

Retro-Future in Post-Soviet Dystopia

Sergey Toymentsev

Moscow State Pedagogical University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Russian Literature Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), and the [Television Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Recommended Citation

Toymentsev, Sergey. "Retro-Future in Post-Soviet Dystopia." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 21.4 (2019): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3179>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 81 times as of 11/07/19.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <clcweb@purdue.edu>

Volume 21 Issue 4 (June 2019) Article 4
Sergey Toymontsev,

"Retro-Future in Post-Soviet Dystopia"

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss4/4>>

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 21.4 (2019)**
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol21/iss3/>>

Abstract: In his article "Retro-Future in Post-Soviet Dystopia" Sergey Toymontsev explores the vision of retrospective future in such Russian novels as Tatiana Tolstaya's *The Slynx*, Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik*, Olga Slavnikova's *2017*, and Dmitry Bykov's *Zhd*. Unlike Zamyatin's and Platonov's anti-Soviet satires, post-Soviet dystopias do not respond to any utopian narrative, but project the historical and ideological reality of Russia's violent (predominantly Soviet) past into the future. Such a traumatic reenactment of the Soviet past in the dystopian future testifies to the rise of authoritarianism in contemporary Russia as well as its incomplete collective memory work regarding its Soviet legacy.

Sergey TOYMENTSEV

Retro-Future in Post-Soviet Dystopia

During the first decade of the new millennium, the Russian literary scene was hit by a veritable avalanche of political dystopias. Dismal prognoses of the country's near catastrophic future spread like an epidemic among fictional writers of all calibers and political affiliations - journalists, debutants, dilettantes and renowned masters as well - winning both the public's attention and prestigious literary prizes, and thus becoming the center of heated cultural debates. The post-Soviet boom of dystopian imagination, which resulted in the so-called "antiutopia factory" that symbolizes the massive descent of the dystopian discourse into mass literature (Chantsev 7), could be compared with the rise of the dystopian genre triggered by the communist takeover in Russia and Eastern Europe in the twentieth century. Yet, unlike Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (*Мы* 1921) and Andrei Platonov's *Chevengur* (*Чебеньгур* 1929) and *The Foundation Pit* (*Котлован* 1930), that is, state-control dystopias written in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, or George Orwell's *1984* (1948) and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) written in the early years of the Cold War, post-Soviet dystopias following the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991 do not respond to any utopian narrative but rather project the historical and ideological reality of Russia's violent (predominantly Soviet) past into the future. Given the classic definition of anti-utopia as "utopia's twentieth century doppelganger" (Gordin et al. 1), that is, a narrative which is "against Utopia and utopian thought" (Sargent 138), post-Soviet dystopian narratives, as many critics concur, can hardly be regarded as pure dystopias since they "actually deal with the present," despite their "maintaining the form of dystopian forewarning and orientation toward the future" (Chantsev 8). Furthermore, in their critique of the present extrapolated into the future, the "new dystopias" emphatically foreclose any possibility of positive future. Hopelessly pessimistic and fully embedded in the present conflated with the past, these novels are, as Chantsev argues, "satire that believes itself to be an antiutopia" (10).

Even though the "new" Russian dystopias do not fully meet these aesthetic criteria, they still pertain to the dystopian genre precisely because of their futuristic embeddedness in the present, since both "utopias and dystopias are histories of the present" (Gordin et al. 1) and thus inevitably reflect sociopolitical tendencies of their own zeitgeist in the fictional future. Following Francis Fukuyama's dictum of the "end of history," many critics concede that, with the fall of communism and the consequent triumph of Western neoliberalism, utopian imagination went bankrupt. As a result, Fukuyama laments, today "we have trouble imagining... a future that is not essentially democratic or capitalist... a world that is *essentially* different from the present one and at the same time better" (Fukuyama, *The End of History* 46). In the twenty-first century, when utopia appears to be somewhat anachronistic, dystopia thus continues to evolve on its own, without its "utopian doppelganger." In this regard, post-Soviet dystopias may prove to be the darkest kind of literary forewarning, as they neither derive their inspiration from utopian prospects gone wrong, nor do they point to any way out of the "terrible new world." Solely anchored in the political reality of the present, their dystopian temporality is caught in a vicious circle of the traumatic repetition of the horrors of the country's communist past projected into its no less authoritarian future.

Contrary to Fukuyama's prognosis that celebrates the victorious expansion of democratic values all over the world, in Russia, the collapse of communism has not necessarily led to the triumph of liberal democracy, although it did open the way for the triumphant development of capitalism. Why market reform has succeeded and democracy has failed to take root in Russia has now become one of the most topical questions in post-Soviet studies (See Gill, Åslund). Many scholars suggest that Russia as a country with a centuries-long history of authoritarianism can hardly escape cultural challenges to democratization. Furthermore, Russia's imperial politics of superpower commanding international respect - a common reference point for the present-day nostalgia for the Soviet era - has always been the result of severe autocracy at home (See Mendelson and Gerber, Jarvik). Some point to Russia's economic reliance on vast natural resources and its superpresidentialist constitution as the main factors for the political elites' isolation from popular pressure (Fish). Others emphasize the lack of political participation and overall popular dissatisfaction with the radical outcomes of Russia's liberalization policies in the early nineties that discredited the value of democracy for most citizens (Carnaghan, Lukin). With all these explanations being plausible, what becomes certain for most commentators is that contemporary Russia's return to authoritarianism can no longer be understood within the "transition paradigm" that presupposes the gradual consolidation of democratic institutions after the regime change. Rather than being a "failed" case of democratization, with Putin's presidency Russia has started

to illustrate more a "success story" of the regime *continuity* that manages to absorb recently imported democratic ideals and practices into the long-standing authoritarian tradition.

The new wave of dystopian forecasts, therefore, has been provoked by Russia's recent authoritarian revival. In these narratives, the restorative tendencies of the present are pushed to their ultimate apocalyptic limit and culminate in yet another terrible world which becomes strongly reminiscent of the old Soviet state merged with Russia's mediaeval feudalism. Yet, as I will argue, post-Soviet dystopias – namely, Tatiana Tolstaya's *The Slynx* (*Кысь* 2000), Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* (*День Опричника* 2006), Olga Slavnikova's *2017* (2006), and Dmitry Bykov's *Zhd* (*ЖД* 2006) – are not merely "extrapolating the current situation into the future and adopting... an escapist stance" (Chantsev 9) while proposing no alternative to the dystopian condition they portray. On the contrary, they provide a powerful social commentary on the very nature of Russia's attempt to overthrow its *ancien régime* in the early nineties, an attempt which certainly qualifies as "revolutionary" yet is ridden with inevitable shortcomings and contradictions that continue to condition the structural ambivalence and incompleteness of Russia's transition to democracy. In what follows, I will first consider Russia's so-called "democratic revolution" in terms of Antonio Gramsci's theory of "passive revolution," an abortive and incomplete revolution characterized by the contradictory tendencies of revolution and restoration. I will further utilize the neo-Gramscian model of Russia's "passive revolution" as an "interpretative criterion" for my reading of the hybrid temporality in selected dystopian novels.

Russia's self-willing transition from state socialism to free market economy could generally be classified as a "rectifying revolution," a revolution which, unlike violent bourgeois or communist revolutions, is reformist by nature and "is meant to make possible a return to constitutional democracy and a connection with developed capitalism" as well as "a return to old, national symbols" (Habermas 4-5). Although USSR's neoliberal "restructuring" did instigate a chain of rectifying revolutions in Eastern Europe circa 1989, Russia's "democratic revolution" is nonetheless unique and highly divergent from that of its former Soviet satellites. As many scholars suggest, Gramsci's model of "passive revolution" could help clarify the structural contradictions of Russia's regime change in all its stages of transition: Gorbachev's restructuring, Yeltsin's Western-style democratization, and Putin's restoration (see, for instance, van der Pijl, Worth, Simon).

Gramsci's concept of "passive revolution" refers to a state-led revolution with no massive support of population ("revolution from above") which brings about the regime change not by the Bolshevik-like machinery of terror but by the "successive small waves of reform" (Gramsci 115) during which old social classes are not destroyed altogether but only demoted from their dominant position and integrated with new elite groups. Unlike a ruptural "active" revolution characterized by the dialectical suppression of one class by another, a passive revolution aims at the continuous reconciliation of contending forces, which expresses itself in a "blocked dialectic" of revolution and restoration (Buci-Glucksmann 315). The transformation of the old regime and its parallel preservation thus become two sides of one and the same process, "a process of reformist "revolution-restoration" evolution," (Gramsci 377) in which the thesis incorporates a part of the antithesis without being transcended by it in "the dialectical opposition." As Gramsci argues, "The thesis alone in fact develops to the full its potential for struggle, up to the point where it absorbs even the so-called representatives of the antithesis: it is precisely in this that the passive revolution or revolution/restoration consists" (110).

Russia's "difficult" case of democratic transition appears to perfectly fit Gramsci's rationale of passive revolution not only because it was orchestrated as an administrative restructuring of power relations entirely within the Soviet *nomenklatura* elite (see Hahn). As a multi-stage process, Russia's passive revolution persistently manifests itself through a contradictory dynamic of progressive and reactionary tendencies successfully neutralized in what is now termed as a "hybrid regime" (Diamond, Hale, Robertson, Levitsky and Way), a regime characterized by the operation of two systemic logics (democracy and authoritarianism) and resulting in a number of constitutive contradictions, such as the combination of the rule of law and individual liberty (or alternative forms of justice), full-fledged capitalism (oligarchy) and its centralized state control (bureaucracy), free elections with the absence of independent parties, freedom of speech with no access to information, population's low income and desire for glamour and prosperity, the marginal yet indispensable status of opposition, etc. As Richard Sakwa comments on such a mix of contradictions, "This is the classic stalemate situation... of a passive revolution. The duality, moreover, is reflected in popular attitudes, with 51 per cent in 2005 supporting the view that Russia needed a president who could exert the 'firm hand' to govern the country, while 44 per cent favored a leader who 'strictly observed the constitution'" (37).

What is more interesting, though, is how Russia's hybrid political regime officially promoted as "sovereign democracy" is directly reflected in its contradictory vision of the past, a hybrid regime of collective memory according to which the Soviet past is simultaneously condemned and glorified for its

crimes and imperial achievements respectively. Russia's ambiguous politics of the collective memory of the Soviet legacy is formulaically captured in President Putin's tribute speech to the victims of Stalin's repressions, given on October 30, 2007, where he suggests that "while remembering this tragedy, we should focus on what is best in the country and unite our efforts for the country's development" (Smolchenko). Glorifying "what is best" while still remembering the worst in the country's past without recognizing the relation of causality between the two extremes has thus become the main tendency in Russia's reckoning with its communist past, a seemingly reconciliatory tendency which manifests itself in a plethora of mnemonic paradoxes. For example, in the recent teachers' handbook for Russian history, Stalin is presented as a "contradictory" figure, "evil for some but a hero for others, especially regarding his role in the Great Patriotic War and territorial expansion" (Andrieu 212). According to a 2007 opinion poll in St. Petersburg, 64 percent of respondents considered that "with Stalin people used to be kinder, more generous and more compassionate" even though 63.5 percent of them understood that 10 to 30 million victims suffered from Stalin's atrocities (Khapaeva). Russian TV equally welcomes popular series both on Gulag and repressions (*In the First Circle* 2006], *Lenin's Will* 2007) and on Soviet police officers (*Liquidation* 2007]). In some Russian cities, monuments to the victims of the regime "quietly coexist" with those to its heroes, as well as with the still functioning prisons where the former used to be kept (Etkind 51). All in all, post-Soviet collective memory work simultaneously developing according to the two fundamentally divergent scenarios appears to be caught in the same "blocked dialectic" of revolution and restoration as Russia's current political life. Both strive to reconcile their commitments to the newly adopted democratic principles as well as the centuries-long authoritarian tradition. In such a stalemate situation, as Gramsci stated, the "problem is to see whether in the dialectic "revolution/restoration" it is revolution or restoration which predominates; for it is certain that in the movement of history there is never any turning back, and restorations *in toto* do not exist" (219-220).

It is to this impasse of Russia's passive revolution aiming at the impossible compromise between pro-democratic and pro-autocratic visions of the country's past that post-Soviet dystopias respond by putting historical time on hold and proposing two equally dystopian scenarios, according to which either infinite *restoration* or perpetual *revolution* takes over in the future. In dystopias of "restoration *in toto*," Tatiana Tolstaya's *The Slynx* and Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* and *Sugar Kremlin* (2009), Russia's future is its violent past which seamlessly merges the mass atrocities of the Soviet regime with patriotic pride and jubilation for its exceptional path. In this future, the former directly conditions the latter, while the latter officially justifies the former. In dystopias of perpetual revolution, Olga Slavnikova's *2017* and Dmitry Bykov's *Zhd*, the antagonism between liberals and communists never comes to an end and thus results into yet another blood bath in the near future.

For both Sorokin and Tolstaya, a Russia of the future develops backward. In *Day of the Oprichnik*, a New Russia of 2027 is a medieval state walled off from the West and enjoying a full-blown renaissance of Ivan the Terrible's epoch, with its all-controlling private police force called the *oprichnina*. In *The Slynx*, two centuries after civilization ended in a nuclear holocaust known as the Blast, Russia is similarly isolated from the world and thrown back to pre-modern feudalism, where the secret police reigns supreme. In both dystopias narrated in radically simplified pseudo-folkloric Newspeak, a quasi-archaic Slavonic language designed to designate the degree of Russia's restoration/retardation, the Soviet-style totalitarianism organically morphs with Slavic mythology and thus proves to be the ideal model for Russia's political (d)evolution.

Since Tolstaya's *The Slynx* was written a bit earlier (1986-2000) than a whole slew of anti-Putin dystopias, it thus responds not to the current politics of restoration but rather to Russia's overall attempt to embrace revolutionary change and overcome its totalitarian past. In her dystopian universe, post-apocalyptic Russia is populated by the so-called Degenerates, the genetic mutants born after the Blast, and the Oldeners, a minority of the Blast survivors who mysteriously became immortal and now seek to restore culture before the catastrophe. As Tolstaya points out, the atomic Blast that reverses the movement of history in the novel was only partly inspired by the 1986 Chernobyl disaster, which is itself a symbolic event that triggered the rapid disintegration of the Soviet Empire; it should rather be associated with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, a tragedy "worse than anything in our history" (Tolstaya, *Pushkin's Children* 342). For Tolstaya, after the Blast of 1917 Russia was thrown into a similar state of savage barbarism and devastation. As a result, a new monstrous species *homo sovieticus* (a term coined by Alexander Zinoviev, another Russian anti-utopian) was born, an anthropological catastrophe from which, according to Tolstaya, Russia could hardly ever recover. Merging the dystopian modality with that of *Bildungsroman*, *The Slynx* thus stages a dramatic attempt of its protagonist, Benedikt, born from the Degenerate-father and the Oldener-mother, to evolve beyond his initial mental degeneracy towards the pre-Blast state of human normalcy, a regeneration which the author deems virtually impossible.

Even though Tolstaya's futuristic Russia hits the very bottom of human degradation where the wheel was just recently reinvented and the fire still remains a mystery, it nonetheless retains all the hyper-bureaucratic machinery of the Soviet Union under the dictatorship of some Fyodor Kuzmich, a timid dwarf who has renamed Moscow after himself following the tradition of other tyrants. To keep the population ignorant and docile, the despot has prohibited all the pre-Blast books yet keeps plagiarizing the old masterpieces by presenting them to the public as his own. Just like in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, severe censorship on reading and "freethinking" is enforced via the KGB-like Saniturations who terrorize the country in search of the forbidden books. Working as a government scribe copying out classic literature for the Ruler, Benedikt develops an avid love for reading, which rapidly escalates into a dangerous obsession. Unlike Guy Montag's spiritual quest through the books, however, Benedikt's passion for education does not provide a counter-narrative of resistance but rather pushes him to an even further enslavement by the regime. To have access to confiscated books, he marries the daughter of the Head Sanituration, Kudayar Kudeyarych, who possesses the largest library in the country. But after Benedikt reads all the available books, he becomes a Sanituration himself by persecuting anyone who might have a new book. By using Benedikt's religious dedication to literature, his father-in-law lures him into the Ruler's palace where "books [are] piled up high as the snow" (Tolstaya, *The Slynx* 267) and thus convinces him to "make a revolution" (Tolstaya 267). Yet after the tyrant is overthrown and former Moscow renamed after Kudayar Kudeyarych, the new regime turns out to be even more violent and repressive. Neither Benedikt's "evolution" nor his father-in-law's "revolution" can transcend the original state of degeneracy caused by the Blast. Both endeavors are caught in a closed loop of mythological timelessness where all metamorphoses, like in Dante's *Inferno*, recycle in static repetition with no progressive development. No matter how many volumes Benedikt consumes, his mind lacks the ability of metaphorical thinking and is thus incapable of building up spiritual knowledge, which makes him equally enjoy reading poetry and instructions for a meat-grinder. Similarly, no matter who governs the country, a new tsar will replicate the same cycle of violence. In Russia, according to Tolstaya, history "repeats itself" (*Pushkin's Children* 146) and thus can only manifest itself as myth with no possibility of historical breakthrough.

In *Day of the Oprichnik*, Russia's history similarly repeats itself, as its future regresses back to a pre-modern era; yet, it enjoys an immense technological progress, which made many readers conclude that Sorokin wrote an autocratic utopia instead. Whereas Tolstaya's dystopia ostensibly laments the protagonist's failure of resistance, Sorokin's wholeheartedly condemns any sign of opposition and ecstatically celebrates the dystopian status quo. Despite the violence and shocking obscenity in this world, the narrator Andrei Komiaga, a former historian, now a diligent *oprichnik*, exclaims delighted: "you feel so good, your soul feels so *perfect*, so balanced, so *important*... life is good, you are strong, you're part of a great endeavor... Russia is alive and well, rich, huge, united" (Sorokin, *Day of the Oprichnik* 86-7). By forcing the reader to simultaneously confront the horrors of totalitarianism *redux* and identify with the conscientious mind of the perpetrator who justifies himself as "part of a great endeavor" by his devout patriotism and loyalty to God, Sorokin pushes the dystopian genre to its limit, where no critical distance to the regime is left available, and thus perversely resolves the current paradox of post-Soviet memory politics which strives to reconcile the nostalgic glorification of the Soviet era with the condemnation of its atrocities. In Sorokin's dystopia, legally institutionalized violence becomes the very basis of Russia's future prosperity: "as long as the oprichniks are alive, Russia will be alive" (Sorokin 191).

Conceived as the grotesque obverse of Solzhenitsyn's 1962 novella *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, recounting the humble struggle for survival of a Gulag prisoner, Sorokin's *Day of the Oprichnik* follows the daily routine of the royal executioner whose day begins with the pillaging of the rich aristocrat's house and the gang-rape of his wife and ends with the sadomasochistic orgy of the entire "death squad" in a sauna. In between, virtually all aspects of retro-futuristic Russia are touched upon in Komiaga's government work, such as his supervising a concert to ensure its patriotism; meeting a disgraced citizen to receive a bribe in exchange for a pardon as well as a delirious clairvoyant on behalf of the Tsarina to learn about Russia's future; flying over to the country's border to deal with Chinese merchants, the only foreign partners new old Russia can afford; listening to the dissident radio stations; observing a food kiosk where all products are exclusively Russian and bookstands in which all literature is "approved by his Majesty" (Sorokin, *Day of the Oprichnik* 89), etc. During a break, Komiaga ritualistically gathers with his co-workers in a bathhouse to collectively enjoy a drug-induced hallucination that presents the *oprichniks* as the Seven-Headed Dragon flying overseas to destroy America.

It is possible, of course, to view *Day of the Oprichnik* as an antiutopian response to such reactionary nationalist utopia as Pyotr Krasnov's *Behind the Thistle* (1922) as well as a postmodern remake of

Vladimir Voinovich's *Moscow 2042* (1982), the anticommunist and antinationalist émigré antiutopia produced during the late Soviet period, since all of them similarly portray the new old Russia isolated from the West and merging autocracy and orthodoxy (Aptekmanm). Sorokin's dystopia is nevertheless non-ideological. By satirizing such ideological narratives as nationalistic Eurasianism, Orthodox Christianity and state socialism, Sorokin does not primarily aim at discrediting their utopian prospects; this task has been well accomplished by other writers or by history itself. The first and foremost target of Sorokin's antiutopian satire is Russia itself or, rather, its ontological anti-modern propensity towards infinite restoration which climaxed in the tyranny of Ivan the Terrible. It is this medieval temporality of orgiastic violence and hermetic dogmatism towards which Russian mentality, according to Sorokin (and Tolstaya as well), obstinately gravitates and in which it feels particularly comfortable. Unlike Voinovich's *Moscow 2042*, whose protagonist is an enlightened dissident writer leaving Russia for Germany in the end, Sorokin's novel does not offer any escape from its all-encompassing dystopian milieu. Indeed, there's no outside world in Sorokin's dystopia, its sinister space is totalizing and uncompromising. Furthermore, in Sorokin's sequel *Sugar Kremlin* the mediaeval future of Russia is granted a panoramic and polyphonic portrayal from multiple perspectives, while the *oprichnik* Komiaga himself perishes in the next wave of terror. In this regard, both Sorokin and Tolstaya, who certainly wish Russia a better future based on democratic principles "Russia is Slipping;" "Democracy Has Nearly Disappeared"), have significantly updated the genre of dystopia: instead of offering a viable alternative to their gloomy forecasts, they rather methodically force the reader to identify with the perverse consciousness of their anti-heroes completely devoid of guilt and critical thinking, which effectively serves as a powerful forewarning to the dangerous tendency of the nostalgic restoration of the Soviet and mediaeval past in Russia's present.

For Olga Slavnikova and Dmitry Bykov, who represent the dystopia of perpetual revolution, a Russia of the near future never quite manages to overcome the tension between democratic and autocratic tendencies laid bare by the collapse of the Soviet Union. In Slavnikova's *2017*, the suppressed dissension spontaneously overflows into a sudden massacre during the preparation for the Bolshevik Revolution centennial. In Bykov's *ZhD*, a futuristic Russia is bogged down in economic recession and yet another civil war which plunge the nation into barbarism and decay similar to *The Slynx's* post-apocalyptic wreckage.

The title of Slavnikova's *2017*, alluding to both Orwell's *1984* and the Bolshevik revolution, might seem misleading, since the novel is not quite a political dystopia but primarily a love story: a talented gem-cutter and a former historian, Krylov, living in Yekaterinburg, is torn between his glamorous and cynical ex-wife Tamara, a wealthy funeral director who is still in love with her ex-husband, and his mysterious lover Tania, who turns out to be an incarnation of the Stone Maiden, a mountain spirit of the Urals folklore. Yet, as the novel progresses, the protagonist's love affair proves to be no more than an illusory flight from the suffocating reality of dystopian Russia similarly torn between its rampant capitalism, where even death becomes a commodity (as we see it in Tamara's funeral business combining burial ceremonies with a lottery to win a Caribbean cruise), and its Soviet past revived in various aspects of cultural and political life. On the one hand, global capitalism thriving in Russia has resulted in the abysmal gap between the rich few and the rest of population, where the former control the media, politics, and even ecology as well as enjoy various electronic gadgets (such as laser keys, video phones and holographic books), trendy \$600 bills with a female US president, gated mansions, maid service, etc., while the latter continue to live in shabby apartment blocks cut off from decades of technological progress. The ideology of consumerist happiness with its "culture of copies without original regulated by hundreds of restrictions prescribed in the Consumer Rights" (Slavnikova, *2017* 187) and aggressively imposed in television shows and Hollywood blockbusters has fully replaced serious art and humanist values. On the other hand, the traditions of Soviet authoritarianism have been gradually reinforced in numerous ways: the memorial to Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Soviet secret police notorious for mass executions, is now reinstated; Lenin's mummy is on tour around the country; portraits of Russian authorities are installed in public places (one of which is in the restaurant presenting Russia's president as an epic hero with a sword, riding a steed); schools have revived the traditions of Soviet pedagogy; "the great Putin" serves now as an ideal model for all other presidential candidates, etc. As Slavnikova demonstrates, the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution on November 7th (that ceased to be a national holiday in 2005) becomes the most representative example of Russia's future restoration of its Soviet legacy. Yet, during the rehearsal of the parade for the revolution centennial people masquerading as the "Red" Bolsheviks and the "White" monarchists start shooting at each other after a powerful bomb explodes. What begins as the celebration of the revolution spills over into an unstoppable bloodbath spreading across other regions of Russia like an

epidemic, dividing the entire population into the "Reds" and the "Whites" and even forcing the current government to resign.

While describing the chaos of a coming civil war, Slavnikova provides no elaborate explanation why the masqueraded revolution exploded with contagious violence. In the novel, it is no more than an extravagant background against which the protagonist's love adventures unfold and, because of these events, go awry. Yet one of Krylov's casual comments does clarify the dynamic of the "epidemic of history":

The reason is the same as in the Great October Socialist Revolution... The rulers are unable and the ruled ones are unwilling. Only in our day and age we don't have formal forces capable of expressing the situation. Therefore they're going to use hundred-year-old forms, because they're the best we have. Even if they're unreal, false. But history has a reflex to them. The conflict itself recognizes the maskers as the conflict's participants. The conflict has always existed, since the 1990s. We just haven't had these rags yet – the revolutionary greatcoats, riding breeches, and leather jackets. The conflict didn't have anything to wear to go public. It's been slipping. And now, in connection with the centenary, we've got all the rags you want. (Slavnikova, 2017 233)

For Slavnikova, therefore, Russia's democratic revolution of 1991 was never able to fully resolve the conflict between antagonistic forces kept in check since the communist revolution of 1917. The antagonism persists even after the triumph of capitalism, although in the dormant form of vast inequalities endorsed by the mixed ideologies of Western neoliberalism and Soviet restoration. In her dystopian future, the regime's suppression of social contradictions, a tendency unmistakably recognizable in contemporary Russia, backfires in mass psychosis triggered by the carnival reenactment of national trauma.

In Bykov's *ZhD*, written as a historiographic metafiction, Russia's potential future is similarly its past since its history ultimately rejects a linear progression. By endlessly repeating one and the same cycle of revolution-terror-war-thaw-stagnation-revolution, a cycle lasting for about a hundred years, Russia is "doomed to live according to the laws of nature" (Bykov *Zhd* 184) following the rhythm of cyclical, or mythical, time. Each new revolution throws the country backward for half a century by sweeping away all the achievements of a previous regime, including the insurgents themselves, after which a new power gradually gets old, senile and ineffective and a new revolutionary leader restarts the historical cycle over again. Depending on a certain cycle, the same communist could unconsciously turn into a democrat, while a democrat into a dictator. Whether it is Ivan the Terrible's Empire followed by Boris Godunov's thaw in the sixteenth century or Stalin's terror by Khrushchev's thaw in the twentieth century, each epoch is caught in a vicious circle, or spiral, of history, which Bykov compares to Dante's circles of Hell leading Russia to apocalypse. As *ZhD* predicts, in the near future Russia reaches its apocalyptic finale by ultimately dying out of exhaustion and degradation in the cycle of constant revolutions as well as the economic breakdown caused by the discovery of a new fuel phlogiston unobtainable on Russian soil. With oil rendered worthless, the country, whose economy is fully dependent on vast oil reserves, is isolated from the world and thrown into yet another civil war that grotesquely illustrates Bykov's historiosophic speculations about Russia's fundamental inability to break through eternal repetitions of the same and take the path of progressive evolution.

As it turns out, Russia has always been a colony alternately invaded and occupied by two rivaling ethnic groups: the Varangians, or Russians, the Nazi-minded descendants of northern Vikings, and the Khazars, or Jews, the liberal-oriented cosmopolitans from the southern kingdom of Kaganate. The former impose a totalitarian model of society with its excessive militarism and vertical hierarchy of power, while the latter pursue the democratic principles of open society with its rhetoric of civil liberties and horizontal egalitarianism. Furthermore, each of the contending camps have been fighting for their own politics of time: Russians for the primacy of the past, while Jews for that of the future. As one of the novel's characters nicely puts it, "Russia has always been divided by all kinds of schisms which have been following one and the same scenario: some were for the past which had never been, while others for the future which would never be" (Bykov 455). Therefore, the ideological conflict between Eastern authoritarianism and Western liberalism is allegorically translated into an endless ethnic strife between Russian Northerners and Jewish Southerners fighting for their right over Russia's territory. Being half-Russian and half-Jewish himself, Bykov supports neither side, since the Varangians' sadomasochistic drive for patriotism always ends up in mass repressions, while the Khazars' hedonistic pursuit of freedom - in moral corruption. This is why during their war turned into a stalemate no one confronts each other in an open battle: the former continue killing their own soldiers to boost the war spirit, while the latter keep indulging themselves in various pleasures.

There is, however, a third ethnic force in the novel: the authentic Slavs, or "Joes," constituting the indigenous population of Russia and described as the holy fools of Russian folk tales, that is, gentle, passive, amnesiac, weak-willed and circle-worshipping vagabonds equally despised by both invaders. It is to them that the author ascribes the root cause of Russia's historical cyclicality: maintaining their pagan belief in cycles, the natives manipulatively pit the rival colonizers against each other and thus imprison Russia's history into a magic circle of endless wars and revolutions.

However bold and majestic Bykov's historiosophic fantasy might be, he provides no solution to the puzzle of Russia's internal colonization (r)evolving under the spell of cyclical time. His protagonists, each representing a certain ethnicity involved, keep wandering *around* in Russia hoping to find love, meaning and home there but ultimately failing to do so. In this regard, Bykov's dystopia shares the same historical pessimism evident in authors examined above. Characteristically enough, the dystopian design of his grotesque futurology, predicated on pushing Russia's political contradictions to the extreme, structurally replicates itself in his novels dedicated to the country's past and present, similarly marked by the unresolved tension between liberal and authoritarian perspectives. For example, in his novel *Justification* (2001) the young historian Rogov is obsessed with the impenetrable enigma of Stalin's repressions. To explain their rationale, he conjures up a paranoid theory that would justify millions of victims including his grandfather: Stalin's terror was not a genocide committed against his own people; on the contrary, tortures and killings were meant to mold a new species of humanity that would be hyper-resistant to severe suffering and thus would win WWII. To prove this theory, he travels to Siberia to find the place where Stalin's "superheroes" were trained, only to discover instead a secret sect of former Gulag prisoners who have upgraded their concentration camp into a sadomasochistic resort for rich Russians in post-Soviet times.

Another Bykov's novel, *Listed Out* (2008), which could be read as a parody of the conspiracy theory novel as well as of Kafka's *The Trial*, also entertains the ambiguity of the current memory politics regarding the Soviet terror. The protagonist Sviridov finds out that he becomes a member of an enigmatic list which includes some other 180 people, yet its purpose is kept in mystery throughout the entire novel. On the one hand, the members on the list are being continuously ostracized in their social lives, by being fired from their jobs, banned from going abroad or stalked by secret police officers. On the other, they sporadically receive unexpected promotions to a higher position, new job contracts or some other social privileges. Ironically enough, the plot never progresses any further but is solely dedicated to countless and absurd speculations on whether the "list" is that of "enemies of the people" and thus foreshadows a new cycle of mass repressions or a list of the state's most distinguished patriots, or "nationally oriented elite," chosen for a higher mission. Regardless of the solution to this dilemma, all the enlisted participants are struck by contagious panic attacks and paralyzing fear, while reenacting the same behavioral models as in Stalin's times, such as personal bonding on the basis of social exclusion or pervasive informing on each other. In truly Kafkaesque manner, Bykov's novel never clarifies the origin of the list, leaving its disoriented characters and readers as well in utter confusion in the end, yet it beautifully illustrates the pattern of post-Soviet collective memory in Putin's Russia. Precisely because the logic of Stalin's terror has never been fully rationalized in the nation's public consciousness, the irrationality of its traumatic return manifests itself by inertia through paranoid speculations in the present.

The post-Soviet dystopian novels examined above are, therefore, characterized by a perplexing mix of different temporalities: anchored in the actuality of the country's present, they see it as reenacting its past which they in turn project into the future. By muddling boundaries between Russia's past, present and future, such narratives unequivocally deny the nation's history any sense of historical progression by enclosing it into the vicious circle of mythological repetition. In its dystopian future, Russia either slides back into the autocratic dictatorship of its pre-modern past or keeps getting out of it though a cycle of bloody civil wars and revolutions. Ironically enough, in the light of Gramsci's model of passive revolution, the two dystopian forecasts exemplified above seem to directly follow from Russia's aborted revolution of 1991 which imprisoned liberal and conservative forces into the stalemate dialectic of revolution and restoration. What remains to be seen now is, understandably, "whether in the dialectic "revolution/restoration" it is revolution or restoration which predominates" (Gramsci 219). And yet, despite the hopelessness and desperation of their prognoses for Russia's uncertain political future, we should not forget that all these novels are phenomenal bestsellers and the recipients of prestigious literary awards, just as their authors themselves are flamboyant media celebrities with a massive fanbase of readers, which symptomatically reflects an unprecedented rise of civic consciousness in Russian intelligentsia since the mid-2000s.

Works cited

- Andrieu, Kora. "An Unfinished Business: Transitional Justice and Democratization in Post-Soviet Russia." *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, vol. 2, 2011, pp. 198-220.
- Aptekman, Marina. "Forward to the Past, or Two Radical Views on the Russian Nationalist Future: Pyotr Krasnov's *Behind the Thistle* and Vladimir Sorokin's *Day of an Oprichnik*." *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2009, pp. 241-260.
- Åslund, Anders. *Russia's Capitalist Revolution: Why Market Reform Succeeded and Democracy Failed*. Peterson Institute, 2007.
- Buci-Glucksmann, Christine. *Gramsci and the State*. Lawrence and Wishart Ltd, 1980.
- Bykov, Dmitrii. *ZhD*. Vagrius, 2006.
- Carnaghan, Ellen. *Out of Order: Russian Political Values in an Imperfect World*. Pennsylvania State UP, 2007.
- Chantsev, Aleksandr. "The Antiutopia Factory: The Dystopian Discourse in Russian Literature of the Mid-2000s." *Russian Studies in Literature*, vol. 45, no. 2, 2009, pp. 6-41.
- Diamond, Larry Jay. "Thinking About Hybrid Regimes." *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2002, pp. 21-35.
- Etkind, Aleksandr. "Hard and Soft in Cultural Memory: Political Mourning in Russia and Germany," *Grey Room*, vol. 16, 2004, pp. 36-59.
- Fish, Michael Steven. *Democracy Derailed in Russia: The Failure of Open Politics*. Cambridge UP, 2005.
- Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Simon and Schuster, 2006.
- Gill, Graeme. "A New Turn to Authoritarian Rule in Russia?" *Democratization*, vol. 13, no. 1, 2006, pp. 58-77.
- Gordin, Michael D., Helen Tilley and Gyan Prakash. "Introduction: Utopia and Dystopia beyond Space and Time." *Utopia/dystopia: conditions of historical possibility*, edited by In Gordin, Michael D., Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash, Princeton UP, 2010, 1-21.
- Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, edited and translated by Q. Hoare and G. Nowell-Smith. Lawrence & Wishart, 1971.
- Habermas, Jürgen. "What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left," *New Left Review*, vol. 183, 1990, pp. 3-21.
- Hahn, Gordon M. *Russia's Revolution from Above, 1985-2000: Reform, Transition, and Revolution in the Fall of the Soviet Communist Regime*. Transaction Publishers, 2001.
- Hale, H.E. "Regime Cycles: Democracy, Autocracy, and Revolution in Post-Soviet Eurasia." *World Politics*, vol. 58, no. 1, 2005, pp. 133-165.
- Jarvik, Laurence. "Cultural Challenges to Democratization in Russia." *Orbis*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2006, pp. 167-186.
- Kharaeva, Dina and Nikolai Koposov (Хапаева Дина и Николай Копосов). "Пожалейте, люди, палачей..." ("Take pity on perpetrators, people..."). *polit.ru* Октябрь, 2007, www.polit.ru/analytics/2007/11/21/stalinism.html
- Levitsky, Steven, and Lucan A. Way. *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War*. Cambridge UP, 2010.
- Lukin, Alexander. "Russia's New Authoritarianism and the Post-Soviet Political Ideal." *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2009, pp. 66-92.
- Mendelson, Sarah E. and Theodore P. Gerber. "Soviet Nostalgia: An Impediment to Russian Democratization." *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2005-2006, pp. 83-96.
- Robertson, Graeme B. *The Politics of Protest in Hybrid Regimes: Managing Dissent in Post-Communist Russia*. Cambridge UP, 2010.
- Sakwa, Richard. *The Crisis of Russian Democracy: The Dual State, Factionalism and the Medvedev Succession*. Cambridge UP, 2010.
- Sargent, Lyman Tower. "Utopia: The Problem of Definition," *Extrapolation*, vol. 16, 1975, pp. 127-48.
- Simon, Rick. "Passive Revolution, Perestroika, and the Emergence of the New Russia." *Capital & Class*, vol. 34, no. 3, 2010, pp. 429-48.
- Slavnikova, Olga (Славникова Ольга). 2017. Moskva, Vagrius, 2007.
- . 2017. Translated by Marian Schwarz. Overlook/Duckworth, 2010.
- Smolchenko, Anna. "Ceremony at Butovo a First for Putin." *The Moscow Times*, 31 October 2007, www.themoscowtimes.com/stories/2007/10/31/002.html
- Sorokin, Vladimir. "Russia is Slipping Back into an Authoritarian Empire." *Der Spiegel Online*, February 2, 2007, www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,463860,00.html
- . *День опричника (Day of the Oprichnik)*. Zakharov, 2008.
- . *Day of the Oprichnik*. Translated by Jamey Gambrell. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.
- Степовой, Богдан (Степовой, Богдан). "Владимир Путин - о жертвах сталинских репрессий: Мы до сих пор ощущаем эту трагедию на себе" (Vladimir Putin on victims of Stalin's repressions: we are still feeling the impact of this tragedy on us). *Известия*, 31 October 2007, iz.ru/news/330250
- Tolstaya, Tatyana (Толстая Татьяна). *Кысь (Kys')*. Moskva, Podkova, Inostranka, 2000.
- . *The Slynx*. Translated by Jamey Gambrell. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2000.
- . *Pushkin's Children: Writings on Russia and Russians*. Translated by Jamey Gambrell. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2003.
- . "Democracy Has Nearly Disappeared in Russia." *New Perspectives Quarterly*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2007, pp. 64-67.
- Van der Pijl, Kees. "Soviet Socialism and Passive Revolution." In Gill, Stephen, ed. *Gramsci, Historical Materialism and International Relations*. Cambridge UP, 1993, pp. 237-58.
- Worth, Owen. *Hegemony, International Political Economy and Post-communist Russia*. Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2005.

Author's profile: Sergey Toymmentsev is Senior Researcher at the Russian Institute for Advanced Studies, Moscow State Pedagogical University, as well as Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Modern Languages and Linguistics at Florida State University. He received his PhD in Comparative Literature from Rutgers University in 2014. His scholarly interests are film-philosophy and memory studies. Toymmentsev's publications include "Active/Reactive Body in Deleuze and Foucault," *Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry* (2010) and "Legal but Criminal: The Failure of the "Russian Nuremberg" and the Paradoxes of Post-Soviet Memory," *Comparative Literature Studies* (2011). Email: <stoymentsev@fsu.edu>