

**The Homeland Is Death: Literary Mythologies of Destruction
and the Performance of Russian-ness in Soviet/Post-Soviet
Punk Rock Counter-Cultures**

By

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Abstract

The 1980s and 1990s were a time of rapid proliferation of identities throughout the former Soviet Union as citizens of all ethnic backgrounds and on all points of the political spectrum attempted to make sense of the Soviet legacy. Although many of the new nationalists spoke in terms of revival of a pre-Soviet national identity and pride after decades of suppression under the socialists, this view has been challenged both by scholars of nationalism who emphasize its artificial and imagined character and by scholars of Soviet politics and culture who have recently drawn greater attention to the ambiguities and contradictions of late Soviet life, pointing out the ways that ideology was performed and subverted in the post-Stalin period. This thesis contributes to both nationalism studies and the study of late Soviet aesthetics and culture by exploring the relationship between the Siberian anarchist counter-culture of the 1980s and the crypto-fascist National-Bolshevik Party of the 1990s and 2000s. By studying the textual and non-textual content of the manifestos and actions of these communities, it attempts to find the thread of continuity between their forms of left-wing and right-wing resistance, ultimately locating it in specifically Russian literary mythologies about suffering and sacrifice which were coming back into prominence in the later decades of the USSR and which were operationalized by radical nationalist movements after its collapse.

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Table of Contents	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Note on Russian Transliteration and Translation.....	v
Introduction: Eternity	1
Approach, Methodology and Structure	3
Lenin is Alive.....	7
Chapter 1: Suffering.....	12
Purpose.....	13
Romance	18
Memory.....	22
Chapter 2: Noise	27
Voices	28
Guitars.....	33
Chapter 3: Suicide.....	38
<i>Pesni Ushanochki</i>	41
In a Coffin	44

Death and Freedom	48
Nation and History	53
Chapter 4: Revolution	60
Art and Identity	62
Nihilism and Heritage	66
Outbreak.....	73
Conclusion	79
Satanism.....	82
Opportunities for Further Research	85
Bibliography	87

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Note on Russian Transliteration and Translation

When transliterating Russian text I have used the BGN/PCGN Romanization system: the “British standard” used by Oxford University Press.

Exceptions have been made in the text for names that already have a more universally-recognized Romanization (e.g., *Dostoevsky* instead of *Dostoyevskiy*) and Russian words that have already been borrowed into English with a standard spelling (e.g., *Bolshevik* instead of *Bol'shevik*, *perestroika* instead of *perestroyka*). These words are still transliterated according to the BGN/PCGN system when they appear in footnotes.

In quotes from academic literature in English containing transliterated Russian, the transliteration used in the English text is retained in the quotation.

Song lyrics and poems, when quoted, are always transliterated in full in the footnotes. Transliterations of sections of prose are included when the choice of wording is particularly telling or when significant meanings would be lost through precise literal translation into English. Otherwise only the translation is given. All translations are my own.

Introduction: Eternity

Alexei Yurchak begins his influential anthropological account of late Soviet life, *Everything was forever, until it was no more*, by discussing the paradox that “the spectacular collapse of the Soviet Union was completely unexpected by most Soviet people and yet, as soon as people realized that something unexpected was taking place, most of them also immediately realized that they had actually been prepared for that unexpected change”¹. According to Yurchak, the post-Stalin and pre-*perestroika* Soviet Union was a highly-introspective civilization in which the hegemony of socialist culture and ideological rhetoric had been so ritualized that most citizens lived the greater part of their lives in the “spaces of indeterminacy, creativity, and unanticipated meanings [that had opened up] in the context of strictly formulaic ideological forms”². In other words, the Soviet state and culture had become almost like a natural environment, a cosmological construction, active resistance to which was not only futile but rather silly; a meaningful life was to be lived with a certain degree of self-segregation from the system, acknowledging its power but not taking it more seriously than necessary. Overthrowing that same system seemed neither possible nor particularly desirable outside of specific contexts and situations. But since the form of everyday life and speech was still loaded with ostensibly ideological content, the expressions of Soviet culture were often misunderstood by outsiders.

People sought out spaces of personal autonomy within this sort of a-political, a-historical, a-territorial timelessness of the Soviet 1960s and 1970s, which Yurchak calls living *vnye*

¹ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 282.

² Ibid., 14.

(“outside”)³. It would be disrupted by *perestroika*, when history and politics would once again become factors intruding into everyday life. If the Soviet state of the 1950s and 1960s had sought to resist Westernization and create New Soviet People through “societal activation” in accordance with ideologically appropriate activities and fashions which the population was successfully able to subvert and complicate⁴, then by the 1980s, Hilary Pilkington writes, youth behavior ceased to be *ideologized* and began to be *politicized* in a sort of “moral panic” about youth who were no longer just dressing ostentatiously but were now tearing the country apart in gangs subscribing to various half-understood belief systems⁵. The subcultures of *panki* (punks), *lyubertsy* (right-wing fitness clubs), *sistemniki* (nomadic hippies), and others were sources of profound bewilderment to the society that had produced them. It would be a mistake, however, to view these communities as belonging to *perestroika*; they were formed in the long sleep of the 1960s and 1970s and they weathered the transitions into *perestroika* and through the collapse of communism. As the external discursive regime, consumption patterns, and societal pressures changed around them, their behaviors and pronouncements would also change in sometimes unexpected ways.

This thesis will consider one such community, the so-called “suicide punks” of the Siberian Wave of late Soviet underground music, from their own self-consciously positioned origins in the Brezhnev stagnation through *perestroika* and into the Yeltsin years. Throughout

³ Ibid. See Chapter 4 (Living “Vnye”: Deterritorialized Milieus).

⁴ Gleb Tsipursky, “Coercion and Consumption: The Khrushchev Leadership’s Ruling Style in the Campaign Against ‘Westernized’ Youth, 1954-1964,” in *Youth and Rock in the Soviet Bloc: Youth Cultures, Music, and the State in Russia and Eastern Europe*, ed. William Jay Risch (New York: Lexington Books, 2015), 69.

⁵ Hilary Pilkington, *Russia’s Youth and Its Culture: A Nation’s Constructors and Constructed* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 118, 141.

the 1980s this community was highly critical of the authoritarian state and expressed its opposition through a highly-depressive and fatalistic idiom in which literary mythologies about suicide and suffering played a key role. After the collapse of communism, there was a shift from the fetishization of individual negation to that of collective negation: i.e., from preoccupation with suicide and early death to preoccupation with revolution and the eternity of national memory. This thesis will argue, in part, that the tropes of suicide and revolution served analogous functions for the two separate historical environments. There was also a political shift away from egalitarian anarchism and pacifism and towards an explicitly anti-democratic Russian nationalism, embodied by the creation of the “national-communist rock movement Russian Outbreak” (*natsional-kommunisticheskoye rok-dvizheniye Russkiy Proryv*) and affiliation with the National-Bolshevik Party created by Eduard Limonov and Aleksandr Dugin in 1993.

This thesis contributes to the existing literature on nationalism by exploring how radical nationalism can become ingrained in counter-cultural communities when the external discursive regime with which they are accustomed to struggling collapses. It contributes to the literature on Soviet and Russian studies by analyzing the underground poetry of the 1980s generation, which has not yet received the attention given to the 1960s and 1970s. The thesis attempts to answer the question: how was Russian identity constructed in these underground communities under the conditions of late socialism and how can that construction explain the apparent contradiction of their rapid shift from leftist to rightist resistance in the 1990s?

Approach, Methodology and Structure

In studying the Siberian suicide punk scene of the 1980s and the national-communist rock movement Russian Outbreak of the 1990s, this thesis makes use of a number of conceptual

approaches to Soviet culture, including that pioneered in the early 2000s by Alexei Yurchak (which emphasizes the performative rather than constative dimensions of late Soviet utterances) and the idea of *sotzromantizm*, or a post-Stalin romantic reaction to the materialism and hyper-rationality of the Soviet Enlightenment, which emphasizes the humanist and aesthetic aspects of Soviet culture over the consciously political. This latter idea is relatively new in Soviet studies and was explored in 2014 at the conference “Romantic Subversions of Soviet Enlightenment: Questioning Socialism's Reason” chaired by Serguei Oushakine at Princeton University. Through a combination of these two approaches, the ideological and artistic statements of the suicide punks are contextualized and interpreted primarily as literary phenomena, albeit imbued with political ramifications and nonverbal meanings by the circumstances and means of their creation and distribution.

With regard to the academic literature on nationalism, the most relevant phenomena here are ethnic election and formation of alternative identities in the USSR. Since the state discursive regime and its relationship to national identity fluctuated so rapidly and dramatically during the period covered by this study, the persistence and continuity of experienced Russian-ness is here best explained by Anthony Smith’s theory of ethno-symbolism and election as described in the book *Chosen Peoples*⁶. Analysis will demonstrate that, both before and after the collapse of communism, the suicide punks interpreted their own ethnic identity predominantly through literary mythologies that emphasize Russia’s special role in the world: namely, a sort of deification of poets and their suffering, which presumably only the Russian or Soviet peoples can fully appreciate or understand. Conflation of the suffering of the poet and the redemption of the

⁶ Anthony D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

Russian people is common in classical Russian literature and it forms the basis for the “music-as-religion” trope so common among the suicide punks. It is a symbol nurtured during the Soviet period and then politicized after its collapse.

Benedict Anderson’s observations about the effects of vernacular print capitalism on the public perception of history and geography are also highly relevant here, since the Soviet countercultures were incubated in the era of *magnitizdat*, the clandestine production and distribution of audio recordings of potentially subversive material. Anderson writes in *Imagined Communities* that the expansion of vernacular print “drove a harsh wedge between cosmology and history” by making people aware of “history as an endless chain of cause and effect”; that is, readers became conscious of belonging to a geographically and linguistically bounded community moving forward in time, an awareness that was manifested through genre innovations like the appearance of the novel as a literary form, but also had profound political repercussions for the development of non-religious identities that ultimately became nationalisms⁷. The USSR, many of the inhabitants of which had been illiterate in 1917, was different; historical awareness was spread not by print capitalism but by print socialism following the state’s ideological program. When *samizdat* and *magnitizdat* appeared they changed things. These *samizdat* and *magnitizdat* networks nurtured the consciousness of a historicized community identity parallel with but alternative to the ones officially promoted by the state. If Anderson’s printing presses “drove a harsh wedge between cosmology and history”, then the USSR’s tape recorders drove such a wedge between ideology and history, with similar effects on the proliferation of uncontrolled and new types of identity. When the collapse of

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 36, 23.

communism made *magnitizdat* redundant and destroyed the social constraints and opportunities that had led to the creation of particularly Soviet models of community and friendship, these identities were compromised and had to be renegotiated.

The objects of analysis for this study are text, audio, and video materials produced by the suicide punk subculture from 1984-1992 and by its survivors and their companions in the National-Bolshevik Party (NBP) in the 1990s and 2000s. The most attention is directed to the work of Yegor Letov, who was the most influential ideological voice among the suicide punks and also one of the founding members of the National-Bolsheviks; his stature within the Soviet underground and his importance in recruiting youth to the NBP in 1990s is incomparable to any other member of the community. Lyrical content and manifestos published in *samizdat* journals (such as *Kontr Kul't Ur'a* and *Periferiynaya Nervnaya Sistema*) and political newspapers (such as *Limonka*, *Den'*, and *Zavtra*) are analyzed in this thesis to look for continuities between the 1980s and 1990s and to trace how the relationships between art and politics and between personal and collective suffering were imagined as social circumstances changed. Academic resources from anthropology, sociology, art history, and literature studies are used to make these analyses as complete as possible.

Chapter 1, “Suffering,” will discuss the concept of *sotzromantizm* and review the existing literature on the construction of Russian identity before and during the Soviet period, with a focus on the mythological “Russian Idea” and its antirational and messianic features.

Chapter 2, “Noise,” will review the existing literature on the idiom of underground poetry and music in the Soviet Union, with a focus on how the modes of production and consumption impacted the interpretation of content and provided artists and musicians with particular roles in the performance of national identity during late socialism.

Chapter 3, “Suicide,” will analyze the underground music of the 1980s and early 1990s, directing most attention to its apparent preoccupation with death and what the political, philosophical and aesthetic implications of death were in the late Soviet context. In building on Yurchak’s discussion of “necroaesthetics” and on the suicide punks’ own efforts to position themselves within Russian literature, it is argued that the death that features so prominently in the texts of these communities is a sort of placeholder for unimaginable freedom, both individual and national.

Chapter 4, “Revolution,” will analyze the radical nationalist opposition of the 1990s with an eye to how its notions of revolution were continuous with the suicide punks’ ideas about death. The NBP would adopt “Long Live Death” as its party slogan and would call for a Russian national revolution. In this chapter it is argued that the movement of many of the 1980s suicide punks towards this ideological position is explained by the need to re-negotiate collectivity in both art and politics after the collapse of communism.

The **Conclusion** will summarize the results of the analysis with some final thoughts on opportunities for further research in interpreting the Soviet legacy in modern Russia.

Before continuing into the first chapter, it may do to briefly introduce the figure of Yegor Letov and describe the paradoxes that make him a cult figure deserving of such academic attention.

Lenin is Alive

Letov, whose music stretched across genres from punk and psychedelic rock to *musique concrète* and experimental, was perhaps “the most banned artist in a world where all artists were

banned”⁸. He was prolific and wrote songs that were sometimes banal, sometimes humorous or crude, but also often ambitious works of art highly conscious of their political and literary positioning. After his death he was named “one of the great geniuses of Russian literature, and perhaps their last” in an obituary by the Moscow-based American expat newspaper *The eXile*⁹. Although much of his early material was composed alone, he was not isolated; rather he was one of the foremost intellectuals and ideologists of the late Soviet youth counter-culture.

His career was also politically messy, straddling as it did the successive transitions from the end of the *zastoy* through *perestroika* and on to the presidencies of Yeltsin and Putin. Originally he presented and was seen as a dissident anarchist and chief ideologist of the “Siberian wave” of Soviet underground music, also known as the “suicide rock” (*suitsidal’nyy rok*) scene, who wrote very directly anti-establishment texts like “The Song About Lenin”:

Lenin is Hitler, Lenin is Stalin
Lenin is Kim Il-Sung, Lenin is Mao
Lenin is Buddha, Christ, Abel and Cain
Lenin is the Ying and Yang, Lenin is the Tao
Lenin lived, Lenin is alive, Lenin will live forever.
Lenin is the little jokes that poison us
Lenin is the sweet used to bait us
Lenin is the hands that mold us
Lenin is the spotlight that blinds us
Lenin lived, Lenin is alive, Lenin will live forever.
Lenin is the bullet that will cure us

⁸ Lev Naumov, *Aleksandr Bashlachev: chelovek poyushchiy (Aleksandr Bashlachev: A Person Singing)*, 2nd Edition (Saint-Petersburg, Russia: Amfora, 2014), 280. Lev Naumov in his biography of Aleksandr Bashlachev relays this quote of Aleksandr Lipitskiy, in which Letov’s dissident status is so extreme it makes comparison unnecessary: “Bashlachev was a banned author. Everyone was banned, but he was in first place ... He was a real dissident, much more than other rock musicians, except, of course, Yegor Letov (*Bashlachev-to byl zapreshchennyy avtor. Vse byli zapreshchennye, a on – na pervom meste ... On dissident deystvitel’no, v bol’shey stepeni, chem drugie rok-muzykanty. Nu, krome Yegora Letova*).”

⁹ Mark Ames, “Punk Legend Yegor Letov Dies,” *The eXile*, February 21, 2008, http://www.exile.ru/blog/detail.php?BLOG_ID=17090.

Lenin is the fear that mutilates us
Lenin is the ass in which we are stinking
Lenin is the blood which we are drinking
Lenin lived, Lenin is alive, Lenin will live forever.¹⁰

Later, in the 1990s, Letov seemed to reverse his position and became one of the founding members of the crypto-fascist NBP, alongside the émigré writer Eduard Limonov and the radical Eurasianist Aleksandr Dugin. Around this time, a collection of Letov's *samizdat*-era writings and interviews was released with the retrospective title *I Do Not Believe in Anarchy*¹¹. A standard song that would be played at NBP rallies and concerts organized by the affiliated “national-communist rock movement” Russian Outbreak (*Russkiy Proryv*) would be Letov's “Homeland”:

I see how my Homeland is rising from its knees!
I see how my Homeland is rising from the ashes!
I hear how my great Homeland is singing!
My Homeland is rising from its knees again!
My epic nation is standing tall
Our wrathful strength is tearing down the walls

¹⁰ Grazhdanskaya Oborona, *Pesnya O Lenine (Song About Lenin)*, 1989, <http://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1056912029.html>. Original text: *Lenin – eto Gitler, Lenin – eto Stalin / Lenin – eto Kim Ir Sen, Lenin – eto Mao / Lenin – eto Budda, Khristos, Avel' i Kain / Lenin – eto In' i Ian, Lenin – eto Dao / Lenin zhil, Lenin zhiv, Lenin budet zhit' / Lenin – eto shutochki, kotorymi nas travyat / Lenin – eto pryani, kotorymi nas manyat / Lenin – eto ruki, kotorymi nas lepyat / Lenin sut' prozhektora, kotorymi nas slepyat / Lenin zhil, Lenin zhiv, Lenin budet zhit' / Lenin – eto pulya, kotoraya nas lechit / Lenin – eto strakh, kotoryy nas kalechit / Lenin – eto zhopa, v kotoroy my vonyayem / Lenin – eto krov', kotoruyu khlebayem / Lenin zhil, Lenin zhiv, Lenin budet zhit'*.

Most of Letov's compositions were recorded multiple times and often with the lyrics changed (subtly or significantly). Because a great amount of these songs were composed and recorded underground, it can be difficult or impossible to determine when a particular song was first written or recorded. Texts quoted in this thesis are taken from www.gr-oborona.ru, the official site of Letov's most recognizable music project, Grazhdanskaya Oborona, and can be seen as the most definitive versions available. Years included are from the earliest official release to contain a recording of the song, though the song may have been written and performed live years earlier.

¹¹ Yegor Letov, *Ya Ne Veryu v Anarkhiyu: Sbornik Statey (I Do Not Believe in Anarchy: A Collection of Articles)* (Moscow, Russia: Isker, 1997).

The sun is calling us into battle
 Into the deadly frost, into the black night
 My mighty nation is throwing aside its chains
 The sunrise is flaring bright and hot in our hearts
 The ice is melting from our breath
 The earth is flowering under our feet.
 I see how my Homeland is rising from its knees!
 I see how my Homeland is rising from the ashes!
 I hear how my Soviet Homeland is singing!
 My Homeland is rising from its knees again!¹²

Whether such songs and statements were meant to be interpreted ironically or earnestly was not always clear to observers (neither fans nor critics), and Letov's authentic political position was often disputed. Sergei Udaltsov, leader of the Vanguard of Red Youth, wrote in a retrospective obituary four years after Letov's death that he had never doubted him to be a "true leftist, an anarcho-communist."¹³ Art historian Dora Apel wrote about him in 2006 (when his ties to the National-Bolsheviks had already been severed for years), calling him a neo-Nazi figure and claiming that his public performances incited anti-Semitic violence.¹⁴

Letov was not alone, and the debates about his legacy resemble debates that circle around other Soviet-era artists and intellectuals who struggled to apply their Soviet-era counter-cultural experiences in the post-Soviet political space. This thesis is therefore not a study of just one

¹² Grazhdanskaya Oborona, *Rodina (Homeland)*, 1997, <http://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1056917372.html>. Original text: *vizhu, podnimayetsya s kolen moya Rodina / vizhu, kak iz pepla vosstayet moya Rodina / slishu, kak poyet moya velikaya Rodina / snova podnimayetsya s kolen moya Rodina / razgibayet spinu moy bylinnyy narod / razdvigayet steny nasha gnevnyaya moshch' / solnyshko zovet nas za soboy v pokhod / na gibel'nuyu stuzhu, na kromeshnyuyu noch' / sbrasyvayet tsepi moy moguchiy narod / v serdtsakh svetlo i zharko polykhayet zarya / ot nashego dykhan'ya tayet plavitsya led / pod nashimi nogami rastsvetayet zemlya / vizhu – podnimayetsya s kolen moya Rodina / vizhu, kak iz pepla vosstayet moya Rodina / slyshu, kak poyet moya sovetskaya Rodina / snova podnimayetsya s kolen moya Rodina!*

¹³ Sergei Udaltsov, "Chetyre goda bez Yegora Letova (Four years without Yegor Letov)," *Radio Ekho Moskvy*, February 18, 2012, <http://echo.msk.ru/blog/udaltsov/860138-echo/>.

¹⁴ Dora Apel, "The Allure of Nazi Imagery in Russia," *Open Democracy*, May 5, 2006, https://www.opendemocracy.net/globalization-institutions_government/nazi_russia_3511.jsp.

artist or of one community, but rather of the effect of discursive and civilizational collapse on the interpretation and function of art and its relationship to political activism and nation-building. The dissolution of the USSR was, as Yurchak says, simultaneously unimaginable and unsurprising. The Soviet social order and associated ways of thinking and viewing the world were abruptly dissolved away with many struggles left unresolved. The legacy of those unresolved struggles continued into the 1990s and the present.

Chapter 1: Suffering

Film director Andrei Tarkovsky once said that art exists because the world is badly constructed. It is natural to art that it be created under imperfect conditions, because in a perfectly free and encouraging environment, there would (paradoxically) be no purpose for it at all¹⁵. He was speaking in reference to his 1966 film *Andrei Rublev (The Passion According to Andrei)*¹⁶, itself a work of art assembled under hostile conditions, a bleak but beautiful telling of the life of a Russian artist working in a time of oppression, war, poverty, and plague. Tarkovsky's words are applicable, of course, to all artists in all times and places, but in the context of this startlingly un-Soviet and meditative film with its medieval setting and its themes of spiritual and material desperation, they also point to the continuity of a particularly Russian artistic mentality, at least as old as the historical Rublev, which continued into Tarkovsky's time and on into the present. Many of Russia's most visible heroes have been artists working in times of persecution, and their contributions to human creative heritage have become fixtures in the construction of Russian national identity just as they are testaments to the endurance of intellectual autonomy and opposition. The victims of one national-political vision become the architects of the next and vice versa. In Russia, perhaps more intensely than anywhere else, the production of the nation has been a self-consciously literary process.

National identity, like many forms of cultural expression and thinking during the Brezhnev years, occupied a space that was usually neither officially sanctioned nor dissident. This space was of increasing importance in the lives of Soviet people as policies shifted, the

¹⁵ Donatella Baglivo, *Andrei Tarkovsky: A Poet in the Cinema* (CIAK, 1984).

¹⁶ Andrei Tarkovsky, *Strasti Po Andreyu (Andrei Rublev)* (Mosfilm, 1966).

building of communism became increasingly ritualized as a non-substantive performance¹⁷, and the population encountered what Donald J. Raleigh has called “deficits in the Soviet myth economy”¹⁸ that had to be filled from alternative intellectual sources. These developments would set the mold for later trends in the post-Soviet space and for how the Soviet legacy would be interpreted by later generations.

This chapter will consider the development of Russian national identity through the lens of Anthony Smith’s ethno-symbolism theory, looking at the mythology of the “Russian Idea” and cult of suffering as a means of asserting Russia’s national uniqueness and historical importance. It will review the existing literature on the Russian Idea and its reemergence in the late years of the Soviet Union.

Purpose

Russia’s history has been characterized by a well-known national schizophrenia of sorts, its intellectual debates dominated by efforts to negotiate the country’s European-ness or Asian-ness, paganism or Christianity, civilization or backwardness. Often Western Europe is the enemy, seen as decadent and soulless but also as a source of envy for its wealth and better-functioning institutions. Boris Groys has called Russia the paranoid subconscious of the West, sourcing its anxieties in the paradox that only by Westernizing can it come to dominate the

¹⁷ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*.

¹⁸ Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia’s Cold War Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 249.

Western ego which it defines and against which it is defined¹⁹. This effort would seem destined to failure.

The messianic and masochistic aspects of Russian national identity have their roots in the history of the Middle Ages and have been linked to such fundamental parts of daily life as the concept of motherhood; anthropologists have argued that even the act of bathing in traditional Russian culture reinforced a sort of value system that prized suffering and abasement²⁰. The first intellectual formulation of these ideas, however, comes from the *Philosophical Letters* of Pyotr Chaadaev, written in the early 19th century. Chaadaev, warning that the people should “not add any more superfluous problems to the ones they already have by creating a false impression of themselves”, describes a Russia that persists in a chaotic and elemental state “without convictions” and therefore not ready for moral development²¹. His conclusion, which would repeatedly resurface in cynical circles for the next two centuries, is that Russia “is not part of the general composition of humanity, but rather exists in order to teach the rest of the world a great lesson”²².

This formulation would be explored further by generations of Russian writers and philosophers, and would become the basis for what Nikolay Berdyaev would later call the

¹⁹ Boris Groys, “Rossiya Kak Podsoznaniye Zapada (Russia as the Subconscious of the West),” in *Utopiya I Obmen: Stil’ Stalin, O Novom, Stat’i* (*Utopia and Exchange: The Stalin Style, New Things, Articles*) (Moscow: Znak, 1993).

²⁰ Daniel Rancour-Laferniere, *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* (New York: New York University Press, 1995).

²¹ P. Ia. Chaadayev, “Filosofskie Pis’mo: Pis’mo Pervoye (The Philosophical Letters: First Letter),” in *Izbrannyye Sochineniya I Pis’mo* (*Selected Writings and Letters*) (Moscow: Pravda, 1991), 26–27.

²² *Ibid.*, 28.

Russian Idea²³. In its various incarnations it would be the selection myth that maintains the integrity and survival of the Russian *ethnie* throughout history in the theory of ethno-symbolism expounded by Anthony Smith and others – the “yearning for a lost golden age and the collective belief in destiny through sacrifice”²⁴. Like the Russian nation itself, the Idea is loaded with contradictions and irrational affectations: Russia is able to save the world precisely because it does not belong to the world; Russia is great precisely because it is backward; Russia is the laboratory of human spiritual development because it is still wild and not quite human. The cultural and humanistic, romantic value of the country and people is connected with sacrifice and suffering for the attainment of some unknown historical end.

A significant theoretical underpinning to ethnic identity construction in the era of late socialism was the work of Lev Gumilev, who became highly influential after *Ethnogenesis and the Biosphere of the Earth*²⁵ was first published in Russian in 1976. His quasi-essentialist ideas and the gloomy geographical determinism inherent to his understanding of culture were to be very influential on the resuscitation of the idea of Russian-ness and the repositioning of Soviet ideology and culture into the trajectory of a more narrowly Russian history. Among other implications of his theory, according to which ethnic units are charged with passion or “passionarity” (*passionarnost*) from the sun and then follow geographically-determined courses of development, was the idea that Russia’s climate and geography meant that its cultural and national uniqueness could never be sustained under democratic or capitalist conditions. That is, the Russian passionarity was a product of the steppe and taiga; in an environment of pure

²³ Nikolay Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962).

²⁴ Smith, *Chosen Peoples*, 256.

²⁵ L.N. Gumilev, *Ethnogenesis and the Biosphere* (Moscow, Russia: Progress Publishers, 1990).

freedom, both labor and capital would leave Russia for richer soils and better weather, and Russian passionarity would be dissolved away, unable to sustain itself in New York or Istanbul. Gumilev's ideas would become popular among intellectuals in the 1980s and would be used by the extreme right in the 1990s²⁶: since removal of constraints on the movement of people would effectively destroy the very conditions for Russian-ness in the first place, only authoritarian rule could keep the nation intact and free from pollution. Gumilev's "strategy for naturalizing ethnicity" has developed "a unique operational potential" in the world of post-Soviet identity politics²⁷.

The son of poets Nikolai Gumilev and Anna Akhmatova, and himself a survivor of the Gulag system, Gumilev brought a counter-cultural or quasi-dissident credibility to his writings that made them popular both among and beyond the intelligentsia as it reemerged in the closing years of the Brezhnev period. The matter-of-fact fatalism of these ideas, expounded by an oppressed academic born of two oppressed poets, was a natural fit to the historical Russian Idea, providing Chaadaev's musings about the potential use of Russia's backwardness with what seemed to be hard scientific backing. This concept, near-ubiquitous in the classic Russian literature of the 19th century, when Dostoevsky declared "neither a person nor a nation can exist without some higher idea"²⁸, was reemerging in the popular consciousness as Marxism-Leninism fell apart.

²⁶ S. Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

²⁷ Mark Bassin, "Nurture Is Nature: Lev Gumilev and the Ecology of Ethnicity," *Slavic Review* 68, no. 4 (Winter 2009): 897.

²⁸ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *A Writer's Diary, Volume 1: 1873-1876*, trans. Kenneth Lantz (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 743.

One significant account of this concept as it was transformed throughout the 20th century is Tim McDaniel's *The Agony of the Russian Idea*²⁹, which considers the Russians through the lens of Anthony Smith's ethno-symbolism and chosen-people myths. According to McDaniel, the continuous reinterpretation of the Russian Idea is crucial to understanding Russian society as it was constructed in opposition to the West and to modernization, broadly understood, but also in resistance to its own succession of states; the Russian Idea asserts the chosen-ness of the Russian people through a value system that prizes collective over individual consciousness, emotion and mysticism over rationality, and literary achievement over material wellbeing. These are concepts formed in the messianic thinking of the Middle Ages but which were carried into the Soviet worldview and beyond into the religious nationalism of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn or the Eurasianist neo-imperialism of Aleksandr Dugin.

The rediscovery of the Russian Idea by intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s is mapped out in Vladislav Zubok's book *Zhivago's Children*³⁰, which focuses on the surviving elements of the intelligentsia that remained after the end of Stalinism and their struggles to reset the course of Soviet development. This book exhaustingly covers the attempt to resuscitate an authentic Russian culture after the near-total annihilation of the traditional peasantry and aristocracy; this effort ultimately destroyed the intelligentsia as well, dividing it between nationalist anti-Semites and cosmopolitan liberalizers, neither of whom could yet pose any credible resistance to the Soviet state of the 1960s. Zubok's book contains long descriptions of the disappointment of the artistic community with the inconsistency of Khrushchev, who may have opened the doors

²⁹ Tim McDaniel, *The Agony of the Russian Idea* (Princeton University Press, 1996).

³⁰ V.M. Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009).

somewhat for intellectuals but never welcomed them very warmly, to say nothing of the desperation of the Brezhnev years. It covers developments in film and literature with regard to nationalism and ultimately supports the idea that the salvation of the Russian identity could be found only in its literary tradition, one intimately tied to the debate over the Russian Idea and the obsessive Dostoevskian maxim that redemption comes through suffering.

Romance

The resurgence of interest in Russian mysticism in the post-Stalin period was part of what Katerina Clark has called the “return of the aesthetic” in the USSR’s attempt to position itself as the leader of world humanism, if not industry³¹. It is also related to the Soviet debate on the ideological value of romantic thought. This idea of a Romantic reaction to the hyper-rationality and universalism of the Marxist-Leninist Enlightenment project has its roots in the Soviet 1950s, although the complex relationship between romantic literature, bourgeois values, and egalitarian utopianism was a subject of intense debate³². An influential article published by Elistratova not long after the death of Stalin suggested that the European Romantic tradition might be of use in revitalizing Soviet culture and politics³³, an idea that was taken up for another generation by Zaslavskaya in her 1986 essay “The Human Factor in Economic Development and Social

³¹ Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).

³² Lauren G. Leighton, “The Great Soviet Debate over Romanticism: 1957-1964,” *Studies in Romanticism* 22, no. 1 (1983): 41–64, doi:10.2307/25600412.

³³ A. Elistratova, “K Probleme Sootnosheniya Realizma I Romantizma. Na Materiale Istorii Angliyskoy Literatury Kontsa XVII - Nachala XIX Veka. (On the Question of Relating Realism to Romanticism. On Materials from the History of English Literature from the End of the 17th to the Beginning of the 19th Centuries.),” *Voprosy Literatury*, no. 6 (1957): 28–47.

Justice”³⁴. The public discussion of these articles and ideas underlined that the reform of the 1980s was seen by most as a “social and moral-humanistic project” first and foremost, with its economic and political repercussions being secondary³⁵. A reimagining of literary culture and aesthetic values was therefore concomitant with the reform of the economy. Poets and artists were assured a privileged role in the rebuilding of Soviet civilization.

In this way the ideology of materialist Marxism-Leninism was subverted and a window of opportunity opened for the earlier antirational Russian chosen-people myth. With scientific socialism losing ground in the public consciousness as a source of inspiration, new value systems emerged that would inevitably push towards national identity and consciousness even when nationalism as such was explicitly discouraged. The tendency towards humanism, particularism, and irrationalism is present in both official and unofficial cultural developments of the post-Stalin period. European Romanticism, as a literary and philosophical movement always more defined by its ambiguities and contradictions than by any coherent ideological content, becomes a useful lens for examining the legacy of this period. As Katerína Lichvárová writes:

... all inherent contradictions that drive Romantic works made the whole movement as such indefinable: for every sign of individuality, there is also an indication of the national; each evidence of irrationality can be disputed with manifestations of rationality and pragmatism; signals of melancholy are contradicted by the vivid desire for the exotic and unknown; alienated characters, disenchanted with their shallow circles, are often themselves superficial and aloof; etc. What defines Romanticism, as such, is precisely

³⁴ T.I. Zaslavskaya, “Chelovecheskiy Faktor Razvitiya Ekonomiki I Sotsial’naya Spravedlivost’ (The Human Factor in Economic Development and Social Justice),” *Kommunist*, no. 13 (1986): 64–73.

³⁵ Courtney Doucette, “Sotsromantizm in the Age of Perestroika” (Romantic Subversions of Soviet Enlightenment: Questioning Socialism’s Reason, Princeton Conjunction, 2014), 8–9, <http://sotsromantizm.princeton.edu/>.

this restlessness and instability that allows for numerous unrelated, even clashing, but never fully extinguished desires for new, unexplored truths.³⁶

This restlessness had no place in Marxism-Leninism, but was a natural fit for the Russian Idea. Soviet ideology was not necessarily to be rejected, but was rather augmented by the inclusion of particularism and emotionality, the continued relevance of which belied the absurdity of the Soviet utopian project and its apparent failures. If the general unifying trend, though, is the rejection of Reason as such, how can this cultural fixation illuminate an understanding of radical politics and nationalism? What is the common thread in the anarchist and depressive “suicide rock” punks and the violent and antidemocratic National-Bolsheviks?

Historical nostalgia, nationalism, religious revival, interest in the occult, co-optation of Soviet aesthetics, and outright bohemianism and neo-nomadism were all means of distancing the individual’s life from the sterility of the official hyper-rational state discourse. Tendencies reminiscent of a Romanticist outlook can be seen in the films of Andrei Tarkovsky and in Aleksandr Tvardovsky’s editorship at the journal *Novyy Mir*, in which some of the treasures of 19th-century Russian intellectual culture were rehabilitated for the post-Stalin Soviet readership. These examples demonstrate how fascination with a non-rational life (in whatever form) gripped many who were not explicitly dissidents³⁷. Oftentimes distancing from the official rationality, whether to the right or to the left, meant resurgence of interest in the Russian literary heritage of the 18th and 19th centuries, with its complex debates of mysticism and national purpose and the inscrutability of the “Great Russian Soul.”

³⁶ Katarína Lichvárová, “Viktor Pivovarov: Romanticising Loneliness - Conceptualising Socialism” (Romantic Subversions of Soviet Enlightenment: Questioning Socialism’s Reason, Princeton Conjunction, 2014), 6, <http://sotsromantizm.princeton.edu/>.

³⁷ Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children*. See Chapter 7 (“Searching for Roots, 1961-1967”).

One account of Moscow Conceptualism during this period makes explicit this connection between “that all-enshrouding Soviet foggiess which rendered everything secretive and enigmatic” and the self-proclaimed incomprehensibility of the older Russian philosophers.³⁸ The perceived poverty of Soviet forms of expression and the perceived spiritual uniqueness of the Russian people were therefore connected. The salvation of the Soviet project lay in the hands of Russian (not Soviet) poets, who paradoxically were empowered by the hostility of the surrounding environment. Their productivity could not help but validate and justify, to some extent, their suffering³⁹.

Soviet Romanticism, then, like its European predecessor, involved the parallel development of nationalism and individual spirituality primarily as a literary and philosophical movement which nonetheless had political repercussions. In the case of Russia, it was all but inevitable that the embrace of the irrational and mysterious be tied to various literary mythologies. With the end of Stalinism, the banner of Russian identity would once again be carried by artists rather than politicians; according to Galina Rylkova, there was a revival of the “messianic role of Russian poets” and a power shift in which “now it was the poet who had to kill society” in a sort of reversal of the purge years.⁴⁰ Studies of the legacy of Russian literature and Romanticism on the Soviet cultural space have often noted such literary mythologies as the

³⁸ Octavian Eșanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art: The Collective Actions Group Before and After 1989* (Budapest - New York: Central European University Press, 2013), 63.

³⁹ Galina Rylkova, “A Poet Must Suffer: Attempts at Re-Romanticizing the Life of a Russian/Soviet Poet in the 1950s-1970s” (*Romantic Subversions of Soviet Enlightenment: Questioning Socialism’s Reason*, Princeton Conjunction, 2014), 2, <http://sotsromantizm.princeton.edu/>.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 1,6.

primary thread of continuity: the poet as a martyr and rallying point, as a “critical idiom with which to address state and society”, as Tom Rowley puts it⁴¹.

Memory

The permissibility of these ideas in the Soviet Union would fluctuate over time, but they would become more widespread as the union neared collapse.

According to the Soviet sociologist Boris Grushin, who conducted extensive research into public consciousness during periods of political transition in the USSR, the most significant change to take place during the Brezhnev years was a genuine mass disaffection with Soviet communism. This disaffection was the result not of foreign interference or of residual nostalgia for the aristocratic or theocratic past, but rather of the internal inconsistencies and contradictions of Soviet civilization itself, made obvious to both intellectuals and working people by Khrushchev’s attempt to salvage Marxism-Leninism while rejecting Stalinism. In his *Four Lives of Russia* series, Grushin writes of the “total dissolution of the national dream” as a direct result of Khrushchevian promises of socialist abundance within the citizens’ lifetimes, which “turned out to be nothing but an ideological bluff so grandiose as to be unprecedented in human history”⁴². Much of the population was saddled with a negative “homo sovieticus” identity characterized by feelings of shame, dependence on the state, a sharp schism between public and

⁴¹ Tom Rowley, “Modelling Mayakovsky: Sacrifice, Self-Fashioning and Dissent in the 1960s” (Romantic Subversions of Soviet Enlightenment: Questioning Socialism’s Reason, Princeton Conjunction, 2014), 2, <http://sotsromantizm.princeton.edu/>.

⁴² B.A. Grushin, *Chetyre Zhizni Rossii: Epokha Brezhneva, Chast’ 2-Ya (Four Lives of Russia: The Brezhnev Epoch, Part 2)* (Moscow, Russia: Progress-Traditsiya, 2006), 843.

private life, and a weakening interest or feeling of disengagement with politics⁴³. For a Soviet nation which had been raised with a messianic superiority complex, viewing its system and its culture as the salvation of the world, this disillusionment could be traumatizing.

In accordance with the Stalinist nationalities policy, many of the Soviet Republics had maintained a certain level of autonomy for cultural development within a socialist framework and therefore inherited national mythologies and self-images which were to varying degrees products of the Soviet state. For Russia, national consciousness was to be rebuilt from only a few surviving elements. Although nationalist narratives had been rehabilitated and promoted by the Soviet government during the Second World War, the Russian peasantry had by that time been destroyed and the social and cultural foundations of the older pre-Soviet Russian identity had been disgraced or disfigured by re-contextualization in the Soviet space. The thread of continuity in Russian civilization had been cut.

Hosking's *Rulers and Victims*⁴⁴ explores how Russian self-consciousness was affected by being the most powerful nationality within the USSR, but one compelled to be somewhat anti-national in its expressions. Since official state ideology did not allow for Russification per se, but rather Sovietification with an implicitly but undeniably Russian face, the self-image of the nation was corrupted and the overall impression was one of loss or sacrifice; Russians were somehow forced to give up their characteristics of nationhood in order to provide the rest of the world with the benefits of socialism (including, ironically, guarantees of the characteristics of nationhood for other, non-Russian peoples). When the USSR collapsed, it seemed that all of this

⁴³ Ibid., 843–51.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey A. Hosking, *Rulers and Victims: The Russians in the Soviet Union* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

sacrifice had been for nothing; again the messianic Russian Idea and the obsession with the inevitability of historical suffering seemed to have been confirmed.

Identity construction and performance is of course not only the realm of the intelligentsia, but takes place among average citizens as well. Those who sought to reconstruct Russia belonged to the third Soviet generation, one characterized by individualist values and a desire for personal expression rather than collective solidarity⁴⁵. During late socialism the expansion of the personal non-political space and Soviet leisure values combined with the inconsistent application of censorship meant that the space for performing ethnicity was constricted and distorted in sometimes unexpected ways. Yurchak's work rejects the impression that masses of Soviet citizens were either duped by the regime or actively opposed to it; rather, according to Yurchak, most Soviet people sought means of self-actualization under the conditions of Soviet socialism and viewed both pro-Soviet *aktivisty* and anti-Soviet *dissidenty* as somewhat abnormal and obsessive⁴⁶. Yurchak's book *Everything was forever, until it was no more* was highly controversial on publishing but his approach has since become essential in Soviet studies. It is limited only in part by its geographical focus on the relatively privileged and culturally atypical Leningrad.

Donald J. Raleigh addressed one of these gaps in the literature with *Soviet Baby Boomers*⁴⁷, another cultural history study focused on everyday life and identity. Raleigh's book deals with the same generation as Yurchak's and the same ironies and ideological crises, but it

⁴⁵ David Lane, *Soviet Society Under Perestroika: Completely Revised Edition* (London; New York: Routledge, 1992), 273.

⁴⁶ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, See Chapter 4 ("Living 'Vnye': Deterritorialized Milieus").

⁴⁷ Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers*.

contains more targeted analysis of specifically political and nationalist aspects of life such as the relationship to the state and relationships between ethnic Russians and Jews in a time of increasing national awareness. Similar ground is covered by Sergei Zhuk in *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City*⁴⁸, which applies Yurchak's approach to the closed city of Dnepropetrovsk to see how the dynamics of identity and consumption played out differently in this more isolated environment. In such a place, where the residents were less privileged than those in Leningrad or Moscow and had less access to the non-Soviet world, significant social phenomena could be triggered by highly incomplete pieces of outside information; Zhuk describes, for example, how the import of the Western rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, itself a product of the hippie culture that was often criticized by religious conservatives, could in Dnepropetrovsk unexpectedly feed a revival of interest in Russian Orthodox Christianity. Such instances of reinterpretation of foreign cultural imports were common.

There is continuity between feelings of isolation in the Soviet Union and narratives of Russian victimhood in the 1990s. For Russian identity outside of the major cities in places like Siberia, the link between the Soviet collapse and the rise of new nationalist movements like the National-Bolshevik Party has been traced in works like *The Patriotism of Despair* by anthropologist Serguei Oushakine⁴⁹. This work addresses formulations of national identity in the writer's hometown of Barnaul, a large and predominantly ethnic Russian city in southern Siberia near the borders with Kazakhstan and Mongolia. One of the only anthropological studies dealing with this sort of isolated but quite large (about half a million people) community in Russian Asia,

⁴⁸ Sergei Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

⁴⁹ Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair*.

it focuses on narratives of national trauma and loss, according to which the collapse of a Soviet system with which everyone was already disaffected could still engender all sorts of quasi-fascistic political movements. It also discusses the revival of interest in Lev Gumilev and of the feeling that Russia and its people were always doomed, if only by geography and climate. In this way, the Russian identity which had been forced underground by the Soviet system comes full circle and reemerges as a force potentially suppressive in its own right.

The “existential” or “suicidal” punk scene associated with Siberia in the 1980s, at the end of the era of Soviet underground music, would emerge mostly from closed industrial cities existing in relative isolation. One of the recurring themes in the interviews assembled for the 2014 documentary film *Zdorovo i Vечно* is the idea that Siberia is incomprehensible and perhaps more Russian than Russia itself, its people a mix of religious dissidents, criminals, and other exiles; furthermore, its isolation made its inhabitants so hopelessly impotent against the state that, ironically, the authorities often gave them more leeway in pursuing their (harmless) counter-cultural activities⁵⁰. Before analyzing how the Russian Idea was envisaged by these artists, however, it will do to briefly discuss the meaning of the idiom of rock and unofficial music within the Soviet space generally, which informed the way that this community related itself to the state and broader civilization.

⁵⁰ Natalya Chumakova and Anna Tsirlina, *Zdorovo I Vечно (Strong and Eternal)* (Omsk: Beat Films, 2014).

Chapter 2: Noise

The cultural phenomenon of late socialism, in which the promotion of new patterns of consumption resulted in the prolific production of new cultural products and ideas beyond the state's direct control, is perhaps best embodied by the appearance of *magnitizdat*, in which tape-recordings were made and distributed clandestinely. The appearance of tape recorders which were relatively cheap and less regulated (in comparison to typewriters and other means of producing written texts) dramatically expanded the cultural space enjoying some level of autonomy. It was a practice and a medium that could be conducive to active dissidence, but which “often took place outside the boundaries of dissidence, in the vast gray area that lay between illegal opposition and active promotion of the regime – the area in which ... the majority of Soviet experience unfolded”⁵¹. It is ironic that this phenomenon, which became possible only in the industrial civilization built by socialism, played a key role in undermining the socialist system by providing a venue for the propagation of new unofficial values.

The previous chapters described how the anti-rationalist Romantic reaction of the post-Stalin years encouraged a revival of the Russian Idea and the concept of messianic victimhood in Russian identity. This chapter will consider the new role assumed by poets and musicians in this Idea during the *magnitizdat* era, the non-lyrical meanings of the rock idiom in the Soviet period, and the overall effect on youth culture and ideas of community. It will attempt to provide context for understanding how underground musicians and poets viewed themselves and their

⁵¹ J. Martin Daughy, “‘Sonic Samizdat’: Situating Unofficial Recording in the Post-Stalinist Soviet Union,” *Poetics Today* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 31.

social role, in consideration of the special status of literary personalities in the formulation of the Russian Idea throughout history and the Romantic reaction against the Soviet Enlightenment.

In considering how the means of distribution of *magnitizdat* affected the interpretation of content, it is useful here to keep in mind Benedict Anderson's observations about the effects of print capitalism in vernacular languages on the development of historical and national consciousness. Anderson writes that print "drove a harsh wedge between cosmology and history"⁵² because it created an awareness of belonging to a community that was geographically and linguistically bounded and was moving forward through time. *Magnitizdat* had a similar effect in the late Soviet Union, where Yurchak's "eternal state"⁵³ seemed in many ways more cosmological than historical, and the uncontrolled distribution of unofficial music and poetry created new feelings of belonging and intimacy among listeners. It therefore encouraged the development of new identities within the Soviet space that were similar to the national identities that print capitalism brought about during the hegemony of Christianity in Europe.

Voices

The majority of Soviet poets and musicians, of course, were not engaged in political struggle with the system, especially if Yurchak's argument about the perceived abnormality of *dissidenty* is taken into consideration; according to Yurchak the likes of Andrei Sakharov were seen by "normal" people as perplexing and strange until the *perestroika* environment unexpectedly endowed them with political relevance and a heroic aura⁵⁴. However, the status

⁵² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 36.

⁵³ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*. See Chapter 1 ("Late Socialism: An Eternal State").

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 128–31, 278.

even of mainstream poets changed dramatically after the death of Stalin, reclaiming its melancholic authority which simultaneously provided a privileged vantage point for an apolitical critique of politics and seemed to make a more active resistance futile or undesirable. As Galina Rylkova writes on the rehabilitation of Anna Akhmatova and others:

Obviously, the years of Stalinism and subsequently de-Stalinization had reinforced the idea that a poet's life was irrevocably linked to those in power. It is difficult not to notice that such acclamation and validation of a poet's suffering could not but justify some of the Stalinist atrocities and of the literary trials ... everything that one thought was negative in Akhmatova's life and poetry is actually positive. But we can equally well consider the paradox of the relationship between the poet and the crowd. The greatness of a poet is not in being inevitably killed by the crowd; it is in being able to defeat the crowd. The essence of the paradox is that it is not the crowd that annihilates the poet, it is the other way around – the poet destroys the crowd by making it invisible and inconsequential.⁵⁵

In avant-garde circles this poetic image was highly sought, and artists increasingly identified with the tragic ghosts of the poets of the past in a form of “*zhiznetvorchestvo*, or the ‘deliberate aesthetic organization of behaviour’, this bringing together of artistic practice and life [as] part of a mission to remake the world”⁵⁶. However, this literary and artistic heritage was not the sole property of the self-consciously avant-garde, but would become widespread in the growing *magnitizdat* culture, imbuing it with the contradictory Romantic qualities of tragic individualism, national consciousness, conscience, and futility.

The first heroes of this culture were the “bards” or guitar poets whose often plaintive songs engaged with the aspects of Soviet life left unaddressed in the music approved by the state censors. As a rule these bards identified as poets first and foremost, with the guitar noise usually serving as a background while the vocals carried the song. The relationships between these

⁵⁵ Rylkova, “A Poet Must Suffer,” 2,8.

⁵⁶ Rowley, “Modelling Mayakovsky,” 2.

lyricists, their listeners within and beyond the borders of the USSR, and the state were complex, providing fertile ground for analysis of the “indeterminacy, creativity, and unanticipated meanings in the context of strictly formulaic ideological forms, rituals, and organizations” alluded to by Yurchak⁵⁷. In other words, they not only skirted the line between deviance and dissidence, but they engaged with the official world and with what was expected of them in novel ways, subjecting the standard image of Soviet life to interrogation from within. The aesthetic qualities of the life of the poet/singer and of the physicality of the inexpertly produced magnetic tape reels added new dimensions of meaning to the music that was not expressed explicitly in lyrics. It was *zhiznetvorchestvo* in action; the bard not only performed in person, but was performed by the tape recorder.

Still, when the *magnitizdat* phenomenon first caught the attention of Western academics in the 1970s, it was often seen as a protest activity rising up in active opposition to the leviathan of Soviet censorship; in a 1979 article discussing the lyrics of the bard Aleksandr Galich, Rosette C. Lamont underlines this music-as-rebellion aspect by writing that the experience of listening to *magnitizdat* songs “lets us into the heart of this mysterious land which does not allow its spirit to be killed”⁵⁸. More recent scholarship challenged or augmented this initial impression. Writing in 2011, Amy Garey emphasizes that recording and disseminating *magnitizdat* music was a social activity first and an act of production second, that it perhaps better resembled the transmittal of folklore than it did any conscious political attitude; as such, it could be an

⁵⁷ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 14.

⁵⁸ Rosette C. Lamont, “Horace’s Heirs: Beyond Censorship in the Soviet Songs of the Magnitizdat,” *World Literature Today* 53, no. 2 (Spring 1979): 226.

environment for political subversion but was not always so⁵⁹. In this way it was similar to the form of *obshcheniye* (communication) practiced in the USSR⁶⁰ and new models of friendship that existed in parallel with the state⁶¹. A similar position is summarized by J. Martin Daughy:

... magnitizdat was commonly regarded by Soviet authorities as inherently less oppositional than samizdat. This was due in part ... to the less uniformly incendiary character of the songs in the magnitizdat mainstream, and in part to the broader and more ideologically diverse audience of music enthusiasts who circulated magnitizdat tapes. Thus, if at times we can legitimately frame magnitizdat as a dissident activity, we must also acknowledge that the practice often took place outside the boundaries of dissidence, in the vast gray area that lay between illegal opposition and active promotion of the regime – the area in which ... the majority of Soviet experience unfolded.⁶²

At times the bards' songs could include highly critical or anti-Soviet themes – such as labor camp songs or songs taken from the *blatnaya pesnya* genre about criminal life – but more often they expressed a sort of existential detachment or grief that was not explicitly political but was supposed to be alien to the officially prescribed mentality of the Soviet citizen with its utopian visions of the inevitability of progress.

This non-Soviet quality was expressed lyrically, but it was also present in other aesthetic features of *magnitizdat* recordings. Brian Horne writes about the cracks, pops, and washed-out sound of many unofficial tapes in terms of a poor sonic fidelity that “became an index of high political fidelity”; that is, the circumstances of the recording and copying the tape were made present through the imperfections of the sound, acting as a sort of seal of authenticity about the

⁵⁹ Amey Garey, “Aleksandr Galich: Performance and the Politics of the Everyday,” *Limina* 17 (2011): 1–13.

⁶⁰ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 148–57.

⁶¹ Juliane Fürst, *Stalin's Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 159.

⁶² Daughy, “Sonic Samizdat,” 31.

music's origins⁶³. The static became a non-textual commentary on how the song did not suffer for, rather was enriched by, the lack of access to a modern recording studio run by the state, just as lo-fi aesthetics would become widespread in the counter-cultures of capitalist countries as a mark of independence from a commercially-oriented music industry. In this way aesthetic characteristics became codes for political attitudes, which explains the ideological basis for some of the aesthetic decisions of late-Soviet and post-Soviet music, which attempted to retain its “high political fidelity” through the same sonic indicators even after production and distribution methods had changed. Even after the collapse of communism, Russian musicians at times tried to retain the Soviet sound in order to lay claim to this particular aesthetic language.

Another aesthetic dimension of the bards more unique to the Soviet case, but no less ubiquitous, was the co-optation of a performed Gypsy-ness. The Gypsy choirs of 19th century Russia had been carried into the Soviet period, albeit in modified form. During socialism, as before in the Russian empire, a stereotypical conception of Roma culture – emphasizing its allegedly primitive characteristics, its impassionedness – was used as an ideological foil to draw into clearer relief the features and goals of the Russian state and people as well as the value of their heritage.

In the context of the *magnitizdat* bards, an exaggerated “Gypsy style” was therefore used as part of the aesthetic package for claiming a non-Soviet, apolitical vantage point on life. This co-optation was accomplished, for example, by taking choruses and other elements of well-known 19th century Gypsy songs and incorporating them into *magnitizdat* compositions. It was

⁶³ Brian A. Horne, “The Bards of Magnitizdat: Political History of Underground Recordings,” in *Samizdat, Tamizdat, and Beyond: Transnational Media During and After Socialism*, ed. Friederike Kind-Kovács and Jessie Labov (New York: Berghahn, 2012), 84.

also present in the use of the seven-string “Gypsy guitar” (which has Russian and not Roma origins) which was used by all bards. As Horne sums up:

This is one manner in which *bardovskaia pesnia* and its illicit circulation became tied to notions of authenticity and Russianness: through verbal and nonverbal performative, metapragmatic references to Gypsiness. I wish to emphasize that this link is not “anti-Soviet” – as posited by previous scholars of bards’ songs – so much as it is ante-Soviet, evoking pre-Soviet Russian musical and literary traditions. It is also worth noting that the very circulation of bards’ songs through magnitizdat could easily be regarded as sharing the stereotypic qualities of the Gypsy: the songs are nomadic and uncontrolled⁶⁴.

The archetypal “Gypsy” here is the true Russian which has been lost or obscured by the realities of Soviet life; the Russian, like the Gypsy, inexplicably manages to resist assimilation. It is a Romantic stereotype.

Rock and punk styles came to Soviet music later, but there was never a clean break with the bardic tradition, even among those who would pretend there had been. The greatest of the bards, Vladimir Vysotsky, would be named by some “the first rocker”⁶⁵, even though the sound and structure of his music had very little in common with Western rock. His appearance and popularity was contemporary with that of the Beatles and other Western groups whose music was also spread unofficially through the same channels. This association afforded authenticity and subversive potential to even banal music from the West.

Guitars

When rock music began to be produced in the USSR in the 1970s and the 1980s, it had absorbed a self-conscious literariness from the bards that made it significantly different from the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 183.

⁶⁵ Paul Easton, “The Rock Music Community,” in *Soviet Youth Culture*, ed. Jim Riordan (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1989), 58–59.

Western models that inspired its superficial features. In his study of the rock milieu in Leningrad in the 1980s, Thomas Cushman writes of the “image of the rocker as a secular priest”⁶⁶; he states that rock musicians “[saw] themselves as part of a unique and historically specific Russian tradition of lyrical poetry”⁶⁷. From Vysotsky and the bards these later rockers took an interest in existential themes and identification with a continuous Russian literary tradition dating back to Pushkin. From the West they took a sound of youthful intensity and a more deliberate individualism, but their rebellions could never be the same.

From the culture of *magnitizdat*, the rock community also inherited an ambivalent attitude towards politics that persisted even after *glasnost* went into effect and recording music became less subversive as an activity. Paul Easton characterizes the Leningrad rockers as cynical and distrustful, but emerging from an underground environment that “did not give rise to a coherent opposition philosophy”⁶⁸. Instead they concerned themselves with personal or spiritual matters which did not translate into political action even when they did confront political realities; their conception of “freedom” was personal or cultural and spiritual, but not political⁶⁹.

Significantly, though, national and regional identification were on the upswing in these underground communities. Expressions of non-Soviet identity played a key role in their relationship to the state-sanctioned culture:

For the rock community, too, patriotism and love for the motherland is still a relevant value. But within Russia this is expressed predominantly outside the context of the

⁶⁶ Thomas Cushman, *Notes from the Underground: Rock Music Counterculture in Russia* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 118.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁶⁸ Easton, “The Rock Music Community,” 104.

⁶⁹ Cushman, *Notes from the Underground*, 320–25.

Soviet system, relating only to ‘Mother Russia’. For example, the Leningrad rock community, acutely aware and proud of its cultural and historical heritage, often refers to the city in conversation, in lyrics and in samizdat as Petersburg, or simply Peter. Though it does not have quite the same emotional significance as the dropping of ‘London’ from Londonderry by Republicans of that city in Northern Ireland, this rejection of the name of Lenin is nevertheless symbolic of the rock community’s desire to disassociate itself from the Soviet system.⁷⁰

Not every rock community in the Soviet Union could compare with the cultural heritage of a city like Leningrad; in Siberia the form of patriotism generated in the underground would have decidedly more depressive features. Still, the presence of the Siberian countryside and history would be important as a signifier of difference; musicians would identify their countrymen as the criminals and religious heretics exiled to Siberia, and they would seek religious brotherhood with the shamans of Siberia’s indigenous peoples⁷¹.

The rock idiom acquired a particular force in the USSR because it appeared during a period when the competence gap between the state and the unofficial cultural sphere was the greatest. In an environment in which acquiring counter-cultural material was difficult but not unusual, and in which the incompetence or obsolescence of the state had become obvious to so many, it was natural that even small amounts of material smuggled in from the West would be reworked into a vibrant and productive local culture⁷². In this way the Soviet rock culture was simultaneously obsessed with Western fashions and intimately engaged in exploring its own historical and cultural heritage. The intellectual trends present in the more elite circles of dissidence would be channeled and proletarianized in modified form through such music.

⁷⁰ Easton, “The Rock Music Community,” 59.

⁷¹ Chumakova and Tsirlina, *Zdorovo I Vечно*.

⁷² Cushman, *Notes from the Underground*, 42.

Dissidence would not become the norm in the rock community, though, in part because rock music was not interpreted by most to have dissident characteristics⁷³, and in part because the scene was determined more by process than by content. Cushman describes communities obsessed with authenticity of lived experience, above all else⁷⁴. Polly McMichael has recently explored Soviet rock music as an alternative mapping of the Soviet city, one in which the personal apartment assumes a more crucial role as the only place in which unofficial musicians could record or perform; as such living space becomes a signifier of intimacy and “the source of important strands of nonverbal meaning” that keep the community intact⁷⁵. It all rather points to the rock community as less of a political or cultural phenomenon and more of a development of the creation of a particularly Soviet understanding of friendship in the post-war period, a form of friendship described by Juliane Fürst as being defined in opposition to comrade-ship and therefore existing somehow beyond the state and social system⁷⁶.

The Soviet rock community would expand during *perestroika* as censorship relaxed and there were increased opportunities to work publicly and to communicate with outsiders. However, it would also begin to fall apart as the social arrangements and consumption patterns around which it was formed – Soviet social arrangements and Soviet consumption patterns – began to collapse. It was a community formed in the Soviet Union that could not continue

⁷³ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*. See Chapter 6 (“True Colors of Communism: King Crimson, Deep Purple, Pink Floyd”).

⁷⁴ Cushman, *Notes from the Underground*. See Chapter 3 (“Musical Identity and Authenticity: The Local Meanings of Rock Music in St. Petersburg”).

⁷⁵ Polly McMichael, “‘A Room-Sized Ocean’: Apartments in the Practice and Mythology of Leningrad’s Rock Music,” in *Youth and Rock in the Soviet Bloc: Youth Cultures, Music, and the State in Russia and Eastern Europe*, ed. William Jay Risch (New York: Lexington Books, 2015), 185.

⁷⁶ Fürst, *Stalin’s Last Generation*, 159.

beyond it, nor could its ideas persist unchanged after 1991. Nor could its inertia be reversed as it collided with the free market.

Chapter 3: Suicide

The greatest of the bards, Vladimir Vysotsky, has a song that is variously titled “On Fatal Dates and Numbers,” “To Poets,” or “On Psychopaths and Hysterics.” In it he explores the apparent bad luck of poets who seem destined to die young. Its lyrics are as follows:

He whose life ends tragically is a true poet,
And if it ends at a specific time, then all the more so,
At the number “26”, one fell under a pistol,
Another crawled into a noose in the Angleterre [Hotel in Leningrad].
But at 33, Christ ... he was a poet, he said:
Don’t kill! You will kill, I’ll find you anywhere, you know.
But they put nails through his hands, so he wouldn’t create anymore,
So he wouldn’t write and so he wouldn’t think so much.
At 37 exactly the intoxication leaves me,
And look now, the wind blows cold,
At this number Pushkin thought up himself a duel,
And Mayakovsky laid his head against a gun barrel.
We’ll tarry some more on “37”! God is cunning,
He posed the question point-blank: either/or!
At this boundary Byron and Rimbaud laid down too.
But poets nowadays seem to have jumped over it.
Their duel didn’t take place, or it was postponed,
At 33 they were crucified, but not severely enough,
And at 37, no blood, what blood? Just grey hair
That has stained around the temples, and not that much even of that.
Too weak to shoot oneself? Full-throttle, they say, the soul left long ago.
Have patience, psychopaths and hysterics!
Poets walk barefoot along the edge of a knife,
And slice up bloody their naked souls!
The word “long-necked” (*dlinnosheee*) ends with three *e*’s.
Cut the poet short! The conclusion is clear –
Stick a knife in him! But he is happy to hang on the blade,
If only he was cut down for having been dangerous himself.
I pity you, who are gullible with these fatal dates and numbers,
You yearn for them like concubines in a harem.
The life expectancy has grown longer and just maybe,
The ends of poets have also been put off for a time.
And it’s true that a long neck is bait for a noose.
And the breast is a target for shooting, but don’t hurry:
Those who left on the wrong dates have acquired immortality.

So do not make the living rush!⁷⁷

The song is typically Vysotskian in its impartial, half-joking attitude towards a serious and tragic phenomenon: the seeming proclivity of artists to be killed or to kill themselves while young. This phenomenon, and the subsequent relationship between a certain morbidity or fatalism about death and the devotion of one's life to transcendent artworks, was not new for Vysotsky or his generation, as attested to by his inclusion of Christ among the list of murdered poets; it is an idea extant around the world and firmly established within Russian literary mythology and religious thinking as well⁷⁸. All of Dostoevsky's novels include discussions of suicide, not as an individual fixation or symptom of depression, but as a philosophical concept or idiom. In the late Soviet period it would resurface as part of the general reaction against state-imposed rationality and modernity, being manifested in such forms as new quasi-spiritualism and the

⁷⁷ Lyrics taken from Vladimir Vysotsky, *Illyustrirovannoye Sobraniye Sochinenii v 11 Tomakh* (*Illustrated Anthology of Compositions in 11 Tomes*) (Moscow: Amfora, 2012). Original text: *kto konchil zhizn' tragicheski, tot – istinnyy poet / a esli v tochnyy srok, tak – v polnoy mere: / na tsifre 26 odin shagnul pod pistolet / drugoy zhe – v petlyu slazil v Angleterre / a 33 Khristu – on byl poet, on govoril: / da ne ubiy! ub'esh' – vezde naydu, mol. / no- gvozdi emu ruki, chtob chego ne sotvoril, / chtob ne pisal i chtoby men'she dumal. / c menya pri tsifre 37 v moment sletayet khmel', / vot i seichas – kak kholodom podulo: / pod etu tsifru Pushkin podgadal sebe duel' / i Mayakovskiy leg viskom na dulo. / zaderzhimsya na tsifre 37! kovaren bog / rebrom vopros postavil: ili – ili! / na etom rubezhe legli i Bayron, i Rembro, / a nyneshniye – kak-to proskochili / duel' ne sostayalas' ili – perenesena, / a v 33 raspyali, no – ne sil'no, / a v 37 – ne krov', da chto tam krov'! – i sedina / ispachkala viski ne tak obil'no. / slabo strelyat'sya? V pyatki, mol, davno ushla dusha! / terpen'e, psikhopaty i klikushi! / poety khodyat pyatkami po lezviyu nozha - / i rezhut v krov' svoi bosye dushi! / na slovo dlinnosheee v kontse prishlos' tri e, / ukorotit' poeta! – vyvod yasen - / i nozh v nego! – no schlastliv on viset' na ostriye, / zarezzanny za to, chto byl opasen! / zhaleyu vas, priverzhentsy fatal'nykh dat i tsifr, / tomites', kak nalozhnitsy v gareme! / srok zhizni uvelichilsia – i, mozhet byt', kontsy / poetov otodvinulis' na vremya! / da, pravda, sheya dlinnaya – primanka dlya petli / a grud' – mishen' dlya strel, no ne speshite: / ushedshie ne datami bessmert'e obreli - / tak chto zhivykh ne slishkom toropite!*

⁷⁸ Rancour-Laferriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia*.

resurrection of Mayakovsky and *zhiznetvorchestvo*⁷⁹, in the ubiquity of morbid irony and aestheticization of death⁸⁰, and of self-destroying literary messianism in general⁸¹.

Vysotsky is characteristically affable and down-to-earth in this song. Less so would be his successors in the rock and especially punk subcultures of the 1980s, for whom death and suicide would become foundational lyrical themes⁸². The critic Vyacheslav Kurytsin would attribute this development, which coincided with the increasing specialization and balkanization of Soviet underground music, to the widening gap between what youth sought to accomplish with their lives and what seemed possible under the anemic conditions of Soviet politics: under these circumstances death emerged as a sort of placeholder for unattainable freedom⁸³. Elena Smirnikova has found linkages between the rockers' approach to death and existentialist ideas about freedom and absurdity; existentialist writers are referenced often and explicitly by some poets and communities⁸⁴. The Orthodox clergyman and philosopher Vadim Lur'e wrote about the fascination with death as a means of segregating the life and values of the critical artist from

⁷⁹ Rowley, "Modelling Mayakovsky."

⁸⁰ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*. See Chapter 7 ("Dead Irony: Necroaesthetics, 'Stiob,' and the Anekdot").

⁸¹ Rylkova, "A Poet Must Suffer."

⁸² V.M. Lur'e, "Smert' I Samoubiystvo Kak Fundamental'nyye Kontseptsii Russkoy Rok-Kul'tury (Death and Suicide as Fundamental Concepts of Russian Rock Culture)," *Russkaya Rok-Poeziya: Tekst I Kontekst* 6 (2002): 57–87.

⁸³ V. Kuritsyn, "Russkaya smert' (Russian death)," *Izvestiya Ural'skogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta* 56, no. 23 (2008): 123–27.

⁸⁴ Elena Smirnikova, "Aesthetic and existential dimensions of freedom in the domestic rock-underground of the 1980s" (12th All-Russian Scientific and Practical Conference of Students and Graduate Students, "Practical Issues in Art History: Music, Personality, Culture," Saratov, 2013).

that of “normal” people⁸⁵, arguing that even the darkest “suicide rock” songs were not actually about negativity but actually about the renegotiating of a positive spiritual life⁸⁶.

The previous chapters described the themes of self-sacrifice and chosen-ness embodied by the Russian Idea throughout history and the ways that these themes were molded and propagated by the non-verbal aspects of unofficial Soviet music culture. This chapter will consider the position struck out by the Siberian “suicide rock” scene in which Yegor Letov was the most ideologically significant member in the 1980s. It will begin by briefly by describing the scene’s origins before considering in turn its seeming preoccupation with death as a literary and philosophical event and its conception of Russian and Soviet history. The materials used will be song lyrics augmented by excerpts from interviews and the commentary of academics and art critics. An understanding of what the suicide punks believed they were doing in the 1980s will serve as the foundation for interpreting their actions in the 1990s.

Pesni Ushanochki

Vadim Lur’e calls the Siberian wave of “suicide punk” in the 1980s one of two responses to an ideological crisis that hit the rock music community as it grew in the final years of the stagnation era. In Leningrad, he says, there was a general movement towards Russian Orthodox spirituality and to cleaner sound and more coherent songwriting; as *perestroika* improved the position of unofficial musicians, they felt a general need to be more socially responsible. In Siberia, though, where a unique community would develop in relative isolation from the more

⁸⁵ Lur’e, “Smert’ I Samoubiystvo.”

⁸⁶ V.M. Lur’e, “Kak Platil Neznayka Za Svoi Voprosy: Egor Letov I Otkrytii Im Mir (How Neznaika Paid for His Questions: Egor Letov and the World He Opened up),” *Russkii Zhurnal*, February 21, 2008, <http://www.russ.ru/pole/Kak-platil-Neznajka-za-svoi-voprosy>.

cosmopolitan music scenes, the “model of escape from actuality” would be one that denigrated the growing proficiency of the Leningrad rockers and instead “broke with any sort of tradition of ‘artistism’, [using] ‘dirty’ sound that underlined the unprofessionalism of the performance in order to demonstrate that it was about how to live and not about how to play music”⁸⁷. The use of low-fidelity atmospherics and incidental noise is, of course, still a deliberate aesthetic decision, and despite the insistence of Letov in a 1989 interview that “I go by religion [and not aesthetics]”⁸⁸, it is clear from retrospective interviews like those in the 2014 documentary *Zdorovo i vechno*⁸⁹ that members of the suicide punk scene took themselves seriously as conceptual artists, albeit at times with some ambivalence. Still, their approach would be, like the *zhiznetvorchestvo* of Mayakovsky, to present the life and personality of the artist and not just the products of her or his labor. As such death assumed a central role in their lyrics, as the “main content of life”⁹⁰.

The figures most associated with the Siberian wave are musicians from Omsk, Tyumen, and Novosibirsk: people like Yanka Dyagileva, Dmitri Selivanov, Oleg Sudakov, Kuzma Ryabinov, and of course Yegor Letov. However, it also formed under the influence of a musician from outside Siberia, the Cherepovets-native Aleksandr Bashlachev (1960-1988), who straddled the line between the bards and the rockers that succeeded them and was also one of the most ambitious poets that his generation would produce. Like many of the figures of the late Soviet music scene, he was heavily influenced by Western music; during his military service he

⁸⁷ Lur’e, “Smert’ I Samoubiistvo Kak Fundamental’nie Kontseptsii Russkoi Rok-Kul’tury (Death and Suicide as Fundamental Concepts of Russian Rock Culture),” 65, 69.

⁸⁸ Letov, *Ya Ne Veryu*, 8.

⁸⁹ Chumakova and Tsirlina, *Zdorovo I Vechno*.

⁹⁰ Lur’e, “Smert’ I Samoubiistvo,” 72.

had even organized an army choir that sang renditions of Deep Purple and Led Zeppelin songs⁹¹. Above all, however, his music was meant to be un-Soviet, and he co-opted both Western styles and Russian literary heritage as an effort to separate himself from the Soviet⁹².

In this way he was a significant influence in the development of a quasi-religious national feeling in the rock community and the resuscitation of the idea of Russian soul. Bashlachev self-consciously cultivated “Russian-ness” (*russkost*) in his lyrics and demeanor⁹³. In songs like “Vremya Kolokol’chikov (The Time of the Little Bells),” Bashlachev equates Russian culture with the bell towers of Orthodox churches, a metaphor he borrows from Aleksey Tolstoy’s 19th century poem “My Little Bells” and uses to illustrate the alienation of Soviet Russians from their native land but also the preservation of their heritage in the underground scene:

But with each day times are changing
The domes have lost their gold
The bell ringers are loitering all over the world
The bell towers are torn down and demolished
What then, now we are walking up and down
On our own field, as underground-dwellers (*podpol’shchiki*)?
If they have not cast for us a great bell
That just means that now will be the time of the little bells⁹⁴.

Asked in a 1986 interview about the need of creating a “principally Russian form” of musical expression, Bashlachev would answer in typically mystical and deterministic terms:

⁹¹ Naumov, *Aleksandr Bashlachev: chelovek poyushchiy*, 224.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 195.

⁹³ V.V. Losev, “O ‘Russkosti’ v Tvorchestve Aleksandra Bashlacheva (On ‘Russian-Ness’ in the Artistic Output of Aleksandr Bashlachev),” in *Russkaia Literatura XX Veka: Obraz, Iazyk, Mysl’: Mezhevuzovyi Sbornik Nauchnykh Trudov* (Moscow: Moscow Pedagogical University Press, 1995), 103–10.

⁹⁴ Aleksandr Bashlachev, *Vremya Kolokol’chikov (The Time of the Little Bells)*, 1984. The lyrics used here are the version printed in Naumov, *Aleksandr Bashlachev: chelovek poyushchiy*, 58-60. Original text: *no s kazhdym dnevno vremena menyayutsya / kupola rasteryali zoloto / zvonari po miru slonyayutsya / kolokola sbity i raskoloty / chto zh teper’, khodim krug-da-okolo / na svoem pole, kak podpol’schiki? / esli nam ne otlili kolokol / znachit, zdes’ vremya kolokolchikov.*

It's very simple: why are you playing reggae if you live in Norilsk? If you play reggae, then take off your overcoat and go around in a loincloth in Norilsk. You should live your song. Not just sing it, but live it every time. If you play your song wearing a canvas hat, you should wear that canvas hat in the snow, in the taiga. No one would do this. And if they wouldn't, that means you should sing songs like *ushankas* (*pesni ushanochki*) instead, songs like that overcoat, like that trash. You must not make a division between the song and yourself. It's not art – it is nature... You cannot incorporate an alien body into yourself, no matter how much you want to, no matter how much you like it. It won't work.⁹⁵

In this way Russian identity and history became semiotically linked to the emotional intensity and honesty of rock music and poetry, in a particularly stripped-down, depressive idiom: one reminiscent of the Siberian taiga and snow. Identification with a mythical Russian past, whether Christian or pagan, as when Bashlachev calls rock-and-roll a “glorious paganism”⁹⁶, is a means of reclaiming that intensity in a Soviet world which is presented as grey and emotionless. It is significant, too, that although Bashlachev was decidedly pro-Western, national identification is here essentialized as something a person inherits from their environment and can never get rid of.

In a Coffin

Bashlachev died in 1988 at the age of 27, having fallen from an eighth-story balcony, presumably a suicide. He would however become a highly-referenced legend in the underground scene that he left behind, and his manner of death would become an essential part of that legend. As he said that one should live one's song and not just play it, it so follows that one should also die in a way consistent with his aesthetic and philosophical values. Yegor Letov would come

⁹⁵ Naumov, *Aleksandr Bashlachev: chelovek poyushchiy*, 507. Various edited versions of this interview were printed in different *samizdat* journals in the 1980s, but the text here is taken from the complete version printed in the 2014 edition of *Chelovek poyushchiy*.

⁹⁶ Bashlachev, *Vremya Kolokol'chikov* (*The Time of the Little Bells*). Original text: *rok-n-roll – slavnoe iazichestvo*.

close to deifying him in a 1990 interview for the Siberian *samizdat* journal *Peripheral Nervous*

System:

It seems to me that he [Bashlachev] was the greatest rocker that we ever had in our country. When I first heard him, it affected me horribly. Not in that it influenced me, exactly, I was pushing off of different things in music and lyrics: off the traditions of English “garage” music in the 1960s and of punk in the 1980s. Bashlachev has nothing to do with any of that. He came from Russian roots, from Russian literature. He mixed everything up on the principle of “trash” ... with no relation at all to aesthetics. I think that even now people don’t understand him... I think that it [his suicide] is the only escape and natural end for a person of integrity in our conditions. If you are honest and conscious, you must understand that you can never change anything. That the further you go, the more you expand, as a personality, the less you have in common with the world around you, and after a certain amount of time no one will be able to accept you, you disappear into a vacuum... I think that Christ was something un-human. I think that what he brought to the Earth has very little to do with humanity. It was truths that were essentially un-human, which is proven by history. A person can’t ... that is, Christ brought love, in essence, from the perspective of modern Christianity, Christ was Satan, because he was first and foremost an antichrist, that is, a person, who brought complete freedom of choice, which is what religion has never given and still doesn’t give ... He said “Love your neighbor as you love yourself,” which means that from the start you must love yourself. Really love yourself, that is, not just yourself, not your personality, but the God that is inside of you ... That’s why they crucified Christ, and he left, in that sense he really wasn’t a person. I think that such people like Bashlachev aren’t people either. They can manifest here in some way. But in reality, according to what is inside of them, they are not people. Because the value system in their art is a non-human value system ... a value system that stands beyond death. That is why they [people like Christ and Bashlachev] are maximally free. They seem more cynical to outsiders, but they are also freer. They cannot exist here for very long. Freedom of choice, really any kind of freedom, is an extreme evil, like in Dostoevsky.⁹⁷

It is this Bashlachev, the Christ-like, Dostoevskian Bashlachev, unable to live in the material world for very long, who would become a mythical figure in the songs and poems of the later Soviet punks. His death, inextricably linked to his life and art that came “from Russian roots, from Russian literature”, and which was interpreted in terms of unbearable freedom, would

⁹⁷ Letov, *Ya Ne Veryu*, 31–32. First published in *Periferiinaia nervnaia sistema*, Vol. 2 (1990). In talking about the principle of “trash”, Letov uses the English word (written as *tresh* in the Russian text), but specifies that he intends this word in the sense of “garbage” and not as “thrash” (i.e., thrash metal, which would also be rendered as *tresh* in Russian).

further reinforce the martyrdom cult of Russian literature and the new self-destructive and messianic role of poets as the standard-bearers of culture and identity. Letov would later sing that “My freedom understands what the flying Bashlachev embraced, what he gained.”⁹⁸

Letov himself often worked alone in the 1980s. He would assemble a circle around himself as the decade neared its close, including figures like Yanka Dyagileva (herself perhaps the more appropriate heir to Bashlachev), Dmitri Selivanov, Kuzma Ryabinov and Oleg Sudakov. His most widely known project, with whom his name would become most closely associated in the Soviet period and after, was the band *Grazhdanskaya Oborona* (“Civil Defense”), often shortened as *GrOb* (“The Coffin”), the history of which was covered in detail in the 2014 documentary *Zdorovo i vechno*⁹⁹. Although the film begins with the musician Aleksandr Rozhkov saying that censorship in Siberia was not as intense as in other regions and therefore nurtured a certain impotent dissident subculture (“They didn’t really touch people, because if a person is manufacturing some sort of turbine or bomb, you already won’t touch him. Let him read Pasternak and to hell with him – where could he go?”), the history of the group before 1989 was defined by conflict with the authorities. Surviving members tell that an early incarnation of the group was destroyed in spring 1985 as a result of a KGB investigation in which the members were accused of plotting to destroy an oil refinery; as a result, Kuzma Ryabinov was drafted into the Red Army and Yegor Letov was confined to a mental institution, from which he was released at the intercession of his older brother, the saxophonist Sergei Letov,

⁹⁸ Yegor Letov, *Svoboda (Freedom)*, 1992, <http://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1056917826.html>. Original text: *kak i chto obrel-obnyal letyashchiy Bashlachev / eto znayet moya svoboda*.

⁹⁹ Chumakova and Tsirlina, *Zdorovo I Vechno*.

who used his connections with foreign journalists in Moscow to frighten the police into letting him out¹⁰⁰.

In subsequent years, the group would become well-known throughout the USSR, ultimately relocating to Leningrad, with some ambivalence. Lyrics of the group owed a great deal to early Soviet avant-garde writers like Mayakovsky and Vvedensky and to the magical realism of Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, although there were also songs that were simpler and more disposable. Journals of the time reported the ideology of the group as “hippie-ism” (*khippizm*)¹⁰¹, perhaps because of their itinerant lifestyle and clear influences from the Western 1960s counterculture. Anarchism was also frequently mentioned in their earliest recordings, but the most apparent philosophical influences were the existentialists¹⁰². The anti-establishment stance of the group was obvious, made clear by direct lyrics like “the enemy of the people is rock-n-roll”¹⁰³ and “I will always be against”¹⁰⁴. However, it was not always clear what political vision the band held, if any, aside from its opposition to the KGB and to the war in Afghanistan. More apparent, as for other rock groups and poets of the time, was the human element independent of politics, and a particular literary fetishization of the idea of death.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Letov, *Ya Ne Veryu*, 18. First published in *Rokmagazin* (1990).

¹⁰² Smirnikova, “Aesthetic and existential dimensions of freedom in the domestic rock underground of the 1980s.”

¹⁰³ Grazhdanskaya Oborona, *Volna Patriotizma (Wave of Patriotism)*, 1987, <http://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1057859941.html>. Original text: *vrag naroda – rock-n-roll*.

¹⁰⁴ Grazhdanskaya Oborona, *Protiv (Against)*, 1988, <http://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1225921409.html>. Original text: *ia vseгда budu protiv*.

Death and Freedom

In *Everything was forever, until it was no more*, Alexei Yurchak devotes a chapter to “Dead Irony” and the explosion of morbid humor or of ironic attitudes toward death during late socialism. Yurchak cites, for example, “necro-realist” flash mobs which staged acts of grisly (but fake) violence in public places or the folkloric genre of “Scary Little Poems” (*stishki-strashilki*) as ways in which the biopolitical realities of death intruded upon and undermined the Soviet discursive regime which appeared to be deathless. He writes that such practices underlined “paradoxes and incongruities within the most mundane and familiar aspects of Soviet reality, making their audiences ‘dimly aware’ that they themselves were intimately involved and enmeshed in these paradoxes and incongruities”¹⁰⁵. In other words, the very reminder that death exists and is inevitable would serve to expose the artificiality of the world in which Soviet life was unfolding.

Among the performance artists described by Yurchak, like the Mit’ki and the necro-realists, were those who seemed to locate themselves in “the zone between life and death, between sanity and insanity, between healthy citizens and decomposing bodies” and who walked around “clearly lacking personhood” in order to disrupt the expectations of what a Soviet citizen could be¹⁰⁶. Such aestheticization of death was the ultimate Soviet nonconformism, avoiding any categorization on the political spectrum from activist to dissident by setting itself up in opposition to life generally. This position was used by the “suicide punks” as well, in their provocative form of *zhiznetvorchestvo*.

¹⁰⁵ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 255.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 248–49.

An example is one of the earlier Grazhdanskaya Oborona albums, one of many recorded by Letov alone in 1987 when he was still largely excluded from the broader community. Its title is *Necrophilia* and it opens with a song with the same name:

I love the pale hands
And the iron curtain against the red background
The moist lips under the carrion birds
And the bodies eaten by worms
I love the hollow echo
And the rotting broth in my head
My own fungus, hiccups, wow!
I am a necrophiliac, I love myself.
Sew buttons in place of the eyes of those who are born dead.
Necrophilia, necrophilia, it's my worn-out necrophilia.
Early in the morning I wake up in line at the mausoleum.¹⁰⁷

At first glance it might seem that such a song contains little of social import, but particular details and the broader cultural context described by Yurchak make clear that this provocative subject matter had different implications in the USSR than it would in other states. If songs in the West like Alice Cooper's "I Love the Dead" were meant to shock the religious right and cast aspersions on dominant sexual morality and standards of beauty, then Letov's "Necrophilia" is decidedly more political. The Iron Curtain against a red background (*zheleznyy zanaves na krasnom fone*) here falls into the list of dead body parts, and the dead body described is not an object of Letov's desire but rather Letov himself and his generation. Most telling is the line about waiting in line at a mausoleum: could it be Lenin's on Red Square, the center of the Soviet gerontocracy and its "worn-out" ideological necrophilia?

¹⁰⁷ Grazhdanskaya Oborona, *Nekrofiliya (Necrophilia)*, 1987, <http://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1056909643.html>. Original text: *ya lyublyu golubye ladoni / i zheleznyy zanaves na krasnom fone / syrye guby pod voron'em / i tela iz'yedennye chervem / ya lyublyu glukhoe echo / i gniluyu zhizhu v moey golove / rodnuyu plesen' ikoty blya bu / ya nekrofil, ya lyublyu sebya / rozhdennomu mertvym prisheye pugovitsy vmesto glaz / nekrofiliya, nekrofiliya, moya uznurennaya nekrofiliya / a rano utrom ya vstanu v ochered' v mavzoley.*

Yurchak focuses part of his analysis of late Soviet irony and morbidity on “Scary Little Poems” (*stishki-strashilki*), a folkloric genre of short two- or four-line poems which were exchanged like jokes. As a rule, these poems were in a playful, nursery rhyme style, but they would juxtapose images of childlike innocence with absurd acts of violence. Yurchak writes:

The opening part of such poems (one or two lines) described an innocent child, suggesting a commonsense interpretation; the closing part made any interpretation absurd or impossible by introducing an inexplicably violent event into the mundane context. The poems presented their listeners with the impossibility of having a direct, literal reading of reality, focusing on a shift between form and meaning within that reality, of which the witnesses were “dimly aware,” and in which they participated usually without contemplating.¹⁰⁸

This genre, like other forms of Soviet irony, would begin to wane and lose its relevance during *perestroika*¹⁰⁹. It would, however, be incorporated into the lyrics of Letov and others, one of many literary styles in the rhetorical arsenal. Letov, though, in taking the genre to a different level of provocation and disruption of the state-promoted reality, would use this style to eulogize his own friends. The song “Vershki i Koreshki” from the 1989 recording *Russian Field of Experiments* would co-opt this format to comment on the suicides of Dmitri Selivanov and Aleksandr Bashlachev:

A light spring rain fell on the café,
The musician Selivanov strangled himself with a scarf.
No one knew it would be funny.
No one knew that it would be so funny to everyone.
A small boy found a machine gun,
And it so turned out, that he isn't alive anymore.
In the kitchen he buttered a piece of bread,
Chewed, had a drink, and placed his head against the barrel.
And while he was eating and drinking from a glass,
The poet Bashlachev fell from the window killed
Oh-ho, the trap worked!

¹⁰⁸ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 256.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 275–76.

Yet another little beast was delivered to our hands.¹¹⁰

There is a double disruption here. The first level of disruption is the one Yurchak describes with regard to the original *stishki-strashilki*. The second is the shock that, in Letov's poems, the "inexplicably violent event" is in fact an event that occurred in reality and to someone with whom the listener is presumably familiar if not personally acquainted. The statement that "no one knew that it would be so funny to everyone" brings this listener herself into the event of horror; if in the Brezhnev-era version of these poems the scene of innocence represented the mundane and the act of violence represented the intrusion of the impossible outer-reality, then in Letov's *perestroika*-era version the act of violence is the new mundane and the reaction of the listener – laughter – is the new intrusion. As in Mayakovsky's *zhiznetvorchestvo*, as in Bashlachev's *pesni ushanochki*, in Letov's scary poems the life and personality of the artist is part of the content of the text.

The suicides of the suicide punks, as a literary construction, are intended not only to undermine Soviet apathy and paralysis of imagination by juxtaposing it with the immediacy of death, but also to highlight the impossibility of inciting political action. The punks are meant to be martyrs and inspirations just as the abrasiveness of the music is meant to be empowering. The most concise presentation of this idea, and the frustration with the impotency of the Soviet irony from which it itself emerged, comes out in a song called "Hara-kiri":

¹¹⁰ Grazhdanskaya Oborona, *Vershki I Koreshki (Branches and Roots)*, 1989, <http://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1056897116.html>. Original text: *Vesenniy dozhdik polival gastronom / muzykant Selivanov udavilsya sharfom / nikto ne znal, chto budet smeshno / nikto ne znal, chto vsem tak budet smeshno / malen'kiy mal'chik nashel pulemet / tak poluchilos', chto on bol'she ne zhivet / na kukhne on namazal maslom kusok / pozheval, zapil i postavil visok / a poka on el i pil iz stakana / poet Bashlachev upal ubilsya iz okna / oi-o, srabotal kapkan / eshche odin zverek byl predan nashim rukam.*

Sid Vicious died right before your eyes,
 John Lennon died right before your eyes,
 Jim Morrison died right before your eyes,
 And you remained just the same as before.
 There are only two escapes for honest guys,
 To grab a machine gun and kill everyone in a row
 Or to kill yourself, yourself, yourself, yourself,
 If you are really taking this world seriously,
 The ends justify the means, alright,
 Kill, rape, slander, betray,
 For the sake of the bright, bright, bright, bright
 Bright building of the ideas of Juche
 Everything that Mamay started
 October has brought to its finish
 October led everything to its last remains
 And there's nothing left for us to do here.
 My friend hanged himself right before your eyes.
 He committed *hara-kiri* right in your stairwell.
 He had run out of hope and everything else he had.
 And all of you remained just the same as before.¹¹¹

The significance of suicide in this and other songs in the genre is not the act of death itself, but the effect that it has on the outside world. The listener is reprimanded for not being affected by it. One is reminded of the Kirillov of Dostoevsky's novel *Devils*, a political radical who believes that by killing himself he can definitively assert the preeminence of human freedom over the will of God and thereby usher in an era of rationality, prosperity, and happiness. Letov and his cohort, however, understood that this was not possible, and that is the most extreme point of their

¹¹¹ Grazhdanskaya Oborona, *Khara-Kiri (Harakiri)*, 1988, <http://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1056964382.html>. Original text: *Sid Vishes umer u tebya na glazakh / Dzhon Lennon umer u tebya na glazakh / Dzhim Morrison umer u tebya na glazakh / a ty ostalsya takim zhe kak byl / vsego dva vykhoda dlya chestnykh rebyat / skhvatit' avtomat i ubivat' vsekh podryad / ili pokonchit' s soboi, soboi, soboi, soboi / esli vser'ez vosprinimat' etot mir / tsel' opravdyvayet sredstva, davay / ubivay, nasiluy, kleveshchi, predavay / radi svetlogo, svetlogo, svetlogo, svetlogo / svetlogo zdaniya idey Chuchkhe / vse to, chto ne dodelal Mamay / Oktyabr' dodelal, dovel do kontsa / Oktyabr' dovel do posledney cherty / i vsem nam nechego delat' zdes' / moy drug povesilsya u vas na glazakh / on sdela hara-kiri u vas na kryl'tse / on istek nadezhday i vsem, chem mog / a vse vy ostalis' takimi zhe!*

political disengagement and disillusionment: they become ambivalent even to their own deaths. At the same time, they elevated the idea of death as a symbol of individual will and the manifestation of freedom.

Nation and History

Still, although many songs in the suicide rock genre were written in isolation, the suicides that they described were in essence conceived as communal acts. Although Hans Fallada wrote about Nazi Germany that “every man dies alone”¹¹², in the USSR at least the situation may have been different. The poets and musicians of the 1980s built on an earlier literary tradition in which they were the bearers of authentic nationhood and their suffering was a sort of heritage; they identified with what Berdyaev (writing about Dostoevsky) called “a hunger for self-destruction in the Russian soul ... intoxication with ruin”¹¹³. Some psychoanalysts and anthropologists have counted this desire for abasement among the most distinctive and enduring properties of Russian identity¹¹⁴. For Letov and others in the Siberian scene, there certainly was a connection between the individual suffering about which they wrote and the broader community with which they identified.

In *Zdorovo i vechno*, Sergei Zharikov says that the suicide rock scene would be remembered in history “as an element of culture and particularly of national culture” even if the word “rock” and its Western origins were forgotten¹¹⁵. Kuzma Ryabinov says that, despite the

¹¹² Hans Fallada, *Every Man Dies Alone*, trans. Michael Hofmann (New York: Melville House, 2010). First published in German in 1947.

¹¹³ Quoted in Rancour-Laferniere, *The Slave Soul of Russia*, 247.

¹¹⁴ Rancour-Laferniere, *The Slave Soul of Russia*.

¹¹⁵ Chumakova and Tsirlina, *Zdorovo I Vechno*.

clear anti-establishment and anti-Soviet lyrics of some songs, the aggression of Grazhdanskaya Oborona was directed “not against a country, but against a human system”¹¹⁶. As in Bashlachev’s *pesni ushanochki*, the specter of a suffering, incomprehensible *Russia* was always present, as was the awareness of belonging to the same literary tradition as Dostoevsky and Pasternak, even if augmented with the additions of Sartre, Hesse, and Castaneda.

The Siberian punks, though, were not affiliated with the more conventionally right-wing Russian nationalist movements that were gaining currency among certain circles of Soviet youth in the 1970s and 1980s. Rather Letov and others took a principled stand against these movements. One song from 1987 was dedicated to the anti-Semitic and monarchist organization “Pamyat’ (Memory)”:

The society Pamyat’ is Russian terror
 The righteous finger touching the trigger
 The people’s axe is excessively sharpened
 Tomorrow the unfortunate time comes
 The sword flashed, and someone got fucked
 The bayonet pierced the hated flesh
 The society Pamyat’ is our sacred father
 It will lead us to dismember and to stab
 The wounds rip open with the rays of dawn
 The proud tribe rises to battle
 We call on you with the cross and the sword
 To hang the Jews and save Russia!¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Grazhdanskaya Oborona, *Obshchestvo Pamyat’ (The Pamyat Society)*, 1987, <http://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1056910682.html>. Original text: *obshchestvo Pamyat’ – russkiy terror / pravednyy palets nashchupal kurok / shchedro natochen narodnyy topor / zavtra nastupit bezvremennyy srok / shashka sverknula – komu-to pizdets / shtyk kovyrnul nenavistnuyu plot’ / obshchestvo Pamyat’ – svyatoy nash otets / nas povedet razdirat’ i kolot’ / vspykhnuli rany rassvetnym luchom / gordoye plemya, na bitvu vstavai / my prizyvaem krestom i mehom / veshay zhidov i rassiyu spasay.*

Like the song “California Über Alles” by the American leftist punk band the Dead Kennedys, this song was at times misinterpreted by those who read it out of context, reading the oblique speech as direct. Dora Apel would misinterpret it as a sincerely anti-Semitic anthem as late as 2006¹¹⁸. However, Letov would make his position more clear in a 1988 song in which he sings, simply: “I am a Jew, kill me, if you are a member of Pamyat”¹¹⁹.

If the Siberian punks were staunchly anti-fascist and anti-chauvinist, then in what sense is their music national? It achieved this property through literary referencing, making explicit its connections to earlier forms of Soviet avant-garde and romanticism by identification with the likes of Mayakovsky and Yevtushenko. Mayakovsky, the resuscitation of whose memory had been crucial to the cultural consciousness of the Thaw generation, was particularly important as a “critical idiom” for staking out a social position¹²⁰. One of the songs Letov would revisit and re-record multiple times was “Samootvod,” dedicated to the suicide of Mayakovsky in 1930. The title *samootvod* is here translated as “abstention” but has the implication of “leading oneself out”:

Mayakovsky had a dream
 In a restless field rice was growing
 In the wild, beasts grow more
 If you go more quietly, you'll sleep more brightly
 Under a neutral sky, under a neutral sign
 Abstention
 Mayakovsky had a dream
 Fleeing step by step
 Who will wake you at dawn?
 Who will catch you, who will understand?
 Under a neutral snow
 Under a neutral fear

¹¹⁸ Apel, “The Allure of Nazi Imagery in Russia.”

¹¹⁹ Grazhdanskaya Oborona, *Zayebis'!* (*Fucking Great!*), 1988, <http://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1056900868.html>. Original text: *ya evrey, ubey menya, chlen obshchestva Pamyat'.*

¹²⁰ Rowley, “Modelling Mayakovsky,” 2.

Mayakovsky squeezed the trigger
 The cigarette butt burned out, the stream spurted
 The wheel turned
 That is how the harvest is collected
 Under a neutral sky
 Under a neutral flag
 Abstention¹²¹

Here the relationship between the death of the artist and the construction of the state is indicated by the neutrality of the flag over Mayakovsky's corpse and the suggestion that "the harvest is collected" through the deaths of poets. As a Futurist radical Mayakovsky had been an early supporter of the Bolshevik Revolution, successively criticized and promoted by the Soviet state and ultimately made a symbol of aesthetic opposition and radicalism coming from within the officially acceptable Soviet culture.

Russian soil is full of the graves of poets like Mayakovsky. Their suffering, paradoxically private but representative of the collective whose desperation they articulate, puts into sharp relief the tragedies of a history in which Russia's alleged incomprehensibility and impassioned beauty have also implied its resistance to development or justice. Letov explored these themes in the most ambitious work of his 1980s period, "Russian Field of Experiments," a 14-minute epic that resembles a traditional *bylina* or bardic poem in how the music is largely background noise carried by the vocal narrative. In this song Letov describes Russia – and here

¹²¹ Grazhdanskaya Oborona, *Samootvod* (*Abstention*), 1988, <http://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1225182512.html>. Original text: *Mayakovskiy videl son / v smutnom pole zreet ris / v khischnoy chashche zreet zver' / tishe edesh' – yarche spish' / pod neytral'nyim nebom / pod neytral'nom znakom / samootvod / Mayakovskiy videl son / shag za shagzom – nautek / kto razbudet na zare / kto poymayet – kto poymet / pod neytral'nyim snegom / pod neytral'nyim strakhom / samootvod / Mayakovskiy zhal kurok / zheg okurok, lil struyu / pokatilos' koleso / vot i sobran urozhay / pod neytral'nyim nebom / pod neytral'nyim flagom / samootvod.*

it is certainly Russia and not the USSR – as the site of repeated failed experiments in which the only progress made is in the development of new forms of suffering:

On the patriarchal garbage heap of obsolete understandings
Used-up models and polite words
Having ended oneself, to annihilate the whole world
Having ended oneself, to annihilate the whole world
Eternity smells like oil
Just like someone else's compassionate laughter
Gloriously falling on the Russian field of experiments
A geography of disgrace
An orthography of hate
An apologia of ignorance
A mythology of optimism
The laws of the howitzer of good-natured attitudes
The elite banquet of discretion
The pit is spoken with the mouths of babes
The bullet is spoken with the mouths of babes
Eternity smells like oil
It is a skill to be superfluous like me
It is a skill to be beloved like a noose
It is a skill to be global like a baked apple
It is an art to exit to the side at the right time
An art to be alien
The newest chemicals for cleaning gas ovens
From those who croaked there by their own will
The newest chemicals for cleaning ropes
From the nasty smell of unwashed necks
The newest means of finding the guilty
The Russian field of experiments
Beyond the door, once opened, is emptiness
This means that someone has come to get you
This means that now someone needs you.
And the snow continues to fall, continues to fall
The Russian field is oozing with snow.
And the mortification of young bulls in the slaughterhouse
Is the cause of collective joy, of collective pride,
Collective hate, the 'General Will'
The General Will and the General Senility ...¹²²

¹²² Grazhdanskaya Oborona, *Russkoye Pole Eksperimentov (Russian Field of Experiments)*, 1989. Original text: *na patriarkhal'noy svalke ustarevshikh poniatii / ispol'zovannykh obrazov i veshchivnykh slov / pokonchiv s soboyu, unichtozhit' ves' mir / vechnost' pakhnnet nefi'yu / slovno*

The song is reminiscent of the *Philosophical Letters* of Chaadaev, in which Russia exists only to teach the rest of the world a lesson, and in which the Russian people are responsible for their own unending suffering and backwardness; the very idea of the experimental field also seems to recall Berdyaev's description of the Russian soul in his book on Dostoevsky:

The Russian soul is capable of undergoing radical experiments, the likes of which the European soul cannot withstand, as it is too formatted, too differentiated, too bound by limits and borders, too connected with the traditions and upbringing of its origin. The spiritual experiments performed by Dostoevsky could only have been performed on a Russian soul. Dostoevsky studied the endless possibilities of the human soul; the forms and limits of the Western-European soul, its cultural enchainment and its uncompromising rationality would be an obstacle for such studies. That is why Dostoevsky is thinkable only in Russia and only the Russian soul could have been the material on which he made his discoveries.¹²³

The song also ties individual suicides and suffering to the notion of national material progress (“the newest chemicals for cleaning ropes / from the nasty smell of unwashed necks”). In this way the individual's intense feelings of futility, helpless and isolation are extended to the entire Russian nation, here seen as having been sacrificed for the greater good, but for whose greater good – it is not certain. One is reminded of Hosking and the perceived victimization of Soviet

iney, serdobol'nyy smekh / slavno valitsya na russkoye pole eksperimentov / geografiya podlosti / orfografiya nenavisti / apologiya nevezhestva / mifologiya optimizma / zakony gaubitsy blagonraviya / znatnoye pirshestvo blagorazumiya / ustami rebenka glagolet yama / ustami rebenka glagolet pulya / vechnost' pakhnet nef't'yu / masterstvo byt' islishnim, podobno mne / masterstvo byt' lyubimym, podobno petle / masterstvo byt' global'nym, kak pechenoye yabloko / iskusstvo vovremya uyti v storonku / iskusstvo byt' postoronnym / noveysheye sredstvo dlya ochistki dukhovok / ot zdokhnuvshikhsya po sovstvennoy vole / noveysheye sredstvo dlya ochistki verevok / ot skvertnogo zapakha nemytykh shey / noveysheye sredstvo nakhodit' vinovnykh / russkoye pole eksperimentov / za otkryvsheysya dver'yu – pustota / eto znachit, chto kto-to prishel za toboy / eto znachit, chto teper' ty komu-to ponadobilsya / a sneg vse idet, a sneg vse idet / russkoye pole istochayet sneg / a to, chto na boyne umertvili bychka / na to vseobschaya radost', vseobschaya gordost' / vseobschaya nenavist', vseobschaya volya / vseobschaya volya da vseobschaya starost'.

¹²³ Nikolay Aleksandrovich Berdyaev, *Mirosozertsnaiye Dostoyevskogo (The Worldview of Dostoevsky)* (Moscow - Berlin: Direkt-Mediya, 2015), 145–47.

Russians¹²⁴, and the subsequent feeling of cultural loss that fed right-wing movements in the 1990s¹²⁵. Suffering is the harvest on the Russian field.

The Russian-ness of this and other songs was present not only in lyrical content, but was emphasized repeatedly in interviews and manifestoes which spoke about the intrinsic intensity and tragedy of the Russian soul and way of doing things. Letov would say that:

... the essence of what we are doing is ... some kind of musical-emotional combination of tragedy, inner turmoil, and victory. It's not like a human feeling of loss ... the level of responsibility is impersonal, collective. Our condition is appropriate to a genre form closer to Russian folk songs. We have a magical connection with Russian music, with Russian pagan rituals, with the Russia of the Middle Ages.¹²⁶

This “impersonal, collective” feeling of loss was expressed in the 1980s through tropes of suicide and suffering, in which the artist was the sacrificial victim of the nation. These tropes would feel less relevant after the collapse of communism, when alternative forms of resistance began to seem possible, but the position of the individual seemed even more precarious and that of the community undermined completely. The inertia of Russian pagan rituals and the aesthetics of death could not be reversed by collision with the free market, however, but would rather be channeled into new forms of expression, into a youth movement which proclaimed death its homeland and its political ideology, which is the subject of the next chapter.

¹²⁴ Hosking, *Rulers and Victims*.

¹²⁵ Oushakine, *The Patriotism of Despair*.

¹²⁶ Letov, *Ya Ne Veryu*, 162. From an interview published in the newspaper *Zavtra* in December 1994. Letov says during the interview that he is quoting himself from an interview he says took place in 1988, but this original interview cannot be traced if it exists.

Chapter 4: Revolution

As *perestroika* continued and the collapse of the Soviet Union grew closer, the underground scenes began to adjust their goals and adapt to new roles. 1989 saw the close of the *samizdat* rock journal *Urlayt*, which had played a key role in promoting the aesthetics and ideas of Siberian punk. Its final issue became the first of a new publication, *Kontr Kul't Ur'a*, which opened with a statement of purpose from the editors Sergei Gur'ev and Aleksandr Volkov:

And so, the underground, which previously appeared as the antithesis of the Soviet stagnation, is now transforming into the antithesis of the whole social order. Many of the old “committed fighters against the regime” have turned out to be fighters for personal benefit, and now work together with the new petty bourgeoisie to replace the collapsed Brezhnev-Andropov bunker with a modern and functional state. But no living thing may function adequately without a set of internal microbes. We intend to remain such microbes in the insides of the state-organism now being born. The anti-Brezhnev period in the history of our underground is finished; relieving it is the period of a global counter-culture.¹²⁷

It was prescient to notice already in 1989 that the counter-culture's focus would have to become more global in order to stay relevant. The growing opportunities to work openly and to go abroad were changing the ways that these communities were constructed and perceived, the ways music and literature was produced and distributed, and the properties according to which they

¹²⁷ Sergei Gur'ev and Aleksandr Volkov, “Ot Redaktsii (From the Editors),” *Kontr Kul't Ur'a*, 1989, 3. Original text: *Itak, andergraund, ranee yavlyavshiysya antitezoy sovku, nyne prevrashchayetsya v antitezu vsemu sotsiumu. Mnogiye byvshiye 'ubezhdenniye bortsy s rezhimom' okazalis' bortsami za lichnoye sotsial'noye blagopoluchiye – i budut teper' vmeste s Novym Byurgerstvom pytat'sya vozvesti na smenu prosevshemu brezhnandropovskomu dzotu zdaniye sovremennogo konstruktivnogo gosudarstva. No ni odno zhivoye sushchestvo ne mozhet normal'no funktsionirovat' bez nalichiya vnutrennykh mikrobov – takim mikrobom my i zhelayem ostat'sya vo chreve narozhdayuschegosya novogo gosorganizma. Antibrezhnevskiy period istorii nashego andergraunda okonchen – na smenu emu idet period global'noy kontrkul'tury.*

identified themselves and in relation to whom. However, the dream of carrying the anti-regime resistance into a global liberation movement may have been destined for disappointment.

Stamm et al, in their discussion of rapid cultural collapse and destruction on an extensive scale, write that “for some, reversing the legacies of cultural trauma must include revolution and more conflict: a situation of unjustified violence begetting righteous overthrow”¹²⁸. In the case of the Siberian punks, many of whose brightest figures had died in the last years of the USSR, and whose particular form of fatalistic resistance seemed desperately in need of realignment, the coming revolution would take on increasingly nationalist features. These would-be nationalisms, though, would be distinctly recognizable as products of the Soviet underground and its literary obsession with death.

Many Siberian punks, including Yegor Letov, would spend the 1990s affiliated to various degrees and at various times with radical organizations like Eduard Limonov’s National-Bolshevik Party. Limonov himself would write, years later, that he discovered punk rock in 1970s New York, as a “new movement ... intentionally acclaiming trash as its ideology” and that this experience motivated him to recruit Soviet punks to National-Bolshevism¹²⁹. However, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, the punks that appeared in Siberia in the 1980s did not have an aesthetic based on the trash of an overproducing commercial society – they could not, since they did not live in such a society in the first place¹³⁰. They rather found their roots in Russian romanticism and the Soviet avant-garde.

¹²⁸ B. Hudnall Stamm et al., “Considering a Theory of Cultural Trauma and Loss,” *Journal of Loss and Trauma* 9, no. 11 (2004): 100.

¹²⁹ Eduard Limonov, “Punk and National-Bolshevism,” *The eXile*, January 26, 2007, http://www.exile.ru/articles/detail.php?ARTICLE_ID=8444.

¹³⁰ Pilkington, *Russia’s Youth and Its Culture*, 228–30.

The previous chapters described how the musical countercultures of the late Soviet Union nurtured the development of a melancholic reimagining of the Russian Idea and how this reimagining was accomplished in the Siberian rock scene through a literary preoccupation with death and the idea of a suffering poet and a suffering nation. This chapter will explore the later post-Soviet connection between that scene as a creative community and the National-Bolsheviks as a political force. The practical aims and policy goals of the National-Bolsheviks would seem to contradict the anti-totalitarian and anti-communist stance of the 1980s poets – Oleg Sudakov of Grazhdanskaya Oborona described the USSR as “ugly”¹³¹ – but there would be similarities in aesthetics and ideas of community purpose.

Art and Identity

Of key importance in the transformation of unofficial Soviet culture was the relationship to the West, which changed fundamentally as the country opened up. Many layers of Soviet culture official and unofficial, but perhaps the underground rock communities most of all, had based parts of their identities on an imagined version of the West built up with limited information under Soviet conditions; when the official Soviet culture began to collapse and the actually-existing West became present in daily life, these “internal imaginary worlds” disappeared too, a loss that many felt keenly¹³². There was a feeling of disillusionment that Western ideas and fashions did not have the liberating potential that they had appeared to possess during the Brezhnev years.

¹³¹ Chumakova and Tsirlina, *Zdorovo I Vечно*.

¹³² Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 206.

On a more esoteric level, the art critic and theorist Boris Groys, who first recognized the Romantic tendencies in Soviet art, has discussed Russian literature and philosophy in psychoanalytical terms whereby national feeling takes the place of the individual subconscious, a key point of difference with the West which has shaped all incarnations of the Russian Idea from Orthodox Christianity through Leninism and Eurasianism. Russia's strength is in its inscrutability, which, it seems, would make its psycho-spiritual victory over the West inevitable, whatever form it might take; the "dark, self-destructive" Russia could never be tamed by the "critical and moralizing" West¹³³. When Soviet intellectuals were able to interact more freely and intimately with the West, they were demoralized to find that such a victory had not taken place or ever been anticipated; rather, the West had made philosophical and artistic progress without the need for input from Russia or Russians. As Groys wrote in 1989:

If postmodern, poststructuralist thought today sees a union of "phallocracy" and imperialism and speaks about an "irreducible heterogeneity of the Other" which cannot be seized either sexually or through revolution, then this Other becomes "absolutely Other," located in an unreachably remote location: the Thing is hiding beyond Thingness (*predmet skryvaetsya za predmetnost'yu*); being (*bytiye*) slips away and becomes inconceivable (or unattainable) as a matter of principle. Precisely because of this absolute remoteness, the Thing, being, woman, or whatever is at the same time imbued with absolute power over "I"; it deconstructs "I", and becomes for it "absolutely close," intimately defining it. Russia, by contrast, from the very beginning emerged in Russian thought as a triumphant, decisive beginning: as a Thing, being, woman, or whatever, that seizes control of the self-important European "I." The problem here, though, is that the corresponding imagining of Russia is possible only from the perspective of European thought: the victory of the Other, which is to say Russia, over the West is possible only as a result of the internal victory of the Russian intelligentsia, that is, the Western principle, Western "consciousness", in Russia itself. Russia responded to Western expansionism with the strategy of self-occupation, self-colonization, self-Europeanization. In the postmodern paradigm this strategy is already doomed to failure: the Russian intelligentsia is lost in the Other, that is, in Russia, with no chance of controlling it. What currently troubles minds in the Russian intelligentsia is the fact that the West has already suffered its defeat, its metaphysics are already deconstructed, consciousness has already dissolved

¹³³ Eşanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art*, 207–8.

in the subconscious – but the West has *again* gotten by without any need for Russia at all.¹³⁴

So would the intellectuals published in journals like *Kontr Kul't Ur'a* be troubled, when the movement they spearheaded would ultimately fail to have global significance. The counter-cultural attitudes and forms of revolt that had gestated under Soviet oppression would not be useful for subverting the West in a new “global counter-culture” as they hoped. Rather, with the Soviet leviathan falling apart, the West and global commercialization would themselves become greater threats to the integrity of those communities than the Soviet state had ever been. Once again the Russian Idea needed to be redefined.

Patterns of consumption and distribution of artworks also changed, with corresponding effects on content. Soviet punk music had been shared by *magnitizdat* tapes and covered by *samizdat* journals which were products of late socialism with their own coded language; when restrictions on free expression were lifted and when the USSR ultimately fell apart, the old signifiers of meaning and status changed. Songs lost their “nomadic and uncontrolled”¹³⁵ qualities after their distribution was no longer tied to clandestine social networks and friendships. Rather, the new nomadism would revolve around trips abroad. Intimacy between artists and consumers would now be negotiated through money; people would come to miss the forms of *obshcheniye* that had taken place in Soviet kitchens and apartments; the kitchens were still there but the conversations felt different¹³⁶. Soviet forms of friendship had been compromised. New

¹³⁴ Groys, “Rossiia Kak Podsoznanie Zapada,” 251–52. Emphasis in original.

¹³⁵ Horne, “The Bards of Magnitizdat,” 183.

¹³⁶ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 148.

ways would need to be found to impart meaning to underground art under the new social conditions.

In writing about conceptual art in the Soviet Union, Octavian Eșanu has noted a shift in creative circles from communities oriented on process and solidarity (in Russian *sodruzhestvo*, from the word *drug* or “friend”) to communities oriented on accomplishments and completed tasks (in Russian *sotrudnichestvo*, from the word *trud* or “labor”)¹³⁷. That is, as artists adapted to market forces and the end of censorship, production became more important than activity. *Zhiznetvorchestvo* was undermined as the circumstances and lifestyle of the artist became less present at the point of consumption. There was a corresponding necessity to “renegotiate collectivity”¹³⁸.

For conceptual artists in Moscow, the collapse of communism was associated with a shift from words to numbers and from wildernesses to landscapes¹³⁹ and a general decline in Romantic or mystical tendencies in favor of rationality. In the Siberian punk rock scene too there was movement away from literature and towards more direct politics, but the more notable change is thematic: from individual to collective sacrifice, from personal to national melancholy. The experiences of recording, distributing, and consuming music lost a great deal of its intimacy; national feeling was one way to compensate for this loss. Furthermore, the hopelessness of the *individual* dissident facing the Soviet state was now replaced by the hopelessness of the Soviet *nation* facing little-understood forces of global capitalism.

¹³⁷ Eșanu, *Transition in Post-Soviet Art*, 218–19.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 224.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 222–24, 256–57.

Letov would become affiliated with nationalist movements only after 1993, but interviews from before the end of the USSR demonstrate this resistance to integration with the West, the music of which had been such a key influence for his own. In 1990, he told *Peripheral Nervous System*:

In general I don't really care about this [Western promotion]. In the West no one can understand what is happening here. They don't have any rock like this, really. I don't know a single band that could compare with what Bashlachev did. They have a different situation. Rock for them is pure aesthetics, or a joyful pop music you can relax with. A whole wave of our groups is now trying to break out to the West, but I don't know what for. In the West everything is very rational and very good. Everything has its proper place, even culture. Now they are inviting me to play in France. I probably won't go. They just think differently. With us everything is the opposite, everything is ass-backwards (*u nas zhe vse naoborot, vse cherez zhopu*). They don't understand this. They interpret everything that is happening here as some sort of avant-garde, as an aesthetic avant-garde. What is here absolutely serious is for them just aesthetics. They see in it an absurd, a pathology. If they knew what this was in reality, they would be horrified.¹⁴⁰

Letov would dissolve the band Grazhdanskaya Oborona in 1990 at the peak of its popularity¹⁴¹. He would distance himself for some years following the death of Yanka Dyagileva, working on psychedelic projects that sonically had little in common with his 1980s output. When he would reform Grazhdanskaya Oborona, it would be in an independent and capitalist Russia and with an updated counter-cultural outlook, as a leading force of the national-communist rock movement “Russian Outbreak”.

Nihilism and Heritage

The National-Bolshevik Party (NBP) was established in Russia in 1993 and might seem to assemble paradoxical elements of nationalist, anti-nationalist, and trans-nationalist feeling into

¹⁴⁰ Letov, *Ya Ne Veryu*, 29–30.

¹⁴¹ Chumakova and Tsirlina, *Zdorovo I Vechno*.

an ideological stance that does not easily fit conventional descriptions of nationalism. Led by former dissidents of various backgrounds and working to mobilize the disaffected youth of the post-Soviet collapse, the National-Bolsheviks have been simultaneously leftist and rightist, anarchist and authoritarian, pro-Russian and anti-essentialist. What brings all of these conflicting positions together is opposition not only to the state, but it seems to the whole world – it is an opposition, though, in Russian national clothes. The foundational myths of the National Bolshevik worldview are Soviet myths, rather than Russian, and the party’s ideal of nationhood and statehood has more in common with Soviet aesthetics and revolutionary fervor than it does with the sorts of cultural or territorial goals associated with most historical nationalisms in Europe.

The views of the National-Bolsheviks were and are shaped by their leader, the former émigré writer Eduard Limonov, together with the Eurasianist philosopher Aleksandr Dugin and others whose notoriety predated the establishment of the party itself. Given Limonov’s personal history as a novelist and poet and the un-conventionalism of some of his statements both in tone and in content, it could be argued that in some respects or at some times the National-Bolsheviks were less a genuine political party than a quasi-satirical movement that effectively mocked the post-Soviet Russian political space by adopting deliberately absurdist positions, or by using absurdist justifications for erstwhile-mainstream nationalist positions, e.g. claiming that a partial annexation of Kazakhstan would be necessary “if we want [Russian] children to have sunshine”¹⁴². However, the popular appeal of the party’s ideology, the sincerity of (at least some of) its followers, and the affiliation of its members with other nationalist movements that cannot

¹⁴² Eduard Limonov, “Through Black Glasses (Limonov on Russia),” *The eXile*, February 11, 2008, http://www.exile.ru/articles/detail.php?ARTICLE_ID=16499.

but be taken seriously (see Limonov caught on film firing a machine gun at Sarajevo in the 1992 film *Serbian Epics*¹⁴³) are such that the party must be treated as a genuine nationalist phenomenon even if its own presentation of itself is not always reliable.

The party's slogan is "Long Live Death" (*da zdravstuyet smert'*). The National-Bolsheviks adopted the NSDAP color scheme for their banner, simply replacing the swastika with a hammer and sickle positioned in a white circle on a red field. The blasphemy of this juxtaposition would be obvious to most Soviet citizens, but the image may not be as contradictory as it initially appears.

The combination of Soviet-style communist ideology with extreme nationalism, Russian or otherwise, was not an innovation of the 1990s; although the simplified consensus among historians is that Russian nationalism was suppressed in the Soviet Union, excepting the duration of the Great Fatherland War, the Soviet-Israeli academic Mikhail Agursky traces the union of Russian chauvinism with communist internationalism to the Civil War period or sooner¹⁴⁴. Of key importance in this development was the interference of the Entente powers in Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution, which would "geographically localize the global evil of capitalism" in the West¹⁴⁵. As before, Russia's rival and enemy remained the West, and the most striking psychological change brought about by the October Revolution was that Russia was no longer backward but rather the model of the future order.

As before, the spirit of Russian people was mythologized. Lunacharsky and Trotsky would both associate the Russian soul with the traits desirable in committed revolutionaries: "a

¹⁴³ Pawel Pawlikowski, *Serbian Epics* (BBC Films, 1992).

¹⁴⁴ Mikhail Agurskiy, *Ideologiya Natsional Bol'shevizma* (*The Ideology of National Bolshevism*) (Moscow: Algoritm, 2003), 69.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

lack of disposition to acquiescence, conformism or submission; decisiveness in thought; daring”¹⁴⁶. Of greater interest in studying the relationship between National-Bolshevism and suicide rock is the involvement of underground religious movements and eccentric artists in the October Revolution. Agursky finds unexpected continuities between the militantly atheist Bolsheviks and the various Christian heretics of the Empire, united by what he understatedly calls a “messianic attitude” (*messianskoye nastroyeniye*)¹⁴⁷ and destructive nihilism:

Russian religious nihilism, like that of the nihilist sects of the Middle Ages, had a sharply expressed apocalyptic character. It existed in constant anticipation of catastrophe ... the perversions of the earth had reached such a scale that the world needed a purifying fire. The fire should swallow up the new Sodom and Gomorrah, and in their place a new Kingdom of God would rise up.¹⁴⁸

In this way there was a surprising affinity between radical religious groups and the Bolsheviks’ desire to create a communist society without first transitioning through capitalist industrialization. In discussing the reasons that poets and intellectuals of the imperial intelligentsia were drawn into sympathizing with the Bolsheviks, Agursky also describes common interests between Christian mystics and satanic occultists like Valery Bryusov, “for whom the greatness of Russia was not that it would emerge from suffering and death to become the light of the world, but rather that it would destroy Christianity, creating another sort of civilization”¹⁴⁹. All of these contradictory influences would become part of the fabric of Bolshevik ideology, although some could be propagated more publicly and with less ambivalence than others.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 68.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 10.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 21.

The National-Bolshevik Party founded by Limonov in 1993 builds on the legacy of the messianic and anti-messianic nihilist Bolsheviks of the 1910s and 1920s, not the establishment communists of the 1970s. In a short essay in a 2003 edition of the official NBP newspaper *Limonka* (“grenade,” also a play on Limonov’s name), the party activist Igor Garkavenko emphasizes that the ideology of the party is one of total negation and not of construction:

At its current stage the NBP is a party of annihilation. Destruction ... is the uniting factor; construction with all of its projects is a factor that would divide us... The main difference between the NBP and the other parties in the national-patriotic camp is that all of the members of those parties are the same. The stress with them is on being *for* something. For one of a thousand possible *fors*... In the NBP there are very different young people, many of whom have a *for* in their heart, but they are united by a perfect joy in annihilation, in the burning away of the abomination, and the fatalistic resistance to the monster of the state. Building is something we can do later.¹⁵⁰

Ultimately the strength and potential of the Russia created by the NBP is to be drawn from this radical opposition, a belief made clear in another manifesto included in the same edition of *Limonka*:

We have neither an army nor any money for one. Our goal is different: to literally suck the remaining life force out of the decrepit and dying old Russo-Soviet nation and incorporate it into a New Russian Nation. Seeing our feats of strength, our wild energy, our great recklessness, the efficiency of our organization, and our patriotism expressed through acts rather than words, exactly the sort of people we need will come to us: the brave, the adventurers, the unrecognized talents, the runaway soldiers, the honorable lieutenants – in such a rabid broth, the new nation will turn out glorious with such ingredients!¹⁵¹

The denigration of the “decrepit and dying old Russo-Soviet nation” (*dryakhleyushchaya i umirayushchaya staraya russko-sovetskaya natsiya*) here is significant, because the Russian nation is thereby conflated with the practical failures of Soviet society and is for this reason considered

¹⁵⁰ Igor Garkavenko, “Sut’ NBP (The Essence of the NBP),” *Limonka*, April 2003, 218 edition, , http://limonka.nbp-info.com/218_article_1226839036.html.

¹⁵¹ Vladimir Abel, “Volya NBP (The Will of the NBP),” *Limonka*, April 2003, 218 edition, http://limonka.nbp-info.com/218_article_1226839021.html.

beyond salvation. This conflation of the old Russia with the Soviet system, with a highly negative implication, is present in all NBP literature.

The goal of the party therefore is to replace both the Russian and Soviet nations with a “New Russian Nation” built in the image of the party and selectively incorporating its preferred elements from both the Russian and the Soviet legacies. The same manifesto describes this “new, as-yet-nonexistent Russian nation” as one which must “take from the Russian past only its brightest, most heroic, most genius breakthroughs and insights. It is not necessary to take everything”¹⁵². It is clear from the context that the elements to be borrowed are chiefly its nihilistic, messianic revolutionary elements, the ones earlier shared by the Bolsheviks and occult heretics; other fixtures of Russian civilization, such as Orthodox Christianity, are dismissed as dead and obsolete ideas. Later sections compare the militarism of the party to a Soviet partisan resistance movement, in contradistinction to a standing army. It closes by identifying the party’s main enemies as agents of the global “police-court civilization” embodied by both Russia and the West, and concludes with the statements “Russia does not need a cosmetic makeover, Russia needs a revolution”¹⁵³.

The apocalyptic vision of a revolution praising destruction for its own sake had some similarities with how death was conceived in political and philosophical-literary terms by the 1980s Siberian punks, as a sort of uncompromising break with absurd reality. Limonov called on his followers to become “kamikazes, focused on radiant death”, because only in this condition

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Ibid. Original text: *Rossiya nuzhdayetsya ne v kosmeticheskom remonte, Rossiya nuzhdayetsya v revolyutsii.*

is it possible to accomplish anything of value¹⁵⁴. Dugin declared that “war is our mother” and that “the immediate experience of existence becomes a philosophical fact during war”, when an individual is confronted with the personal mortality from which they are alienated during peacetime¹⁵⁵. Both Limonov and Dugin, however, were not simply philosophizing about the power of life and death, but were forwarding radical political ideas that defended violence against concretely and explicitly identified enemies. Limonov argued that Russia needs not a president but a *vozhd'* (dictatorial leader)¹⁵⁶; he further said that Russia could have no friends and that its enemies “must be either subdued or exterminated”¹⁵⁷. How palatable could these ideas be to the Siberian scene, whose members were predisposed to messianic nihilism, but also to hippy-ism?

The very first issue of *Limonka* in 1993 would include an interview with Yegor Letov to bring the Soviet punks into the fold. In this interview he would decry “Gorbachev’s crawling counter-revolution” (*gorbachevskaya polzuchaya kontrrevolyutsiya*) and call in apocalyptic terms for a new “tribal civilization of artists, creators, and poets” (*plamennaya tsivilizatsiya khudozhnikov, tvortsov, poetov*)¹⁵⁸. He would also say that the humanistic qualities of the Soviet system had only become apparent after they were replaced by the system of Western capitalism, which was worse. With these pronouncements Grazhdanskaya Oborona would be reformed in

¹⁵⁴ Eduard Limonov, *Kak My Stroili Budushchee Rossii (How We Built the Future of Russia)* (Moscow: Presskom, 2004), 85.

¹⁵⁵ Aleksandr Dugin, *Filosofiya Voyny: Tot, Kto Ne Gotov Srazhat'sya I Umirat', Ne Mozhet Po-Nastoyashchemu Zhit' (The Philosophy of War: He Who Is Not Ready to Fight and Die Cannot Fully Live)* (Moscow: Iauza-Eksmo, 2004), 116.

¹⁵⁶ Limonov, *Kak My Stroili Budushchee Rossii*, 30.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁵⁸ Letov, *Ya Ne Veryu*, 107. First published in *Limonka* 1, October 1993.

its post-Soviet incarnation and the national-communist rock movement Russian Outbreak would be formed to declare concert venues liberated from the Yeltsin regime.

Outbreak

Discussing “contradictions of freedom” in the book *The Kingdom of the Spirit and the Kingdom of Caesar*, first published in Paris in 1947, Berdyaev would write that:

True freedom is found not when a person has to make a choice, but when he has already made it. Here we come to a new definition of freedom: real freedom. Freedom is an internal creative energy in a person. Through this freedom the person may create a totally new life, a totally new society and world. It would be a mistake, though, to understand this freedom as an internal causality. Freedom exists independent of causal relations. Causal relations are located in the objective world of observed phenomena. Freedom is an outbreak in this world (*proryv v etom mire*). It comes from elsewhere, and it contradicts the law of this world and overthrows it.¹⁵⁹

Given the conception of rock music in the Siberian underground as something elemental and religious, it was probably in this sense of freedom as an “outbreak in this world” (*proryv v etom mire*) that the name of the national-communist rock movement Russian Outbreak (*Russkiy Proryv*) was intended. The movement was founded in 1994 in close affiliation with the National-Bolshevik Party. It included a reformed Grazhdanskaya Oborona as well as other national-communist bands like Rodina (Homeland), led by sometimes-member of Grazhdanskaya Oborona Oleg “Manager” Sudakov. They organized a series of concerts in the mid-1990s that involved deliberate provocations of the police and calls for revolution against the Yeltsin regime.

¹⁵⁹ Nikolay Aleksandrovich Berdyaev, *Tsarstvo Dukha I Tsarstvo Kesarya (The Kingdom of the Spirit and the Kingdom of Caesar)* (Moscow: Respublika, 1995), 326.

The theme of death and suicide, so important to the way that the 1980s punk scene had expressed itself, would not disappear but would be reinterpreted as part of the newly-imagined collective struggle. As death, per Yurchak, had been ironically aestheticized in the Soviet Union as a sort of *proryv* in its own right, disrupting the monotonous banality of the state discursive regime, it would need to be transformed in order to disrupt the new weak and commercial regime of the 1990s. In 1993 in the newspaper of the “spiritual opposition” *Den’* (*Day*), Letov would retroactively enlist the suicides of 1988-1990 into the new movement:

The Kingdom of Heaven is taken by force, as we know. If there is no strength and no escape, then one must leave with dignity, without giving up, one must leave like Yanka, Bashlachev, Selivanov, and my other brothers- and sisters-in-arms on the front. They were victorious, in the first place, because they defied the fierce law of self-preservation, in the end they defied death itself. Those who are left in their wake must defend their own sections of the front as well as the ones that have been abandoned ... do not lose hope or honor! Stand up, comrades!¹⁶⁰

Interviews and public statements from these early years of the post-Soviet constitutional crisis place as great an emphasis on life as the music of the 1980s had placed on death. In the first issue of the official National Bolshevik newspaper *Limonka*, Letov commands his countrymen to “act in such a way that Death would run away from you in horror” (*deystvuyte tak, chtoby Smert’ bezhala ot vas v uzhasse*).¹⁶¹ The collective political will of revolution had subsumed the individual artistic will of suicide.

Limonov and others would call themselves Russian nationalists, though Russian-ness and Soviet-ness were conflated in the ways they defined themselves. Limonov would list Soviet cult figures like Marshal Zhukov in his list of heroes, but also celebrate Russians as “the most

¹⁶⁰ Letov, *Ya Ne Veryu*, 111. First published in *Den’*, October 1-7, 1993.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 110. First published in *Limonka*, no. 1, October 1993.

numerous white nation in Europe”¹⁶². Letov always adamantly emphasized that he was a Soviet nationalist; as “Russian Field of Experiments” in 1989 had described the historical reprobation of the Russian people in tragic terms, the idea of Russian sacrifice and victimhood would be rehabilitated just like the deaths of Bashlachev, Selivanov, and Diagileva. From the same *Den’* interview taken in the midst of the October 1993 events:

... the glory and greatness of Russia is in the fact that it was the first country in the history of humanity to accept the bitter and righteous mission of breaking through (*proryv*) a thousand years of wretchedness, bigotry, and the isolation of the individual to the great union of humanity. I believe, I have faith in the global, universal revolution for which I am prepared to fight in word and deed, like my courageous predecessors, teachers and comrades from Dostoevsky to Mayakovsky, all those who were against deception, indifference, collapse, death. In 1917 our country made its first step on the path to real truth (*istina*), let it not be the last!¹⁶³

Again the name of the dead poet Mayakovsky is resurrected, but no longer dying “under a neutral flag”, he has become a symbol of Russian greatness, alongside Dostoevsky, a religious conservative.

Many of the songs performed at Russian Outbreak rallies were the same ones that had been written in the 1980s. In live performance they would often include political dedications or there would be minor lyrical changes, as in the song “The Rifle is a Celebration”; in its original version it includes a line mocking “cops and patriots” (*menty i patrioty*), but during the Russian Outbreak concert in Saint-Petersburg in 1994 the phrase is changed to “cops and democrats” (*menty i demokraty*)¹⁶⁴. At this show the band performed with a giant National-Bolshevik Party

¹⁶² Ibid., 139–41. Quoted in an article in the newspaper *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* credited to Fenechka Oblomova, June 1994. The article is titled “The Suicide of Yegor Letov” and is heavily critical of *Russkiy Proryv*, calling it a disgrace to Letov’s anti-totalitarian legacy.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 110. First published in *Den’*, October 1-7, 1993.

¹⁶⁴ Grazhdanskaya Oborona, *Russkiy Proryv v Leningrade (Russian Outbreak in Leningrad)*, CD (GrOb-Records, 1994), www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1045895472.html. The song “The Rifle is a

banner hanging behind them; video and audio recordings were later published with the title “Russian Outbreak in Leningrad,” consciously rejecting the change back to the city’s older imperial name.

Among the songs most often played during the Russian Outbreak period were “The Homeland is Death” (*Rodina – Smert’*) and “New Day” (*Novyy Den’*). The latter, when performed in 1994, would be dedicated to the “heroic defenders of the House of Soviets in October 1993”¹⁶⁵:

The paths are obscured in the mist
A shadow has begun to reign over my land
There will be a new day.
A clear bright day.
The revenge sweet, the die cast, the power usurped
Scarlet streams, fallen crows, stomped dirt
Forbidden profits, concrete dust, horizons sold off
Like nothing at all, but all the same, it’s something too, just too fucked up
It’s crowded in paradise
It’s dirty in paradise
It’s stuffy in paradise
It’s nauseating in paradise
The thicker the gloom, the brighter it will be in battle
The darker the night, the sooner comes the dawn
There will be a new day.
A clear bright day.
There will be a new day.
A long clear day.
I give praise to the new day!¹⁶⁶

Celebration” also includes lyrics about the expansion of the “global frontline of the insane” (*vsemirnyy obezumevshiy front*), the spreading of the “seeds of anarchy” (*semena anarkhii*), and the growth of the “psychedelic army” (*psikhedelicheskaya armiya*). These lines were not changed for the 1994 concert.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Grazhdanskaya Oborona, *Novyy Den’ (New Day)*, 1994, <http://www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1056899718.html>. Original text: *puti-dorozhki skomkany vo mgle / na moey zemle votsarilas’ ten’ / budet novyy den’ / yasnyy svetlyy den’ / sladostnaya mest’, broshennaya kost’, kradenaya vlast’ / alye ruch’i, palye grachi, stopannaya gryaz’ / zapretnaya byl’, betonnaya pyl’, prodannaya dal’ / vse by nichego, da tol’ko chto-to uzh slishkom, slishkom vse*

“New Day” would be among the most explicitly political songs to come out of this movement, but Letov never stopped seeing himself chiefly as an artist. In 1994 he would tell the oppositional newspaper *Zavtra* (*Tomorrow*) that a political song, “even just slogans, if it works, if it has an effect on a person, on his mood, on his soul, then it is art”¹⁶⁷. As in the 1980s, he would emphasize the religious and messianic aspects of his form of rock music, but increasingly the West and commercialism would be the ideological foils, and religion and mysticism would become exclusive to Russian heritage:

Where could America get such energy, where could it get such real rock? It [America] is a pile of immigrants making money, a people without their own mentality. Europe is already senile ... Aleksandr Dugin makes the point in *Elements* that all the human community is divided into two currents, two vectors of development. The first is the civilization of the West, the system of negotiations, the system of global solitude: a great number of solitary units. The second current is the aspiration to the collectivity of origin, family, nation ... We are raising a revolution to return to ‘pre-civilization family values’ (*dotsivilizatsionnye semeynyye tsennosti*).¹⁶⁸

The revolution, of course, would be unsuccessful, and when Russian Outbreak collapsed its various participants would go their separate ways. Some would shift further to the right and others back to the left or separate themselves from politics altogether, but the particular aesthetic of death and revolution espoused by Russian Outbreak would fail to find widespread support after the 1996 election.

khuyevo / tesno v rayu, gryazno v rayu, dushno v rayu, toshno v rayu / chem gusche sumrak – tem svetley v boyu / chem temnee noch’ – tem skorey rassvet / budet novyy den’ / yasnyy svetlyy den’ / budet novyy den’ / dolgiy yasnyy den’ / slavyu novyy den’!

¹⁶⁷ Letov, *Ya Ne Veryu*, 160. First published in *Zavtra*, December 1994. *Zavtra* (*Tomorrow*) is the same newspaper of the “spiritual opposition” that had been called *Den’* (*Day*). The name was symbolically changed after the shelling of the White House in 1993.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 161.

This chapter has looked for points of ideological or aesthetic continuity between the anti-totalitarian punk subculture and the crypto-fascism of the National-Bolsheviks in order to explain the unlikely union of these two movements. It has found such points of continuity in the way that literary tropes of death and suicide were renegotiated and collectivized in the 1990s, when Russian Outbreak literally declared death to be its homeland and its ideology; if the 1980s culture viewed the state as eternal and insurmountable and death as the primary means of breaking with the absurd outer reality, then in the 1990s the state seemed weak and the new eternal, insurmountable force was the intruding global market led by Europe and North America. In this context death became a cultural value in need of protection and national revolution became the new escape from absurdity. The suicidal values of the past were reenlisted into the new struggle in seemingly contradictory ways.

Conclusion

This thesis began by considering the apparent paradox of why an anarchist, anti-totalitarian, anti-patriotic counter-culture like the existentialist “suicide punks” would become so closely affiliated with a hard nationalist organization like the National-Bolshevik Party in the 1990s. The question was how such an affiliation could have happened and what it can teach us about the ways that national identity can be constructed and politicized. Upon analysis of the dominant themes in the ideological and artistic pronouncements of the suicide punks and National-Bolsheviks, the conclusion has been reached that these groups were united chiefly by literary mythologies about suffering which fetishized radical breaks with the existing reality; under the conditions of the 1980s, this break could only be individual death, and in the 1990s, it could only be national revolution. Although political content changed between the two decades, the performance of resistance followed similar patterns based on Russian messianism and the poet as an inspiration.

As the political and social situation in Russia began to normalize and the a-historical intensity of Soviet feeling retreated to memory, the appeal of radical revolution faded and the participants of Russian Outbreak and the early National-Bolshevik Party split. Dugin would become closer to power. Letov and the other punks would abandon the National-Bolsheviks; Limonov would call Letov “capricious and feminine” in the March 1996 issue of *Limonka*¹⁶⁹. Letov would ultimately call the NBP a “comical party” and complain that the original ideas of

¹⁶⁹ Dmitrii Nevelev, “Delo Letova - Obyknovennoye Predatel'stvo (The Letov Affair - Typical Treason),” *Limonka*, March 1996, 35 edition, http://limonka.nbp-info.com/035_article_1226837546.html.

Russian Outbreak had been turned into an affair for typical skinheads¹⁷⁰. Limonov has remained in opposition and remained provocative but is no longer the terrifying bogeyman he once was, having been supplanted in the political scene by more responsible voices as the political and media environment became less erratic and Soviet aesthetics became less visible in the public¹⁷¹.

From out of the Siberian punks, Oleg Sudakov would adopt the most conventionally nationalist position, ultimately dropping much of the radical messianic rhetoric of the National-Bolsheviks and the specter of violent revolution, but becoming increasingly defensive of ethnic Russian cultural hegemony. His writings call the creation of the Soviet nation a fortuitous solution of the Nationalities Question that had existed in the Empire; he considers the dissolution of this nation to be the work of foreigners, foremost among them the United States¹⁷². He calls the demographic crisis in Russia a “liberal genocide” that has taken more life out of the country than the Civil War or the purges of Stalin did¹⁷³; he also suggests that the anarchy of the 1990s and “denationalization” of the country was the work of a disproportionately Jewish elite¹⁷⁴, but insists that racism and chauvinism are alien to the Russian character, since all other peoples will

¹⁷⁰ Sergei Zharikov, “Paradigma Svastiki: Sergei Zharikov Meets The Letov Brothers (Paradigm of the Swastika: Sergei Zharikov Meets The Letov Brothers),” *Kontr Kul’t Ur’a*, 2001, 26.

¹⁷¹ Evgenii Viktorovich Rozhkov, “Evolution of the Image of a Writer and Politician-Extremist: The Transformation of the Ideology of Limonov in Russian Media in the 1990s and 2000s” (National Research University - Higher School of Economics, 2015).

¹⁷² Oleg Sudakov, “Russkiy Vopros I Denatsionalizatsiya (The Russian Question and Denationalization),” *Official Site of Oleg “Manager” Sudakov*, January 18, 2006, <http://manager.lenin.ru/stat'i/20-russvopros.htm>.

¹⁷³ Oleg Sudakov, “Kontury Ideologii Osvobozhdeniya (Contours of the Liberation Ideology),” *Official Site of Oleg “Manager” Sudakov*, July 2, 2006, http://manager.lenin.ru/stat'i/23-kontury_ideo.htm.

¹⁷⁴ Sudakov, “Russkiy Vopros I Denatsionalizatsiya (The Russian Question and Denationalization).”

naturally be “charmed by the incomprehensible Russian Soul”¹⁷⁵ and put up no resistance to being assimilated by it. In this way the Russian Idea is taken away from its fatalistic and literary origins and becomes a nationalist ideology with more expected policy goals: hegemony of the Russian language, territorial integrity, resistance to foreigners abroad, keeping minorities in a minority position.

Letov died in 2008 and was buried under a Jerusalem Cross, the “symbol of eternal victory over death” and the “cross of the first Christians of the catacomb period, which unites all Christians”, in the words of his widow Natalya Chumakova¹⁷⁶.

Political controversy continues to circle the legacy of the Soviet punk movement. In 2016, the annual Bashlachev Festival in Cherepovets will be organized by Zakhar Prilepin of the National-Bolshevik Party, who has promised to turn it into a propaganda event celebrating the pure Russian-ness of Bashlachev’s work. Some are boycotting the festival; Bashlachev’s biographer Lev Naumov emphasized the poet’s pro-Western political attitudes and Yan Sherkman summed up in an article for *Novaya Gazeta*:

The schism is [not according to leftist or rightist politics but] according to a different principle. Some say “Yes, Death”, like Zakhar’s comrades in the [National-Bolshevik] Party, and others say “Yes, Life” ... death is always a simplification, with no ambiguities, the rejection of subtlety. Death always sells well. It is alien, naturally, not one’s own. Death is the ideal theme for the manipulation of consciousness, and Prilepin is an experienced and competent manipulator ... But life, as Kharms joked, is victorious over

¹⁷⁵ Oleg Sudakov, “Pugayuschiy Labirint Natsionalizma (The Confusing Labyrinth of Nationalism),” *Official Site of Oleg “Manager” Sudakov*, August 6, 2006, http://manager.lenin.ru/stat'i/24_pug_lab_naz.htm.

¹⁷⁶ Natalia Chumakova, “Pamiatnik Egoru Letovu (Memorial to Egor Letov),” *Official Site of the Group Grazhdanskaia Oborona*, accessed May 30, 2016, <http://www.gr-oborona.ru/pub/rock/memorial.html>.

death by some means unknown to science. And even Zakhar cannot do anything about this.¹⁷⁷

The debate about the Bashlachev Festival was still fresh when, a few weeks later, Yuriy Saprykin addressed the 25th anniversary of Yanka Diagileva's death for the culture site *Meduza*. He wrote that there was no sense in having political debates speculating on what Yanka's political views in 2016 might have been, because she was "like a space ship that ejects its unnecessary components ... with time she became separated from time. It is impossible to imagine her in any modern context"¹⁷⁸. Her songs, he says, "have no lyrical hero, or any character really, just a face that is suffering, enduring, held captive, but there is no action taken" (*v ee pesnyakh otsutstvuet liricheskiy geroy, voobshche lichnost'; zdes' suschestvuyet litso stradatel'noe, perezhivayushcheye, zakhvachennoe, no net deystvuyuschego*)¹⁷⁹. This approach, which highlights humanity and empathy and avoids the effort to "update" politics, is perhaps the healthiest one to take.

In briefly closing, this thesis will return to the concept of *sotzromantizm* which emphasizes the humanistic and antirational trend in late Soviet culture.

Satanism

The romantic, absurdist and ironic aspects of the Siberian community are perhaps best demonstrated by groups like Flirt or the project Communism (*Kommunizm*), which was formed

¹⁷⁷ Ian Shenkman, "Bashlachev imeni Prilepina (Bashlachev according to Prilepin)," *Novaya Gazeta*, April 27, 2016, <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/arts/72881.html>.

¹⁷⁸ Iurii Saprykin, "Cherez zasnezhennyye komnaty i dym: Yuriy Saprykin o Yanke Dyagilevoy (Through snowed-in rooms and smoke: Iurii Saprykin on Ianka Diageleva)," *Meduza*, May 9, 2016, <https://meduza.io/feature/2016/05/09/cherez-zasnezhennyye-komnaty-i-dym>.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

by Yegor Letov, Kuzma Ryabinov and Oleg Sudakov in 1988. This project was announced in the first issue of *Kontr Kul't Ur'a* with a manifesto titled "Conceptualism Inside"¹⁸⁰; it was conceived as a dialogue of archetypal personalities in which Sudakov represented the arrogant ego, Ryabinov the clumsy and ironic, and Letov the nervous and romantic¹⁸¹. Its albums are pieces of noise collage and studio experimentation in which samples from Soviet and Western popular music are juxtaposed with poems and texts from various sources.

One poet often sampled in this project was Lev Oshanin, winner of the 1950 Stalin Prize and one of the signatures on the letter condemning Boris Pasternak for the publishing abroad of *Doctor Zhivago*¹⁸². The members of Communism created a background of static and heavy bass for a chant-like recital of his poem "Four Soldiers", which was written to honor the crew of a barge drifting at sea:

A black wind is roaring, the darkness is full of menace
 A storm wave rises up to the sky
 From sunset to sunset the hurricane is raging
 Four unarmed soldiers
 And before them the ocean!
 Hunger has drained their strength, the rudder is useless in the waves
 Only the light of the Homeland in their Komsomol hearts
 "Well, hang in there, guys" – the lighthouse says to them.
 Four unarmed soldiers
 And an ocean full of spite!
 Many years will pass over the frontier of the seas
 The children of our children will live on the earth
 And they will remember, that once an example was given to people
 Four unarmed soldiers

¹⁸⁰ Egor Letov and Kuzia Uo, "Kontseptualizm Vnutri (Conceptualism Inside)," *Kontr Kul't Ur'a*, 1989.

¹⁸¹ Chumakova and Tsirlina, *Zdorovo I Vechno*.

¹⁸² Anna Balueva, "Lev Oshanin Svoi Pervye Stikhi Prines v Komsomolku (Lev Oshanin Brought His First Poems to the Komsomol)," *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, May 30, 2012.

And they were victorious over the ocean!¹⁸³

These lyrics, written by one of the USSR's most prolific and politically orthodox poets, contain much of the same melancholic pathos found in the suicide punks' original writings: they describe an overwhelming, inhuman foe but also faith in an ultimate victory which will pass into eternity despite not being described or explained at all. The hopelessness and faith of the Komsomol hearts in the poem are felt by the suicide punks too, despite their political and aesthetic differences. In arranging the performance of the poem with guitar feedback and monotone singing, the members of Communism do not contradict its meaning or intention but rather emphasize the anonymity of the four unarmed soldiers and the broader applicability of their dread and resolve. There is a disruption of the work of Oshanin but the identification with Soviet emotionality is genuine.

Former members of the suicide rock scene say in *Zdorovo i vechno* that their songs were imagined as magic spells, in which two or three words were thought to have the power to pull listeners out of their "Soviet complexes" and into states of ecstasy¹⁸⁴. The complete text of the song, beyond those two or three magic words, was to be just Dadaist noise. The most extreme example of this effort in all of the output of the 1980s Siberian scene is the Kommunizm album *Satanism*, which consists of two compositions of disjointed noise, sampled orchestral works, and shouting¹⁸⁵. According to the contributors, the piece was intended, like the music of indigenous

¹⁸³ Kommunizm, *Chetyre Soldata (Four Soldiers)*, 1988, www.gr-oborona.ru/texts/1395157671.html.

¹⁸⁴ Chumakova and Tsirlina, *Zdorovo I Vechno*.

¹⁸⁵ Kommunizm, *Satanizm (Satanism)*, CD, 1989.

Siberian shamans, to bring the listener into a trance-like state through improvised tempo changes and inconsistent repetition¹⁸⁶.

The revival of the Soviet debate about humanism during *perestroika* was sparked by Zaslavskaya's essay "The Human Factor in Economic Development and Social Justice" (*Chelovecheskiy faktor v ekonomicheskoy razvitiy i sotsial'naya spravedlivost'*) in the journal *Kommunist*¹⁸⁷. The nihilistic, anti-cerebral madness on *Satanism*, full of laughter and howling but without language, was named by its creators simply "The Human Factor in Action" (*Chelovecheskiy faktor v deystvii*).

Opportunities for Further Research

This thesis has focused on only a certain small community of artists and on one particular aspect of their artistic and political activity. It has been unfortunately beyond the scope of this project to explore more broadly in terms of geography, time and content. The influence of the 1980s underground on culture and politics inside and outside of Russia has not been sufficiently researched, nor have the works of this period been integrated into the general narrative of Russian or Soviet literature.

Russian art and conceptual subversion have been back in the international news lately, from the imprisonment of the members of Pussy Riot in 2012 to Pyotr Pavlensky's decision to nail his scrotum to Red Square in 2013. From the "amoralism" propagated by the Ulan-Ude rock community of the 1990s to the post-modern satirical Orthodox fascism of Tver's Ensemble of

¹⁸⁶ Tim Hodgkinson, "Siberian Shamanism and Improvised Music," *Contemporary Music Review* 14, no. 1–2 (1996): 59–66, doi:10.1080/07494469600640161.

¹⁸⁷ Zaslavskaya, "Chelovecheskii Faktor Razvitiya."

Christ the Savior and the Damp Mother Earth (*Ansambl' Khrista Spasitelya i Mat' Syra Zemlya*), deviance within the Russian underground remains high-concept, self-consciously ideological, and insistently, self-destructively Russian. What relation do these modern expressions of protest have to their predecessors in the Soviet and Imperial pasts? What influence might they have on the parallel identities being produced now?

An extensive oral history of the underground movements of the anarchic 1980s and 1990s has yet to be produced. Such a study would be greatly useful not only for understanding how rapidly disintegrating discursive regimes can provoke all sorts of ideologically messy reactions, but it would also illuminate how a nation's poets have tried to remember themselves and how they have been remembered, again and again.

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