The authors of the Conception ask in response whether Belarus can be termed a social state, bearing in mind the following factors:

23. www.templetonthorp.com/ru/news880
24. Krauchanka is a former foreign minister who fell foul of the government and was appointed ambassador to Japan; Masherauva is the daughter for the former Communist era leader Piotr Masherau (1918-80), who remains a popular figure in Belarus.
According to the Conception, the state struggles not against poverty, but against those with the potential to make the state richer, namely the intelligentsia and businessmen. Kazulin’s party offers several remedies. In the economy, it proposes that the state bureaucracy be removed from its uncontrolled management, along with the development of all spheres of economic and commercial activity. Licenses should be permitted for private businesses; shareholders and labor collectives should play an active role in the running of factories; tax policy should be reformed and the independence of the National Bank restored. Economic democracy must be directed toward the accelerated development of the country. The Conception includes a step-by-step (2-5 years) transition from presidential rule to a parliamentary republic, the transformation of the two-tier Parliament into a single assembly, a revision of the Electoral Code, the establishment of an institute dealing with human rights, and a new administrative division of the country based on the okrug and volost. In order to begin state transformation, the Social Democrats demand the reduction of income taxes, the abolition of the contract system, reform of pensions, assistance to families with children, and the preservation of free medical care. In foreign policy, the Conception demands that Belarus maintain state neutrality with “sincere and friendly” relations with Russia. It should revive warm relations with other neighbors and use the geographic location of the country to maximum advantage. The ultimate goal is an agreement based on “National Consent” and a coalition government relying on popular support.

Though the prospects for such a Conception to be put into practice seem remote, it is worth considering the deep legacy of Social Democracy in the history of Belarus. Most of the leading politicians, including Lukashenka, have at one time or another been linked to one or another of the Social Democratic parties that have emerged in post-Soviet Belarus. Throughout the preparatory period before the election, Lukashenka retained a high level of popularity among the Belarusian public that ranged approximately from 40 to 60 percent. This popularity has led one Western analyst to stress that Lukashenka appears to mirror the wishes of the Belarusian electorate. However, it is relatively easy to monopolize the voting when only the president has access to the media, and appears daily and ad infinitum on national television to espouse his views, or is depicted visiting factories, villages, or the army. One recalls that in 1992, the level of support for Shushkevich, acknowledged today at the very least to have been a leader beset by economic problems, was higher than that for Lukashenka today, with the latter running a state that is far more authoritarian and in which speaking out against the president is now a criminal offence, even during an election campaign! In other words, it would be misleading to dismiss the opposition—as the president frequently does—as being distanced from the needs of the population, or the tools of Western powers that would like to see the removal of Lukashenka, as the United States has stated overtly.

**Lukashenka’s Views**

The president’s political outlook is far from static, even on the question of relations with Russia. Shortly after the announcement of the 2006 elections, he provided an exceptionally frank interview to the newspaper Rossiiskaya gazeta, and the contents were evidently suitable to be published at the same time in the president’s own mouthpiece, Sovetskaya Belorusiya. Though Lukashenka has always lacked a clear conception of how he perceives the future of the state, he has enunciated strong and sometimes ambivalent views on a number of issues. It is logical to begin, as he did, with relations with Russia and the slow evolution of the Russia-Belarus Union, first conceived under his first administration on April 2, 1996, when Boris Yeltsin was the Russian president. The state, declared the president, must be built through good relations with neighbors, and first and foremost with Russia. If Poland and the Baltic States prefer not to have friendly links with Belarus, then such links will be developed with states that are more willing for such connections. Though Lukashenka has been criticized for forming a tight union with Russia, “it cannot be otherwise.” This situation explains why he and Putin reached an agreement on gas prices at the meet-

---

26. Ibid.
ing in Sochi, and why a contract was eventually signed between Gazprom and Beltransgaz. The Supreme State Council that will meet in St Petersburg must also accept decisions in the area of issues like pensions and taxes.

Russia and Belarus, in the president’s view, are tied together by many problems that require joint resolution. One is the question of Kaliningrad and its status as an outpost of the Russian Federation cut off from the motherland. Belarus is in a position to provide assistance to this region. The new gas price contrasted with that in Ukraine, in which Russia has key defense interests. However, Ukraine wishes to join NATO and defense installations built in Ukraine will be eliminated. As a result, according to Lukashenka, Russian companies and the Russian state will lose billions of dollars. There is also the possibility that Russia will be obliged to pay much more for the lease of bays in Sevastopol for the Black Sea Fleet. Belarus, however, had never reacted in such a fashion to the Russian neighbor, even when Chubais raised the prices for electricity several years ago. On the other hand, Russian interests in Belarus have to be clarified. Lukashenka is firmly opposed to the notion of a single currency, and believes that Belarusian citizens now prefer the Belarus ruble to the dollar and the Russian currency. A Union must be based on equality, and Belarus will never accept a situation in which it is reduced to a western province of the Russian Federation. If he were to agree to such incorporation, “the situation here would be worse than in Chechnya.” Though Putin has recommended as an alternative that the Union be modeled on the EU, Lukashenka would prefer to use the experience of the Soviet Union first, and only later, “if it is necessary,” the experience of the EU. Thus at present the Russia-Belarus Union is at an impasse because Russia is unhappy with the terms being suggested by Lukashenka, in his new guise as a defender of the republic’s interests, but the Belarusian leader is also intent on maintaining intact the foundations of his own authority.

Lukashenka insists that the economy is thriving and the economic reforms listed in the SDP Conception are not necessary. Over the course of ten years, he points out, the GDP has doubled and Belarusian factories have already entered cooperative agreements with counterparts in Russia and elsewhere. “There is a rule by which we abide—first consider one’s native land and then yourself. What is wrong with that?” Therefore, he refuses to sell off ailing factories at cut-rate prices and will continue to provide facilities such as kindergartens and outpatient clinics. Concerning the election date, it was not his responsibility and even opposition deputies in parliament (he mentions Haidukevich and Abramova) preferred and pushed for an early date. People have more free time in the spring. If the opposition has no time to prepare for a March election, then Lukashenka wonders what they have been doing for the past five years since they have had ample time to be prepared. He then repeats the earlier comment about the great responsibility of being president; he is not concerned about money or having a bank account in Switzerland. “I honestly serve my people”—in other words, for Lukashenka the election is not about a fight for power. Though some people refer to him as “the last dictator of Europe,” he is not the chief executive power but rather the person that coordinates all sections of authority. Rather he is a president who takes on all the burdens of leadership but gets blamed when everything goes wrong.

Finally, he broaches the issues of society and color revolutions. Civic society is already in place in Belarus through youth organizations, veteran’s societies, and others; these are authentic societies rather than ten people getting together with “money from abroad” claiming to represent the majority. Even in terms of media, private distribution is three times higher than those with state support. The key point, he feels, and the one that has brought him adverse publicity is that Lukashenka does not carry out policies that meet with the approval of the West and the United States. The so-called color revolutions are in his opinion no more than banditry using Western money in the interests of elite groups. The U.S. applauds such actions, but in the twenty-first century, it is unacceptable to overthrow presidents by force with foreign money and cunning; it has nothing to do with bravery. As an example of the sort of democratic country for which oppositionists are clamoring, one should look at France. Belarus has created laws in order that it does not fall into the sort of chaos that has recently occurred in France. He ends with thanks to the Russians for their support and hopes that the demographic picture in Russia improves so that more people are born than are dying. This last statement appears especially ironic, given that the demographic crisis and mortality rates in Belarus are as high as in Russia.

The long and often less-than-coherent statement indicates several things about Lukashenka’s thinking: he is obsessed with the notion of a Western-backed color revolution, and thus has tightened the laws as to what is permissible in the way of dissent to the extent that no one can now criticize any of his actions or statements. It is illegal for opposition groups to make contact with the EU or other foreign agencies or to accept foreign assistance.

28. Subsequently, on December 31, 2006, Gazprom and the Belarusian government signed a contract for the supply of Russian gas to Belarus for the next five years. In 2007, gas prices were raised to $100 per 1,000 cubic meters of gas, rising to $250 by 2011. Gazprom also has started to purchase shares in the gas transit company Beltransgaz that will give the Russian company 50 percent ownership by this same year (2011).
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
There is no prospect of a radical economic reform, but there is also no chance of a complete union with Russia that would result in a single currency and single government. Yet Russia remains his closest ally and an important one, given the apparent forces ranged against him. Lukashenka continues to pursue the line of being a “man of the people,” a populist president who selflessly works for the nation with little personal advantage. However, this pose is belied by his authoritarian rule, monopoly over the media, and arrests and harassment of every political figure who has spoken out against him, usually through the courts, OMON troops, or his personal fiefdom, the KGB. So what does he offer the electorate? Essentially his election is based on security and presidential rule, the knowledge that life will not change, pensions will be paid on time, and Lukashenka will work for his people. If he is removed, then the outcome will be chaos, both economic and political: either Belarus will fall under the sway of an increasingly lengthy list of hostile powers: U.S., Western Europe, Poland, and the Baltic states; or it will become part of the Russian Federation with young Belarusians enlisted to fight in Chechnya and elsewhere. Simply put, it is the politics of fear, enhanced by tight control over the state apparatus and election procedures.

The Results and Aftermath of the 2006 Election

The results of the election were clearly predictable during the gathering of signatures for the candidates. Through pressure on employees of factories, students, and other groups for mass signings, the incumbent president amassed more than 1.9 million signatures by February 17th, or about one-third of the entire electorate. The only other candidates to obtain the minimum 100,000 signatures were Milinkevich, Kazulin, and Haydukevich. The campaign was conducted under very restricted conditions for the opposition candidates: they lacked access to the media, other than two brief TV and radio broadcasts of less than 30 minutes each, their campaign staffs were arrested (including every major figure in both opposition camps), opposition newspapers were harassed and in one instance confiscated outright, and they were prevented physically and through petty laws from holding public meetings. Though the president had maintained he would not campaign, he appeared daily on television, and he made several major speeches. He also convoked what was termed the “Third All-Belarusian People’s Assembly,” composed of his supporters, which essentially amounted to setting out his policy for the future. While trying to register for this assembly, Kazulin was detained and beaten by Special Forces under the command of Dzmitry Paulichenka, one of the president’s most repressive henchmen. His presence was justified on the grounds that the opposition, in league with foreign powers, was planning a coup! Some 30 percent of the voting was conducted the week prior to the election.

On 20 March, the chair of the Central Election Commission Lidziya Yarmoshyna, a close ally of Lukashenka, announced the preliminary results: Lukashenka had received 5.46 million votes (82.6 percent), with the other candidates well behind. Milinkevich was reported as garnering around 400,000 (6 percent), Haydukevich 250,000 (3.5 percent), and Kazulin, 154,000 (2.3 percent). When the final tally was revealed, the totals were even more unrealistic, as the president now had 5,501,249 out of 6,630,653 votes, or 83 percent, and the turnout was reported at 93 percent, an unlikely figure and unique during post-Soviet elections in the European republics of the former Soviet Union. The opposition candidates and their supporters—particularly youth groups—mounted a sustained protest over several days in October Square near the center of the city of Minsk, which also ended with a violent confrontation and arrests. Both Kazulin, arrested on 25 March, and Milinkevich, arrested on 26 April following the Chernobyl 20th anniversary demonstration, were incarcerated.

Their treatment reflected the nature of the most undemocratic election to date under the Lukashenka administration, one that was condemned by most outside observers, including the EU, the OSCE, and the United States. But what significance can be ascribed to the 2006 election and what does it signify for the future of this small central European nation? Few signs of hope appeared in the first months of 2007. Lukashenka planned the construction of a Belarusian gas pipeline to Italy, but even his own government had doubts. Most Western observers remained unconvinced that Belarus under Lukashenka was a democracy. Indeed, the Church could hardly be called such, even in the least repressive of its branches. 

Conclusion

Several issues defined the election. First, the incumbent president employed the tactic of creating an image of a state surrounded by enemies; one bolstered by the refusal of EU countries to grant travel visas to Lukashenka and selected members of his cabinet. The constant references to the “last dictatorship” or to Belarus as an “outpost of tyranny” (as described by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice) are important in terms of highlighting the repressive internal situation.

34. After the election, Kazulin was arrested during a public disturbance. In July 2006, he received a 5 1/2-year confinement at a hearing. Subsequently, he went on hunger strike and was declared a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. In February 2008, following the death of his wife Iryna from breast cancer, he was permitted a three-day leave to attend the funeral, but then returned to the penal colony in Vitsebsk region, despite international pleas for his release. At the time of writing, both the U.S. and Belarus ambassadors have been called home, after the United States reportedly increased sanctions against Belarus, ostensibly in protest at the treatment of Kazulin. See Belorusy i Rynok, February 25-March 3, 2008.

within Belarus, but they also provided an instrument for the president’s official portrayal of a beleaguered small nation surrounded on three sides by hostile powers that would like to inculcate an internal revolution. Second, the state administration had enormous advantages in the coming election, not least in its ability to fill the vacant positions in the territorial commissions and the Central Election Commission with its own supporters. The opposition to date has not succeeded in getting any of its members on these commissions, thus bringing to mind Stalin’s dictum that it is not a question of how many votes one gets, but of who is counting the votes.

The third and critical factor was that some divisions remained within the opposition. Despite the best efforts of the united forces to come up with a single candidate, both Milinkevich and Kazulin moved on to the March 19th contest. The situation reflects, in part, the reluctance of the Social Democrats to pledge allegiance to a leader who was proposed, even though he was not attached to, the Popular Front. Those leaders who had sacrificed their own ambitions to support Milinkevich were not amused. Lyabedzka, for example, attributed such disaffection to personal vanity, people thinking about emblazoning “Candidate for the Presidency” on their business cards. The two candidates at times worked together and even complemented each other. Whereas Milinkevich appeared calm and determined, Kazulin took on the role of rabble-rouser, with an inflammatory TV broadcast that shocked many viewers, and he evidently smashed a portrait of Lukashenka in the police station following his arrest on March 25. Though the president remains personally popular, few objective observers accept that he could have attained a total of 83 percent of the vote. The consensus is that his support by election-day lay somewhere in the 50-60 percent range. Fourth, as Milinkevich and others have stressed, communication with the electorate was crucial and this candidate embarked on an extensive program to visit as many areas of the country as possible, but did not have time to complete this campaign. It was not sufficient to win the election, but it raised public awareness of the issues and the potentiality for change if not in 2006, then in the near future.

Lastly, there is every indication that the Belarusian electorate places issues like economic welfare above party or election politics. In other words, the popularity of the president owes more to the relatively benign economic situation in the republic, at least as compared with the early years of independence, than to his political views. This economic stability and progress is somewhat illusory. It could end “tomorrow” if Russia’s Gazprom decided, as it has indeed threatened, to raise oil and gas prices to the levels charged to Ukraine or to Western Europe. In order to maintain the artificially low level prices, Lukashenka, as noted, has already sacrificed 50 percent ownership of the Belarusian company Beltransgas, which controls the processing and transport of Russian resources on Belarusian territory, to Gazprom. The EU has imposed sanctions on Belarus following the flawed election, but they pertain to the travel of individuals within the Lukashenka leadership (and the president himself). To date it has not restricted the delivery of goods to Belarus, which constitutes the largest portion of Belarus’s imports. The conception therefore of a Belarus as an economically prosperous and thriving state under Lukashenka is somewhat contrived. No doubt: Russia was content with the election results in Belarus, but could have done without the violence that ensued and the manipulation of the final figures that provided Lukashenka with an unrealistically high vote total and a first-round victory. On several grounds, however, there are causes for concern for the Lukashenka regime. The opposition is much more mobilized than hitherto, particularly youth groups; the government is increasingly isolated from Europe and the United States and hence reliant on Russia; and the latter country has the power and possibly the inclination to place more pressure on Belarus to make concessions in return for continued economic stability. A referendum on the Russia-Belarus Union has been anticipated for some time and it remains to be seen how much sovereignty of his country Lukashenka is prepared to compromise in order to stay in power indefinitely.

The authors wish to express their sincere thanks to Lyubov Pervushina of Minsk State Linguistic University for her assistance on this paper.

David R. Marples is University Professor, Department of History and Classics, University of Alberta, Canada. He is the author of twelve books, including Heroes and Villains: Constructing National History in Contemporary Ukraine (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2007) and Vice-President of the North American Association of Belarusian Studies.

Uladzimir Padhol holds the degree of Candidate of Sciences in Philosophy from the Belarusian State University. He is chairman of the public association, Information and Social Innovation, and former leader of the information and analytical center with the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet (13th session). He has authored several books, three novels, and over 1,000 scholarly articles. He resides in Minsk, Belarus.


36. To some extent that reflected pressure on Vladimir Putin from the other countries of the G-8. Russia hosted the summer session in St. Petersburg for the first time, and did not wish to see this prestigious occasion undermined by embarrassing questions about the rogue regime in Minsk.
Weaponizing the Story: Chechen and Russian Media Operations

Dodge Billingsley

While “warfare remains a violent clash of interests between organized groups characterized by the use of force,” the media war was, and still is, a critical component for both Russian and Chechen strategies in the fight for Chechnya. The wars in Chechnya were won and lost, in large part, by the attention or lack thereof on the part of both sides to information operations, specifically media operations. The Chechen and Russian approaches to media operations were significantly different during the first war (1994-1996); there was also a discernable shift in the nature of media operations conducted by both sides during the second war (1999-present).

Media during the First War: The Chechen Perspective and Approach

During the first Chechen war (1994-1996) the Chechen resistance used TV and print media, both domestic and international, to get their message out, creating worldwide sympathy for their cause. Relatively free access best describes the Chechen resistance’s relationship with the media personnel flowing into Grozny during the initial battle for the capital. Whether by design or not, the Chechens made considerable efforts to educate and inform the world about who they were and why they were fighting.

Mark Bauman of NBC’s Moscow Bureau covered the war from both the Russian and Chechen side, and while in Grozny meeting with Chechen commander Shamil Basaev, he was given Basaev’s ring for safe passage within the besieged capital. The ring, akin to a key to the city, enabled the NBC crew to travel block to block, between insurgent groups with relative ease, gathering material for numerous broadcasts. Other journalists found Chechen hospitality and access to be equally as good. Whether the fair treatment was part of a specific, premeditated media campaign is debatable. Some journalists felt that the openness with which they were greeted by Basaev and other serious fighters was more a condition of traditional Islamic hospitality, while others credit Chechen culture more than Islamic tradition specifically.

It is impossible to overestimate the favorable conditions in which the Chechens found themselves at the end of 1994. The Russian Army was in dire straights; corruption was rampant, and the global audiences more than curious regarding the mysterious Chechens. The Chechens were also perceived to be the underdog, taking on the remnants of the mighty Soviet military machine. For many journalists and commentators it was impossible to ignore the David and Goliath metaphor and they wanted to give the Chechens the attention they were seeking.

Even fashion magazines covered the war in vivid pictorials of photogenic Chechen fighters dressed in insurgent chic, cradling the instruments of their power, the AK-47 and RPG, while international news magazines portrayed the war’s brutality through images of Russian and Chechen civilians suffering in the carnage taking place in Grozny as the Russian advance into the city center systematically destroyed the capital.

The international media attention given the war provided multiple benefits to the Chechens, including recruiting. Although numbers were not large, there was a significant contribution of non-Chechen fighters lured to Chechnya via the media. Al Khattab, the Arab leader of the foreign mujahadeen battalion operating in Chechnya, claims to have had no idea that the Chechens were a Muslim people. It wasn’t until watching Western news that he learned this and consequently made his way to Chechnya to become a major military force during the first and second wars.

The result of a media-friendly Chechen leadership and the worldwide fascination with the tiny republic’s effort to break free of Moscow’s grip led to substantial coverage from within Grozny, from the Chechen perspective, during the initial seizure of the capital, December 1994 to March 1995.

The Chechen side also made extensive use of new media, for example, the Internet, to get its message out to like-minded individuals and anyone else following the war worldwide. Kavkazcenter.com and a handful of other pro-Chechen sites were up and running very early on in the war, providing information from the Chechen side daily, Movladi Udugov receiv-

ing much of the credit. The Chechens also were keen to photograph and tape many of their operations; as a result, when the Russian military leadership would deny operations or casualties, it was frequently in the face of video and images that contradicted the official Russian line. This created a credibility gap for the Russians.

POWs

The Chechens were better at getting their message out, often turning a tactical operation into a worldwide media event with strategic repercussions. The broad coverage given to Russian prisoner repatriation is but one example of this. Shamil Basaev and other Chechen commanders made headlines by turning over Russian POWs to their family members, usually their mothers. The image of Russian soldiers, who appeared to have been relatively well treated and who were obviously happy to be released, thanking their captors, while family members, desperate to have their sons back, hugged and kissed Basaev and other Chechens, was a public relations coup. The media value was far more important than the release of the prisoners itself. In fact, the strategy of the media coverage of the prisoner repatriation not only gained sympathy for the Chechens because it demonstrated honor and a sense of fair play, but it also helped galvanize the strongest anti-Chechen war movement in Russia—mothers against the war. The Committee of Soldiers’ Mothers of Russia remains active and continues to track independently Russian casualties in Chechnya. In this way Basaev and other Chechen leaders played to multiple audiences at once: global, Russian and Chechen.

While critics, and the Russian leadership, might rightly say that the media was pandering to the Chechens, they failed to recognize what the media is, what a story is, and more importantly how to work with or manipulate the media to their ends. War reporting can be broken down into five factors: Bias, Knowledge, Logistics, Risk and Access. A successful media operation will incorporate a strategy to help the media towards all those ends. This does not necessarily entail telling the media what to print or play, yet it will provide an environment in which the media can operate and fulfill their mandate.

Budyonnovsk

Even in desperation, in the best Dunkirkian tradition, the Chechen side used the media to snatch victory from defeat.4 In June 1995, with the Russian Army bearing down on the remnants of the Chechen separatist movement, Basaev led a group of more than one hundred Chechens into Russia. Caught in the city of Budyonnovsk, Basaev and his men shot up the police station and a few additional targets, killing dozens before retreating to the central hospital to take hostages and care for his wounded.

His tiny band was outnumbered and surrounded by Russian units, including Special Forces, but Basaev quickly turned to media operations to salvage the day. Likely due to the number of hostages, and the disposition of the Russian government under Yeltsin, Basaev was granted media access and was able to hold a number of press conferences from within the hospital. More interesting, Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin

---

4. Dunkirkian refers to the British withdrawal from Dunkirk in 1940; the British government was able to spin the forced retreat into a moral victory, emphasizing that the British Expeditionary Force had been saved to fight another day.
negotiated with Basaev live on Russian TV while Russian President Yeltsin was out of country at a G8 Summit.5

The result—Basaev and his men were granted safe passage back to Chechnya on busses with Russian hostages/volunteers as human shields.6 More important, Basaev was able to wrangle a cease-fire from Russia at the very moment the Chechen separatist movement was at the point of breaking under the strain of Russian military might. The Chechens used the ceasefire to get themselves reorganized and eventually attack and seize Grozny two more times before the Russians capitulated and withdrew from Chechnya. Basaev’s stature at home and abroad was even greater than before. He became a household name in Russia.

Media during the First War:
The Russian Perspective and Approach

By most accounts, the Russian attitude towards the media in general was antagonistic and not proactive in its approach to media operations. Obviously, the condition of the Russian Army in the mid-1990s challenged its operational capabilities to the limit and the ability to plan, let alone implement, an effective information operation campaign might not have been possible. But the inability to apply any significant media campaign hurt Russian efforts to counter the strong media message the Chechens were disseminating and convince the world and even its own population that the war in Chechnya was necessary, justified, important to national security, and worth the costs. Despite a steady flow of traditional news conferences and press releases claiming operational successes and pending victory, the Russian government and military could not convince or sell the international, or even the Russian media, on its efforts in Chechnya.

Like ABC, CBS, and other news agencies covering Chechnya during the first war, Mark Bauman’s NBC team had to cross both the Russian and Chechen lines every day to reach the feed points in Ingushetia and on the Dagestan border. In one incident, while filming the Russian armored columns roll into the city, the NBC and CBS positions were so close to the tanks and BTRs (armoured personnel carrier) passing by that a CBS soundman slapped CBS bumper stickers on the back of the Russian armor as they thundered past. During filming a Russian special forces squad drove up on a BTR ordering them to move, throwing stun grenades and shooting at the legs of the NBC crew with rubber bullets. The event would have been lost, but one of the other news crews a few hundred feet away witnessed and filmed the desperate situation in which the NBC crew found themselves.7

While the episode may be extreme and not representative of the entire Russian military’s relationship with the media, it stands in stark contrast to the assistance given journalists by Chechen fighters inside Grozny. The NBC crew’s bad experience is just part of a larger failure of Russian forces to engage in media operations.

Perhaps the greatest challenge that the Russian military faced in Chechnya was that media operations to sway public opinion were a hard sell in the face of the near indiscriminate bombing of the capital and the killing of Chechen and Russian civilians alike. Opting for blunt force and massing of firepower in an urban area like Grozny did not leave the Russians much room to construct a media message that might have appealed to any audience in the face of so much destruction. In fact, the media, many of whom were veterans of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, were able to make quick and accurate comparisons of the bombardments of Sarajevo and Grozny, highlighting the intensity and the brutality of Russian barrages.

Taking a page out of the U.S. Army’s new counter-insurgency manual, all operations should be built on a bed of information operations, and all operations should be in support of the overall media message. The Russian military was either unwilling or unable to tie any media campaign to the combat tactics applied; moreover, Russian military action was a difficult sell in the face of moments of extreme brutality, such as the 1995 massacre at Shamansk.

Media during the Current War:
The Chechen Perspective and Approach

Chechen media operations of the second Chechen war (1999-present) stand in stark contrast to the strategies of the first Chechen war. The biggest shift in the media operations conducted by the Chechens between the first and second wars are directly linked to at least four factors: the perceived failure to attract global sympathy and tangible support for the Chechen cause outside the Islamic world; splits within the Chechen resistance; the brutality of the war itself; and an evolution of tactics.

If one were to examine the primary websites of the Chechen resistance movement in 1995 and then again in the last five years, there is a remarkable difference between the general theme of the site and stories covered. Kavkaz-center.com was initially dedicated to the Chechen conflict. However, it has now become a portal for anti-Russian and anti-Western stories stretching from Chechnya to the U.S.-directed operations in Afghanistan and Iraq and

---

5. Chechnya: Separatism or Jihad, Combat Films and Research, 2005; see also Russian NTV news coverage for the week of June 14-19, 1995.
6. Initial press reports stated that there was sympathy for the Chechens from the hostages themselves. This was very unpopular in Russia and has been but forgotten and much of the facts lost to history as Russian media have become less and less independent. Reference original news reports by Russian NTV, week of June 14-19, 2005.
7. The videotape of the event in question was pooled out to all the news agencies and can still be found in various network archives.
anti-Israeli operations in Palestine. Kavkazcenter.com is now a media tool of the global jihad in which the conflict in Chechnya is one of many battlegrounds globally.

In the beginning the war was about separatism and independence, albeit the Chechens are Muslim. General Dudaev and Maskhadov were clearly seeking a secular path for Chechnya. However, with most of the original Chechen leadership dead, the influx of foreign Islamic volunteers, and the lack of official recognition by the West, the Chechen resistance movement metastasized to a path of jihad.8 Chechen moderates who fought for an independent secular Muslim state have been killed, marginalized or coerced to consider and embrace the Wahhabism brought to Chechnya by jihadists like al Khattab.9 This evolution has changed the face of Chechen media operations. This is strongly evident on recent home pages of Kavkazcenter.com, which boasts photos of the current Chechen separatist leadership in the banner and featuring news stories that focus on Islamic struggles worldwide, demonstrates the evolution of media awareness and scope from the early years of the Chechen-Russian conflict, when the site’s emphasis was centered squarely on the Chechen conflict.

The home page of Kavkaz.net in 2007, highlighting the Chechen separatist leadership in the banner and featuring news stories that focus on Islamic struggles worldwide, demonstrates the evolution of media awareness and scope from the early years of the Chechen-Russian conflict, when the site’s emphasis was centered squarely on the Chechen conflict.

8. Chechnya: Separatism or Jihad.

The reputation of the Chechen insurgency, once seen by the press as a brave freedom fighter, chivalrous towards prisoners, was very much tarnished via their actions during the chaotic interwar years, when internal fighting, killings and kidnappings became so common that all NGOs and outside media opted not to operate in Chechnya. The hard-fought media message images and names of their leadership in the context of jihad, rather than keeping the leadership’s identity in the shadows, or presenting them as Chechen nationalists. What is left of the Chechen insurgency has determined that appealing to its Umma is more important than hiding from the Russians and reaching out to the West.

Splits in leadership also split the grand strategy and message of the insurgency. The concept of a centralized like-minded Chechen command has always been a bit misleading as field commanders were often at odds with one another and as the movement transmogrified, roughly speaking, into separatist and Islamic ideologies. There were always questions about Basaev’s loyalty to Maskhadov; now, with new leadership, there are more questions. Other figures in the separatist movement who demonstrated a pro-West stance have been branded traitors by the more Islamist factions.10

The reputation of the Chechen insurgency, once seen by the press as a brave freedom fighter, chivalrous towards prisoners, was very much tarnished via their actions during the chaotic interwar years, when internal fighting, killings and kidnappings became so common that all NGOs and outside media opted not to operate in Chechnya. The hard-fought media message

10. Periodic discussions with Ilyas Akhmadov, December 2005 to December 2007, as well as frequent postings on pro-Chechen websites run by Movladi Udugov.
rang hollow in the face of Basaev and Khattab’s incursion into Dagestan in 1999. The war in Chechnya for the media-dependent observer had become something else, something the Putin administration was quick to capitalize on—a jihad for the entire north Caucasus.

In addition, the Chechen insurgency has conducted increasingly violent acts against Russian civilian targets, most notably the tragedies of the Moscow theater and Beslan. Media stories such as the abuse of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib have done irreparable damage to the U.S. effort to compete, let alone win, the information war in Iraq. Likewise, the Chechen attacks at the Moscow Nord-Ost theater in 2002 and Elementary School No. 1 in Beslan in 2004 nullified the possibility of popular support for the Chechen insurgency amongst Muslims globally, in Russia, or even amongst many Chechens.

It is tempting to say that like Russia’s inability to sell its message during the first war, the Chechens now were unable to sell their message during the second war. But it was more than that. In addition to not having a convincing media campaign to counteract the instability of interwar independence and the increasing brutality of Chechen attacks, the conflict with Russia had changed, and the audiences had changed as well. At some point during the first war, the Chechen leadership realized that international and, specifically, Western support for their cause would not be forthcoming. Instead, the only source of support came from the Islamic world, including support from various jihadist organizations and individuals. This realization reshaped the media message from within the Chechen movement—framing the fight as a jihad rather than a struggle for independence. Moreover, global conditions and attitudes now favor Russia. The attack on the World Trade Center towers on September 11th, Russian President Putin’s insistence that the Chechen conflict be seen as part of this larger global war on Islamic radicalism, and the Bush administration’s acceptance of the Russian position on Chechnya, helped change the Chechen war forever.

Media during the Current War:
The Russian Perspective and Approach
The Putin administration’s approach to media operations, with few exceptions, has been to severely limit press access via Russian channels, while taking control of independent media in Russia. Media critical of Putin’s administration and Russian prosecution of the war in Chechnya have been systematically muzzled, while a number of key journalists have been killed or have sought asylum outside Russia. Western media organizations in Russia have felt the pressure as well, as demonstrated by the government’s ban on ABC following Andrey Babistsky’s interview of Basaev during the summer of 2005. The result has been to limit the world’s view of Chechnya and give the Russian Army a freer hand to prosecute the war.

For Chechnya specifically, Russia has instituted a strategy of isolation, closing Chechnya off to the outside world, and depriving the Chechen resistance of much needed coverage for their cause. There are still press junkets into Grozny and media coverage of important events like the swearing in of the new pro-Moscow Chechen president, but the most significant information operation has been to isolate the Chechen insurgency from any press coverage.

Russia has also been very successful in discrediting the Chechens globally by perpetuating the myth of Chechen jihadists fighting against the U.S. and Coalition partners in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Chechen bravado, success in arms and their appearances in other conflicts on the former Soviet periphery in the mid-1990s perpetuated an already firmly established reputation as a warrior people, helping create—with Russian assistance—a new myth of a global Chechen force engaged in multiple global battlefields.

In the immediate aftermath of September 11th ethnic Uzbek and Tajik Northern Alliance personnel were quick to walk the battlefield at Qala i-Jangi and pronounce dozens killed as Chechens. They also fed Western news crews other unlikely stories that were quickly transmitted to hungry audiences worldwide, such as fifty-some Chechen fighters who threw themselves into the river below rather than surrender to the Northern Alliance and U.S. Special Forces during the fall of Kunduz in late November 2001. As recently as summer 2007, Chechens were given credit for conducting military operations against Pakistani Army units in Pakistan’s western provinces.

As a result of these media reports, U.S. Army intelligence briefings continue to warn U.S. troops and airmen about Chechens operating in both Afghanistan and Iraq, yet not a single Chechen has been identified—killed or interned in either conflict.

15. As witnessed by author in the immediate aftermath of the fortress uprising at Qala Jangi.
17. Author’s discussions with numerous U.S. Army personnel in both Afghanistan and Iraq (2002-2007).
talized Grozny, complete with new tree-lined sidewalks, cars, people, and a mosque—a thriving metropolis out of the ruins of more than thirteen years of chaos and war— the clearest indication yet that Russia and Chechnya’s Moscow-backed government has won the war for the tiny republic.

But media management of the Chechen wars raises a point about successful media operations. There is no one decisive manner to orchestrate media operations. Chechnya won the first war with much credit to its ability to engage the media, while Russia is winning the current conflict by quashing media access and controlling the message. It is equally important to understand the target audience, global conditions, the strategic picture and tactical nature of the conflict. Finally, as far as the five factors or war reporting are concerned—Bias, Knowledge, Logistics, Risk and Access—bias will always exist. The Chechens better managed knowledge, logistics, risk and access during the first war. Since then, in contrast, Russia has better managed the logistics, risk and access reporters depend on in war.

Dodge Billingsley is the Director of Combat Films and Research and has covered Chechnya for more than a decade, and media operations extensively since the U.S. actions in Afghanistan and Iraq.


The Occult Revival in Russia Today and Its Impact on Literature

Birgit Menzel

The word *occult*, following Maria Carlson’s broad definition, “embraces the whole range of psychological, physiological, cosmical, physical, and spiritual phenomena. From the Latin word *occultus*, hidden or secret, applying therefore to the study of the Kabbala, astrology, alchemy, and all arcane sciences.”1 The occult always comprises both a certain theoretical or philosophical concept and a number of practices, which are supposed to lead the person involved to an experience of higher, ultimately divine knowledge and consciousness. According to esoteric thinking, this is considered ultimately a path to elevate and realize the divine essence within the human life. However, sometimes it is not used to achieve higher consciousness or divine knowledge, but to deliberately make effective use of dark “evil forces.” The occult has always been used for different ends, for purposes that range from benignly spiritual to totalitarian or fascist.

As “concealed wisdom” the occult is linked to, but not identical with, *mysticism* as “secret experience.”2 It is also linked to the term *esoteric*, which, from the Greek *esotericos*, i.e., secret teaching, can be traced to Greek philosophy of the third century A.D. and can be applied to all cultures. But today, in a semantic context shaped since the late nineteenth century, “esoteric” is used in two different senses: (1) as a general term for occult practices, teachings and communities, and (2) as an “inner path” to certain spiritual experiences that goes beyond following dogmas and ideas in an external or formal manner, and which is connected with tradition, secrecy and initiation. “Nothing is naturally esoteric. Esotericism is a designation of the historical role of certain ideas and methods within a culture rather than a description of their intrinsic characteristics. As an adjective, esoterical describes a culture’s attitude towards ideas rather than the ideas themselves.”3 All three terms, occult, mystic and esoteric, are often used synonymously, although they refer to different historical and ideological contexts. For a scholarly analysis, however, the use of the terms should therefore be specified and the context in which they are used should be spelled out.

The prevalence of occult and esoteric ideas and topics in post-Soviet culture is a fact that many Western scholars of contemporary Russia have encountered either through the vast literature or simply by visiting bookstores and street vendors in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as other cities, like Kazan, Novosibirsk and Khabarovsk. It is almost impossible to understand contemporary Russian literature without being equipped with an encyclopedia of the occult. In the 1990s no less than 39 percent of all non-fiction publications in the humanities dealt with occult-esoteric topics.4 Some former Soviet thick journals, for example, *Literaturnoe obozrenie* and *Nauka i religiia*, have adopted a whole new profile with publications on aspects of the occult.5 This revival has been described by some Western scholars, for instance, Eliot Borenstein, Valentina Brougher and Holly deNio Stephens, as a phenomenon of popular culture,6 and one

---

5. The monthly journal *Nauka i religiia* [Science and religion], since its founding in 1959 one of the most aggressive propagandists of atheism, changed its profile and since 1988 has been open to Eastern religions and has developed a strong profile in esoteric and Eastern religious topics. *Literaturnoe obozrenie* has published special volumes on “literature and the occult” since 1989. The journal regularly prints articles on topics connected with the occult, esoteric traditions and Gnosticism; numerous articles engage in the reinterpretation of Russian literature along these lines.
might be quick to assume that it represents a primarily one-way import of New Age ideas and publications flooding into commercialized Russia from the West.

I will argue that the occult revival in Russia is by no means simply a question of popular culture. The fascination with esoteric, supernatural, and non-orthodox spirituality, with popular utopian and pagan folk traditions in post-Soviet Russia can be found on all levels of intellectual and artistic life, including the sciences and politics. One can discern a considerable impact of esoteric ideas and ideologies not only on the humanities, but also on the sciences: newly established organizations based on the ideology of cosmism, such as the Association for a Complex Survey of the Russian Nation (Assotsiatsiya kompleksnomu izucheniiu russkoi natsii, AKIRN), which has ties with several Pan-Slavist circles, closely collaborates with the Slavic International Union of Aviation and Aeronautics (Slaviaskosmos), with the Mir Station and with the Museum of the History of Aviation and Aeronautics. The sheer number of conferences and research projects, university course offerings and college textbooks on supernatural powers, from bioenergy theories, the so-called “torsionic” fields to UFOs and cosmic consciousness, produced by scientists at the highest academic ranks has been so disturbing that in 2002 a commission within the Russian Academy of Science was founded to warn and propagate against the spread of “obscure pseudoscience.”

The occult is also connected to the healing sciences. Shamanism as an alternative medicine has entered scientific discourses in Russia and the West. In July 2005, the International Congress of Transpersonal Psychology was held for the first time in Moscow. Transpersonal psychology, a branch of professional psychology, was founded by the American psychologist Ken Wilber and is based on an esoteric approach and worldview.

A considerable number of practising Russian psychologists and psychiatrists participated in this congress. I will show that today’s occult revival should be seen, first of all, as the result of seven decades of the forceful suppression of metaphysical thought in Russia. The spiritual vacuum caused by the downfall of Communism helps to explain the strong impact of belief systems outside of established religions. As Mikhail Epstein writes, “many more people now exit atheism than enter the churches. They exit atheism without arriving, they stay somewhere at the crossroads.” The Russian people have a desire for wisdom, unity and a holistic being, which reaches out beyond the dogmas and traditionally confined systems of the established religions:

Imagine a young man from a typical Soviet family, who for three or four generations has been completely cut off from any religious traditions. And now that he hears a calling, the voice of God from above, this young man is unable to determine into which church, under which roof he should take cover. All historical religions are equally alien to him. He seeks belief and finds only religious confessions (verosposovanii). [...] And it is precisely in this gap between [the yearning for] belief and [traditional] confessions that the poor religion emerges, one without dogma, books, or rituals. [...] This crossroads is in fact the crucial point, where all paths merge. A point of common belief, equally accepting all beliefs (systems?) as leading to one unified belief. [...] Simply belief, belief in the Good. [...] Poor religion is a religion without further definition.

For Epstein, this particular search for spiritual reorientation, which he calls “poor religion” or “religious modernism,” is a uniquely post-atheist phenomenon, and thus inseparably linked with the Soviet past. While all believers had formerly been equal in relation to the monolithic atheist state, the negative sign has now been turned into a positive one in the same totalizing undistinguished way. This uniqueness, however, is open to question, if the religious renaissance is seen in a broader international context. Wouter Hanegraaff, Professor of the History of Hermetic Philosophy and Related Currents at the University of Amsterdam, argues that “the emergence of modernity itself is intertwined with the...
history of esotericism.”13 However, “surviving examples […] of western esoteric currents are not recognized as an integral part of our collective cultural heritage and are insufficiently documented, studied and preserved.”14

What we see in Russia today is a merging of different traditions: a popularization of occult counter-culture of the post-Stalinist period, various permutations of the Russian occult in early twentieth-century Russian culture and a remigration of occult ideas processed through the Western New Age.

We must not lose sight of the specific historical conditions at play, since mystical, utopian and pagan roots in religious and intellectual belief systems and more generally in Russian folk culture were stronger than what was found in modern Western societies and had a pervasive influence throughout the twentieth century.15 Historical conditions also include different uses of the occult by the Soviet state and by the people, in both the official and unofficial cultures. Uses of the occult by the state range from trading in the life and works of theosophical Buddhist mystic Nicholas Roerich in exchange for U.S. dollars and Soviet propaganda abroad16 to experiments with mind control and psychic warfare for political and military reasons, which was also practiced in the United States.17 In spite of its claim to “scientific atheism,” Soviet civilization was from the very beginning influenced by religion. It defined itself as a purely rational ideocratic society, based on science and empirical knowledge, but its cult of the rational was taken to such an extreme that one could talk in terms of a “rationalistic religion.” In the 1920s and again in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when science merged with utopian thinking, when during the proclaimed “cosmic era” borders shifted between science and fantastic fiction, certain disciplines, for example, telepathy, hypnosis and parapsychology, to choose three topics traditionally connected with spiritual and occult thought, all experienced a boom. Commissions at the Academy of Science explored the phenomena of alien intelligence, intergalactic UFOs, the Tungus meteorite in Siberia and anthropoids (the Abominable Snowman/Yeti) in the Tibetan Himalaya. All these projects evoked strong popular interest and were accompanied by extended discussions in popular scientific journals.18

In order to bring attention to the wide range of uses of the occult and to help open up a new perspective of cultural history, I will approach the topic here as broadly as possible. I will sketch some contexts of the occult in Soviet unofficial culture, and then suggest a typology of approaches to the occult, each of which can be applied to contemporary contexts. To illustrate the impact on current Russian literature, I will then discuss three literary texts, all written after 1990: Olesya Nikolaeva’s story A Cripple from Childhood (Invalid detstva), Yury Mamleev’s novel Flickering Time (Bluzhdaiushchee vremia) and Vladimir Sorokin’s novels Ice (Led) and Bro’s Path (Put’ Bro). In conclusion, I will address the role and function of the occult in Russia Today.

---


18. On parapsychology and the Abominable Snowman see Informationnye materialy Komissii po izucheniui voprosa o ‘snezhnom cheloveke’, 4 vols. (Moscow, 1958-59). On the hypotheses about the Tungus meteorite, see N.V. Vasil’ev, Tungusskii meteorit. Kosmicheskii fenomen leto 1908g. (Moscow, 2004), 256-66. For an account of the discussions in Soviet popular scientific journals like Nauka i zhizn and and more recently by Bogomolov, Obatnin and Stahl-Schwaezter. Monographs have been published about the historical influence of the occult on Russian literature.
and culture in the nineteenth century, including its reception in popular culture (Berry, Leighton, Mannherz23).

New perspectives have been opened up on the Russian avant-garde, where philosophical concepts of immortality, the technological utopias and energy theories of conquering time and space have been seen as interrelated. The influence of theosophical ideas and esoteric traditions on the theory and practice of poets and artists has been documented and analyzed (Malevich, Kandinsky, Filonov, Larionov).24 Now only that the complete edition of Malevich’s works has been published and his prolific philosophical writings have become accessible can we fully understand the extent to which this artist considered himself a spiritual founder of a new religion.25 Moreover, some “new cultural” studies (Hagesteus, Dalrymple Henderson, Parton and Greenfield) have begun to focus on the complex interrelations among science, technology, utopia and religion and have investigated the metaphysical undercurrents of the avant-garde.26

Barnes Rosenthal’s _The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture_ is the first study to focus on selected topics of the Soviet period. But the history of the occult in Soviet, and in particular, the post-Stalinist period, which would include the manner in which the occult was transformed, adapted and implemented into Soviet science, as well as the religious-philosophical renaissance in the 1970s, is still almost completely unknown and unstudied. This is one problem that confronts every researcher who is dealing with the present time. Thus, the rediscovery of abstract art and the avant-garde of the 1920s during the Thaw by artists, like Valery Shvartsman, Vladimir Vesberg, Tatiana Nazarenko, Vladimir Nemukhin and Evgeny Kropivnitsky, which proved so important for underground culture and perestroika, had its strongest impact not by means of its political message, constructivism or sterile geometries, but by the individual and spiritual challenge of transcendency. Valery Turchin recalls his own discovery of abstract painting in the late 1950s: “Abstract art symbolizes the presence of the individual, its mythological-transpersonal being. [...] This kind of art appeals to persons who notice the signs of creation and the elements of the transcendental in life.”27

We can state with certainty that the rich tradition of occult thought during the first decades of the century was violently interrupted in the 1930s. Prohibition and political repression made any continuous activity virtually impossible. The question, however, of how far the ground for today’s occult revival was laid by direct influences from the past, that is, whether one can discern a continuity of occult undercurrents throughout Soviet history, and how much this revival represents an import or re-migration of ideas from the West can only be answered after more material has been collected and this history becomes the subject of further study.

The following examples illustrate some contexts of the occult in the Soviet period, which need to be addressed in future studies:

(1.) Theosophical and anthroposophical ideas continued to survive in Soviet times. After being officially banned, most theosophists and anthroposophists chose emigration, but private relations continued, including communication between émigrés and those left behind in Russia.28 As recently published documents from the

---


25. The context of research on the avant-garde was different from the research on Symbolism, since in this context religious and philosophical topics were rarely addressed at all. Most research on the Russian avant-garde since the 1960s concentrated either on cultural-sociological, aesthetic, ideological and/or political aspects, due to the academic mainstream of methodological approaches (structuralist, semiotic, much less sociological, and—since the 1980s—mythopoetic and poststructuralist approaches). But the “spiritual paradigm” puts former studies on particular avant-garde artists into a wider context.

26. For the history of anthroposophy in Russia, especially the Soviet period, see Maria Carlson, _No Religion Higher than Truth_, based on rich archival material Renata von Maydell, _Morfologija ruskoi bespredel’nosti_ (Moscow, 2003), 43. Both Shvartsman (1926-97) and Vesberg (1924-85) developed metaphysical concepts based partly on mystical experience and never exhibited their paintings during their lifetime. Mikhail Shvartsman, _Zhiyopia_. _Risunok, Gos. Tre’i’ukskovskai Galeriei_ (Moscow, 1994); Vladimir G. Veiberg, _Painting, Watercolors, Drawings_ (Tel Aviv, 1979).

archives of the KGB show, several esoteric orders in Soviet Russia remained active until the 1930s. For instance, the secret order of the Rosicrucian Templars in Moscow and St. Petersburg existed until 1937. The poet Marina Tsvetaeva’s sister Anastasia was one of its members. The members of the order, who came from all professional levels—doctors, engineers, artists, technicians, scientists—had developed a secret language, created a body of texts and established a complex structure of communication. Since all materials were confiscated in 1937 and all members were extensively interrogated by OGPU “special agents for occult matters,” some of the published documents from the archives offer material from inside the history of a secret society, something which is rarely accessible.

In the 1990s, all these associations—the theosophical society, the “Lectorium Rosicrucianum” and the anthroposophical society—were officially re-established.26

(2.) The painter and practicing Buddhist Nikolai Roerich, a figure of benign esoteric influence and a mystical theosophist with an international moral and political impact in both the East and West, emigrated to the Himalayas (after living in Russia and the United States) and became an internationally renowned ambassador of peace. Roerich, a cult figure in post-Soviet Russia, is significant both for bringing Oriental elements into the Russian occult and for bridging decades and cultures: the 1910s and 20s with the post-Stalin decades. Roerich began his artistic career in the decade of Symbolism and established his fame first as a scenarist and set designer for Igor Stravinsky’s Rites of Spring in 1920. After coming to New York, Roerich followed neither the aesthetic path of abstract avant-garde painting or socialist neorealism; moreover, he still travelled to Moscow and managed to establish a semi-official status with the Soviet government and friendly relations with some organizations for foreign propaganda since the late 1920s. At the same time he translated Helena Blavatsky’s main work, the Secret Doctrine, into Russian and prepared for his retreat to India and Tibet.

His peace mission was used as a token by political propaganda in Russian-Indian relations. Some of his paintings were sold to the West and thus brought foreign currency to the Soviet state. After his death in 1947, Roerich was celebrated, officially canonized and studied in the Soviet Union. His paintings as well as those by his son Svyatoslav in the same style were exhibited in Leningrad and Novosibirsk. Nikita Khrushchev, who saw Svyatoslav Roerich’s paintings in India, was so enthusiastic that he had an exhibit mounted in the Hermitage Museum. But Roerich’s various activities, his engagement in efforts for international peace, ecological and environmental issues, as well as alternative medicine, not to mention the practice of Buddhism in Russia and the liberation of the Mongolian and Tibetan peoples also gave a political dimension to his occult convictions, and his involvement with theosophy and Buddhism.27

Since the 1960s, Roerich has had a growing number of disciples among artists and intellectuals in Russia (and the West). Roerich scholars even managed to publish some of his esoteric essays and literary texts in official journals such as Moskva and Nauka i zhizn’. The writer Valentin M. Sidorov got involved in the occult through personal contacts with theosophists of the older generation who had managed to preserve private libraries and who had been giving underground lectures since the late 1950s, among them the psychiatrist and mystic Nadezhda Mikhailovna Kostomarova, a descendant of the famous historian Nikolai Ivanovich Kostomarov.28 In 1982, Sidorov published an account in the mainstream journal Moskva of his own expedition and spiritual initiation to the Himalayas, entitled “Seven Days in the Himalayas,” which caused a long and controversial debate, and also attracted new followers.29 Since the 1990s, Roerich’s collected writings, including his personal esoteric concept of Agni Yoga, have been published, as well as eleven monographs on the life and works of Nikolai Roerich and his son Svyatoslav; and the Roerich Association in Russia and in New York have gained in popularity. The Roerich Museum in Moscow, which opened in 1991, together with newly established research centers in St. Petersburg and Novosibirsk, have established an international network of conferences and other activities, which has been particularly active since 1995 via the internet.30

The publishing house Molodaya Gvardiya (Young Guard), which has also specialized in science fiction literature, has figured as another center of occult thought.


27. For an introductory overview on N. K. Roerich, with references to the numerous publications by and on Roerich, see Holly de Niophile, “The Occult in Russia Today,” The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture, 361-65.


30. There are 43.800 links to “Nicholas Roerikh” in the internet. See V. E. Larichev and E. P. Matochkin, Rerikh i Sibir’ (Novosibirsk, 1993); Rerikhovskoe nasledie. Trudy konferentsii, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg, 2002); Rerikhovskie chteniia. Materialy konferentsii, N. D. Spirina and V. E. Larichev (Novosibirsk: Institut arkeologii i geografii, 2002).
After the official ban in 1977 on parapsychology, which had experienced a boom in the 1960s era of cybernetics and space travel, the extended discussion in popular journals about UFOs, extraterrestrial aliens, Caucasian snowmen was also stopped; nevertheless, scientists continued to meet and exchange their findings under the seemingly innocent cover of science-fiction clubs. The impact of the long-term close relationship between those who were interested in astrophysics, parapsychology and science fiction and who also engaged in such figures as Roerich, Fyodorov and Tsiolkovsky can be seen, for example, in the twenty-volume anthology “Biblioteka Russkoi Fantastiki” (Library of Russian Science Fiction), published since 1990 by Yury Medvedev, Molodaya Gvardiya’s editor-in-chief.

(3.) In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the so-called Yuzhinsky pereulok (Yuzhinsky Lane) circle of artists and poets that was gathered around the writer Yury Mamleev, named for the address of Mamleev’s apartment, had a strong influence not only on several of today’s well-known writers, for example, Vladimir Sorokin and Viktor Erofeev, but also on mystical ideologists of what many consider Russian neo-Fascism, namely, Alexander Dugin and Gaidar Dzhemal (Gaydar Jamal), who today have become part of official politics. In the 1950s the young Mamleev discovered the Western classics of occult writing in Moscow’s Lenin Library: Evola, Eliphas Lévi (Alphonse Louis Constant), Papus (Gérard Encausse) and Carl du Prel. Other occult texts, for example, Blavatsky, Steiner and Pyotr Uspensky, began to circulate in the early days of samizdat. They called themselves the “sexual mystics” or “metaphysics” and not only studied esoteric literature and recited their own writings, but as some witnesses and scholars have confirmed, they also experimented with practices of excessively amoral behavior and acted out what some have described as a “poetics of monstrosity.”

Other writers also initiated occult circles, for example, Arkady Rovner and Evgeny Golovin, disciples of Georgy Gurdjieff. In the 1970s, Rovner and his wife, the poetess Viktoriya Andreeva, founded the circle Gnozis in Moscow. Most of them emigrated in the 1970s, and, like Mamleev, got involved with New Age philosophy in the West, promoting the remigration of occult ideas through samizdat publications and translations, and beginning in the 1990s when some of them returned to Russia, by joint American-Russian anthologies. The 1970s was a decade of religious and philosophical renaissance. Many intellectuals, writers, artists, poets and musicians rediscovered Christianity and chose it for their spiritual reorientation; others turned to mysticism, the Kabbala and the occult; and still others evinced a growing interest in Buddhism and, more generally, in Eastern religion and philosophy. In 1971, Anatoly Pinyayev founded the first Hare Krishna group in Moscow.

(4.) The connection between German Fascism and esoteric mysticism, about which there have been occasional publications and discussions in journals since the 1960s, is one example of occult contexts that have been explored in official and popular venues. One of the earliest publications, considered a sensation at the time, were excerpts from the international bestseller Morning of the Magi (Le Matin des Magiciens [Paris, 1960]) by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier in the journal Nauka i religia (1960), which described for the first time the occult context of Hitler and Nazi politics. Pauwels, a critical follower of Georgy Gurdjieff, was himself involved in an esoteric quest, while his co-author, the physicist Jacques Bergier, contributed to the science fiction part. The book, one of the early hallmarks of Western counterculture to challenge the existentialist pessimism of postwar intellectual culture, presented for the first time in postwar historiography information about the esoteric connections of Nazism, for example, the eccentric cosmological World Ice Theory by the German scientist Hans Hoerbiger, which was quite popular in Germany during the late 1920s, and the theory of the Indo-Aryan origins and the Nazi-Himalaya connection. Nauka i religia published thirty pages from the second part of the book under the...
title “To Which God Did Hitler Bow?” with the following comment: “Although we must point out the false historical conception of L. Pauwels and J. Bergier, we consider it necessary to make our readers familiar with the mystical, religious cosmogony of the hosts of the Third Reich […] all the more so, since the religious side of Hitlerism until now has only been treated from a political perspective.”

Lev Gumilyov, then a professor at Leningrad University, but already a highly charismatic ideologist of a racist, anti-Semitic neo-Eurasianism, responded to this publication with a scholarly article about the supposedly historic origins of Shambala in Syria, the Eastern mythical paradise on Earth. This first publication on the esoteric myth of Shambala in an official scholarly periodical also proved to be a sensation among intellectuals. Some of the ideologists of neo-Eurasianist extremism, such as Gaidar Dzhemal, a close friend of Alexander Dugin and Yuriy Mamleev, were inspired to engage in the occult by the Pauwels and Bergier book. The history of the occult circles of the 1960s and 70s has yet to be written. Such a history might well explain the esoteric orientation of some Russian intellectuals today, certain obsessions with dark, evil forces, the background for their fascination with Gnosticism and metaphysics.

Approaches to the Occult and Types of Involvement in Post-Soviet Russia

I will now give a brief overview of occult contexts in Russia today and at the same time suggest a classification of four different ways to be involved in the occult:

(1) The first and in-post-Soviet Russia the most obvious way to be involved in the occult is through what Mikhail Epstein has called “Pop-Religion,” which is basically what we see in popular culture: a mixture of the most diverse, even contradictory, religious, spiritual and esoteric ideas, promoted, followed and practiced as an immediate force of salvation. This includes all non-arcane phenomena of popular magic, witchcraft, astrology, cults and sects, Western mixed with Eastern, Oriental mixed with Orthodox heretics, such as the Old Believers. The attraction to random, some-
find, mysteriously discovered and preserved by a former White Army officer during the Civil War and published in 1957 in San Francisco. It is made up of several scattered boards of birch wood with carvings in Cyrillic letters, which have been deciphered as ancient tales, spells and prayers to the Slavic gods. This document, like the “Protocols of the Elder of Zion,” has long been scientifically proven to be fraudulent, but nevertheless is widely regarded by Neopagans as proof of the early origins of Slavic culture, spiritualism and literacy, absent until now from the sparsely documented pre-history.

Representatives of Neopaganism, or the “political occult,” as Bernice Rosenthal has called it, include:

**Alexander Dugin.** His theory of geopolitical Eurasianism is based on an occult Indo-Aryan race concept and is gaining considerable influence in post-Soviet society—from politicians and military academies to intellectuals, formerly leftist countercultural artists, and provincial proletarian skinheads. Dugin combines “Esoteric Orthodoxy” with a rehabilitation of paganism, admires Hitler and hails esoteric Nazi German ideologists like Karl Haushofer. Since 2000, Dugin has moved to the center of political power close to the Putin administration by a deliberate strategy of veiling his mystic-esoteric ideology; in November 2003 Dugin founded the International Eurasian Movement, inspired by Western theorists of esoteric fascism, such as Julius Evola and Alain de Benoist. He has become an official consultant to several leading Russian politicians, and his think-tank Arktogeya has a strong presence in the Russian internet. Marlene Laruelle writes about Dugin: “Each of his geopolitical reflections is justified by esoteric traditions: astrology, occult sciences, Oriental religious texts, Atlanteian myths, woolly etymological research, Kabbala symbolism, similarities between Slavic words and the vocabulary of classic oriental civilizations.”

**Lev Gumilyov (1912-1992),** the son of the poets Anna Akhmatova and Nikolai Gumilyov, was a charismatic historian and ethnographer who developed a theory of Slavic ethnogenesis and biosphere, the popularity of which in Russia today cannot be overestimated. With its syncretistic explanations and the legitimization of Russian imperial Messianism, it attracts scientists, professional intellectuals as well as a wide public. According to Gumilyov and the Neo-Eurasianist ideologists, “the State of power in Russia is never really secular, because it is bound to a superior esoteric knowledge.”

**Cosmism** is an ideology with equally widespread popularity in post-Soviet Russia. Developed in the 1920s and again since the 1960s, it is based on several complex concepts by Russian philosophers, including Nikolai Fyodorov, and scientists, like the geochemist Vladimir Vernadsky, the cosmobiologist Alexander Chizhevsky and space scientists, like Konstantin Tsiolkovsky.

In the ideology of cosmism theosophical ideas of an esoteric higher consciousness merge with scientific and pseudo-scientific bioenergy theories, electromagnetism and speculations on the cosmos. The impact of cosmism on science in Russia today can be seen in the growing number of conferences, projects and college textbooks on topics ranging from bioenergy and the so-called “torsionic fields” to UFOs and extrasensory psychic phenomena.

Both political Neopaganism and Cosmism are at the same time Russian nationalist ideologies and have become part of an international network of the extreme Right, which because of its consistent esoteric ideology Mark Sedgwick in his profound study on René Guénon has categorized under the name of Traditionalism.

(3.) A third type of involvement refers to the non-political, benign use of the occult either with theological or anthroposophical concepts by individuals or communities, or by applying it to the healing sciences.

---


47. Russkii kosmizm: Antologia filosofskoi mysli, ed. by S.G. semenova and A.G. Gacheva (Moscow, 1993). On Fyodorov, see Michael Hagemeister, Nikolaj Fyodorov: Studien zu Leben, Werk und Wirkung (Munich, 1989); Vladimir Vernadsky (1863-1945) developed a theory on the circulation and transformation of matter and energy within the ecological macrosystem of the biosphere. Alexander Chizhevsky (1897-1964), a disciple of Nikolai Fyodorov, and scientists, like the geochemist Vladimir Vernadsky, the cosmobiologist Alexander Chizhevsky and space scientists, like Konstantin Tsiolkovsky.

48. Obskurantizm v postsovetskuiu epokhu.

49. “This book is a biography of René Guénon and a history of the Traditionalist movement that he founded, two subjects that have been almost unknown to the outside world,” Sedgwick, Against the Modern World, vii.
both traditional shamanist and new alternative medicine or systemic psychology. Or it can be found in the life and works of individual visionaries, whose impact Mikhail Epstein has called a “path in the desert.” These people pursue a path of spiritual quest, referring to the traditions of the arcane sciences and occult literature, connecting Western Christianity with Eastern Oriental religion and mysticism. Like Helena Blavatsky, Georgy Gurdjieff and Pyotr Uspensky, the founders of theosophy and occult thinking in the early twentieth century, Nikolai Roerich is certainly one of these individual visionaries. All their works have been reprinted and sold in high numbers of copies in Russia today.

Another individual visionary is Daniil Andreev, whose novel or rather mystical tract, *The Rose of the World* (*Roza mira*), written in total isolation from society during twenty years of the Gulag prison camps, has circulated in samizdat since the 1960s. The work was published more than once in the early 1990s and has had a considerable impact on Russian writers and intellectuals, if one can judge by the number and contexts in which his name and book are quoted and alluded to. What has established his reception as an esoteric vision beyond orthodox mysticism is not only his language; the terms he uses, though neologisms, sound much like the ones Blavatsky used in her *Isis Unveiled*, but Andreev also professes the theosophical ideas of a pan-religion and reincarnation.

*Konstantin Tsiolkovsky*, the “father” of Russian space travel, who became a cult figure in the triumphant era of Soviet space travel, was internationally recognized for his technical and scientific texts and to a certain extent for his science-fiction writings, but his “cosmic philosophy,” out of which all his scientific work was developed and which he himself considered to be his most significant accomplishment, was all but unknown. In more than 400 essays and articles, most of them still unpublished, he explains his philosophical ideas and visions. Driven by the idea of self-perfection and the self-deliverance of man (“There is no end of life, no end of reason and the perfection of mankind. Progress is eternal. If this is so, there can be no doubt in the accessibility of the immortality of mankind” [*Monizm vseleznosti*]), Tsiolkovsky developed a theory of “Pan-Psychicism,” the idea of an animated cosmos, in which each and every atom is alive (“All atoms flow together to one whole Living organism”; “Organic life is everywhere in space” [*Chuvstvo atoma i ego chastis’*]), in which matter is alive and has the capacity to feel (“Dead bodies can feel even more intensely than live ones” [*Monizm vseleznosti*]). The ultimate goal of man’s perfection is the rationally planned reproduction by parthenogenesis (*samorozhdenie*), which, as he maintained, was the eternal mode in cosmic life anyway (*Gore i genii*). Tsiolkovsky sees it as the most useful and reasonable way to structure and plan the future of mankind. This process can and must be corrected by the technologically and mentally most advanced segments of mankind, in which all pain, illness and disease, all minor, incomplete and handicapped, i.e., unworthy life will be abolished, so that all living creatures can ultimately be happy. The main vice or sin behind everything, however, is passion, the libido, the most irrational power, the uncontrollable drive to reproduce, the sex drive (*Um i strasti*). Tsiolkovsky develops detailed plans to conquer and abolish all threats of the present time, such as the narcotics of music and alcohol. There is also racism in his biologicist utopian concepts. The price mankind will have to pay for the pursuit of this eternal happiness and balance will be a certain decrease of susceptibility and perception; some kind of indifference towards the beauties and varieties of nature.

Tsiolkovsky’s philosophical writings have circulated among scientists and science-fiction writers since the 1960s; some were published or reprinted, in Russian or in German translation, but the connections between Tsiolkovsky’s philosophy and theosophical concepts were taboo in Soviet times and only now have begun to be investigated. This is all the more surprising since the provincial town of Kaluga, which has always been the center of Russian theosophy, was turned into a massive museum and research center, in honor of Tsiolkovsky, the father of Soviet space travel. The cult of Tsiolkovsky as a father of cosmism gained momentum in the 1990s; now he is idolized in numerous publications as a genius of universal technology, science and spirit. But as Michael Hagemeister has stated, “there has been no reliable critical treatment, in any language, of Tsiolkovsky’s life and work,” and both a demystification and a comprehensive understanding of this controversial figure is still a task for the future.

---

50. See, for example, the Russian Transperonal Psychology and Psychotherapy Association, see footnote 10 above, or the newly established holistic discipline “Valeology.” On Shamanism, see Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (ed.), *Shamanic Worlds. Rituals and Lore of Siberia and Central Asia* (New York, 1997); Zhukovskaia, N. (ed.), *Buriatya* (Moscow, 2004).


Yury Mamleev explicitly refers to the essential influence of Daniil Andreev on his thinking (interview *Nevazisimia gazeta*, 2003, op.cit.).

It is debatable whether Konstantin Tsiolkovsky and Yury Mamleev should be linked to this third type of involvement as individual visionaries. These two controversial figures, the problem of critical re-evaluation and the criteria on which such evaluations are to be based remains a problem that must be addressed and highlights one of the many difficulties posed to any scholarly analysis of the occult.

(4.) Scholarly analysis of the occult represents a fourth avenue for involvement. It poses several methodological problems and affords a special approach. Occult thinking covers a seemingly unlimited number of topics, which range from religious and philosophical issues to scientific, political, aesthetic and artistic questions. It makes both a personal engagement and a collective, interdisciplinary approach almost inevitable.

The nature of sources and documents is highly diverse, contradictory and unreliable. This is due, in part, to the literally secretive self-awareness of the ones involved, the mythologizing and obscuration of most occult thinkers and also is the result of its becoming part of popular culture and fashion with its derivative recycling of ideas and the fascination for all decadent, inexplicable and supernatural phenomena. Finally, some of the visionary texts are, above all, spiritual texts, and therefore afford a special approach, which is able to describe the immanent spiritual level of expression as well as analyze the text from a rational scholarly distance.

Literature and the Occult

The occult, mysticism and literature have always shared a certain affinity that stems from a common belief in the magical power of the Word. Language as a literary device may be chosen for its magical effect or symbolism rather than as an aesthetic value or for explaining ideas. Long before Symbolism and Romanticism, warnings had been given that the improper involvement in magic and occult could lead to madness. In Russia, esoteric mysticism, literature and philosophy were always closely con-}

---

55. For a discussion of methodological problems and approaches, see Hanegraaff and Faivre in the collected volume Studies in Spirituality, 8 (Leuven, 2002).

expression. In any case, a scholarly analysis of the occult in literature, whether it focuses on the author’s biographical context or solely on the texts should not seek to exclude either concern and thus reduce the complexity of the matter. These issues connected with the analysis and evaluation of occult or mystical texts have been discussed in some recent studies of comparative literature, as well as in studies on Russian Symbolist literature.61

Post-Soviet Literature and the Occult

Valentina Brougher’s attempt to provide an overview of the occult in Russian literature of the 1990s illustrates that the sheer quantity of texts with esoteric elements renders a complete survey or classification impossible and perhaps meaningless.62 Brougher catalogues elements ranging from fashionable occult lexicology, motifs and symbols in popular literary genres (particularly in science fiction and fantasy) to theosophical ideas and concepts that shape the plot, for example:

• The material power and reality of thoughts and psychic energy
• The idea of the cosmos alive
• A pan-psychic approach to nature
• Gnostic ideas of a vertical image of man delivering himself to his divine essence and a Manichean ethics in which the powers of light fight against darkness
• Monistic ideas and concepts processed from Eastern religions—Buddhism, Hinduism from India and Tibet—like divination, initiation and reincarnation; symbols, e.g., the cyclic concept of time as a wheel and certain eras of world history (Kali-Yuga)
• A certain metaphysical concept of evil

Such elements can be found, for example, in the prose of Viktor Pelevin, Mark Kharitonov, Alexander Borodynia, Zufar Gareev, Alexander Vernikov and Ekaterina Sadur, as well as in certain texts by Viktoria Tokareva, Vladimir Makanin, Valeria Narbikova and Marina Palei.

Recent studies on the impact of the occult on the literature, art and science of both Symbolism and the avant-garde, both high artistic literature and pulp fiction, as well as some studies that document the occult underground in the Soviet Union in the post-Stalin era seem to imply that much of today’s occult revival had its origins in the 1960s and 1970s with direct ties to deeper roots in the turn of the century. A number of critical literary studies also indicate a process of reevaluation and reinterpretation of literary classics of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries by tracing Gnostic, religious and occult-esoteric influences on Russian literature.

Three examples

I will try to illustrate the different types of involvement with the occult in literary texts by three examples.

The first text, Olesya Nikolaeva’s story “A Cripple from Childhood,” is an example of the fictionalization of pop-religion. Nikolaeva, a poetess from Moscow who has published in Russian periodicals since the late 1980s, is the author of six volumes of poetry and one book of prose fiction; she received the prestigious Boris Pasternak award in 2002. She currently teaches at the Moscow Literary Institute. This short novel (povest’), published in January 1990, marked her debut in prose and represents her longest fiction to date.63

“A Cripple from Childhood,” set in the 1990s, is the story of a middle-aged mother who travels to a monastery of Old Believers in Odessa to pick up her son, who after his graduation ran away from home to become a monk and “fight the devils, despise the world and reject women” (45). Irina represents a typical New Russian in that she regularly travels to Western Europe and supposedly has a wealthy suitor in England. She not only follows each and every fashionable trend in clothes and lifestyle, but she is also equally attracted to all kinds of spiritual fashions offered on the new market of religions.

Her view of the monastery as a place suited for an exotic soul-searching vacation changes when she stays with a group of poor old women and a crippled young monk—the Cripple from Childhood—in a filthy cabin, waiting for an audience with the elder (starets), whom she calls Caliostro. During this wait and then again during the mass that she attends, she is confronted with the people in and around the monastery: an unspeakably backward, uneducated crowd, the marginalized losers and outcasts of post-Soviet society. Some burst into ecstatic screams for punishment, others, like the young monk and the old women, share an obscure brew of reactionary, superstitious and xenophobic views on society. The only sophisticated person she meets is the elder, an intellectual, who receives her with refined manners, cultivated speech and responds with fine irony when she presents her own brew of spiritual orientation, asking for advice, which belief she should choose, as if she were trying on several new dresses. Finally, she convinces her son to return home.

with her and he gives up digging himself into a one-
man cave in the ground and becoming an icon painter.

The title of the story may be applied both to the
physically crippled monk and the mentally crippled son.
The characters are distinguished by their language; the
story makes use of an interesting variety of styles, from
post-Soviet newpeak to the vernacular of Orthodox
believers (not unlike the stories of Old Believers in Mel-
nikov-Pechersky’s novels) and the refined lofty style of
sophisticated priests (reminding one of the priest Alexan-
der Men). The narrative is written from the perspective
of the mother, often utilizing “indirect-reported speech,”
so that the narrator’s irony puts her at a distance; but at
the same time, she is described not without sympathy.

“A Cripple from Childhood” represents a finely
textured ironic treatment of the devastating spiritual
and mental disorientation in the New Russia. The mar-
et of goods, to which people are exposed for the first
time and for which they seem unprepared, corresponds
to the random mixture of Orthodox mysticism and West-
ern New Age, which offers itself as an instant saving
force, but in fact merely adds to the general confusion.

Yury Mamleev, a key figure in the late Soviet occult
revival, is one of the most eccentric living Russian writ-
ers. An expert in esoteric literature, Buddhism and in
Vedanta-Hindu mysticism since the 1950s, Mamleev
has been both a spiritual and literary mentor to many of
today’s postmodern writers. During his emigration in
America and Paris (from 1974 to 1991) he got connected
with Western New Age and other Russian émigré occult
groups and brought much of French and Western occult
literature to Russia. In particular, he introduced to Russia
the French occult philosopher René Guénon, who rep-
resents an explicitly traditional, if not reactionary, ver-
sion of occult utopia and has long been popular among
intellectuals of the West-European New Right. Mamleev’s
publications made their way back to the Soviet Union via
samizdat; after his return to Moscow in 1991, he once
again became the leader of a group of young writers and
poets, dedicated to what they call the “new mysticism.”

Mamleev’s novel Flickering/Erring Time 65 (2001)
represents an example of a literary text penned by an
individual occult visionary. The novel both continues the
author’s well-established poetics of fantastic monstrosity
and at the same time can be read as a late counterpart
to his first and darkest novel, Shatuny (1974), a some-
what brighter version of the same metaphysical problem.

64. See Unio mystica. Moskovskii ezotericheskii sbornik (Mos-
cow: Terra, 1997) and Interview with Kulle, Literaturnoe obozrenie.
Press conference in December 2004: official founding of the group.
On René Guénon, see Sedgwick, Against the Modern World, the first
comprehensive biography of this most influential occult philosopher
and of the international esoteric movement of traditionalism.
65. Iurii Mamleev, Blizhdaushchee vremia (St. Petersburg,
2001).

Flickering Time is set in today’s metaphysical, fantas-
tic Moscow: a young man (Pavel Dolinin) is invited by
an obscure stranger to a party, where he meets a strangely
déjà-vu crowd of 1960s bohemians and finds himself
raiding a young woman in a closet and later beating up
an older man who gets in his way. To his own horror, he
discovers that he was taken on a time-trip into the past,
where he met his own mother as a young woman, preg-
nant with himself, and beat up his own father. From now
on he is obsessed with the search for this self and find-
ing the secret source of time travel. He is drawn into the
occult Moscow “underground kingdom,” where crazy
homeless down-and-out eccentrics, artists and visionar-
ies—with names like Skull and Living Corpse—dwell
in a filthy basement, all obsessively talking about God,
Brahma, the Vedanta and the path to deliver their souls,
get away from the curse of life and gain access to divine
knowledge. Much like the characters in Dostoevsky’s
novel Demons, some are magnetically attracted to one
person, the painter Nikita, who has tranced himself into
the future and appears before his occult friends only occa-
sionally. A parallel subplot involves a political conspiracy
about an evil leader planning to take over the world and
establishing his version of utopia: uniformed mankind
with low drives and emotions and no metaphysically
striving individuality. (This is very much the utopia that
Konstantin Tsiolkovsky imagined in his philosophical
writings.) The leader of Black Magic says: “Journalists,
intellectuals and humanitarians, we don’t touch […],
because the intelligentsia is corrupt and stupid.” While he
considers them to be harmless, mentally corrupt and too
self-centered to bring any change to society, his real ene-
 mies are the metaphysical creative humans. His slogan
is: “Occults against metaphysics!” 66 The simple-minded
killer Yulik Poseev is sent out to search the underground
community to find and liquidate the metaphysical Nikita.
Both Pavel and the killer search for Nikita in vain, but
the killer turns out to be the son Pavel had conceived in
his time travel into the past by raping that young woman
in the closet. Thus, he finds his own double, a spiritual
and criminal monster, who finally kills him as well as his
chief, the evil conspirator. In spite of this dark ending, the
novel concludes with a vision of one female character’s
death as transformation into the esoteric realm of “Eternal
Russia” and with a vision of vague hope for a complete
change of the world: “And secretive Moscow […] was
seized by an infinite expectation (and anticipation) that
sooner or later (or in the far future) something Unbeliev-
able, Powerful, Scandalous would happen, which would
overturn the foundations of the life of suffering mankind,
perhaps even the foundations of all worlds, and which
would turn to ashes all their false hopes of the past.”
The novel favors dialogue over action—the characters propound the author’s reflections on esoteric spirituality, which he has published elsewhere in philosophical texts. There is very little individualization in the language of different characters. The setting among the homeless outcasts of the doomed city is familiar from and repeats earlier novels. One cannot help but consider this novel a literary failure. Nevertheless, it represents a significant development in Mamleev’s post-1990s prose. It marks a departure from the aesthetically daring vivisection of the dark sides of humankind and a provocative exploration of total amorality and evil in his early prose; he has now turned to a lighter verbal diet of various theories of New Age by characters who don’t really act and have no concrete idea of how to change their life other than reject it and reality altogether.

Mamleev, though not politically inclined himself, is a loyal friend to Alexander Dugin, who in return promotes Mamleev’s works by reviewing them. Mamleev has published an overtly nationalist non-fiction book entitled Eternal Russia, a collection of classical poems on Russia, together with his own essays written in a style reminiscent of Leo Tolstoy’s folktales for peasant readers, which includes a tribute to the Orthodox Church as the true force of hope and essential attribute of the Russian nation. Mamleev’s occult novels are trapped in the post-atheist condition, in that his underground characters go around in circles in a world isolated from the outside; recently they have begun to circle more and more around the Eternal Russian nation.

My third example is Vladimir Sorokin’s novel Bro’s Path (2004), by content a precursor of the earlier novel Ice (Led, 2002), the second and third parts of a trilogy. The two novels are quite different from his earlier work, both in terms of story and more particularly in language and style, which is almost completely devoid of the shocking poetics of verbal and topical excesses for which the provocative writer has become famous. Although Bro’s Path was published two years after Ice, its story chronologically precedes Ice in giving the history of the main hero Bro and the prehistory of the esoteric cult he is engaged in.

It is the story of an occult order of blond, blue-eyed elected people of the Light, “whose hearts can speak to one other.” According to the cosmological myth, which Bro, the first member of the order, is given on his initiation, the creation and evolution of the earth has been a mistake of the divine cosmic order. By resurrecting and uniting 23,000 people—the exact number of the circle of the initiates’ lights’ rays—cosmic harmony can be re-established. Key to the people’s resurrection, and, therefore, the transmission of the cosmic energy on earth, is the Ice of the Tungus meteorite, which exploded in June 1908 in Siberia, the day Bro was born. Only by breaking one’s chest with a Tungus ice-hammer can an elected person be identified, whose heart would then speak his real magic name (names like: Fer, Ip, Kta, Dzhu, etc.). The new member would then leave his former life and join the order, which is a peaceful, kind and ascetic, i.e., an asexual, community of vegetarian brothers and sisters, as long as you ignore the ice-cold brutality which dictates that all non-elected people who fail the test be killed with ice-hammers.

All non-elected people are considered inhuman sleepers. Since the story is told in reverse chronological order and the mythical plot is unfolded only in the middle of the second novel, the reader of the novel Ice is confronted with a mysterious series of extremely bloody and cruel random attacks on innocent people in today’s Moscow of different ages, social classes and professions. The short sketches of the characters’ lives before their resurrection present an edgy kaleidoscope of the material and spiritual brutalization and decadence in Russian society. It is thanks to Sorokin’s stylistic talent that the description of their childlike life of an endless embrace of harmony after resurrection becomes intriguing in its promising power, as a sharp contrast to the hardly bearable cynicism and vulgarity of normal life outside the order, be it prostitution, computer- or drug-addiction, skinhead violence or business corruption. Since the second novel is told as Bro’s biography—from 1908—and as the members of the order travel all over Russia in search of hearts to attack and resurrect, there is also a wide range of colorful episodes told in a convincingly realistic narrative that bring pre-Revolutionary and early Soviet history to life.

As to the uses of occult topics and their function in these novels, I see Sorokin’s novels as a parody of post-Soviet political occult ideologies and at the same time as a Gnostic tale in popular disguise. The idea of an elected Indo-Aryan race with the mission to purge the world of millions of unworthy lives refers to the connection between Nazi mysticism and the Russian nationalist version of the occult one finds in the theories of Alexander Dugin and Lev Gumilyov. The idea of the majority of

68. Vladimir Sorokin, 23 000, Trilogia (Moscow, 2006), Led (Moscow, 2002), Put’ Bro (Moscow: Zakharov, 2004).
69. Alexandre Genis also takes Sorokin’s self-promoted worldview as a gnostic and metaphysical seriously. He judges, however, the latest novels as aesthetic failures: the author, disappointed with literature as his own instrument, has exhausted his capacity of brilliant stylistic mimicry. “Novyi roman Vladimira Sorokina ‘Put’ Bro.” Interview with Radio Liberty, December 8, 2004 (www.svoboda.org/II/cult/0904).
70. Gumilyov’s theory of subethnoses (e.g., Cossacks and Old Believers) and superethnoses. Each ethnos develops a passionate field—passionarnost’, so-called “passionary” (a neologism) energies—comparable to a magnetic field, which provides the energy to grow and survive with a certain amount of strength and vitality. Crossing ethnoses deliberately weakens its energy and ultimately
mankind sleeping and not really being alive can be found in Gurdjieff’s theory as the first stage of unconsciousness before awaking, it also corresponds with Nikolai Roerich’s concept of Agni Yoga, with the idea of the first and lowest race in the hierarchy of seven before divination. All these ideas essentially represent reconsiderations of various aspects adopted from Hindu philosophy. According to Tsiolkovsky, the atoms floating in the cosmos are all asleep until human consciousness brings them to life.

Ice and Bro’s Path also parody the cult of the Tungus meteorite, which has not only occupied Russian scientists and inspired the occult establishment ever since the inexplicable explosion in June 1908, but has also become a cult topic in international science fiction as well as in Western popular culture. Writers and scientists alike, such as Alexander Kazantsev and the geophysicist and writer about UFOs Alexei Zolotov, who followed in the footsteps of Leonid Kulik, the first leader of Soviet academic expeditions to the Tungus, have dedicated their life-long research and writings to the so-called “Tunguske Divo” (the Tungus Wonder); recent popular treatments include the film the X-Files.

Sorokin, indeed, has broken with his poetics of monstrosity. He has confirmed his deliberate return to narrative fiction in several interviews; moreover, the extensive historical research upon which the many authentic prototypes are based, from the NKVD officer Yakov Agranov to Leonid Kulik, the famous physicist and leader of the first scientific expedition to Tungus in 1921, also signal this new direction for Sorokin’s prose fiction. Nevertheless, he continues to utilize his strategy of subversion by affirmation, a ritualizing depiction of a dominating ideology, which is adopted through mimicry, e.g., Socialist Realism in his Sots-Art prose and now the popular metaphysical discourse of the occult. The worldview of Gnostic pessimism informs many of Sorokin’s former writings. As he stated in connection with his Sots-Art prose, there is no escape from Socialist Realism, you have to love it. Now he turns to issues of spiritual value by both exposing the totalitarian essence and the challenge to self-liberation by living through it.

Sorokin’s novels, according to the classification suggested above, may be viewed as an example of a parody of Pop Religion and Neopaganism at the same time, achieved by a chameleon-like mimetic assimilation, while leaving it open, whether there is some hidden serious voice in the desert behind it or not.

***

I conclude with two observations on the cultural significance of the occult revival in Russia today:

First, despite the diversity of occult ideas and theories in Russia today, the preoccupation with the Russian past confirms that national identity as spiritual legitimization is a driving, motivating force. Most occult writings tell stories of ethnic or cosmic genesis, but with the exception of Alexander Dugin’s ideology of Neo-fascist mysticism, we find scarcely any ideas about concrete steps one must take to change or better one’s life, suggestions of a path to utopia, or a life enlightened by occult knowledge.

And second, the occult in literature is presented both from an insider’s point of view—Mamleev—and from the perspective of distant irony or parody—Nikolaeva and Sorokin. But all these representations of the Occult detail an asceticism, an attitude that rejects the body and the senses, where sex is presented as a drug, a threat, and an enemy of spiritual liberation. Here I see a connection to the utopian philosophical and occult concepts of the early twentieth century in Russia from Fyodorov and Tsiolkovsky to the theosophical and anthroposophical concepts as well as the technological utopias of the avant-garde.

Birgit Menzel, a former Visiting Scholar of the Harriman Institute (2004-05), is Professor of Russian Culture and Literature and Chair of the Department of Slavic Cultural Studies at Johannes-Gutenberg University, Mainz. She is the author of Reading for Entertainment in Contemporary Russia: Post-Soviet Popular Literature in Historical Perspective (Munich, 2005). Professor Menzel organized the conference “The Occult in 20th-Century Russia” (Berlin, March 2007), where this paper was first presented.

leads to its death and decay. Orientalists, like the Leningrad scientist B. I. Kuznetsov, suggested that this passionate theory could be proved valid with the history of Tibet, which from an originally high amount of energy descended to a low level, which then should transfer to mankind sleeping and not really being alive can be found in
